



Sonata for Miriam

Linda Olsson

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A haunting novel of loss, love, and human connection from the author of *Astrid & Veronika*

Linda Olsson's first novel, *Astrid & Veronika*, introduced readers to her gorgeous prose, and her extraordinary understanding of human relationships. With her second novel, she once again charts that terrain in a novel that also explores the significant impact of history on individual lives. In *Sonata for Miriam*, two events occur that will change composer Adam Anker's life forever. Embarking on a journey that ranges from New Zealand to Poland, and then Sweden, Anker not only uncovers his parents' true fate during World War II, but he also finally faces the consequences of an impossible choice he was forced to make twenty years before-a choice that changed the trajectory of his life.

Sonata for Miriam Details

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From Reader Review Sonata for Miriam for online ebook

Susan says

I guess the theme of this book was people who don't talk and are unable to communicate. Maybe so, but I got so tired of no one talking and communicating that I just wanted to yell, "Somebody SAY something!" Read for my IAL contemporary literature class, and I think I made an ass out of myself during the discussion. Still, some of the description of New Zealand, Warsaw & Norway? (Sweden?) which occurred while no one was talking were lovely.

Tattered Cover Book Store says

The first thing you come to in this complex book is a quote from Symon Laks: "But words must be found, for besides words there is almost nothing." This thought is central to all of the story lines in this novel of memories, silence and history both shared and hidden.

On the same day that Adam Anker loses his only remaining family, a teenage daughter, he finds an obscure lead to his father that leads him on an amazing journey through post-war-torn Europe and its survivors. Secrets long untold are slowly revealed and truths come to painful light that somehow complete the circle of who Adam is and what he is meant to do in this life. The idea that no true love is ever lost reoccurs over and over again.

Mostly told in Adam's voice, there is a brief section where the author says that one of the other characters just "had to be allowed to speak for herself... Nobody else could possibly tell her story." While jarring at first, this change in tone, and the glimpse into years of silence it offers us, is perhaps one of the most moving parts of this emotional book.

This book truly spotlights the value of words, especially stories of people, and their ability to bring us closer together and ease our pain. Full of loss, this is nevertheless one of the most hopeful books I've read in some time.

Jackie

Ulla says

I love everyone of Linda Olsson's books! I may have read them all now, so I can start from the beginning again. Some I've read in English, some in Swedish so now I'll try and change the language. I also hopeh! to meet her in Stockholm later this month.

Paltia says

I practically inhaled this melancholy novel. Checked it out from the library, curled up on the couch, and

before I knew it it was over. This starts off with a large dose of mystery. Enough to keep the reader searching for answers. The story is told by Adam and then shifts to the love of his life's perspective. The unfolding events are related in words that glide while evoking a struggle. In less deft hands all the minute descriptions could become tedious. This is not the case with Ms. Olsson as her attention to detail provides the reader with a fine tuned sense of place. The story shifts locales with each one presenting more clues as you near the resolution. No character is wasted. Each one enhances the story and sustains Adam in his search for answers. I think this story is not for everyone. The sadness might get too oppressive. It definitely is the kind of book I love to read. The language is elegant, the story is intense, and the ending will bring a peaceful tear to your eye and sigh of release to your soul.

Kaye says

In her second novel, Linda Olsson explores the themes of love, loss, choices, and memories from the past. A single decision can change a person's life and the lives of those who come after. Even inaction or silence has repercussions. One morning Adam Anker's daughter, Miriam, had urged him to "Get out, Dad. Have an adventure. It's Saturday!" Little did he know that this simple act would forever impact his world. Adam's thoughts in retrospect:

" If I had listened more carefully, would I have been able to hear more? Could I have heard it in the lingering sweetness of the final bars of the music that was playing in the background? Seen it in the light that washed over my daughter's face? In the graceful movement of her hand? Tasted it in the bitter flavors of the coffee?

Should I have known that this scene, in its everyday triviality, would become the shimmering crescendo of the memories on which I now sustain a sort of life?"

When Adam Anker visits the Holocaust Gallery in Auckland Domain Museum, his entire life is changed and a course of action set in motion to come to terms with Adam's past. Adam sees a picture of a man named Adam Lipski which sends his senses reeling. Elusive memories flit in and out of his brain. Lipski, the name he was born with but no longer carries, sends him on a search for family and answers to the past.

This journey takes him to Krakow, Poland and then on to Sweden. In Krakow he tracks down Adam Lipski's sister, Clara, and from her he gets more pieces of the puzzle. These pieces give him a better sense of who he is now and why his childhood was the way it was. This part of his search also introduces him to more key people from the past. These characters are an integral part of the story.

The next leg of the journey takes him to Sweden to meet up again with Miriam's mother, Cecelia, whom he has not seen for almost twenty years. Before Adam arrives in Sweden, the narrative is picked up by Cecelia and told from her perspective, we see many more pieces of the past and how they reflected on her relationship with Adam. In his journey Adam finds much more than he set out to find originally. All the pieces come together to make some semblance of resolution and a feeling of peace.

