

One Last Summer Catrin Collier

About the Book

Charlotte celebrates her 18th birthday with a spectacular ball in Allenstein, East Prussia, 1939. About to become engaged to a Count, she has reason to expect a glittering future, secure in the love of her family and friends. Charlotte records her hopes and dreams in her new diary. However, she has not realised that the world is about to be drawn into war and by the end of it Allenstein and East Prussia will cease to exist. Charlotte faces hardship and exile.

Years later, towards the end of her life, Charlotte shares the secrets of her original diary with her granddaughter Laura and together they make a journey to Allenstein, now the Polish town of Olsztyn and into Charlotte's past. Told through Charlotte's diary entries and her reflections as an old woman, this book, inspired by the real life experiences of the author's mother and grandmother, offers a moving history of German, Polish, Jewish and Russian experience and deals with the difficult question of those termed 'bystanders'. It should encourage older students to consider how ordinary German citizens could let a monstrous regime take control of their country, dominate their lives and murder their neighbours. It also shows clearly the consequences of rebellion against the Fuhrer, the treatment of prisoners and the plight of those living in disputed territory.

Discussion Points

Please note that some of the discussion points below may act as spoilers for the book's content.

1. think about two people, apart from Charlotte, who attend the birthday ball. How do their lives change between 1939 and 1945?
2. Charlotte's sister becomes an active member of the Nazi regime but her brother Wilhelm joins the plot against Hitler. What were the consequences of their actions for the rest of the family? How is it possible for two members of the same family to react to the Nazis and their leader in such contrasting ways?
3. in what ways is it fair to describe Charlotte as a 'bystander' to Nazi atrocity?
4. who, other than herself, did Charlotte put in danger when she entered a relationship with Sascha?

5. would you say that Charlotte's second 'marriage' was happier than her first?
6. why does Sam become so important to Charlotte?
7. how important is Laura's role in the story? Would the plot have worked so well without her?
8. why do you think it took Charlotte so long to make the journey to Poland?
9. do you think Charlotte's visit to Grunwaldsee helps her to come to terms with the past or as some might say 'bring closure'? What actions does Charlotte take just before, during and after her visit which show us she is trying to set things right?
10. the author says that she wrote the book as a tribute to 'lost people from a lost country'. Who are the lost people?