

BOOK CLUB TO GO!

ASTRID & VERONIKA

BY LINDA OLSSON

Introduction

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 Swedish village as she tries to come to terms with a recent tragedy while also finishing a novel. Her arrival is silently observed by Astrid, an older, reclusive neighbor who slowly becomes a presence in Veronika's life, offering comfort in the form of companionship and lovingly prepared home-cooked meals. Set against a haunting Swedish landscape, *Astrid and Veronika* is a lyrical and meditative novel of love and loss, and a story that will remain with readers long after the characters' secrets are revealed.

--Publisher's comments

About the Author

Linda Olsson was born in Stockholm, where she obtained her law degree and worked in finance for many years. She has lived around the world but made her permanent home with her husband in Auckland, New Zealand in 1990. She returned to school in the early 90's to earn a bachelor of arts in English and German. In addition to her first novel, Olsson has written short stories and travel pieces.

--suite101.com

Author's Personal Biography Given at a Presentation

"Some time after the publication of my first novel I was asked to make a presentation to a club in Timaru on the South Island in New Zealand. **'Feel free to speak on anything you like, not just your novel. Anything. Yourself, for example. Your life. Anything,'** they said. 'We're interested in you, as a person.' So I thought about myself for a while and couldn't find all that much of interest to tell, other than the bare facts – that I was born in Stockholm, Sweden, that I studied law there, married, had three sons, worked in banking till we left Sweden in 1986, after which I became an increasingly frustrated accompanying wife who turned to creative writing. This would certainly not stretch to the hour or so requested, or be particularly inspiring, I thought. I thought long and hard, and then I decided that if they cared to have me talk about myself, then perhaps they would be interested in an essential factor in my personal development. Or rather two factors. Two women whose friendship came to play an essential role in my life and contributed to make me who I am. Who continue to provide comfort and inspiration. In order to talk

about them, I first had to revert briefly to my first novel. When my manuscript was accepted for publication I was told to think up a line or two in response to the inevitable question: 'What is your book about?' To me, the manuscript had no existence outside of myself, I had not stopped to think about it in any external way. It was an interesting journey to return to my own words and read them as an independent text with its own life. And suddenly some threads and themes that I had not been conscious of during the process of writing became obvious to see.

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. But, more importantly, I think it is a book about friendship. The novel tells a story of an unusual and unexpected friendship. It describes the strength that is to be found in friendship, the comfort and perhaps the love. It describes how a deep friendship can be found and developed anywhere, anytime, at any stage in our lives and between persons who may superficially seem to have very little in common.

So, I decided that my line must be 'It's a book about friendship'. And I decided to talk about two deep friendships that have formed my own life.

Often we talk about family on the one hand, and friends on the other, as if the two are always separate. I suppose that not all our relatives are our friends, but in my case the two most important friends of my life were also my relatives.

They were my grandmothers.

I was born just after the war, a complete and not entirely welcome surprise to my entire extended family on both sides. My parents were very young and I appeared as the first grandchild to my two grandmothers. Because of the circumstances I came to spend a lot of time with these two women. Both my grandmothers accepted their new status enthusiastically once I existed physically, each in her own way. The two women couldn't have been more different.

My paternal grandmother Dagny came from a poor fishing village on the island of Åland in the archipelago between Sweden and Finland, and had been sent to Stockholm as a young girl to work as a maid. She had raised four children in a small apartment in Stockholm, four flights of stairs, coal in the cellar and only cold water. She was widowed shortly after my birth and I never really knew my grandfather. My grandmother was a practical, down to earth woman, used to hard work. She was also profoundly accepting of what life had offered her. For years she worked as a cleaner in a theatre in town, about 6 kilometers from my grandparent's apartment in southern Stockholm. The work started at three am, before the trams had begun to run and she had to walk to work across the Western Bridge where the icy wind had free reign on black winter mornings. After work she would catch the tram back, prepare breakfast and wake her family and begin the day. She found her joys in little things – her one a day cup of coffee (she wasn't supposed to have any after a series of stomach ulcers, but allowed herself one), the satisfaction of a cupboard full of neatly piled starched clean linen, a weekly hot bath in

