

Astrid & Veronika

by Linda Olsson

About the Book

With extraordinary emotional power, Linda Olsson’s stunningly well-crafted debut novel recounts the unusual and unexpected friendship that develops between two women. Veronika, a young writer from New Zealand, rents a house in a small village in the midst of a harsh Swedish winter. She has come here alone hoping to come to terms with a recent tragedy while finishing her latest novel. Her arrival is observed by Astrid, her elderly, reclusive neighbor who harbors a dark secret from her past. Astrid offers Veronika companionship in her grief, and the two embark on an unusual and unexpected friendship. As the seasons change around them, Astrid and Veronika slowly reveal their stories to one another, and what happens between them over the course of a year will change both of their lives forever.

Praise for the Book

“Linda Olsson evokes, with great beauty and precision, the landscape of a friendship between two very different women, each caught in a tragic moment from the past. Their connection, initially as tentative and fragile as the first filaments of ice, gradually strengthens, allowing each woman to give voice to her stories, and in doing so to reclaim ‘a heart for beauty.’ Subtle, penetrating, and beautifully written, *Astrid & Veronika* affirms the power of narrative to transform.”

— **Kim Edwards,**
author of *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter*

“Beautiful and deeply affecting. A dreamlike evocation of the power of friendship.”

— **Mary McGarry Morris,**
author of *The Lost Mother and Songs in Ordinary Time*

“Emotionally satisfying . . . not only impossible to put down, but impossible to forget.”

— *New Zealand Canvas*

“A subtle but powerful novel, tender and poignant.”

— *Dominion Post* (New Zealand)

Courtesy of Penguin Group

About the Author

Linda Olsson

New Zealander Novelist

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Personal Information: Born in Stockholm, Sweden; immigrated to New Zealand, 1990; married; children: three sons.

Education: University of Stockholm, J.D.; Victoria University of Wellington, B.A.; Auckland University, M.A., 2004.

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Career: Writer. Previously worked in banking in Sweden.

Awards: *Sunday Star Times* Short Story prize, 2003, for "Someone to Watch over Me."

WRITINGS

- *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* (novel), Penguin Books (Auckland, New Zealand), 2005, published as *Astrid and Veronika*, Penguin Books (New York, NY), 2007.

Sidelights

Linda Olsson was born and raised in Stockholm, Sweden, but as an adult she moved several times before settling permanently in Auckland, New Zealand. Her first book, published as *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* in New Zealand and as *Astrid and Veronika* in the United States, is a reflection of her formative years. On her Web site, Olsson says of the book: "There is the landscape, the seasons, the land. My native Sweden. In a sense perhaps the book is a love letter to the country where I was born. Perhaps it is a letter of farewell." Set in Sweden, the book tells the stories of two women of disparate ages who live next door to each other and share their personal histories and emotional upheavals. Veronika is a struggling thirty-year-old writer, while her neighbor Astrid is in her seventies, living alone; her husband is dying in a nursing home. *Booklist* reviewer Allison Block praised Olsson's effort for "the lyrical prose and expert rendering of the themes of heartbreak and loss." A *Publishers Weekly* contributor felt that the story is not completely fleshed out, but commented that "Olsson has a clear feel for the emotional wellsprings of both characters." On a more positive note, Steve Scott observed in the *New Zealand Herald* that "Olsson seduces the reader with her hypnotic prose, rendering the book not only impossible to put down, but impossible to forget."

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, January 1, 2007, Allison Block, review of *Astrid and Veronika*, p. 57.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, December 15, 2006, review of *Astrid and Veronika*, p. 1240.
- *New York Times Book Review*, April 1, 2007, Ann Harleman, “Unlikely Friends,” p. 18.
- *Publishers Weekly*, January 22, 2007, review of *Astrid and Veronika*, p. 160.

