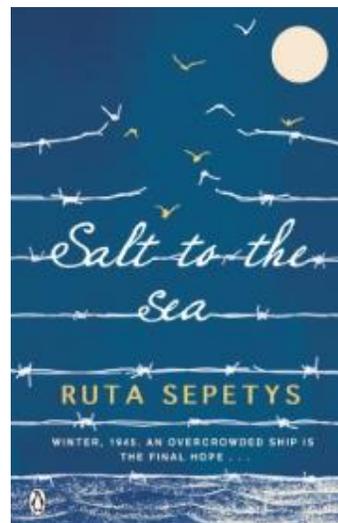


## 2017 Carnegie Medal shortlist Talking Points

Title: **Salt to the Sea**  
Author: **Ruta Sepetys**  
Publisher: **Puffin**



### UNTOLD STORIES

Had you heard of the story of the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff before reading this book?

The author has said, *“History, particularly hidden history, is absolutely a passion of mine”* – what do you think she means by “hidden history”? And what do you think the appeal is?

East Prussia in the winter of 1945 is not a setting most readers will be familiar with – how well does the author bring it to life for you?

### HISTORICAL FICTION

If you read the “author’s note”, you’ll know that Sepetys did a lot of research to write this book; why do you think doing that detailed historical research is important, given that this is fiction anyway?

And why might a writer choose to write fiction about it in the first place, rather than a work of historical fact? What does the fictionalising add to the reader’s experience?

### FOUR STORIES IN ONE

The narrative point of view moves between characters (teenagers from Germany, Poland, Lithuania and East Prussia); how well do the strands fit together and complement one another?

What does each of the main characters’ strands contribute to the big picture?

There were of course millions of people affected by war, and many thousands on the ship, and we’re just getting a glimpse of a tiny handful of lives (a few small tragedies among the vast tragedies) – how well do you think the author uses these characters to make us understand a wider picture, something beyond just their particular experiences?



The CILIP Carnegie  
& Kate Greenaway  
Children’s Book  
Awards

## SECRETS AND GUILT

Each teenager has things they have to keep secret, or guilt they carry around with them – what are these particular burdens for: **Joana?** **Florian?** **Emilia?**

What does the fact that even the good people all have dark secrets say about the world they've been living in?

## ALFRED

Alfred is not by any measure one of the novel's "good" characters – why do you think his part of the story is included alongside the others?

Is some attempt made by the author to get us to understand him, or even to sympathise him, or is he his purely irredeemably nasty?

Is it important, do you think, for fiction to help us try to understand even characters like this?

## ENDING

As we approach the final stages of the story, how have the relationships between the main characters shifted?

How do you feel about the very end, and the fate of these characters you've hopefully come to love?

Is there some hopeful message about humanity to be found among the wreckage?

## SOME OTHER QUESTIONS...

If you've read the author's *Shades of Gray*, did you notice the loose connection between the books?

Sepetys herself is the daughter of a refugee; did reading the stories in her book make you think differently about the often brutal experience that refugees are still going through in our world today?

The book is published in the UK as a "young adult" novel, but in some countries Sepetys is considered an adult writer, not a YA writer. Do you have strong feelings about how a book like this should be categorised for a particular readership, or does it not matter?

## AND FINALLY...

Does this Carnegie-shortlisted book deserve to win? Why, or why not?

