

The Secret Countess

By Eva Ibbotson

In the Prologue, we are given a brief history of Anna and her family. On a world map trace her flight from Russia to England.

We are told that Anna was given Faberge animals each Christmas. Who or what was Faberge?

Chaliapin is said to have sung to Anna, who was he?

Who was Diaghilev and what was the Maryinsky?

Why do you think the author has included these historical figures in her work? What do they bring to the reader?

Can you find a map of St Petersburg and show the landmarks mentioned?

Anna is described as a 'Tolstoyan' on page 6. Who was Tolstoy and why was he famous?

Why do you think Anna was so influenced by him even as a young child? What does this tell you about Anna's personality?

What insight does this Prologue give us into the life that Anna was used to leading in Russia? What examples can you find the back up your assertions in the text?

What influence did Anna have on the household? What evidence can you find to support this assumption?

Compare the way Anna and Muriel treat Ollie Byrne. Give examples from the book to support your ideas.

What impact do you think Muriel's comments to Ollie during the Dress rehearsal would have had?

Why is it important to treat everybody with kindness and respect, regardless of their disabilities?

In Chapter 4 Muriel is introduced. Compare and contrast Anna and Muriel using a Venn diagram. Find as many similarities or differences in their personalities, backgrounds and outlook on life as possible. What do you notice?

With whom would you prefer to form a friendship?

Give your reasons and explain using the text to justify

Why is Anna so determined to keep her new life as a servant secret from Peter?

Muriel is said to be interested in 'New Eugenics' which is the technological control of human evolution allowing us to produce 'Faultless' human beings. What is your opinion on this theory? Discuss your reasons for supporting or opposing this philosophy.

What does the author think of this theory? How does she persuade you throughout the novel to share her point of view?

Write a diary as if you are Niannka, describe your flight from the city and your journey to try to meet up with the Grazinskys. Describe the adventures you had and the trials and tribulations you had to overcome to finally get to London.