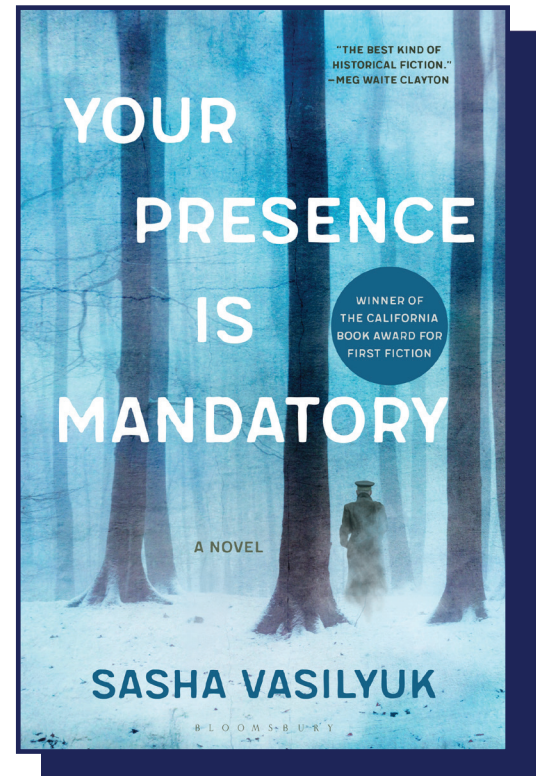




Your Presence Is Mandatory by Sasha Vasilyuk

Questions for Discussion

1. In the first scene, Nina reflects on her mortality, an idea that returns at the end of the novel. Why do you think the author chose to begin the story with this? What might death mean to Nina, who experienced so much death throughout her life?
2. Stalin famously called artillery the “god of modern warfare,” which was a source of pride for Yefim when first joining the army. To what extent does Yefim’s faith in “the cause” challenge or influence his Jewish identity? How does this change throughout the novel?
3. Yefim identifies with different names throughout the novel. In what ways does his name—all the variations of it—reflect his behaviors and beliefs throughout the novel?
4. Nina and Yefim’s “first loves”—and what was said and not said about these people—play a unique role in their relationship. How do Nina’s feelings for the Professor and Yefim’s feelings for Ilse differ from one another? In what ways do these relationships of the past affect their attitudes toward one another?
5. What is the significance of the dark-haired woman holding an infant in Yefim’s dreams? Why does he return to this image again and again?
6. Once Yefim finds his mother, after the war, she reveals her own secret about his birth name. In what ways does this confession add to Yefim’s trauma? In what ways does the truth free him?
7. Shortly after they meet, Yefim seems to want to confide in Nina some of his experiences in the war: a confidence she quickly violates, sharing stories with their friends. Later, he’s rumored to be talking to Claudia about the war, which confirms her suspicions about an affair. In what ways are truth and intimacy tightly bound for Yefim?



8. After Yefim charmingly lies about Nina catching the fish, she wishes she were a better liar “because in their country it was usually honesty that got you into trouble.” Later, Yefim tells his son that lies are “how you preserve a family.” In what ways does their culture encourage dishonesty?
9. Vita hides her own small trauma from her father, while Andrey says that children shouldn’t know everything about their parents. How does Yefim’s secrecy influence his children’s relationship to openness and truth?
10. When Yefim speaks to his daughter Vita’s class about the war, he hides a single truth—about his dear friend Ivan—within the lies. Why does Yefim then reject this truth when his daughter presses him for more information? Why does he struggle to lie about Ivan, in particular?
11. Yefim seems to demonstrate feelings of “survivor guilt,” especially later in life. How does this guilt manifest throughout the novel? In what ways is it this, and not his experience as a prisoner of war, that contributes to his sense of shame about his past?
12. Yefim confesses only to his granddaughter, Masha, about his experience as a POW. What is significant about his decision to confide in her alone? What does it mean when he later wonders if “he had told her anything at all.”
13. The “famine” in Ukraine is referred to throughout the novel, but it’s only toward the end that the author uses the more distinctive, historical name for this event, the “Holodomor.” Similarly, we learn about the “glasnost,” the Great Confession, as the USSR comes to terms with its past. What is significant about the shifts in perspective? How does this shape our views of the contemporary conflict in Ukraine?

Further Reading

If This Is a Man by Primo Levi, *Life and Fate* by Vasily Grossman, *Auschwitz and After* by Charlotte Delbo, *The Shawl* by Cynthia Ozick, *Red Famine: Stalin’s War on Ukraine* by Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* by Anne Applebaum, *Soviet Fates and Lost Alternatives: From Stalinism to The New Cold War* by Stephen Cohen, *All The Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr, *Against All Odds: A True Story of Ultimate Courage and Survival in World War II* by Alex Kershaw, *Beneath a Scarlet Sky* by Mark Sullivan, *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah