

About Purge

Western Estonia, 1992.

Aliide Truu, an aging widow, finds an abused young woman collapsed in front of her house in the Estonian countryside. The girl, Zara, says she's fleeing from her husband. Although Aliide is suspicious, she offers the girl shelter. As their encounter evolves, Aliide finds out that Zara is a sex-trafficking victim on the run from her pimps. When Zara shows Aliide an old picture of Aliide and her sister, Ingel, it becomes clear that Zara's choice of sanctuary isn't coincidental. Zara's desperation brings back nauseating memories from Aliide's past. With the perpetrators on Zara's trail, Aliide once again has to decide how far she will go for her loved ones.

Purge – narrated through multiple story lines— follows the story of one Estonian family through three generations from the Soviet occupation to the regaining of independence in 1991. Purge is not just about a divided Europe; it goes deeper. Purge is a story of a small country that is violated by the East and ignored by the West. It is also an exploration of the female experience of the loss of freedom and the price of survival in an authoritarian state.

Discussion topics

1. When Aliide finds Zara lying in her yard at the beginning of the novel, she is immediately suspicious. Why is that? What does Aliide have to worry about living in the peaceful countryside? Even though there is an uninvited guest in Aliide's house, she keeps up her daily routine. What is Aliide's everyday life like? What do you think the descriptions of these everyday activities represent in the novel?
2. Zara is living in Vladivostok when her best friend Oksanka comes to visit her. Oksanka arrives in the backseat of a Volga, a vehicle Zara has been taught to fear. Why is a Volga something to be afraid of? Oksanka's visit in Purge is brief but important. Do you think Oksanka knows what kind of future awaits Zara in Berlin? If so, why do you think she does what she does? Why is Zara so eager to leave with Oksanka? What kind of dreams does she have?
3. In Vladivostok there is a wardrobe with three suitcases: Zara's, her mother's, and her grandmother's. Why do they have these suitcases? In Zara's childhood something happened involving the suitcases. What was it, and what effect did it have on the bond between Zara and her grandmother?
4. Aliide seems to envy Ingel in every possible way. Discuss the relationship of these two sisters. Is Ingel as pure and innocent as everyone seems to think? Is Aliide wicked? Do you think Aliide wants Hans just because he is Ingel's, or

- is she really in love with him? How do you feel about the idea of l'amour fou, crazy love. Is it purely pathological or in some ways understandable?
5. When each of the sisters decides to save Hans, they are making perhaps one of the hardest decisions imaginable. Are their actions justified? Can it be said whose crime is worse, Aliide's or Ingel's?
 6. Hans writes that he is not a man anymore. He feels he is fragile in some way, even weak. What do you think about Hans's decision to flee to the forest? Does he love his country more than his family? Is he brave or cowardly? What about his decision to live incognito under Aliide's and Martin's roof? Does he obey Aliide too easily? What do you think might have happened to Hans if things were different and he could have fled?
 7. Why does Aliide choose Martin? Do you think their union is purely a marriage of convenience, or do they learn to love each other? What benefits does the marriage offer Aliide? What might be the reasons why Aliide never leaves Martin? Do you think Martin knows what happened to both Aliide and Linda?
 8. Pasha and Lavrenti represent oppression in the story. What kind of violence, both physical and psychological, do they use against Zara? How much alike are Aliide's experiences in 1940's Estonia and Zara's experiences in 1990's Berlin? Discuss this comparison.
 9. Lavrenti says to Pasha that he doesn't love Russia. What do you think he means by that? What kind of patriotism does Lavrenti represent? What about Pasha?
 10. Aliide Truu is a complex person. Do you dislike her, or do you feel you understand her in some ways? What about Zara? Both Zara and Aliide are survivors. What else do they have in common? Is killing too easy for them? Do you think they go too far to survive?
 11. The final section of the book contains the secret service reports. What are we to make of them? How much light do they shed on the characters of Aliide, Martin and Hans?
 12. Flies and boots both play an important role in *Purge*. Discuss what they represent. The name of the first chapter is *The Fly Always Wins*. Does the fly win?
 13. What do you think about the structure of *Purge*? Is the novel classical or modern in structure? What about Oksanen's way of using point-of-view characters? Why do you think Ingel doesn't have a voice of her own?
 14. What about the title, *Purge*? What kind of connotations does it bring to mind?

