

2015

The Sojourn Reading Guide

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Repository Citation

Aghishian, J., Caulfield, A., Clark, T., Ewing, R., Gaffin, J., Gale, S., Ganz, E., Garrett, K., Jones, M., Laing, E., Lynch, C., Mangan, S., Mills, A., Ramey, R., Ray, C., Sorg, E., Weisman, A., & York, B. (2015). *The Sojourn* Reading Guide. .
https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/dlpp_guides/1

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The Sojourn Reading Guide

Introduction

World War I was said to be the war to end all wars. But who were the men that fought this war? What happened to them before they were soldiers? And what remained after? Andrew Krivak's short novel *The Sojourn*, offers some answers to these questions as well as offering a meditation on language and storytelling as tools for promoting peace. Words and shared language build relationships in this book. And at the end of the Great War, which consumes the middle portion of the novel, the shadow of these relationships is what remains, along with the remnants of a destroyed Empire. It is from these ashes of society and identity that Jozef Vinich must rise or burn and which ashes readers must sift to discover the root of peace. After all, this is a book on which The Dayton Literary Peace Prize was bestowed.

Krivak's novel illustrates the struggle of the Austro-Hungarian Empire's Slovaks, Hungarians, Czechs, Romany, and Austrians as they contend with language and ethnic barriers along with the enemy. It is also a tale of fatherhood and brotherhood, the powerful relationships that result from the shattering of tradition, and how these new relationships are tested through troubling times. Krivak's themes manifest within the first pages of the novel. Tragedy strikes, and the young protagonist, Jozef, is brought from America to a new country and family that do not accept him; his home country is foreign to him.

He cannot find the sense of belonging among his countrymen. However, in the solitude of shepherding with his father he finds a quiet contentment. It is here that Jozef learns English through interacting with his father and listening to him read works of American literature. Jozef's journey into understanding a new language, one of many "sojourns" in this novel, creates a medium for connection with his father. And, eventually, Jozef even discovers a kind of destiny through his ability to understand another way of speaking.

As a young man on the eve of the Great War, disillusioned by his father's self-diminishment, he enlists in an effort to establish himself as a separate person from his father. Jozef is accompanied in the war by his "brother", Zlee. Initially they are successful as snipers, and Jozef is imbued with a sense of success by being part of the war effort. However, after the death of Zlee and a series of increasingly mismanaged battles leading to a jarring casualty, Jozef comes to realize the true horror of the war. From this point on he struggles with disillusionment. Through grief, and longing for personal relationship, he begins to appreciate human life.

The innate value of human life is a significant concept Josef will learn. Born in America, and raised in Austria-Hungary; Josef is a multilingual shepherd who grew up reading *Moby Dick*. Jozef is a cultural contradiction. A young man, he understands the futility of nationalism even as he enlists and fights for the Empire. A prisoner of war consumed with guilt over the deaths he has caused and witnessed he learns to cultivate peace and forgiveness in the company of a murderer. A homeless veteran of a demolished empire he finds a new home and citizenship in the United States.

The Sojourn proceeds to peace through a similar set of contradictions. Krivak gives readers a vision of the Great War as one whose purpose was lost on the very soldiers that fought it. The emptiness of the war for Jozef in particular establishes the idea that peace is not only freedom from the violence and horror of war but also but also tranquility and freedom from personal disturbance. Despite the war setting, Jozef spends much of the novel searching not for armistice type peace, but for inner peace.

Discussion Questions

Culture

1. How is classism demonstrated between the soldiers and the officers in the novel?
2. In what ways does Jozef's father bring parts of America back with him? He teaches Jozef about America; does this make Jozef "American" in some way?
3. Both the reader and Jozef are thrown into a new world with a new culture and an untranslatable language when they arrive in Pastvina. Does this create a sense of separation or does it make the reader more involved? How?
4. Jozef's father keeps a few things from America including: a small version of Whitman's poetry, *Walden*, *Moby Dick*, and memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant. Why do you think Krivak chose these select works?

