

Q&A WITH RUTA SEPETYS

Q – How did you create Josie Moraine?

A – Years ago I was part of a mentoring program for young women. I met girls who were swept into the dysfunctional current that surrounded their home lives. But I also met young women who made difficult decisions and divorced themselves from a negative environment. That's incredibly hard. Those girls inspired me. They taught me that we can learn to fly, even if we're born with broken wings. The idea of that broken, yet beautiful bird became Josie Moraine.

Q – Why New Orleans?

A – New Orleans is unlike any city in America and such a rich backdrop for a novel. Its cultural diversity is woven into the food, the music, the architecture — even the local superstitions. It's full of secrets and dark doorways. It's a sensory experience on all levels and there's a story lurking around every corner.

Q – Why do you enjoy writing historical fiction?

A – History is full of secrets. Writing historical fiction is a bit like being a detective and I love that aspect.

You really have to research and dig in order to unearth information that will be interesting to readers.

Q – How did you research the book?

A – I took several trips to New Orleans and spent many days at the Williams Research Center. I also combed library archives. I walked Josie's paths that I describe in the book and interviewed people who had intimate knowledge of the underbelly of the city. My meetings were both fascinating and terrifying. I couldn't sleep at night. Scandals, murders, crooks, and crime—all beyond your wildest imagination.

And as a writer, I loved it!

The most incredible part of my research was being allowed into Norma Wallace's former brothel. I based Willie's house on Norma's. Standing in Norma's old bedroom, I imagined how Josie would bring Willie her coffee, where she'd count the money. I saw the girls' rooms upstairs, the hiding places, and the escape route through the courtyard for when the cops would show up. I could hear the voices of the characters in my head so clearly. I hope their personalities come across in the book.

Q – Why 1950?

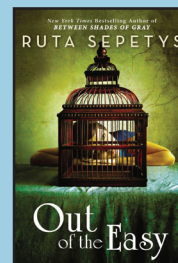
A – I chose the historical setting of post-war America because it's complex and often misunderstood. Following WWII, the U.S. experienced unparalleled prosperity. But the American Dream for some became the quiet nightmare for others. Societal pressures to conform were severe and deep tensions developed across social, racial, and gender lines. People escaped these pressures in various ways and the alluring “come hither” of New Orleans was one of them. But for some, the Big Easy was more than they could handle. People kept a lot of secrets back then. Illness and family troubles were often hidden from the public. Sometimes, what looked perfect on the outside was quietly rotting on the inside.

Q – Did the time period inspire the creation of the characters?

A – Well, the more I researched the time period, the surface sparkle faded to reveal a fair amount of pain. Learning of that pain helped me create characters like Willie, Patrick, Jesse, and Josie, who are all full of secrets, yet also quietly full of love. I then tried to contrast that pain with people like Cokie, Forrest Hearne, Charlotte, and Miss Paulsen — beautiful souls whose kindness and encouragement plant seeds of hope that eventually sprout courage.

Q – So how would you sum up the book?

A – I'd say it's a story about decisions and how they shape our destiny. Teenagers are constantly facing difficult decisions and are often worried about being perfect. But some of the most interesting people are those we can't categorize. Those are the characters I love to create, those who remind us that beauty can be perfect in imperfection. So I put a character who is perceived as broken in a situation of decision making. Sometimes, small acts of kindness and respect can impact young people more than we'll ever know. It could be a teacher, like Miss Paulsen, who believes in a student. Or it could be a David Copperfield, like Forrest Hearne, who inspires someone to dream big. Right now there's a teenager somewhere who is about to put on shoes that will take them in the wrong direction. We all know how easy it is to make bad decisions. But who knows, maybe they'll decide to put on the brown loafers and step out of the easy.