my parents' modern bath room, her solitary exploration of the public transport in Stockholm, where she knew every new bus route, every new subway station. She was not a woman used to showing affection, but fiercely loyal to her own, and she developed into an excellent and much loved grandmother. As her first grandchild I owned her exclusively for some years and I always knew that we had a special relationship. I used to visit her often on my own, spending the night. We would go down to the small corner shop where we would choose our bread carefully, one bun for me, one for grandmother, then we would walk through the swinging doors to the grocery part of the shop and choose our cold cuts, ham for grandmother, Berliner wurst for me. And then we would go back upstairs and grandmother would make tea, a treat that I never had anywhere else. She had no fridge and the butter that rested on the deep window sill on the northern side of the apartment was always soft. Then we would sit at her small kitchen table that seated two, a wooden table painted bright blue and we would eat our sandwiches and drink our tea, lots of tea. And read my grandmother's magazines. She followed the lives of all the European royals and we would gossip till it was time for bed. But before retiring for the night grandmother would open the small metal cabinet on the kitchen wall and take out her only personal luxury, a small bottle of lanolin cream, liquid mother of pearl in a small glass vial. She would shake out a small dollop onto my open palms, another on her own, and we would carefully rub our hands while the perfume filled the kitchen. Bed was a pullout that sat behind a curtain in the bedroom – grandmother slept in the sofa-bed in the living room just as she had when her children lived at home – and I would be pinned down under the heavy red quilt and the mangled linen sheets - a privilege and an escape, and I would sleep better than anywhere else.

When I was five we went on a trip to the north, to a village where my grandfather's spinster sister worked as a teacher. I couldn't possibly have known, but my grandmother had had a hysterectomy and had been ordered by her doctor to take a holiday, possibly the first of her life. We went by train, and I have wondered if this might have been the trip that awakened my wanderlust. We ate our packed lunch, enjoyed the view of the passing landscape and made conversation, and it was magical. I think we both felt that the following stay in the village school where we shared a small room with two beds was sheer magic, too. And I think that possibly the room where my grandmother would tiptoe across the floorboard in her white nightgown and drop her false teeth into a glass of water on the small table is inspiration for the old woman's house in my novel. The pale summer night whispered beyond the drawn white roller blinds while we lay in our narrow beds, just as it does in the book.

In spite of her own poor education my grandmother followed my aspiring ballet career as well as my academic studies with keen interest. Once a year she was given free tickets to the theatre where she cleaned and I was always her chosen guest. Dressed up in our finest we sat through the annual operetta: 'The Merry Widow', 'The Count of Luxembourg' and 'The Land of Smiles'.

I was the first member of the family to go to university and of all possible degrees I chose law. I am sure my grandmother had no idea of what was involved, but instinctively she seemed to know when I needed her support. Her phone calls were always impeccably timed. She would reach me across the gulf of a black depression over missed exams or general despair. And comforted by her interest and her cauliflower soup – she was not a great cook – I would pick myself up and drag myself

through another week, month and term. Nobody could have been prouder than my grandmother when I finally graduated.

In my first memories my grandmother is an old woman, dressed in dark clothes, her stockings darned and her perm protected with a hairnet. But it was as if she grew younger as I aged, and when she died I felt that there was no longer any age difference between us. I think that we took those last remaining steps towards a common age when my father died. My parents were long separated and it was to me the call came. My father had stood up after lunch at work and died of a massive heart attack. He was fifty-two years old. One of his colleagues rang to let me know, asking me to inform the rest of the family. And it was to my grandmother I went first. My father was her oldest child, a much loved loving son. When she opened the door she took one look at me and then she said his name. 'Rune.' Nothing more. And we embraced and went to sit in her small lounge to await the arrival of her other children. 'It is not right,' she said. She looked at me and I realized it was not a complaint, rather more like a statement. She didn't complain on her own behalf, but lamented on behalf of her son. And me. She stretched out her hands over the immaculately starched table cloth and I took them in mine. And we were friends, united in grief, but also in love.

