

Sonata for Miriam Reading Guide

1. Olsson begins *Sonata for Miriam* with an epigraph by Szymon Laks, which reads, “But words must be found, for besides words, there is almost nothing” (p. 4). What does this mean? How does it connect to the events of the novel?
2. In the beginning of the book, both Adam and Cecilia live on islands. How does the idea of an island work as a metaphor for their personalities? With that in mind, why is it significant that Adam eventually moves to Krakow?
3. In a very vivid way, Moishe embodies the truth that we all experience: our lives are filled with the ghosts of those we loved and lost. What was your reaction to the way he lives and how he honors the memories of Marta and others?
4. Wanda’s decision to take Adam as her own certainly saved his life, but what effect did it have on her life? What did she gain from this choice? In particular, look at what she says to Adam on her deathbed. What does this tell us about her feelings?
5. Adam is presented with the impossible task of choosing between Cecilia and Miriam. Did he make the right decision? Why?
6. Like Adam, have you ever been prompted to action in pursuit of a family secret or unsolved mystery—to satisfy a question, seek out a person, or return to a place? What was the result?
7. Both Adam and Cecilia find emotional nourishment in their respective arts, yet Adam temporarily abandons his while Cecilia pursues hers to the exclusion of all else. Can art serve as an emotional refuge? Between Adam and Cecilia, whose approach do you believe is healthier?
8. What is the effect of hearing Cecilia tell her own life’s story instead of having Adam tell it? Did it shed light on her decisions earlier in the novel? Do you blame her, sympathize with her, or both?

9. "Memories are unreliable," says Adam. "I carry memories that are now so worn I can't possibly tell if they are accurate. I am sure they have been shaped by my handling" (p. 9). How does this statement affect your reading of a novel that is so rooted in memory? Do you have a similar experience with your own memories? Is it necessary for memories to be accurate, or does the act of remembering serve a deeper emotional purpose?
10. How do the poems at the beginning of sections I, II, and III connect to the themes of those sections? Express in your own words what you believe each poem says.

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