Jozef

5. In the first paragraph of the narrative, Jozef claims, he was "saved by the simple act of a boy" (21). What other simple acts does Jozef receive or perform throughout the novel? How do they contribute to his strength and his subsequent actions?
6. When Jozef and Banquo are talking about the time after the war, Banquo says that the thing left to be afraid of is "one single moment in which we die so that someone else lives. That's it, and it is fearful because it cannot be seen, planned, or even known. It is simply lived." How does this statement relate to Jozef?
7. A sojourn is defined as a time of rest during a journey and this story is a "coming of age" novel. What effect does the idea of rest have on Jozef's coming of age? How does this affect his journey?
8. Why did Krivak find it necessary to add the scene in the beginning where the boy swimming in the river saves Jozef?
9. "What does it matter, I thought, if this village or some other raises him? What will he know of life, his mother, or even me, regardless? He will grow, learn, love, fight, and die, and someone, whether he knew them or not, will deliver him into his grave" (178). Is Jozef's view that we will grow, learn, love, fight, and die, all there is? Or is there more to life than just being present here on this Earth?

Relationships

10. Jozef has visions of his mother four or five times throughout the novel. What specific purpose or goal might Krivak have by including these visions?

11. Jozef welcomes new people into his "family" like Zlee and the gypsy woman. What does his acceptance of them say about family and love? What kind of responsibilities do people have to those that they love?

12. "I had never seen anyone fight and I had never been taught to defend myself. But I knew hurt and never wondered that day what it was I had to do if I didn't want to be hurt again" (35). When Jozef says this, it brings up the interesting concept of socialization. What does it have to say about the long debated topic of nature vs. nurture?

13. "He seemed intrigued by Zlee's insistence that he was an orphan adopted by my father and that we were brothers not of blood but of labor and the land" (67). What do you make of the definitions of brotherhood stated and implied in this passage? Are blood brothers "closer" than self-made brothers?

Death and War

14. "...I felt the heat of the rounds, wondered how it was I hadn't been hit and killed, turned to Holub for direction, and saw his body lying next to me, eyes wide open as he stared at the sky, his chest and belly torn apart. [...] When the attack was abandoned, we crawled back into our position and sat numb and indifferent, like prisoners who had just received a stay of execution..." (125). Will this "numb and indifferent" view towards the death and devastation going on around these men catch up with them? How will it affect them?

15. "I knew that the next time I stood would be my last...I had lost all faith in the belief that I would see those I loved again, but I didn't want to die and disappear like every other soldier who fought and died and decayed in the flood and layers of indifferent rivers and mud. And I was overcome with fear" (128). Put yourself into Jozef's shoes. What last thoughts would you have if you were overcome with fear and thinking that this was the end of your life?

16. Throughout the novel Josef kills without provocation simply because he is ordered to as a soldier. However, near the end of the novel, he not only refuses to murder the boy who batters his companion, Aishe, but he also "heave[s] the rifle into the woods." Why does Joseph find it easy to kill indiscriminately throughout the war? Why, by the end of the novel, does he then refuse to kill the boy that has personally wronged him and his companion?

17. The character Banquo believes "that nothing prove[s] truer in the course of one's life than a man's incessant need to fight—even when convinced that he wants nothing more than peace—against someone, something, some other, so that he doesn't go to his grave having lived to no purpose." What do you make of the idea of fighting for peace merely as a means of giving oneself a purpose in, what the quote implies would be an otherwise meaningless existence? Is this an insincere way of advocating for peace?

Peace

18. The final paragraph of the novel starts with, "The gangplank backed away, and *the Mount Clay* gave one prolonged blast from her pilothouse" (191). What kinds of qualities does

the passive construction of this passage give to the ship? How do you think it would have been different if more aggressive words had been used to describe the ship leaving the shore?

