



***I Will Die in a Foreign Land***  
a novel by  
**KALANI PICKHART**

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**Reader Guide: Questions and Topics for Discussion**  
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1. This is a novel of historical fiction that largely focuses on the 2013–2014 Ukrainian revolution, but it also dives deeply into the history of the people, country, and region. What are some things that you learned about Ukraine and its history that you did not previously know?
2. The author chose to title the novel *I Will Die in a Foreign Land*: why do you think this is fitting? Which characters literally leave their homeland? What deeper meanings can you draw, considering the ancient and modern Slavic history that is sprinkled throughout the book?
3. The novel is comprised of multiple main narratives, spanning different periods of time, that are braided together along with frequent asides featuring folklore, history, and news related to Ukraine: what effect did this structure have on your reading experience? How do the asides add value to the main narratives and plot?
4. The four main characters of the novel are Aleksandr, Katya, Misha, and Slava: what are each of their backstories? In what ways do their lives intersect?
5. “**The father begets the daughter—the lion begets the lion.**” (p. 198) How is this line, from Salva’s reunion with her father, fitting for larger themes of the story? What do you make of the recurring references to lions, cats, and kittens?
6. What role do cassette tapes play in this story? Which characters recorded them and which listened to them? How do the tapes connect the different characters of this braided novel?
7. Upon arriving to the chaos in Kyiv, Katya thinks: “**We’re all under water here... Shaken loose like silt. An undertow. A baptism. A drowning.**” (p. 13) Throughout the novel, Katya’s descriptions and analogies continue to involve themes of water: what do you make of this?

8. Throughout this novel, the author chose to prominently feature Russian composer Igor Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring: Pictures from Pagan Russia in Two Parts*, whose music and choreography so challenged its audience that a riot broke out during its 1913 premiere in Paris. The ballet's plot revolves around ancient Slavic pagans performing a ritual to ensure the coming of a new spring. Stravinsky is also quoted as saying: "**My earliest memory is of the sound of the ice breaking on the River Neva in St. Petersburg near where I was born. It was the sound that marked the beginning of a new year, a new spring.**" (p. 118) How do you interpret the importance of that is given to the theme of a new spring in this novel?
9. Of the ballet, Aleksandr says: "**The pagans in *The Rite of Spring* sacrifice a woman, the Chosen One, so they might survive as a tribe. I wonder about this often—the individual loss for the collective gain.**" (p. 192) How does this idea relate to the novel's themes? Can you think of various examples of who or what is "sacrificed" in this book in a way that benefits others?
10. While describing who the *Kobzari* are to young Aleksandr circa the 1950s, the old piano man says to him: "**Music, Aleksandr. It is a powerful, dangerous thing... We must do all we can to protect it.**" (p. 47) Who are the *Kobzari*? Why did the older Russian man think music was dangerous? What effect did the old piano man's teachings have on Aleksandr? What importance does music have to specific characters, and to the novel in general?
11. The old piano man also teaches young Aleksandr that "**In Soviet times, it was dangerous to believe in God**" (p. 49), referring to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's often violent suppression of religious beliefs, in favor of atheism. How are ideas of religious freedom explored in this novel?
12. Misha's mother tells Katya: "**We come from *Kozak* blood, my dear. Misha's ancestors were all *Kozak*, both sides. He's been waiting for war his whole life without knowing.**" (p. 184) Who are the *Kozaks* (AKA Cossacks)? How does this statement relate to the larger themes in the novel of war and conflict in this region? What is Misha's fate?
13. Through the character of Dascha Bandura—a journalist who has been living in eastern Ukraine's Luhansk, near the border with Russia in the disputed Donbass region—we are able to see both sides of the recent and ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia: what are Dascha's views on the conflict?
14. How are the roles of, and risks to, journalists who are covering the Ukrainian Revolution illustrated through the character of Dascha Bandura? What is her fate? How else are journalists and others who are documenting the conflict in Ukraine depicted?
15. Dascha, a self-described lesbian filmmaker, says to her lover Slava, who was involved in FEMEN—the radical protest group for women's rights before they moved from Ukraine to France: "**Today, we fight against Putin. Tomorrow, we fight against hate.**" (p. 116) What do you think about this conclusion of Dascha's, that for a country experiencing civil unrest and war, the goal of working toward equal rights must wait? What are some of the ways in which this novel explores issues of human rights, homophobia, and the abuse of girls and women?

16. How is the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant disaster and its consequences explored through the characters of Misha and Vera, and Misha's mom, who is a *samosely*?
17. In what ways does the author include information about the *Holodomor*—the intentional famine orchestrated by Joseph Stalin that killed millions of Ukrainians by starvation in 1932–1933?
18. In Donetsk, eastern Ukraine, where Misha works as an engineer in the coal mines, he is persistently offered a special job by his manager, Oleg. Why is Misha conflicted over this offer, and what does he ultimately decide to do? Why do you think it was important to the author to include illegal coal mines, or *kopanky*, in the book?
19. Aleksandr's audio cassette recording sections begin with him as a young Soviet soldier arriving in Czechoslovakia to suppress the liberalization reforms known as the Prague Spring. What did Aleksandr think of his role? What echoes are there between the Prague Spring and the Euromaidan protests?
20. Aleksandr returns to Czechoslovakia again, this time as a KGB spy named Stepan. What is his mission and how does he feel about it? What has changed for him since the last time he was in Prague?

21. Arrange this list of character names on a white board or large background paper with arrows and words explaining the various connections and relationships:

Adam

Aleksandr Arkadyevich Ivanovich (AKA Sasha, Stepan)

Alexis

Anna

Anna Arkadyevna Ivanova

Dascha Bandura

Jara (Jarmila) Kučerova

Katya (Ekaterina)

Misha (Mikhail) Tkachenko

Nedezdha (Nadia) Stepaneva Vasilieva

Petyr

Slava (Yaroslava) Orlyk

Vera

Zoya