

Lara's Gift

(Knopf / Penguin Random House)

by Annemarie O'Brien



Discussion Questions

1. In the beginning of Lara's journey, she is conflicted about how to handle her visions: trust them as her mama encourages her to do or dismiss them as her papa demands. If you were Lara in that exact moment, what would you have chosen to do and why?
2. During the Imperial Era, when *Lara's Gift* takes place, it was not uncommon for people to speak of their visions as something quite commonplace. Visions at that time were generally regarded as a gift from God. Rasputin is probably the most famous visionary in Russian history and leveraged his visions to gain the trust and confidence of Tsar Nicholas II and his wife. Even the Russian novelist Vladimir Nabokov, in his autobiographical memoir, *Speak, Memory*, shares an example of his first vision. Do you think it's possible for people to have visions, or some kind of intuition or sixth sense? Why or why not? Give examples.
3. How is the Russian setting in *Lara's Gift* similar to where you live? How is it different?

4. Lara loves borzoi dogs. Can you give examples from the story that show her love? If you have a dog, how do you show your love?
5. Describe Lara's friendship with Alexander. How does their friendship change and grow throughout the novel?
6. The Golden Rules of breeding borzoi have been important to Lara's family for generations. Does your family have rules or traditions? If so, give some examples. Do you think these rules/traditions make sense today? There's a saying: Rules are meant to be broken. What do you think this means? Are there rules that should be broken? If so, give an example. If not, do you believe *all* rules should be followed? Why or why not?
7. Lara must keep her visions a secret from everyone, including Alexander. Discuss the reasons for or against keeping a secret.
8. Lara loves Alexander Pushkin's poetry and cites it several times throughout the novel word for word. On page 124, however, the words from Pushkin's poem, "Winter Journey" come to her differently from what she has learned. Instead of hearing: *Of the sleigh-bell's tuneless ringing / Numbs me with its monotone*, Lara hears: *Of the wolf-pack's frightful howling / Numbs me with its hungry tone*. How do you think Lara is feeling at this moment? What do you think she believes is about to happen?
9. What role does Ruslan play in Lara's life? What do you think Lara learns from Ruslan? What do you think he means when he says on page 48, "Be careful what you wish for . . ."? Do all of Lara's wishes come true by the story's end? Do you think Lara wishes she had wished for something else?
10. Resisting/embracing change is a recurring theme in *Lara's Gift*. Can you give an example of where change is resisted and where it is embraced? Can you give an example of where you might

have resisted change and one where you embraced change? Why do you think people have a hard time with change? Can you think of ways to make change easier? What does Ruslan mean when he says on page 112, “Change is what we all fear at some level. Once we learn to embrace it, only then can it become our friend.”

11. Female empowerment is a central theme in *Lara’s Gift*. Do you think Lara’s papa is being fair when he demotes her from future kennel steward to seamstress? Do you think there should be gender-specific roles for girls and boys? Why or why not?

12. Following your heart is another key theme in *Lara’s Gift*. What is in Lara’s heart? What about you? What are you most passionate about? Are you following your heart? Why do you think it is important (or not important) to follow your heart?

13. Writers try to plant their readers in the protagonist’s world by evoking the five senses: sight, taste, scent, sound, and touch. Can you give an example of where the author evokes each sense?

14. What scene or passage from the book had the biggest impact on you and why?