19. Does Jozef still believe in his own free will? If so, how much?

20. “And in my delirium, I dreamed of my mother once again. This time, we were walking together and I was telling her about my life in Pastvina and how I missed my father now that I understood the wisdom I had mistaken for weakness...” (119). What changed that allowed Jozef to see the wisdom that his father possessed?

21. [Alan Cheuse and April Smith](#), the fiction judges for the 2012 Dayton Literary Peace Prize, assert that *The Sojourn* is a "story that celebrates... the flow between creation and destruction we all call life." Though the novel gives vivid and myriad descriptions of death and destruction, what instances of creation, either tangibly or abstractly, can be found in the novel?

22. [In Krivak's acceptance speech](#) for the Dayton Literary Peace Prize he says that, in regards to peace, what remains is for us is “to keep telling of it as well as to keep praying for it, to keep insisting upon it as well as to keep hoping for it, and to keep listening so that we’ll know when to act, whether it’s out in the world... or at work on a sentence alone in a room with words.” In what ways does Josef, throughout the novel, act upon keeping peace? In what ways does he tell of it to the reader?

Glossary

The Sojourn is written primarily in English, but contains many terms and phrases in other languages such as German, Slovak, and Hungarian. Though the novel is in no way difficult to read and understand without the translations, in the interest of full comprehension, this glossary has been provided.

Dobré_ráno (10)

Language: Slovak

English Translation: good morning

Appears in The Sojourn: First foreign phrase that appears in the book. It is used by Jozef's mother when greeting her husband as he awakes.

Matka_pod'me (14)

Language: Slovak

English Translation: Mother, let's!

Appears in The Sojourn: Tobias Hudak, Lizzie Venich's nephew, says this to his mother to ask that he and she accompany Lizzie on her walk.

Prosím (15)

Language: Slovak

English Translation: Please

Appears in The Sojourn: In the same conversation as above, Tobias begs his mother to go on the walk, adding a "please."

Som_v_poriadku (16)

Language: Slovak

English Translation: I'm alright.

Appears in The Sojourn: Tobias falls and lets his aunt know that he is okay.

L'úbim_t'a (19)

Language: Slovak

English Translation: I love you

Appears in The Sojourn: The phrase is actually spoken twice. The first time is by the infant Josef's mother right before she throws him to safety from the train trestle. The second time it is spoken is by his father as Jozef leaves for the war. Every other time Jozef hears the phrase it is from the vision of his mother.

Chod'_prec (31)

Language: Slovak

English Translation: Run away [possibly "get away from me" or "Be gone!" in this context].

Appears in The Sojourn: Ondrej Vinich says this to his wife, Borka, whenever she comes near him and his son after she was caught starving the boy.

Slava isusu Khristu_(32)

Language: Slovak

English Translation: Praise Jesus Christ

Appears in The Sojourn: This phrase appears as Jozef and his father are heading into the mountains. It signifies one of the last times they will hear Slav language for several months, as they speak English in the mountains.

Slava na viki_(32)

Language: Slovak

English Translation: Glory Forever

Appears in The Sojourn: This is the response to the Lenten greeting *slava isusu Khristu*. This phrase is the last Slovenian spoken by Jozef or his father before they head into the mountains.

Stacilo_(36)

Language: Czech

English Translation: Enough

Appears in The Sojourn: During Jozef's stay in the Hungarian school, he gets into a fight. This word is shouted during the fight.

Zly pes_(43)

Language: Slovak

English Translation: Bad dog

Appears in The Sojourn: Jozef's step-brothers taunt his father's ward, Marian, by calling him this.

Čo myslíš, Jozef? Krásny, hej?_(44)

Language: Slovak

English Translation: What do you think, Joseph? It's beautiful, right?

Appear in The Sojourn: After Marian takes Tibor's coat and wears it, he asks Jozef this question.

Dobry deň_(56)

Language: Polish

English Translation: good day

Appears in The Sojourn: Jozef used the phrase when talking about the village people and how they do not even greet people politely.

