

## ***The Extinction of Irena Rey* Reading Group Guide**

1. The novel begins with a “warning” note from the translator, who we learn is also a character in the book. In this warning, Alexis writes, “Trust is crucial to every stage of the translation process” (1). In Alexis’s footnotes, Emilia is represented throughout the novel as an unreliable narrator. But how would you classify the reliability of Alexis’s translation—does she earn our trust as readers? Why or why not?
2. Relatedly, how does this framing set your expectations for the reading experience? Are those expectations subverted at all by the novel’s end?
3. The novel begins in a collective narration, and then breaks off into the first-person voice of Emilia. What effect does this have?
4. “We worshipped Our Author” (5), the novel begins, the figure of Irena upheld to a nearly divine status for most of what follows. How might the novel be commenting on the concept of celebrity, literary and otherwise?
5. How do Białowieża and the Białowieża Forest function as settings in the novel? What might they be working to represent?
6. “Each of this book’s original sentences is like a tiny haunted house,” writes Alexis in her introductory translator’s note (1). How else does the idea of haunting appear in the novel? What role do ghosts and the paranormal play?
7. “Alexis blew her candle out, as if to make herself invisible, as if someone like her could ever escape anyone’s notice,” writes Emilia (60). In what other ways do the characters of Alexis and Emilia enact, or subvert, the stereotypes of translator and author as described in the novel?
8. “If there is one thing in the world that actually interests Irena, it’s fungi” (123). Discuss the role of fungi in the novel. What does it represent?
9. “How could everything be amadou now? Or had everything always been amadou and I had simply never noticed it before?” (111). Likewise, what do you believe to be the significance of the elusive amadou?
10. “Notwithstanding that this is obviously fiction, I nonetheless remember this differently,” Alexis writes in one footnote (63). How might the novel relate to conversations about perspective and memory in a post-truth era?

11. "There's no such thing as death. Nothing ends. Everything only transforms" (85). Consider this statement in accordance with the plot of the novel in its entirety. What transformations take place?
12. Consider Alexis's reference to Robert Frost's assertion that "poetry is what gets lost in translation," and her understanding of its meaning: "To me, poetry is concision, refinement—the effect of considerable loss," (268). Do you agree with her interpretation? What is your own understanding of Frost's quotation?
13. "Every original work of literature is a Pasiphaë that bathes the world in light. Yet cursed with an insuperable desire for the Reader, a white bull, the text is doomed to engender a Minotaur, over and over again. I am Ariadne falling to her knees on Naxos, stricken by the folly of my kindness," Irena allegedly writes to her translators (278). Consider further exploring these myths with your book club—what deeper connections to the novel can you draw from them? Discuss.
14. "Painting, sculpture, literature—even language itself, a system of abstractions intended to stand in for the real world. That was the key: every creation that served as a substitute for what was given in nature was art" (145). Do you agree with this assessment? Do you believe art to be natural or unnatural? Discuss.
15. What do you imagine a reverse translation of the novel might look like, in which Emilia translates Alexis's narration?
16. Consider Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author" theory, which argues that the meaning of a literary work is to be interpreted and thus created by its readers, rather than by the author and their own intentions for the text. How might this theory apply to the metanarrative of the novel, and the plight of the translators? How do you imagine they each might feel about Barthes's theory?