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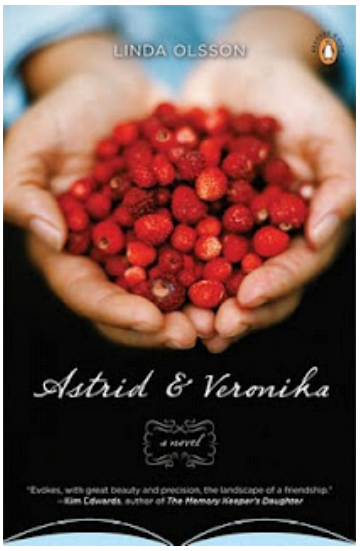
Astrid & Veronika



This lovely book describes a friendship between a septuagenarian and a woman of 30. Veronika, the younger woman, has spent a lifetime moving, first accompanying her father to his foreign service assignments, then on her own to Stockholm and London before impetuously following a boyfriend to Auckland, New Zealand.

This slow paced character study is not for everyone. But those who enjoy psychological fiction and beautiful writing will love this novel. The author, Linda Olsson [1], wrote her first novel in her fifties, and has lived in many places around the world including the two countries described here. Although she wrote this in English, several readers were convinced that she captured the flavor of her native Swedish in her prose.

After a recent tragedy involving a surfing accident, Veronika moves to a remote Swedish village to write her second book. Across the field is a big house that does not appear to be lived in. After a day or two, Veronika believes that someone is inside, so she begins waving when she passes the house, never sure if anyone has seen her. A few days later, intuitively, the young woman senses that something is wrong. After knocking, she runs inside and finds Astrid who is very sick.

She nurses her back to health, and cooks for her. This begins their tradition of sharing a meal every few days. Soon they each share secrets about their pasts, usually sorrows. Astrid takes Veronika to her favorite places from when she was a young woman. Many of these are in natural settings, in deep woods, on mountainsides, next to the flowing river. Together, they gather food from the land: wild strawberries, lingonberries and mushrooms that bleed. The bleeding mushrooms seem symbolic of their friendship, bleeding the bad stories out. What I particularly liked about this novel is it's quiet celebration of village life. On holidays, the women link arms and share the traditional activities of the day. Linda Olsson's grandmother once told her, "If we were the same age, we would be such great friends." And Linda responded, "Grandmother, we already are." This book is a tribute to both her grandmothers.

For other books about friendships, see Walking Across Egypt [2], which describes a friendship between an older woman and a teenage boy. Also check out Jane Austen's Emma [3] and Elisabeth Berg's Talk Before Sleep [4].
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Posted by Dory L. on Feb 13, 2011

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