Discussion topics based on Purge's historical background

15. The bloodiest – and the most well-known— dictatorships of the 20th Century were Nazi-Germany and the Soviet Union. Discuss similarities and differences between the two. Why do you think Stalin is so often considered the lesser of two evils when compared to Hitler? What makes a country an authoritarian state?
16. According to Anne Applebaum, author of *Gulag: A History*, the Gulag "was the branch of the State Security that operated the penal system of forced labour camps and associated detention and transit camps and prisons. The Gulag system is infamous as the place where many millions died from inhuman work conditions and hunger."
17. Many have asked why there hasn't been a "Nuremberg Trial" for those guilty of atrocities in the Gulag. Do you think that there should have been or should be one? What would be achieved by it, if anything?
18. Many scholars think that integration between two nations is impossible if both parties don't share the same view of the country's history. Lately Russia has been attempting to rehabilitate the historical image of Stalin. How do you think this will affect relationships between Russia and Estonia, or other countries that were once occupied by the Soviet Union? How important is a sense of history?
19. Land reform is a policy whereby the government administers possession and use of land. Some might call it a form of legalized theft. In Estonia, land reform still continues today. If you had lived in a house you inherited from your family and then you found out it was stolen from somebody, how would you react? When does something that was stolen become the possession of the one who stole it, if ever?
20. Human trafficking is the fastest-growing criminal industry in the world, with the total annual revenue for trafficking in persons estimated to be between USD \$5 billion and \$9 billion. The UN estimates that nearly 2.5 million people from 127 different countries are being trafficked around the world. Why do you think this horrible industry is growing so fast, and why in our "civilized" world can human beings so often be treated as a commodity?
21. According to Wikipedia, post-colonial literature involves writings that deal with issues of de-colonization or the political and cultural independence of people formerly subjugated to colonial rule. Many postcolonial books have been written, but only a few are about colonization under the Soviet Union. What do you think are the reasons for this?

Suggestions for further reading

- Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys
- Blonde Roots by Bernardine Evaristo
- The Gulag Archipelago by Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn,
- A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini,
- Gulag: A History by Anne Applebaum,
- The Natashas: Inside the New Global Sex Trade by Victor Malarek,
- Café Europa; Life after Communism by Slavenka Drakulic,
- The History of Love by Nicole Krauss,
- Half of a Yellow Sun by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
- Suite Francaise by Irène Némirovsky,
- The House of the Dead by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Critical praise

“Purge is that very rare thing, a sheer masterpiece...A marvel....I hope that everyone in the world who knows how to read, reads Purge.” —*Nancy Huston, author of Fault Lines*

“Set in 1992, only three years removed from the joyful optimism undammed by the demolition of the Berlin Wall, Purge burns through the mists to show how decades of debasement have twisted society in the former USSR into one characterized by crime and cruelty. Oksanen couches this larger theme within a tight, unconventional crime novel, one punctuated by dreadful silences, shameful revelations and repellent intimacies. By examining the toll of history on a close, personal level, Oksanen . . . makes the cost of mere survival sickeningly palpable. . . . Evoking both noir and fairy tales . . . Purge is an engrossing read.” —*Oliver Villalon, National Public Radio (US)*

“A dark, harrowing, and at times difficult read that wrings every ounce of emotion from the reader.” —*The Bookseller (UK)*

“This wonderfully subtle thriller . . . captures both the tragic consequences of one of Europe’s biggest conflicts and the universal horrors that war inflicts on women. With a tone somewhere between Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* and the best of the current crop of European crime novelists, this bitter gem promises great things from the talented Oksanen.” —*Kirkus Reviews (US)*

“A riveting tale...Oksanen adeptly handles dual story lines and multiple points of view as she keeps us turning pages to reach the dramatic conclusion. Highly recommended for fans of classic Russian writers like Tolstoy and Pasternak, as well as those who enjoy a contemporary tale of lust and betrayal.” —*Library Journal (US)*