ONLINE

- *Linda Olsson Home Page*, <http://www.lindaolsson.net> (August 30, 2007).
- *New Zealand Herald*, <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/> (September 22, 2005), Steve Scott, review of *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs*.
- *Novel Journey Blog*, <http://noveljourney.blogspot.com/> (March 30, 2007), Göran Palm, interview with Linda Olsson.
- *Penguin Group Web site*, <http://us.penguin.com/> (August 30, 2007), “A Conversation with Linda Olsson.”

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Source Database: Contemporary Authors Online

Author Interview

Q: You have taken a very interesting path to becoming a writer. Would you discuss how you went from a career in banking and finance to becoming a novelist?

Linda Olsson: Oh, I wouldn't describe it as "went," which sounds quite purposeful. Rather, I found myself having written this book without quite knowing how it happened. Each step on the way seemed so insignificant at the time: taking my first creative writing course in London, writing those first terrible short stories, applying to do a BA in English literature when I arrived in New Zealand, sending a story to the Sunday Star Times Short Story Competition. And winning. Then, applying to the new postgraduate course "Writing the Novel." And writing one. And getting it published. I look back and can see a pattern, sort of. But at the time it felt more like ambling along. Living.

Q: Veronika talks about "moving from the small streams and ponds of poetry and short stories to the ocean of a novel" (p. 43). Does this reflect your own feelings about writing your first novel? What was this process like for you?

LO: Yes, absolutely. A short story, though I think it is the finest literary art form, is manageable. Things going well, it can be created in one sweeping inspired movement. With a novel, that inspiration will have to be kept alive over an extended period of time. There were several moments during the writing of my novel where I felt ready to put it all aside, to give up. Those dreadful moments when the parts never seemed to become a whole, and it all felt like a presumptuous idea that I should never have acted on. Now, I have enormous respect for the novel as an art form, and I will treat novels that come my way with respect for the sheer craft.

Q: Did you or your family experience firsthand the kind of political repression you write about in *The Dream Life of Sukhanov*?

LO: I myself was too young to experience fully the exigencies of life under an oppressive regime, but my family did have its share of troubles. My father, Boris Grushin, who is considered one of the founders of Soviet sociology, pioneered public opinion studies in the country. Since for decades his area was a taboo subject — the whole enterprise was, after all, based on the highly questionable premise that regular citizens could have differing opinions about life, or even (gasp!) government — he constantly found himself at odds with those in power. In the mid-1970s, he dared to propose a revolutionary sociological approach and witnessed a full-scale attack mounted against him in the press. Branded as "anti-Marxist," he lost his job and became virtually blacklisted — a persona non grata in his field. At one point he was so desperate he seriously considered a position at the Institute of Entomology, which some friends had procured for him, even though his knowledge of insects was limited to swatting flies and helping me pin my summer catches under glass. (I was then four years old.) In the end, another influential friend offered him a job as a journalist at a magazine in Prague, and

we lived there for five years, until such time as my father could return to Moscow and resume his work. We were luckier than many in my parents' circle. Among others, the artist Ernst Neizvestny, a close family friend whose wonderful illustrations to Dante's *Inferno* lined the walls of our Moscow apartment, famously stood up to Khrushchev during the Manege exhibition (a central behind-the-scenes event in my novel), and was eventually forced to leave the country for good.

Q: The landscapes of both Sweden and New Zealand are very powerful forces in *Astrid & Veronika*. How does each place influence you, and how important are place and landscape to you in your work?

LO: The physical place is very important to me, perhaps because I have moved so much. Someone has been quoted as saying that "those who have traveled much know that place is nothing." I disagree. The more I travel, the more I know where I belong, the more important place becomes. Physical longing for my native Sweden increases year by year, while I know that the longer I live in my present place of residence, New Zealand, the more roots I put down there, too. Also, there is the sense that distance enhances one's appreciation of a remembered place.

Q: You've dedicated the novel to your grandmother Anna-Lisa. Would you be willing to share with readers a little bit about her and how she serves as an inspiration to you?