Years later when I was living in London she rang me one day – an exceptional thing for her to do, as the value of money was ingrained in her from birth and indulgences such as toll calls, generally frowned upon. 'You must help me, Linda,' she said. 'I don't want them to know of my plans.' Her plan was a big party for her eightieth birthday. A three course meal in a restaurant. Wine, music and dancing. With all the immediate family and close friends, young and old. 'I want it just so, and I have saved up. There is money,' she said. 'They' were her children, my aunts and my uncle. And she was right. Just as we had conspired and made the reservation in a restaurant in Stockholm, I had a call from one of my aunts, suggesting grandmother didn't know her own best, that we should cancel and save the money and instead have a traditional reception at one of the children's houses. I said it was out my hands, already booked and paid. And grandmother had it her way. On the night she walked the room wearing a wreath of flowers on her hair, she had a couple of dances and I saw her blush after the first sip of wine of her life. She died the following spring, holding on to life for months to allow me to return from overseas and give us time for a proper farewell. I had been told she was confused and that she didn't recognize anybody. But as I walked up to her bed she turned her eyes to my face and smiled. 'Do you recognize me, grandmother?' I said. 'Linda,' she said and held out her hand and I took it and we looked at each other and we were comfortable with the inevitable physical separation that we were facing.

After her death we discovered that she had made a new will. There wasn't much to bequeath in financial terms, it was more an expression of intent, perhaps an explanation. She had had grandfather's grave cancelled and his ashes strewn, and she wanted the same for herself. But when I see her, which is often, she sits on her favourite sunwarm little rock with her feet in the water of the sea of Åland. She has a ball of fine linen yarn on her lap and she is crocheting, another lace, I think, because even in heaven she will not be wasting any time.

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I loved my paternal grandmother, but it is to Anna-Lisa, my maternal grandmother that I have dedicated my first novel. Because I think that Dagny found her peace in life, and I think she would understand.

Unlike Dagny, Anna-Lisa was a woman born with impossible dreams, a longing for something always out of reach. My maternal grandmother was orphaned as an infant, left with a foster family while her mother pursued some important business in Stockholm, never to return and reclaim her baby daughter. Her father, a member of a prominent family, took interest in the child and visited her regularly, but never became more than a fleeting ghost who came and went, leaving dry money notes in the little girl's hand, but never staying long enough to answer her questions. I have come to think that children can survive unscarred on very little love, but not entirely without. My grandmother had to. And her later life did not compensate for the initial abandonment. The woman who became my grandmother may have seemed aloof to some, reserved, austere, demanding. Always stylish, with an air of arrogance for those who did not know her. Yet, for all her external elegance, she worked hard all her life to support herself and her children. Both her marriages were failures, providing neither love nor financial security. But she had dreams. And she gave me dreams.

On the occasional days when she was free from work we would spend time together. At her small apartment we would sit and listen to her music, a handful of classical records. She would sit in her sofa with her slim elegant legs resting on a chair, smoking a cigarette with her eyes closed, while I lay on my stomach on the imitation Persian rug in front of the record player. My grandmother's favourite record was the Intermezzo from 'Cavalleria Rusticana'. As she listened, tears would trickle down her face. Not till many years later, when I came to see a performance of that opera in Frankfurt did I realize how closely the libretto resembled my grandmother's own life. I don't know if she knew. Perhaps she only related emotionally to the sound of the music. But our shared moments with the old mahogany record-player releasing the music left me with a profound love of classical music, that particular opera, and also a sense that music can enhance and reflect all human feelings.

Once a year grandmother took me to the Opera for a performance by the Royal Swedish Ballet. She would equal any of the elegant ladies in the audience, immaculate in hat and gloves and tailored two piece suite and crocodile leather shoes with matching handbag. I would wear my two piece suit with pleated skirt, my white cotton gloves and black patent leather shoes. After the performance of 'Sleeping Beauty', 'Swan Lake' or 'Cinderella' we would go to one of the nice cafés near the Opera and I would get to choose my cake, usually a round meringue smothered in butter cream and sprinkled with almond flakes and finished with a candied cherry. While I slowly ate morsels of the cake, trying to make the moment last as long as possible, I looked around the room where ladies had their coffee and men smoked cigarettes. I watched the smoke rise and reach the glistening prisms in the candelabras and I heard spoons tinkle against china. It dawned on me that there was a world where these things happened every day. And I knew I wanted to be part of it.