Scharfschutzen_(68)

Language: German

English Translation: Sharpshooters

Appears in The Sojourn: Used by the Austria-Hungarian army to denote the special cases of soldiers like Jozef and Zlee, as sharpshooters.

Cecchini_(68)

Language: Italian

English Translation: Snipers

Appears in The Sojourn: This is the Italian word for the sharpshooters.

Frontkämpfer_(69)

Language: German

English Translation: Front line soldier

Appears in The Sojourn: Jozeph uses this to say that they are not front line soldiers, they are hunters.

die Zwillinge (73)

Language: German

English Translation: the twins

Appears in The Sojourn: This phrase is used by Zlee and Jozef's commanding officer when talking about the two soldiers, and how they were a rarity; spotter and shooter equally good at both.

Absturz_(100)

Language: German

English Translation: crash

Appears in The Sojourn: The term was used when Jozef and Zlee are climbing Mount Marmolada with their fellow soldiers and the rope gives and they begin to fall. This is called out to Zlee and Jozef as a warning.

Andiamo_(133)

Language: Italian

English Translation: let's go

Appears in The Sojourn: This phrase is used when the Italian guards are taking prisoners and making them hurry to walk.

Mangia_(138)

Language: Italian

English Translation: eat

Appears in The Sojourn: The phrase was used when the Italians were forcing the prisoners to eat.

Milumjem_t'a (171)

Language: Slovak

English Translation: I love you

Appears in The Sojourn: The phrase was used by Jozef when he kissed the Gypsy girl on the cheek.

Bože_môj_(182)

Language: Slovak

English Translation: My God

Appears in The Sojourn: Borka, Jozef's stepmother, utters this phrase when Jozef unexpectedly shows up on her doorstep after the war is over.

Guns/Weapons/Military Equipment

Here are a few brief descriptions of the military equipment that appear in this novel. Use this to give you an idea of the power and history behind each of them. Their history is real and gives this book a realistic quality as a fiction novel.

M1896 Krag Jorgensen Rifle:

The **M1896 Jorgensen Rifle** (usually shortened to Krag) is a .30 caliber repeating, smokeless rifle. In *The Sojourn* the Krag is Ondrej Vinich's signature weapon and it is the same gun the Jozef learned to shoot on as well.

Zeiss field glasses:

Zeiss field glasses are high precision optics, binoculars, made in Germany. They are named after their inventor Carl Zeiss who opened his factory in 1846.

Mannlicher-Schoenauer 95:

The **Mannlicher-Schoenauer 95** is a rifle designed by Ferdinand Ritter von Mannlicher in 1895. The rifle was used by the Austro-Hungarian army, and was later improved to better equip the army.

German-Mauser:

The Mauser brothers created many weapons used at war. The **German-Mauser**, also known as Mauser 98, was initially used during World War I and allowed for higher pressured round to be fired safely.

Gewehr 98:

The **Gewehr 98** (abbreviated G98, **Gew 98** or M98) is a German bolt action Mauser rifle firing cartridges from a 5 round internal clip-loaded magazine that was the German service rifle from 1898 to 1935, when it was replaced by the Karabiner 98k

Schwarzloses:

The **Schwarzlose** was a machine gun invented by Andreas William Schwarzlose, and was primarily used by the Austro-Hungarian army during World War I. It was heavy and had a cyclic rate of 400 rounds. Its success lead to a continued use in World War II and the Polish-Bolshevik war.

M9 Beretta Pistol:

The **Beretta M9** was primarily used by the Italians during World War II. It was later adopted by the U.S. army and is still used today.

Carbine:

The **Carbine** was a light automatic rifle used by cavalry.

British Enfields:

The **British Enfield** was the quickest bolt firing rifle of the 20th century. It had a 25 inch barrel and a 10 round clip as well a bayonet. It was used primarily by British infantrymen during World War 1.

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