LO: My grandmother was an orphan and I think that all her life she was searching for a connection with something always out of reach. She was oddly out of place wherever she went and always dreamed of a better life. I think that perhaps she gave me a little of those dreams, and when I was the first member of the family to go to university, she was very proud. It felt as if she saw in me the person she would have liked to be, as if I was given the opportunities she would have liked. And that she was so very happy for me. She was the one who taught me about classical music, opera, and ballet. Fine food and fine French wines. All things that were alien to the people I was surrounded by in the working class environment where I grew up. When my grandmother was fifty she followed her son to the United States, perhaps still searching. I longed for her daily, hoping that she would return, but didn't meet her again till I was an adult, when I first visited her in her home in Anaheim, California. One evening, we cooked together. Grandmother made her famous blueberry pie and I my fish soup. As we stood in her kitchen, she suddenly looked up from her work. "It's a pity we are not the same age, you and I," she said. "We would be the best of friends." I looked back at her and said, "We are." Later, we sat on her small balcony watching the hummingbirds feed on the hibiscus below. I asked if she was ever homesick for Sweden. She looked at me and was silent for a moment. "Always," she said. "I am always homesick." I asked if she would allow me to pay for her to go back and visit Sweden. Again, she was silent. "No, Linda," she said after a while. "I want to remember it as it was. I like my longing. I need it." And she never returned. Years later, I woke up in my house in Auckland, New Zealand, filled with an intense dream. I had

dreamed that my grandmother lay by my side in my bed. She was naked and vulnerable and I pulled her toward me, tucking the bed sheets around us and holding her in my arms. A moment later my aunt rang from California to say that my grandmother had died that night. Whenever I think of my grandmother, I am filled with an intense feeling of gratitude for having been her granddaughter. And best friend.

Q: Most readers probably don't know that you've also written travel books and are quite an adept photographer. How does your travel and photography influence your fiction writing?

LO: I write about places I know, as I think all writers do. It has been my privilege to travel extensively, and get to know many places. I have come to realize that places are both similar and utterly different. People go about their lives all over the world, and it is easy to find connections. Yet, I do think that the place where one spends one's early life will become ingrained in a way that no other place later in life can. We will carry with us the smells, the light, the seasons of our childhood, and it will be the measure against which we will compare all other places we encounter. There is a young woman who works at the checkout in the local supermarket in Auckland where I live. We have gotten to know each other a little and always chat for while when we meet. One day I had bought a couple of mangoes. She took one in her hand and said longingly "These are not as sweet as the mangoes in my country." When I asked her where she was from she said Afghanistan. And added that she would never be able to go back. But the mangoes there are sweeter than anywhere else . . .

Q: You are fluent in both Swedish and English and have written in both languages. What impact does the language a novel is written in have on its nature? What specific differences, if any, do you find between your writing in Swedish and in English?

LO: I think that my English writing is more deliberate. That I choose my words more carefully when I write in English. This also means that I see more opportunities in the language. That I am conscious of the impact of each word. Writing in Swedish is more intuitive, I think. When my book was first released in New Zealand, several of the reviews mentioned that the language sounded "Scandinavian." I once read an article about research that proved that it is possible to discern the composer's native language from the music he or she writes. So, perhaps, in a similar manner, I write in Swedish even when I write in English. When my book was published in Sweden, I did not translate the book to Swedish myself. I made an attempt, but quickly realized that I was rewriting, rather than translating. For me, it felt as if the story I had written could not just be translated word by word, but that a Swedish version needed other, different expressions. I am enormously grateful that my translator was able to do what I could not.

Q: The emotional power of Astrid and Veronika's friendship leaves a lasting impression with readers. They are from different generations and have led very different lives, yet the bond of being women seems to override all else. Do you agree? Do you think that women have different, or deeper, friendships than men? Could this book have been about two men? In what ways would it have been different?

