



A DOOR BEHIND A DOOR

A NOVEL

YELENA MOSKOVICH

Reader Guide: Questions and Topics for Discussion

If you've also read author Yelena Moskovich's earlier novels, *The Natashas* and *Virtuoso*, what similarities or common themes did you notice? What differences?

Early on, the main character, Olga Bokuchava, says that she didn't tell her girlfriend Angelina about a murder that had occurred during her childhood due to a "feeling of anachronistic dread." How does that wording relate to other elements of this novel, and set the tone for the book?

The great Russian novel *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky — a dark tale of murder infused with philosophical, religious, and social commentary — is referenced and quoted in *A Door Behind a Door*. What connections do you see between the novels? Which characters experience punishment?

Quotes and imagery from "The Sail," a famous poem by the Russian writer Mikhail Lermontov that many school children are asked to recite from memory, recur throughout the novel. After reading the poem, what connections can you make between the themes in it and themes in *A Door Behind a Door*?

Each of the sections in this novel start with an emboldened line that are sometimes part of the running text and at other times act as headers. What effect did the style have on your reading? Why do you think the author might have been inspired to use this technique?

In *A Door Behind a Door*, the author has written about queer characters and their lives. Discuss the characters' sexualities: What are their different obstacles? What relationships were unique, and in what ways? Do you think the exploration of "queerness" in this book goes beyond just the sexual?

In what ways does author Yelena Moskovich explore time and place in *A Door Behind a Door*? In an analysis of Moskovich's previous novel *Virtuoso* for *The Sociological Review*, Clare Fisher considers the formation of queer time and space in the story through the lens of Halberstam, who has written the following; how does this enhance your reading of *A Door Behind a Door*?

"Queer Time is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois production and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance. Queer Space refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterepublics." (From *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* by J. Jack Halberstam, NYU Press, 2005)

The theme of water: dampness, wetness, floods, drips, waves, and shades of the color blue, occur frequently throughout this novel. In what sections did you notice water-related descriptors? Why do you think the author chose to do this? How do the references to water tie in to the larger story?

In an essay published by *The Calvert Journal* (December 21, 2020) on the theme of home, author Yelena Moskvich wrote the following; considering the important role that religion plays in *A Door Behind a Door*, how does this insight about her family's background further your reading of the novel?

My tongue otherwise is this: born in Soviet Ukraine, my family, Jewish mutts from Ukraine, Romania, Moldova, etc., live as "Jewish" nationals on their homeland, meaning that at the time, all Jews in the USSR were not considered natives of that territory. In my hand-written birth certificate, I am welcomed as: daughter of Jew and Jewess, nationality Jew, Yelena Valer'evna Moskvich. As all Jews, the adults are slighted, diminished, humiliated in the heartbreaking banality of the Soviet institution – access to work, school, cultural resources, and sense of humanity denied. Their kids, dark cursive faces, are collateral damage of the era.

Olga's brother is named both Misha, which means "Who Is Like God?" and is of Russian origin, but renames himself Moshe, which has a meaning of "Drawn Out Of The Water" and is of Hebrew origin. In which parts of the novel does he use each of the names? What importance do you see in the difference of the names for this character? Considering the different scenes that he is in, how is adult Moshe's character described? What do you think is the meaning behind his one eye?

One of the most recognizable symbols in Judaism is the Star of David, a six-pointed star. The star appears in two major forms: what are they? Where does Moshe tell Rémy he found the necklace? How are the intertwined stories connected through the symbol? What are your interpretations?

Numbers play an important part of this novel — one-two; once, twice, thrice; un, deux, trois; a recurring number 6; the frequent occurrence of a word or phrase repeated three times — what significance do you think this has? Nicky and Olga are both described as loving numbers, with Nicky even calling mathematics his paradise. In the ending pages of the section narrated by Nicky, we learn his motive for killing the woman on floor six; what parallels does this have to Olga?

How are themes of "family" and "home" explored in this novel? Which characters find a home and how? Which family relationships are strong or strained?

When do locks and keys appear? What are your interpretations of them?

What are the literal and figurative braids or twining that you noticed in *A Door Behind a Door*?

Lisette, a name meaning "God's Promise," plays an important role for many of the characters: what is it? How is she described?

How are the characters Angelina and Oksana similar? What good deeds do they do, and what are their fates?

Vaska — a Russian diminutive of the name Vasiliy, meaning "Protector, Guardian" — is the mutt that young Nicky befriends. When Vaska is first introduced, what celestial words are used, and why do you think the author chose to do this? How does this fit in with larger themes of the novel? In the beginning of the main scenes that Vaska is in, what state is Nicky in? What role does the dog play?

What happens to Olga's palms when she is in the jail? Who else has palms like this? The description of "open palms" occurs elsewhere throughout the novel. What significance do you think this has?

What do you think the meanings of "Fire and Ice" are? What elements are described as burning hot and ice cold? There is a famous poem by Robert Frost of this same name that discusses the end of the world, perishing twice, fire as desire, ice as hate: what connections do you see with the novel and the poem?

Early on, how does Nicky describe what a door behind a door is? How do Hell, America, the diner, and the jail fit into the story? What might each symbolize?

For Tanya Tarasova, her sexuality is very much a central issue and we see her displaying a range of mixed emotions: lesbian desire, homophobia, self-hate, an earnest wanting of love. Despite her bullying, there are moments when she is tender and vulnerable: when were they? What do you think the author's intentions were with this character? Considering that Tanya frequently acts or speaks in violent ways, is full of anger and rage, and is hypersexual, what might this character represent? There are two distinct scenes where her voice changes: when are those instances? What might be the meaning behind jokes and laughter?

Which characters are dead and which are alive? How does this change at different parts of the story? Do you think the author is using a character's "death" in the literal sense, or might these deaths have other meanings?

Sveta and Rémy do not remain in the story in the same way as the other characters. Why do you think that is? What did they have in common and how were they different from the other characters?

What other symbols or recurring actions did you notice throughout the novel, and what meanings do you think they might have?

On a blank piece of paper, write down this list of character names, cut them out, and then arrange them on a white board or large background paper with arrows and words explaining the various connections and relationships:

Angelina	Moshe
Anya	Nicky
Brendan	Oksana
Bud	Old lady on Floor 6
Carlos	Olga
Carmita	Rémy
Crazy Mama	Sally
Dima	Sveta
Lisette	Tanya
Misha	