**The Prussian Dispatch**

**Book Club Discussion Questions**

**-§-**

1. From the outset, readers discover that Sophie is not an ordinary 18th century heroine. What do you learn about her in Chapter 1 that sets her apart as a protagonist in a historical novel in 1770s Vienna? Does your view of her change as the story progresses, or does it remain the same?
2. Some readers may see Sophie as an anachronism. What do you think? Can you believe such a woman might have existed in that time period in Europe? Why or why not?
3. *The Prussian Dispatch* is written in the first person, with Sophie telling her own story. To what extent does the author succeed in developing a strong female character, her voice, and her interaction with the other characters who appear in the book? Does the fact that the author is male make a difference in what you think?
4. In 1963, Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, challenging the notion that women can only find fulfilment through childbearing and homemaking and that they only achieve a meaningful life through their husbands and children. In what ways does Sophie challenge those same beliefs in her time period? To what extent is she successful in that challenge? To what extent is she unsuccessful?
5. What aspects of Sophie’s upbringing shaped her for the work that she does? Is she a victim of that upbringing, or is she a stronger person because of it?
6. In what way(s) did her loss of Gustl and Katharina influence her choice of a vocation, her style of living, and her goals for herself?
7. In what way(s) did her relationship with the Rathenau family influence her?
8. Had Gustl and Katharina lived, might Sophie be a very different person? What aspects of her character might have emerged anyway?
9. It is said that Sophie has a sardonic tongue and a quick wit. Where do you see these qualities illustrated in her story?
10. It has been suggested that the scene between Sophie and Cesare bears a resemblance to film noir of the twentieth century; that is, it is a characteristic scene between cynical characters in a somewhat sleazy setting. In what way might this scene exemplify noir? Are there other scenes or situations with other characters you would consider characteristic of noir?
11. There is a vivid and powerful cast of characters in this story, both female and male, and Sophie’s interaction with them reveals much about her; but as the story unfolds it also reveals much about them and the time in which they live.
12. **Camilla**: She is obviously important to and loved by Sophie. Why doesn’t Sophie turn to her for help when she needs it? In what ways is she similar to and/or different from Sophie?
13. **Aurelia**: Because she is a Rathenau, Sophie is reluctant to turn to her for help. How would you define Aurelia’s character and Sophie’s relationship with her? How would you characterise her treatment of Sophie? What insights do you gain about Sophie in her scenes with Aurelia?
14. **Wielopolska**: She is, of course, important in the political intrigue that engulfs Sophie. Is she simply a vehicle for the author to present opposing sides in the conflict between Prussia, Austria, and Russia regarding the Partition of Poland, or does she serve a more important purpose in the narrative?
15. **Empress Maria Theresia**: We don’t meet her until almost the end of the book. What is your impression of her as a ruling monarch and a politician? Does the author show her in a favourable light or not? How does Sophie respond to the things Her Imperial Majesty shares with her?
16. **Sabine**: Is Sabine simply a mirror image of Sophie or is she her own woman? How might she also embody The Feminine Mystique?
17. **Narcysa and Georg’s wife**: What do we learn about Sophie through her interaction with each of these women? What do we learn about them and their roles in the story?
18. **Xaver**: He is perhaps one of the most complex male characters in the story. He is both a potential love interest and foil for Sophie. On the one hand, he helps her, while on the other hand, he betrays her trust. Why does he make the choices he makes? Do you see a future for their relationship if Xaver appears in upcoming books in the series? Why or why not?
19. **Granitz**: The consummate politician, Granitz shares power with Maria Theresia and her son Joseph. How does he use and/or abuse this power in his dealings with Sophie as well as with the political situation created by the loss of the dispatch? There are two very important scenes that Sophie shares with him. In the first, he lies abed with his nightcap on; in the second, he is in his element as Imperial Chancellor. What do you make of these contrasting views of him? How do these views of him represent who he is and where his weaknesses lie? In the battle of wills between Sophie and Granitz, how does each win and lose at the same time?
