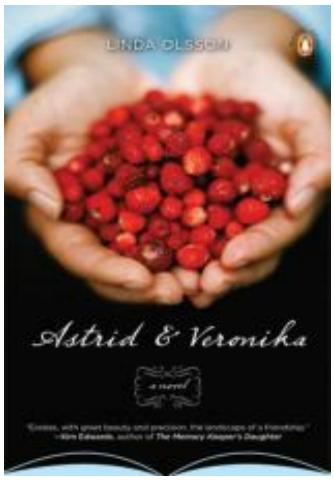
Astrid and Veronika

by Linda Olsson



About the Book

It is a freezing night in March when Veronika Bergman arrives from New Zealand at her rented house north of Stockholm. Bereft after the recent death of her fiancé, Veronika is looking for a place to recover. The house is unwelcoming and unfamiliar, but as the days progress she begins to make it her own. She quickly establishes a routine of rising early, turning on her laptop to work on her novel?though the screen remains blank?and taking morning walks in the chilly, bleak grayness, until finally spring arrives, and with it, a life-changing encounter.

Astrid Mattson lives in the only house next door and is often described as ?the neighborhood witch.? Indeed, she is a solitary, old woman living in a decrepit house, haunted by her past. Yet when the young woman moves in next door, Astrid takes notice. She watches from her window as Veronika emerges for her daily walks, and when several days pass without Veronika?s appearing, Astrid feels a newfound sense of concern. Surprising even herself, she goes over to Veronika?s house and, finding the woman sick with fever, Astrid makes her pancakes and tea. From that day forward, neither of their lives will be the same.

Astrid begins to join Veronika on her walks, sharing her knowledge of the landscape while also beginning to reveal the painful secrets of her life. At last, she seems to have found the confidant she?s always needed but never had. When she divulges that her husband is dying in a rest home nearby, Astrid also reveals the details of her loveless marriage, her once fierce desire for revenge, as well as a terrible confession that shocks her new friend. Veronika doesn?t react with indignation or disgust; instead she responds with her own story of love, loss, and guilt. But as she tells Astrid about the tragic death of her fiancé, she also begins to remember the happiness of falling in love.

As winter approaches again, Veronika feels it is time to take the next step in the journey of her life. Astrid agrees, and for herself believes it is also a time to move on. Her friendship with Veronika has given her the chance to care and, in return, get her life back; she has discovered that human connection can heal even a wound so deep that she thought she would never feel again. From Astrid, Veronika has learned to look for the beauty and the joy in all things, and, most

importantly, she has realized that remembering, no matter how painful, can bring peace.

Two women, one whose life is only partly written and one whose story is coming to an end, help each other close one chapter of their lives and open the next. Through Astrid, Veronika has uncovered the story she needs to tell in her novel. As she had planned, it is about the power of love, but surprisingly it is not about her fiancé; that book will come later. This one will be about Astrid, who, in helping Veronika discover her story, writes the perfect ending to her own.

Discussion Guide

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*, Ollson 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?

Author Bio

Linda Olsson was born in Stockholm, Sweden. In 2003, she won the *Sunday Star-Times* Short Story Competition. Linda has lived in Kenya, Singapore, Britain, and Japan before settling in Auckland, New Zealand, where she lives today. Her previous novel, ASTRID & VERONIKA, was published in 2007.

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