

SAPPHIRE SKIES

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS



WARNING: SPOILERS BELOW

1. The motifs and themes of love, friendship, betrayal and uncertainty flow through the lives of the characters of *Sapphire Skies*. What other themes do you see in the novel?
2. What do you think about Lily travelling to Russia to help her overcome her grief? Was it a natural and wise step? Or was this the kind of country to exacerbate grief?
3. What do you think of Scott's 'affirmations'? Lily remarks on how he usually chooses an inappropriate one for her. What's your view of such techniques?
4. Natasha was charmed by Stalin when she met him at the dinner in honour of Valery Chkalov. Do you understand her childish obsession with him?
5. Two of the most reviled dictators the world has known are Stalin and Hitler. Do you think one was worse than the other? In your view, are they equally heinous?

6. Do all dictators need to be brutal? And is being unpredictable brutal leader more effective than simply brutal?
7. During the dinner in honour of Valery Chkalov, Natasha reflects on the fact that men and women in Russia are equal. Do you think she was right? Were they more 'liberated' than women in Western countries? How equal do you think they were?
8. The Russian 588th bomber regiment, were named *Nachthexen* (Night Witches) by the Germans because they would fly to a target then idle their engines to glide in and release their bombs, with only the sound of the breeze the planes made giving their approach away – like witches on broomsticks. They flew in slow old wood and canvas biplane crop-dusters, which had the advantage of flying at speeds lower than the stall speed of Messerschmitts and the Focke-Wulfs, making them difficult to chase and shoot down. The women's acts were heroic and brave, yet they are not widely known and celebrated. Why do you think that is? And from where do you think these women found their courage?
9. Patriotism seems to be a core value in the Russian people. How much do you think patriotism and the fight against a common enemy helped take the ordinary person's mind off the regime they operated under?
10. Natasha loses her father, her home and her relatively comfortable life when her father is arrested, yet she refuses to publicly denounce him. She constantly lives in fear of people finding out about him. What would you have done in her place?
11. Natasha chooses not to finish off the Black Diamond. The consequences of this were fatal for Colonel Smirnov and beneficial for Natasha when she was captured. In not killing him when she could have, was Natasha showing her humanity, a failure of courage, stupidity or something else? Were the consequences ultimately tragic for Natasha as well?
12. Despite being a member of the NKVD, and complicit in Stalin's purges, Valentin's brother Fyodor shows some restraint and conscience, and eventually his guilt causes him to suicide. In contrast, the officer that Natasha is interrogated by in the Lubyanka shows no humanity or regard

for truth. How do you think Stalinist Russian functionaries such as him maintained their capacity for brutality and torture of their fellow countrymen and women?

13. Natasha and Svetlana go through with the pact they made each other if they were captured by the Germans. Do you think you could have done as they did?
14. Natasha finds a staunch friend in Svetlana through her time in the air force, a comrade in Dora at Auschwitz, and a protector in Nikita at Kolyma. Were these relationships circumstantial or do you think there was something in Natasha's character that drew people to her?
15. Valentin and Natasha snatch love in the face of war. Do you think their love would have flourished normally?
16. Lily eventually learns to put her grief aside. How much of that do you put down to becoming absorbed in a new life, attraction to a new man, or the fact that Russia, with her history of tragedy, helps put her grief into perspective?
17. Luka is very different from Adam. Do you think he might be a better partner for her than Adam?
18. Was Natasha right in resisting a meeting with Valentin in the end? What positive things do you think would have come from a meeting and what negative things?