20. **Cesare**: Friendly as relations appear to be between Cesare and Sophie in Chapter 9, the two have had a history that should set them at odds. Sophie had foiled his petty robbery in Venice, and you might expect him to openly resent her. Is it possible that he's sincere in wishing to keep her from involvement for her own good, and, if so, what might be the reason?
21. **Georg**: He is a working man whose livelihood depends on serving the wealthier, more powerful citizens of Vienna. How does he, as a servant of sorts, respond to Sophie’s egalitarian treatment of him?
22. **Franz**: As Camilla’s husband and a lieutenant in the *Rumorwache*, Franz is in an awkward position with Sophie’s initial arrest. Was his handling of the situation with Horvath appropriate, or was he giving her special favours? Revisit the discussion between them in Chapter 6 after Horvath’s departure. How does this conversation provide insight into both Franz and Sophie? Near the end of their scene together, he asks, “Is there no one stupid enough to marry you?” How do you view this question?
23. **Horvath**: The scenes between Sophie and Horvath are disturbing, especially their second scene together. What kind of man is he? To what extent might his later treatment of her be a result of: (1) her insolence toward him; and (2) Franz’s interference in his first interrogation? The method of torture he uses is not unlike some methods used in the Inquisition. Does the description provide you with an adequate picture of what he is doing, wrapping and tightening of the rope around her arms? When the torture is at its worst, how does she manage to withstand it?
24. **Theo Weydmann**: Theo finds Sophie an annoyance, and he shows little respect for her in their confrontation in Chapter 28. He says, “I’m someone you shouldn’t annoy. I let you off till now because you’re brainless. But I might reconsider.” Do you really think he believes she is brainless? Why or why not? How does Sophie manage the confrontation and get what she wants from him? Why does Theo give way?
25. **Dschingis**: As an Ottoman mercenary, killing is his occupation. When he and Sophie meet in Saint Peter’s Church in Chapter 31, part of the conversation includes Sophie’s gratitude for Dschingis’ intervention on her behalf. Do you think there was more to Dschingis’ reason than he admits? They have met before and will later in Sophie’s adventures, but there is much more to their relationship (even though it is very distant). Why would he care if she survived? What does this exchange suggest about Dschingis? About Sophie?
26. In the story, power over nations and peoples is exercised by an unelected cabal. In what ways does that have any relevance to current affairs in the world today? Does Sophie offer those in power today any guidance for meeting their responsibilities for keeping the world safe?
27. To what extent does the use of various foreign languages (in this book, German, French, Italian, and Turkish) interfere with the flow of the story and the events? In future books, would you like the author to offer more or less such language variety? To what degree does the glossary help you deal with language and historical figures and issues?
28. In Chapter 1, Sophie mentions a news story about a butcher’s apprentice; in Chapter 5, she refers to the vintner’s dwarf; and in Chapter 14, she describes a small boy trying to pull a cart. Unless you read the glossary, you would not know that these references are to historical people or people thought to be real. Why do you suppose the author added these details to Sophie’s narrative?
29. The glossary also reveals a few anachronisms in Sophie’s narrative: the possible origin of her reference to the wild pig on the Prater in Chapter 15; her mention of Galicia in Chapter 30, a political region not yet designated; and Sabine’s reference to Rousseau’s Confessions, which had not yet been written. Again, why might the author have chosen to intentionally include these details?
30. Would your reading group be interested in following Sophie through additional adventures? In which directions would you like to see the series develop? Should it, for example, lay more emphasis on family aspects or concentrate more exclusively on crime and the mysteries that Sophie must solve, or both? Please share your ideas with the author.

**-§-**

*If you would like the author to join your reading group for a conversation via Skype or Google Hangouts, contact him at* [*neilsondavid3@gmail.com*](mailto:neilsondavid3@gmail.com)*.*