
WEAPONIZING WRITTEN THOUGHT: TRUTH AND PERSONAL SACRIFICE IN *I MUST BETRAY YOU*

Amanda K. Stinemetz
Fort Hays State University

Abstract

The author reviews the young adult historical novel *I Must Betray You* (2023) by Ruta Sepetys, providing a summary, personal connection, and potential audiences and applications.

Keywords: young adult historical novel, *I Must Betray You*, Ruta Sepetys, communism, isolationism, endurance

In *I Must Betray You* (2023), Ruta Sepetys illustrates with historical accuracy the horror of communism in Romania. Specifically, Sepetys provides an in-depth view of the communist regime weeks before its violent fall in 1989. We experience this communist Romanian life through our protagonist, Cristian, a boy in his final year of high school whose life has existed exclusively under the communist regime. Through him, we see the extent to which the Romanian government not only dictates how people are to live, but it controls how they should think and feel (revealing the government is more likely totalitarianism than communism). Again, it is through Cristian that we see how people isolate from others as a form of self-preservation and survival; people are heavily driven to do so by suffocating paranoia and crippling fear that *the securitate*, the government's secret police, will land relentless blows of punishment to those who either outwardly disobey or to those who display even the slightest displeasure with communist operations. The most significant forms of betrayal to the mother country involve listening to the radio, using birth control, and expressing personal thought (even in written form) that differs from that of the collective. Interestingly, we learn of Cristian's gracefully subtle defiance as he writes secretly in a hidden notebook, a practice encouraged by his grandfather, Bunu.

This novel would appeal to high school readers because they directly parallel in age to Cristian, his sister Cici, his love interest Liliana, and the majority of their peers in the book. Moreover, as the year 2025 continues to unfold, the threat to freedom of speech is becoming more prevalent and prominent; this is evidenced by government-endorsed retaliation towards journalists that speak unfavorably about political directives. It is the new reality for American high school students that their words, if perceived as defiant by the administration, have the potential to warrant consequence. This is a critical issue that can be taught to the students; however, it is potentially problematic in that discussion and analysis of different governments (democracy and communism) in a classroom may invite emotional commentary that is uninformed and impatient. In short, some students might be more invested in arguing about political stances than having an open discussion about subtle threats to democracy and what is taken from the people under communism.

This novel can be incorporated into the classroom in a more structured, non-political way by focusing discussion on mental health (e.g., anxiety, depression, paranoia), family dynamics,

reproductive rights, sacrifice, and the power of expressive writing. It would also be ideal for a collaborative project with history, namely focusing on communism (or the fall of communism) in Europe.

Although there are countless aspects about this novel that I appreciate, what I enjoy most is the portrayal of human relationships, namely within Cristian's family unit. While reading the book, I often questioned what I would sacrifice in a similar situation to keep my family safe, secure, and healthy.

Author Biography

Dr. Amanda K. Stinemetz is an Assistant Professor of English at Fort Hays State University, where she serves as the Coordinator of Secondary ELA Teacher Education for the Department of English and Modern Languages. She has 15-plus years of experience in ESL instruction for university time-intensive Culture and Language Programs. Similarly, she has 13-plus years of teaching ENG 101/102 to traditional college freshmen and Dual Enrollment credit to high school seniors. Previously, when working at Fairmont State University (WV), Amanda was the DE Coordinator for English, providing DE English courses to the majority of high schools in the state (online, serving over 300 students per semester). Currently, while working at FHSU, Amanda helps manage the family farm in Northwest Kansas which operates a "pick your own" peony flower farm (12 acres of peonies) and offers a "watermelon patch" (15 acres of watermelon hills) to the public. She may be reached at akstinemetz@fhsu.edu.