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- ★ “. . . beautifully written and deeply felt.”
—*Booklist*, starred review
- ★ “Sepetys’ flowing prose gently carries readers through the crushing tragedy of this tale that needs telling.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review
- ★ “A harrowing page turner . . .”
—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review
- ★ “[A] gripping story.”
—*School Library Journal*, starred review
- ★ “This novel should be on every high school library shelf.”
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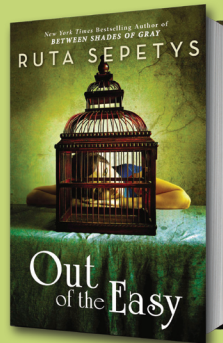
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DISCUSSION GUIDE



Out
of the Easy
RUTA SEPETYS

ABOUT THE BOOK



The year is 1950. The place is New Orleans, frequently referred to as ‘The Big Easy.’ The main character, Josie Moraine, is the teenage daughter of a French Quarter prostitute, who desperately wants to escape the sordid life to which she has been subjected and make a fresh start for herself somewhere far from New Orleans. An exceptionally intelligent and resourceful young woman who loves to read and longs for a “literary life,” Josie devises a plan that will make her dream of a college education in a new locale a reality. Josie is surrounded by complicated characters who lend both color and support to her existence, yet is also plagued by those determined to do her harm. The most vivid character of all is the city of New Orleans itself, rendered in messy, exuberant, and heartbreaking detail. Just as we think Josie may actually leave this all behind, she is dealt one crushing blow after another, including being the victim of a crime she did not commit, and enduring not one but three unexpected deaths. Will she overcome such tremendous upheaval to become the hero of her own life? Readers of Ruta Sepetys’ impeccably researched and emotionally riveting historical fiction novel will discover the answer.

Learn more at www.OutoftheEasy.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ruta Sepetys was born and raised in Michigan in a family of artists, readers, and music lovers. Her award-winning debut novel, *Between Shades of Gray* was inspired by her family’s history in Lithuania and is now published in 40 countries. Her second novel, *Out of the Easy*, combines her love of historical research, scandal, and the intriguing and storied French Quarter of New Orleans. Ruta lives with her family in Tennessee.

To learn more about this fascinating author, visit www.rutasepetys.com.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Throughout the book, the author uses language in unexpected and original ways. Two examples include her depiction of a dejected Patrick on page 140 where she writes that his “shoulders frowned,” and her description of Miss Paulsen’s “taffied scalp” (p. 152). What do you think each of these phrases means? What are some other examples of imagery created by the author? Why do you believe she made these choices as an author? (Reading Standard 4)
- Unlike many of the people in her life, Josie is an avid reader. How does her love of reading bring her closer to certain characters and further separate her from others? Cite specific examples from the book. (Reading Standard 1)
- Why does Josie become obsessed with Forrest Hearne, a stranger she met only once? How do her thoughts about him change after his death? Cite specific evidence to support your answers. (Reading Standard 2)
- What role does the setting—the French Quarter of New Orleans in 1950—play in the story? How might the story be different if it were set in the present in your hometown? (Reading Standard 6)
- Why do you think Willie would only pay for Josie to go to college in New Orleans? (Reading Standard 3)
- The author includes a number of literary references throughout the text, incorporating titles and quotations of both classic literature and books that were popular during the time period in which the book was set. Why do you believe she chose to include these references? (Reading Standard 5)
- On page 41, Josie remembers a line written by Keats: “A thing of beauty is a joy forever.” Josie’s life and her surroundings are filled with ugliness, but there are also things of beauty that bring her joy. What are some of those things? (Reading Standard 1)
- On page 260, a policeman questioning Josie says, “I told him he was going to a goat’s house for wool.” What does that mean? How does it make Josie feel? (Reading Standard 1)
- On page 211, Josie and Willie have a conversation in which they compare each other to characters from Cinderella. What do you think Willie means when she says Josie is like “Cinderella with the stepmother heart”? How does this comment make Josie feel? (Reading Standard 1)