The year my grandmother turned fifty she realised one of her dreams. She moved to America. But as is often the case, the dream had no likeness to the reality. Although she lived out the thirty-five last years of her life there and never returned to Sweden, I don't think those years were any better than the earlier ones. Her son, my uncle Bjarne,

had emigrated before her, and we were all destined to follow. I studied English preparing myself and read up on everything American. In the end, my parents' divorce ended our dreams, and with the exception of a short summer holiday in San Francisco in 1959 I didn't see my grandmother again till I was an adult with a family of my own.

But there were letters. In her driven handwriting, and always with a unique mix of the profound and profane:

Make sure to get a good education.

Wear cotton underwear.

Choose your husband carefully.

Remember to apply castor oil on your eyelashes every night before bed, no matter how tired you are.

In 1979 my second son had just been born and I was on maternity leave and I decided to take the children and spend time with my relatives in America. My grandmother, who had not been given much time to enjoy her own babies, took to mine with exceptional intensity, particularly my six month old whom she would not let out of her sight. We spent lazy summer days on her small porch watching humming birds feed on the hibiscus. 'Such tiny birds, yet always so comfortable together. Always in flocks. Always together,' she said in her heavily accented but flawless English. For my farewell party we put on a joint dinner. I made my special fish soup, my grandmother her special blue berry pie. As we stood across each other with the flour, butter and sugar on the table between us, she suddenly looked up. 'It's a pity we are not the same age. We would be the best of friends,' she said. 'We are,' I said.

www.lindaolsson.net/me/ (See the author's website for more interesting information.)

Author Interview

1. 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.

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2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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 . . .

6. 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.

7. 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.

8. 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.

9. 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."

--*Reading Group Guides*

Reviews

"In Swedish novelist Olsson's somber debut, Veronika Bergman returns to Sweden after a childhood following her diplomat father around the world (her mother abandoned the family), and after publishing her first novel titled *Single, One Way, No Luggage*. She rents a small house in a rural town to work on her second, but in solitude finds herself seized by feverish dreams and paralyzed by the 'stillness' of the landscape and the memories of her recently dead fianc. Reclusive septuagenarian Astrid Mattson, thought by the village to be a witch, takes an interest in Veronika, and the two strike up a friendship based on loss. Against the backdrop of the changing seasons and their small, plangent houses, the two women slowly tell each other their most closely guarded secrets (which concern their mothers and lovers), and venture, tentatively, out of the safety of their routines. Olsson has a clear feel for the emotional wellsprings of both characters, but can't convert her terse lyricism into a fully realized story."

--*Publishers Weekly*

Veronika, a 30-year-old Swedish writer, rents a home in a remote village to finish work on her second novel. Her only neighbor for miles is Astrid, a reclusive octogenarian who has earned a reputation (perhaps undeserved) as the village witch. Veronika and Astrid gradually become friends, taking long walks and sipping wine made from the wild strawberries in Astrid's garden. Each shares painful secrets along the way. Veronika abandoned a devoted boyfriend to take up with a bartender from New Zealand. They fell passionately in love, then tragedy befell him, leaving Veronika incapacitated by grief. Astrid endured sexual abuse from her father and a long loveless marriage to a man chosen by him. Until now, she has never told anyone the truth about her infant daughter's death. This is the first novel for Olsson, a native of Stockholm who now lives in New Zealand. Though the pace of her narrative lags at times, readers of Anne Tyler and Jodi Picoult will appreciate the lyrical prose and expert rendering of the themes of heartbreak and loss.

--*Allison Block in Booklist*

"Not only impossible to put down, but impossible to forget." --*Canvas (New Zealand)*

"Linda Olsson unravels... each woman's story... gradually revealing their grief and loss.... This a subtle but powerful novel, tender and poignant."

--*The Dominion Post (New Zealand)*

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Further Reading

The Day I Ate Whatever I wanted by Elizabeth Berg

The Wednesday Sisters by Meg Waite Clayton

Second Chance by Jane Green

The Knitting Circle by Ann Hood

The Hindi-Bindi Club by Monica Pradhan

Also authors--Anne Tyler and Jodi Picoult

Possible 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?

--Reading Group Guides