



Two Lives

By Vikram Seth
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Introduction

Spanning almost the entire breadth of the twentieth-century, the life, friendship and marriage of Shanti Seth and Helga "Henny" Caro bookend a particularly violent slice of European history included the Second World War, the Holocaust, the collapse of imperialism in Europe and Asia and the division of Germany and the Middle East. The unlikely coupling and five-decade-long love affair between this European-educated Indian dentist and German-bred Jewish woman form the centerpiece of acclaimed author Vikram Seth's dual-biography of his beloved Aunt and Uncle and provides a stunning meditation on the resiliency of an entire generation that experienced firsthand the depths of human cruelty and horror.

Two Lives is more than just a simple tale of two people brought together by extraordinary circumstances and events, however. It is also a beautifully etched work that redefines the modern biography, weaving together a pair of individual narratives to comprise a singular love story that manages to thrive despite the horrors of war, the devastation of the Holocaust and the betrayal of friends who make the most unforgivable choices. Relying on interviews, private letters and over ten years of research, *Two Lives* is Vikram Seth's masterful tribute to his Aunt and Uncle, and takes readers on a remarkable ride from 1920s India, to Berlin during the Third Reich, all the way up to present-day England.

Questions for discussion:

1. How would you characterize the relationship between Shanti Seth and Henny Caro? Would you call their relationship one of true love or of simple, if devoted, companionship and mutual support?
2. The author writes: "with so much suffering, isolation and indifference, it is cause for gratitude that something is sufficiently good." How do you feel this view of "sufficiently good" manifested itself in Shanti and Henny's lives both as a couple and as individuals?
3. How did you see Shanti and Henny's interracial, interfaith relationship in the context of the social climates they lived through (particularly in Germany and England)? Did it surprise you that both Shanti and Henny made very little mention about the difficulties that racial, ethnic and religious barriers must have played in their relationship?
4. It has been written that this dual biography uncovers the "extraordinary" in the "ordinary" lives of its two subjects. Do you consider Shanti and Henny's lives to be "ordinary"?
5. Why do you think Shanti refused to look at the letters his wife kept, once the author discovered them locked in a trunk in the attic? Do you think his refusal was made out of respect for his wife's privacy or for some other reason?
6. How differently would Henny's life have been portrayed in the book if she had been able to tell her own side of the story, as opposed to having it divined from intimate letters that she most likely meant to keep private?
7. Did you feel any sense of sympathy for Hans Mahnert and Lili Wurth? Why or why not?
8. What did you make of Eva Cohn's relationship with Henny? What about her relationship with Fred Gotte?
9. The idea of home—from nationality to the very house in which you live—plays a key role in each of the narratives in the book. How do you think Shanti, Henny and the author define "home" for themselves? Does this help explain the author's violent reaction to his Uncle's will at the close of the book?
10. The author titled his book *Two Lives* but also calls it a memoir. How does the term "two lives" apply to both Shanti and Henny's separate life stories? Does the term also apply to the author's life story?

About the Author

Vikram Seth was born in Calcutta, India and educated there and in England, California and China. He has written acclaimed books in several genres: verse novel, *The Golden Gate*; travel book, *From Heaven Lake*; animal fable, *Beastly Tales*; epic fiction, *A Suitable Boy*. His most recent novel is *An Unequal Music*.