



The Madonnas of Leningrad

By Debra Dean
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Introduction

In this sublime debut novel, set amid the horrors of the siege of Leningrad during World War II, a gifted writer explores the power of memory to save us... and betray us.

Questions for Discussion

1. The working of memory is a key theme of this novel. As a young woman, remembering the missing paintings is a deliberate act of survival and homage for Marina. In old age, however, she can no longer control what she remembers or forgets. "More distressing than the loss of words is the way that time contracts and fractures and drops her in unexpected places." How has Dean used the vagaries of Marina's memory to structure the novel? How does the narrative itself mimic the ways in which memory

functions?

2. Sometimes, Marina finds consolations within the loss of her short-term memory. "One of the effects of this deterioration seems to be that as the scope of her attention narrows, it also focuses like a magnifying glass on smaller pleasures that have escaped her notice for years." Is aging merely an accumulation of deficits or are there gifts as well?

3. The narrative is interspersed with single-page chapters describing a room or a painting in the Hermitage Museum. Who is describing these paintings and what is the significance of the paintings chosen? How is each interlude connected to the chapter that follows?

4. The historical period of *The Madonnas of Leningrad* begins with the outbreak of war. How is war portrayed in this novel? How is this view of World War II different from or similar to other accounts you have come across?

5. Even though she says of herself that she is not a "believer," in what ways is Marina spiritual? Discuss Marina's faith: how does her spirituality compare with conventional religious belief? How do religion and miracles figure in this novel? What are the miracles that occur in *The Madonnas of Leningrad*?

6. A central mystery revolves around Andre's conception. Marina describes a remarkable incident on the roof of the Hermitage when one of the statues from the roof of the Winter Palace, "a naked god," came to life, though she later discounts this as a hallucination. In her dotage, she tells her daughter-in-law that Andre's father is Zeus. Dmitri offers other explanations: she may have been raped by a soldier or it's possible that their only coupling before he went off to the front resulted in a son. What do you think actually happened? Is it a flaw or a strength of the novel that the author doesn't resolve this question?

7. At the end of Marina's life, Helen admits that "once she had thought that she might discover some key to her mother if only she could get her likeness right, but she has since learned that the mysteries of another person only deepen, the longer one looks." How well do we ever know our parents? Are there things you've learned about your parents' past that helped you feel you knew them better?

8. In much the same way that Marina is struggling with getting old, her daughter, Helen, is struggling with disappointments and regrets often associated with middle-age: her marriage has failed, her son is moving away, she may never get any recognition as an artist, and last but not least, she is losing a life-long battle with her weight. Are her feelings of failure the result of poor choices and a bad attitude or are such feelings an inevitable part of the human condition?

9. In a sense, the novel has two separate but parallel endings: the young Marina giving the cadets a tour of the museum, and the elderly Marina giving the carpenter a tour of an unfinished house. What is the function of this coda? How would the novel be different if it ended with the cadets' tour?

10. What adjectives would you use to describe *The Madonnas of Leningrad*? Given the often bleak subject matter - war, starvation, dementia -- is the novel's view of the world depressing?

About the Author

Debra Dean worked as an actor in the New York theater for nearly a decade before opting for the even dicier life of a writer. She received her MFA from the University of Oregon and now lives with her husband in Seattle, Washington, where she teaches college-level literature and writing.