

Reading Group Guide

1. In the novel's opening scene, Ethel says to her granddaughter, Lena, "Life doesn't travel in a straight line. Knowing the end doesn't mean you can follow it back to the beginning." Where did this bit of wisdom come from? What is she trying to teach Lena? And what does this particular lesson mean to you?
2. *A Bend in the Stars* is organized by sections that are based around the Hebrew calendar. Why do you think the author made the choice to structure it this way? How does it change your experience of the story?
3. Baba's role as a successful and trusted matchmaker allows her an elevated position among the Jews of Kovno, yet it places her and her grandchildren in a liminal spot in Russian society, members neither of the working poor nor the more comfortable, respected higher classes. Is this "in-between" status good or bad, do you think, for the Abramovs? Can you think of examples of the ways in which they benefit or suffer from this unique spot in the social hierarchy? Are there any people or groups of people in our modern society who exist in this in-between space?
4. When Yuri originally agrees to take Miri on as his student and train her to be the first female surgeon in Kovno, he warns her that her choosing this career path will require them both to make sacrifices. Did you have to make any sacrifices to follow your professional dreams? What about your personal dreams? Do you think Miri would have gone ahead and followed her ambition if she'd known where it would lead?
5. At first glance, Dima and Vanya could not be more different: a gruff, violent, seafaring sailor looking only to save his hide and a timid, cerebral Jewish physicist with a head full of numbers and idealistic dreams. Yet, by the end of the book, they have both made immense sacrifices for the other. Do they have more in common than it originally appears? Why or why not?
6. Many of the novel's most pivotal scenes take place on trains. Why do you think Barenbaum made this choice? What importance do trains hold in the larger scheme of the book?

7. After Miri saves Sasha from the river and their trust begins to grow, she finds herself with an unexpected problem: she is caught in a love triangle between two good but different men, both of whom are determined to love her the best way they know how. Do you think she makes the right choice in the end? Would you have chosen differently?
8. On the day of the fateful eclipse, Vanya and his companions are starkly confronted by the dangerous superstitions that the villagers still hold about scientific events. Miri faces this in the medical community, too, when she tries to cure the tongue-tied baby who has been “cursed.” Can you think of any modern day equivalents to this fear and distrust?
9. Baba encourages Miri to make her way in the world: “The word ‘Jew’ is not stamped on your forehead.” Does this idea of “passing,” of allowing your cultural, racial, or religious identity to be obscured, remind you of other similar situations either in the past, or even today? Is it ever defensible, or indefensible, to try to “pass” for something you’re not? Are there cases that can necessitate or excuse it?
10. The historical crimes of the vicious Polyakov brothers haunt the novel, but Miri and Sasha don’t agree on whether they could happen again. With whom do you agree, and why?
11. Why do you think the book is titled *A Bend in the Stars*? Is it purely about the eclipse, or does it hold other meanings for you?
12. Are Vanya and Miri right to believe that ideas can change the world, or is Dima closer to the truth when he argues that greed and a lust for power are more powerful?
13. Early in the novel, Ethel says, “History needs a narrator. Perhaps this museum chose the wrong one.” Do you agree? In your opinion, is there such a thing as a “right” or “wrong” narrator for history, and if so, how do you choose?