- Josie says about herself, “No matter how I parted my hair, I couldn’t part from the crack I had crawled out of” (p. 258). Why can’t Josie see the good in herself the way others do? (Reading Standard 1)
- Josie and Jesse are both characters with very difficult pasts who could have easily chosen a lifestyle of “hustle and blow” like many of the other people in their lives. Why do you think each of them is able to choose a different path? (Reading Standard 2)
- While John Lockwell is not a sympathetic character, Josie essentially blackmails him to get what she wants. How do you feel about that decision on her part and why? (Reading Standard 3)
- Josie often reflects on the concept and elements of family. How would you define family and what are some things that create feelings of family for Josie? (Reading Standard 1)
- Josie makes a decision to do something abhorrent to her in order to get the money she needs from John Lockwell but is not able to go through with her plan. What is your reaction to that scene? How does the author create those feelings in you as a reader? (Reading Standard 5)
- Patrick has a secret that is never explicitly stated in the text. What is his secret? How does the author use foreshadowing to reveal it? What are specific clues from the text that illuminate what he is hiding about himself? (Reading Standard 5)
- How does Patrick feel about the part of himself that he is keeping secret? How do you know this? (Reading Standard 1)
- What happens when Patrick tries to explain his secret to Josie? Why do you think she never confronts him with the fact that she understands what he is hiding? (Reading Standard 3)
- On page 284, Josie recalls the following quote from Keats: “I love you the more in that I believe you have liked me for my own sake and for nothing else.” How does that quotation apply to Josie’s relationship with Patrick? (Reading Standard 3)
- Josie’s mother is an extremely unlikeable character. Does she have any redeeming qualities? Cite specific examples from the text that influenced your feelings about her. (Reading Standard 3)
- Shakespeare wrote in *The Merchant of Venice*, “The sins of the father are to be laid upon the children.” In Josie’s case, she is punished for her mother’s sins in a number of ways. What are some of Josie’s mother’s sins for which Josie is punished and in what ways is she punished? (Reading Standard 2)

- Why does Josie choose to change her name? What is the significance of the name she chooses? (Reading Standard 1)
- The author chose to write this story solely from Josie’s point of view. How did that choice affect you as a reader? Select another character from the story and describe how your reading experience would have been different if the story had been told from her/his perspective? (Reading Standard 6)
- On page 237, Josie muses about how John Lockwell displays his history publicly in family photographs, how Willie keeps hers hidden in a drawer, and how she keeps her own history and dreams “on a list in my desk and, now, buried in the back garden.” What does she mean by each of these statements? Where do you keep your history and dreams? (Reading Standard 3)
- *Out of the Easy* is a work of historical fiction. Any author of this genre must do extensive research to ensure that all the historical details included in the text are accurate. Ruta Sepetys describes some of the resources she used in writing this book in the “Acknowledgments” included at the end. What historical details did she include that sparked your curiosity as a reader? How might you go about finding out if a specific detail is factual or fictional? (Reading Standard 8)
- Josie quotes *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens on page 265. Why is this quote significant? Is Josie the hero of her own life? What would you have done if confronted with some of the circumstances she faced? (Reading Standard 3)
- Josie wants desperately to escape from New Orleans because she wants to use her mind “for study and research instead of trickery and street hustle” (p. 267). Do you think she accomplished that goal? Why or why not? Cite specific evidence from the text to support your opinions. (Reading Standard 2)
- Were you surprised by the outcome of Josie’s decision to apply to Smith College? What do you imagine will happen to Josie after the story ends? (Reading Standard 10)

About this Discussion Guide:

The *Out of the Easy* discussion guide has been correlated to the Common Core Standards for grades 7 to 10. This discussion guide was created by April Whatley Bedford, the Interim Dean of the College of Education and Human Development at the University of New Orleans. She is a past president of the Children’s Literature and Reading Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association, an active member of the Children’s Literature Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English, and a former editor of the *Journal of Children’s Literature*. She was the 2008 Chair of the Notable Books for a Global Society award committee and the 2011 Chair of the Notable Children’s Books in the Language Arts award committee. She lives in the heart of the French Quarter and can’t imagine ever wanting to leave New Orleans.