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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

The Tiger's Wife by Tea Obreht

Summary

In a Balkan country mending from years of conflict, Natalia, a young doctor, arrives on a mission of mercy at an orphanage by the sea. By the time she and her lifelong friend Zóra begin to inoculate the children there, she feels age-old superstitions and secrets gathering everywhere around her. Secrets her outwardly cheerful hosts have chosen not to tell her. Secrets involving the strange family digging for something in the surrounding vineyards. Secrets hidden in the landscape itself.

But Natalia is also confronting a private, hurtful mystery of her own: the inexplicable circumstances surrounding her beloved grandfather's recent death. After telling her grandmother that he was on his way to meet Natalia, he instead set off for a ramshackle settlement none of their family had ever heard of and died there alone. A famed physician, her grandfather must have known that he was too ill to travel. Why he left home becomes a riddle Natalia is compelled to unravel.

Grief struck and searching for clues to her grandfather's final state of mind, she turns to the stories he told her when she was a child. On their weekly trips to the zoo he would read to her from a worn copy of Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, which he carried with him everywhere; later, he told her stories of his own encounters over many years with "the deathless man," a vagabond who claimed to be immortal and appeared never to age.

But the most extraordinary story of all is the one her grandfather never told her, the one Natalia must discover for herself. One winter during the Second World War, his childhood village was snowbound, cut off even from the encroaching German invaders but haunted by another, fierce presence: a tiger who comes ever closer under cover of darkness. "These stories," Natalia comes to understand, "run like secret rivers through all the other stories" of her grandfather's life. And it is ultimately within these rich, luminous narratives that she will find the answer she is looking for. (From the publisher.)

Discussion Questions

1. Natalia says that the key to her grandfather's life and death "lies between two stories: the story of the tiger's wife, and the story of the deathless man." What power do the stories we tell about ourselves have to shape our identity and help us understand our lives?
2. Which of the different ways the characters go about making peace with the dead felt familiar from your own life? Which took you by surprise?

3. Natalia believes that her grandfather's memories of the village apothecary "must have been imperishable." What lesson do you think he might have learned from what happened to the Apothecary?
4. What significance does the tiger have to the different characters in the novel: Natalia, her grandfather, the tiger's wife, the villagers? Why do you think Natalia's grandfather's reaction to the tiger's appearance in the village was so different than the rest of the villagers?
5. "The story of this war—dates, names, who started it, why—that belongs to everyone," Natalia's grandfather tells her. But "those moments you keep to yourself" are more important. By eliding place names and specific events of recent Balkan history, what do you think the author is doing?
6. When the deathless man and the grandfather share a last meal before the bombing of Sarobor, the grandfather urges the deathless man to tell the waiter his fate so he can go home and be with his family. Is Gavran Gailé right to decide to stop telling people that they are going to die? Would you rather know your death was coming or go "in suddenness"?
7. Did knowing more about Luka's past make him more sympathetic? Why do you think the author might have chosen to give the back stories of Luka, Dariša the Bear, and the apothecary?
8. The copy of *The Jungle Book* Natalia's grandfather always carries around in his coat pocket is not among the possessions she collects after his death. What do you think happens to it?
9. The novel moves back and forth between myth and modern-day "real life." What did you think of the juxtaposition of folklore and contemporary realism?
10. Of all the themes of this novel—war, storytelling, family, death, myth, etc.—which one resonated the most for you?

(Questions issued by publisher.)