LO: I would like to think that it could just as well have been a story of two men. I have had many interesting responses from male readers, proving that they have reacted deeply and emotionally to the story. If it is true that women have more, and more intense friendships than men, then I think that is due to social roles and behaviors that have been imposed on us more than anything else. I think that more interesting than the gender issue, though, is that of age. In modern Western societies contact between the generations has diminished. There are a number of reasons for this, but sadly it is further encouraged by segregated living and age related categorization. Personally, I find it much easier to relate to young people now than I did when I was in my thirties or forties. Also, it has been a privilege for me to go back to university as a student and find that my fellow students in their early twenties have no issues with my age, while in many other parts of society I am foremost a woman of a certain age.

Q: What books or writers have been particularly influential in your life? What are you reading now?

LO: This is such a difficult question — a bit like being asked what food has made your body what it is today. I have been a voracious and indiscriminate reader since I first learnt to read. Just as with food, I like anything as long as it is made from good ingredients and well cooked. I grew up on a mix of Swedish and Anglo-Saxon literature, I suppose. And that is still my staple literary nourishment. Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Paul Auster are some of my favorites. I like short stories very much and Alice Munro is a particular favorite. I keep coming back to August Strindberg, the only Swedish author of international significance. Among the classics I am particularly fond of Gogol and Kafka. I like a good thriller, and there are a number of superb Swedish writers who are among the best in the world in this genre: Henning Mankell, Roslund and Hellström, Stieg Larsson. And I read more and more poetry. For my next book I am doing quite a bit of research, reading essays and books on modern Polish history.

Q: What are you working on next?

LO: First, my new novel has a male main character. I am conscious of the challenge of creating a believable male voice, but in a sense, as it was with Astrid and Veronika, it has been him choosing me, not the other way around. He has appeared in my life and I am trying to write his story as well as I can. Again, I am interested in the issue of relationships between people, how we choose to relate, or not to relate to each other. I want to explore the consequences of silence. And that is also the working title on my new novel: “The Consequence of Silence.”

Courtesy of Penguin Group

Discussion Questions

1. Astrid has been solitary for so long. Why, then, do you think she is drawn to Veronika, essentially a stranger, and then later allows herself to open up to her so freely?
2. The houses in the novel serve almost as characters. The author describes Astrid's house as "dark and warm . . . It was an organic part of her and its shapes were ingrained in her body" (p. 9). Discuss how the author uses the houses in the novel. What is the importance of a home in our lives? How does our house/living space define us? What do you think your house/living space says about you?
3. Astrid's mother committed suicide when Astrid was six-years-old; Veronika's mother left when Veronika was a child. Talk about the theme of the "absent mother" and how it influences these characters' lives.
4. What did you think of Astrid's confession regarding the death of her child? Were you able to understand her actions? Did knowing this about her past affect the way you felt about her? What do you think Astrid expected Veronika's reaction would be to her story? Was Astrid taking a risk in telling her? Why do you think Veronika reacts in the way she does?
5. Veronika feels very guilty about the death of her fiancé and agonizes over what she could have done differently that day to prevent his death. Why do you think she feels so guilty?
6. When Astrid tries on the floral swimsuit during Veronika's birthday "outing," the women burst out into laughter. (p. 85). Why do the women find this moment so hysterically funny? How does this day, Veronika's birthday, serve as a turning point in the novel?
7. After her husband dies, Astrid says to Veronika, "There was nothing more to be afraid of. . . . It was never about him. It was about me" (p.167). What does she mean?
8. Veronika visits her father after her fiancé's death, and when she is leaving her father begins to say, "I wish . . ." but doesn't complete the sentence (p. 200). What do you think he was going to say? How would you describe Veronika's relationship with him?
9. Great literary novels skillfully incorporate sometimes elaborate symbolism. In *Astrid & Veronika*, Olsson makes repeated and significant references to water. Discuss the symbolic function of water in the novel and consider how water may be connected with Olsson's major themes.

10. Discuss how the seasons shape the novel. How do the seasons influence the characters? Discuss the ways that the seasons affect you throughout the year? Are your memories connected to the seasons in which they took place?
11. In her letter to Veronika, Astrid mentions “a great love” (p. 241). Whom do you think she is talking about?

Courtesy of Penguin Group