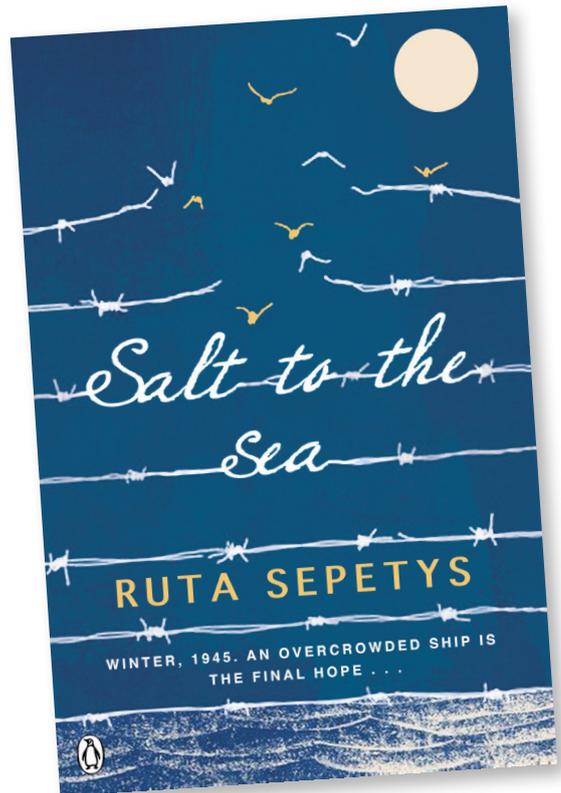
# SALT TO THE SEA

by Ruta Sepetys

Puffin

Shortlisted for the 2017 Carnegie Medal and the Amnesty CILIP Honour

*'A haunting and beautiful novel that breathes life into one of World War II's most terrifying and little-known tragedies'* – Judging panel



**Disrespect for human rights has led to horrific acts that have outraged people across the world. We all want a world where people can enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want. If these rights are made law, then people will be protected from tyranny and oppression.**

Preamble, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

This heartbreaking story takes place during World War II. It follows four young people on the Wilhelm Gustloff, a German ship promising freedom to those desperate to escape the advancing Russian Army. It tells a true but largely forgotten tragedy – the ship had over 9,000 refugees on board, including about 5,000 children, when it was sunk by a Soviet submarine. Nearly all were drowned.

‘War is catastrophe. It breaks families in irretrievable pieces. But those who are gone are not necessarily lost.’

Clara

## HUMAN RIGHTS THEMES IN THIS STORY

Discrimination, xenophobia and racism; war crimes including genocide and sexual violence; right to life and to safety; right to an identity; right to healthcare, food, clothing and housing; refugee rights; women’s rights; children’s rights.

## YOU CAN TALK ABOUT...

### The characters

- Each of the four main characters has a secret. How does it define them and their actions?
- To begin with, the four main characters don't even trust each other enough to exchange names. By the end, we see how connected they all are, even with Alfred. What do they have in common?
- Which character inspires you the most?
- Why do you think the author chose to include Alfred's point of view? What does his perspective show about Nazi ideology and rule?

### Discrimination and duty to others

- Why might Eva behave in the way she does?
- What might motivate Alfred? How can he think and act in the way that he does?
- What do you think about Mrs Kleist's actions?
- How can we change people's attitudes and behaviour?

### Human rights abuses in conflict

- The author doesn't shy away from the horrors of war. Give examples. Although this is fiction, they are based on a true story. How does that make you feel?
- Who was responsible for human rights abuses committed by Russian and German soldiers under orders from Stalin and Hitler?
- Do you have any answers to Florian's questions? 'What had human beings become? Did war make us evil or just activate an evil already lurking within us?'
- How do you feel when you read Alfred's rhyme to remember the groups of people who were declared racial, social and political enemies by Hitler?

### Safety and asylum

- Why does the Shoe Poet think that Joana might want some poison for herself?
- Why did the grandfather of the estate house dress in his uniform then kill his family and himself?
- The scenes at the dock and when the ship is sinking are horrific. Why would people risk such danger?
- You've seen news reports of Syrian refugees in their dinghies. How does that make you feel now?

### ACTIVITY

Many children today are like Klaus and Hannika – they are refugees and separated from their families. Imagine you have fled the country you call home and made it to the UK. But you are alone. Write a letter to your family describing who you have met, what life is like and how you feel. Think about whether you have been welcomed and how different people have responded to you.

### RESEARCH

Research the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff. It remains the worst single naval disaster in history. Why isn't it widely known? What happened? Who died, and who got to live? Why is it important to tell this story?

Find out about European Refugee movements in World War II including how many came to Britain and how they were treated.

## We are all born free and equal

The atrocities of World War II sparked a determination to protect the rights of all human beings, everywhere. On 10 December 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The preamble says it must be shared, learned by children and be a part of all our lives.

For a simplified version of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights go to [www.amnesty.org.uk/udhr](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/udhr)

For more free educational resources from Amnesty International go to [www.amnesty.org.uk/education](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/education)



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