



Sixteen

By Auguste Corteau

A Study Guide

Synopsis

A famous Soviet composer kills himself upon the announcement of Stalin's death, leaving behind a symphony that provokes mass defections. A haunting tale of love, loss, and obsession, *Sixteen* is also a literary thriller centered around the mystery that is music. Can music bring about a revolution?

A few hours after the death of Stalin is announced on the radio, spreading panic and bereavement throughout the Soviet Union, Pyotr Rabinovich—Russia's most cherished composer, a famously reclusive man, and lifelong Party pet—is found dead of an apparent suicide on a park bench in the heart of wintry Moscow.

At the same time, a recording of his swansong symphony, *Sixteen*, has been smuggled in an unknown number of copies across several Eastern-bloc borders and is broadcasted nonstop by illegally operating radio stations, causing a bizarre, and possibly ruinous, outbreak: the en masse defection of its audience, a rapidly growing crowd of people who, moments after listening to Rabinovich's parting musical conundrum, drop everything and abandon their homes and homelands in a state of blind frenzy.

As the mystery of this widespread wave of civil disobedience threatens to destabilize the orphaned USSR, Alexei Samoilenko, Rabinovich's disciple, protégé, and closest friend, is ordered by the Party to investigate the inexplicable phenomenon, along with what truly lies in the heart of *Sixteen*—an answer to the riddle of the music's potentially destructive power.

Thus, begins a quest that will send Alexei across the continents, in order to trace Rabinovich's steps while he worked, in utter secrecy, on his final work—an adventure which, in turn, will uncover a deeper mystery that dates back to the composer's little-known youth and the bloody days of the Revolution.

A playful tale of alternative history, a frantically paced whodunit, and a harrowing fable on the riddle that is music, *Sixteen* is a story for all the people who would give up their lives in a heartbeat for what they hold dear.

Author Bio

Auguste Corteau (pen name of Petros Chatzopoulos) was born in Thessaloniki, Greece, in 1979. Over the last 18 years, he has published more than 20 books in Greek. An internationally bestselling author, critically acclaimed translator of English-language literature, and a vocal LGBT+ activist, he lives in Athens with his husband.

Reasons to Include This Book in the Classroom?

Sixteen offers the rare opportunity for teachers to provide an interdisciplinary experience to their students. Auguste Corteau's novel combines a literary canvas steeped in historical details and a vivid examination of the role that music plays in life.

Study Questions Knowledge Section

1. *Sixteen* has many aphorisms. Compile a list of aphorisms and discuss how they foreshadow the events that occur in the novel.
2. Corteau embeds historical events and characters in *Sixteen*. Identify three real events and three fictional events and explain how each impacts the story.
3. In a one-page essay, describe the various forms love takes in *Sixteen*.
4. Discuss the role of God and/or religion for three characters in *Sixteen*.
5. Google videos of Nikita Khrushchev. Do you believe the author's portrayal of Khrushchev is accurate? Why or why not?

Comprehension Section

1. Why did Rabinovich lead Alexei on this "Sixteen scavenger hunt" (page 270)? What does Alexei learn about himself on each stop of his journey?
2. Why does Alexei run from the dacha on the island at the end of the book? What fuels his feelings of fury, grief, and betrayal?
3. What is the significance of the number sixteen in *Sixteen*?

Application Section

1. By the end of *Sixteen*, "Alexei was now convinced that this was *Sixteen's* influence: it commanded you to go after your heart's most passionate desire, be it person, animal, object, or place" (page 284). Has a piece of art, musical or otherwise, ever compelled you to action? If so, what piece? In what ways does art drive our actions as empathetic beings?
2. Did you question Alexei's reliability as a narrator? If so, what made you question the truth of his observations? Give three examples of what made you question his reliability.

Analysis Section

1. Compare and contrast Alexei's relationships with his mother and with his Uncle Petya.
2. How has Alexei changed by the end of the novel? How has he remained the same?
3. Compare and contrast Alexei's perceptions of Rabinovich and Khrushchev.

Synthesis Section

1. Listen to one musical piece mentioned in *Sixteen*. What images does it conjure in your mind? Write a scene based on the images you see.
2. Write a one-page scene of *Sixteen* from Uncle Petya's point of view.
3. Imagine Alexei's future and write a journal entry from his point of view. What will he be doing in ten years? In twenty years?

Evaluation Section

1. The Soviet era's morality and social pressures limited Alexei's expression of his sexuality. Discuss the restrictions Russian society places on individuals today and how they are enforced. How do these modern restrictions differ from the Soviet era?
2. What is the nature of truth? Is the objective truth more important, or the truth we create for ourselves? Which truth was more important to Alexei and why?

3. Evaluate Alexei's question at the end of the novel: "Who was luckier after all was said and done? Was it the people who had died, their hearts brimming with love, or those whom *Sixteen* had left unaffected, men and women who apparently loved nothing so much as to give up their lives for a glimpse of it" (page 285)? Is the cost of love too high for Alexei, as it may have been for Semyonovich, the Holocaust survivor?

Book Group Section

1. Discuss the similarities and differences of oppression depicted in *Sixteen* and present-day American society.
2. What style of music do you imagine *Sixteen* to be? What type of music moves you? In what circumstances is music likely to influence your mood?
3. Think of your opinion and knowledge of Russia before you read the book. Has the book changed your opinion of Russia? How? Did it make you want to visit Russia more or less than you previously did?
4. What art form resonates most for you? Why? Have other people influenced your preference? If the answer is yes, how so? If the answer is no, what has influenced your preference?
5. Discuss the role of women in the novel. Do you believe the lack of active, participatory female characters reflects Soviet society, a symptom of Alexei's biases, or an intentional decision by the author? Support your answer.
6. Thomas Mann is quoted as saying of an artist in general, "his personal feelings initiate him into those of the criminal." What does Mann mean by this? How can art be considered a crime in the eyes of society?



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