



Colorado Book Club Resource

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE WEIGHT OF A PIANO

BY CHRIS CANDER

1. Why do you think the author decided to open the story with a description of the origins of the Blüthner piano? Did anything surprise you about the piano's history? What major themes of the novel does this first chapter foretell?
2. How would you describe Clara Lundy? What has she "always prided herself on" (page 13), and why does she refuse romantic advances and offers of help from Peter? What leads to the failure of Clara's relationships with Ryan and Bobby? What does this reveal about her ideas of love and connection? What values ultimately seem to be the most important to Clara?
3. How does Katya come to own the Blüthner piano? Who owned the piano before her, and what did people imagine about the piano's former owner? Were they correct in their assumptions about this person? How did Katya feel about the former owner? What did Katya's father believe about this person's character, and what made him think this?
4. Explore the theme of memory. What does Clara remember about her parents, their relationship, and their home life together? What were "the moments Clara recalled most vividly" (page 21)? Would you say that her memory is reliable? How are the other characters impacted by their own memories? What might the novel reveal or suggest about the nature of memory?
5. Analyze the treatment of loss and grief in the novel. How does Clara cope with the loss of her parents and their home? How do her new caretakers try "to soothe her" (page 22)? What method seems to be most helpful to her? Where does she learn "how to live with her losses" (page 22)? What losses do the other characters suffer, and how do they cope with these losses and the grief that accompanies them? Are any of the characters able to overcome their grief or reach catharsis? If so, how?
6. Consider the important role that art plays in the lives of the characters. Which of the characters create art, and why do they do this? What was Katya's first love? Why does Greg enjoy photography? What does Boris believe can be accomplished via dance and performance? How are these characters affected by their proximity to the arts? Likewise, how are the characters in the novel affected by their experience of art created by others?
7. Why does Mikhail insist that the family leave their home in Leningrad and go to America? How does Katya feel about this? What does the novel reveal about the experience of immigration and the American Dream? What does the process of immigration entail? What hardships does the family endure as they make this transition? What must they leave behind? What risks do they take? Is the family ultimately better off in America? Discuss.
8. Why does Boris visit Katya after three and a half years? What does he tell Katya is his "wish" (page 67)? What does he believe is their duty? How does Katya respond to his proposal? What makes her believe that the visit may be a test?



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9. Why does Clara decide to sell the Blüthner piano, and who buys it? What does the purchaser say that he wants with the piano? What does he tell Clara he is “trying to depict” (page 74) with the piano? What does he want the piano to symbolize?
10. Who does Katya believe is talking to her once she is in America? What does she hear? Why does she ask her husband if they can visit Death Valley? How does she feel when she looks at the photographs her husband took of her there? What does she believe they reveal?
11. What fable does Katya share with her son Grisha and what is the message at the heart of this fable? What does the story reveal about its storyteller? What does Grisha not realize about the story until he is an adult?
12. What surprises Greg about Clara’s piano when he finally gets to see it in person, and why does it make him emotional? What didn’t he notice in the photographs of the piano at the time of its purchase? Why does Clara decide to follow Greg from this point on?
13. Who does Katya receive a letter from, and what message does it contain? What does the sender tell Katya will change the world? Why is Katya overjoyed after receiving the letter, and how does she offer to repay the messenger who delivers the letter? How does this decision affect her life and the life of her son?
14. What does the novel suggest about how well we can know other people—and ourselves? How well would you say the characters know themselves? How do they come to know themselves better? What causes them to misunderstand others, and what helps them to correct these misunderstandings and come to a better knowledge of one another?
15. What is remarkable about the sailing stones that Greg and Clara see in Death Valley? What does Greg think they look like they are doing? To what or to whom does he compare them?
16. Why was Greg determined to take the piano to Death Valley? What did he plan to do with the piano there? Why does he later change his mind and what does he decide to do with it instead?
17. How are Clara and Greg connected, and how does each respond to this connection? How did Clara come to own the Blüthner piano? What effect does the revelation of the piano’s provenance have on Clara, and how does it influence or alter her understanding of her own past?
18. Why do you think the author chose to include a passage told from the point of view of the piano itself? What effect did this anthropomorphism have on you as a reader? What “weight” (308) does the piano carry?
19. What choices does Clara make at the conclusion of the story? Were you surprised by her decisions? Why or why not? What becomes of the piano? What does Clara mean when she says that she doesn’t “want to be Sisyphus anymore” (311)?

Questions from the publisher.



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