This is but a brief synopsis of Adam's personal journey. The writing in this novel is simply exquisite. The images evoked are so clear. This is one of the most visually descriptive books I have read in a long time and I can't remember a novel where the inner most thoughts and feelings of the characters are so intimately expressed.

Ms. Olssen has a deep understanding of the human emotions and this uncanny ability is ably depicted in her

writing. She not only lets us see into the characters' heads, but creates a mood and tone to the novel that is almost haunting. The way Adam's memories are revealed is like looking through a gossamer curtain rippling in the breeze. A little bit is revealed as the curtain moves, even then it is not quite wholly grasped, but fleeting and elusive. A wonderful example of this style of writing taken from the very beginning:

" I can take one individual note out of the music I am trying to write at the moment, and it could belong anywhere. Yet, where it sits, where I have placed it, it follows what came before and leads to what comes after. Without it, the whole would not be as it is. " And

"It applies to music, to art, and to life itself, I think. When you listen to the finished composition, or when you go about living your life, the individual components join to make a whole that can so easily be taken for granted. But it is not until you become aware of the parts that you can begin to understand the miracle. It took me almost a lifetime to start searching for the sounds, the notes that make my life's music. And it required a sacrifice so enormous that it did away with all that had made my life meaningful. But in the total silence that came afterward, I finally heard a first single note, and others slowly followed."

It is extremely easy to see how this novel entranced me from the beginning. When I finished the last page, I could have gone back to the beginning and started to savor the beautiful prose all over again. I think this would make a wonderful book club selection. Highly, highly recommended. 5*****

Jackie says

The first thing you come to in this complex book is a quote from Symon Laks: "But words must be found, for besides words there is almost nothing." This thought is central to all of the story lines in this novel of memories, silence and history both shared and hidden.

On the same day that Adam Anker loses his only remaining family, a teenage daughter, he finds an obscure lead to his father that leads him on an amazing journey through post-war-torn Europe and its survivors. Secrets long untold are slowly revealed and truths come to painful light that somehow complete the circle of who Adam is and what he is meant to do in this life. The idea that no true love is ever lost reoccurs over and over again.

Mostly told in Adam's voice, there is a brief section where the author says that one of the other characters just "had to be allowed to speak for herself... Nobody else could possibly tell her story." While jarring at first, this change in tone, and the glimpse into years of silence it offers us, is perhaps one of the most moving parts of this emotional book.

This book truly spotlights the value of words, especially stories of people, and their ability to bring us closer together and ease our pain. Full of loss, this is nevertheless one of the most hopeful books I've read in some time.

Caroline says

Linda Olsson's writing is absolutely beautiful, which is why I gave this book three stars. The central theme that runs through this novel about loss are the consequences of silence.

The reason I did not rate this novel higher are that I thought that the plot was contrived. There was a bit too much packed in - loves lost, the Holocaust, long-lost relatives who just happen to live in New Zealand. The other reason for not loving this book is that I found the main characters to be distant and their explanations for their actions to be either vague or not lacking emotional resonance.

Staci says

This is my first experience with Linda Olsson and I'm so thankful that I have found her. Her writing is exquisite and invokes such emotion, that I find it hard to put into words the feelings I experienced while reading this novel. Her descriptions of the places and people make you feel as if you are there along side Adam. I felt his pain accutely in so many parts of this book. The loss of his daughter is always moving like a whisper in the background of the story. Everything that he is and does is because of this love that he experienced while raising her and then losing her. With that loss, he has to find a way to live again. Living is something that he finds extremely hard to do, but he realizes that he did not give his daughter everything that he could've...he never gave her the mother that she needed to know. He himself never got to know his real father, so he decides to explore the clues that he uncovered in the War Memorial Museum. As he uncovers his family's history you get to really know, understand, and to see how his past has influenced his life and the choices he has made along the way. With the help of family he never knew about and newly found friends, he eventually is able to reconcile his past so that he can embrace his future. Olsson's writing is spare and eloquent. She has such a masterful command of language and I found myself falling in love with her words.

"I never knew how Jan's father had discovered that our time was running out. He must have made some elaborate preparations after he heard about the imminent deportation of Jews. But he never discussed it with me--not then, not later. When I arrived at their apartment, they were ready to go, and we left the same afternoon. I was to travel with them to London, officially as Jan's tutor. And that was how I ended up as the only surviving member of my family. I survived. But I lost my life.

p.133

I lay down on the bed clasping the pictures and buried my face in the pillow in a vain attempt at silencing my sobs. But it was as if all my life's accumulated grief had finally found an outlet and was allowed to take its course. I screamed, I cried, until the grief became bearable. Afterward I lay staring into the air above the bed. And eventually I fell into a dreamless sleep.

p. 175

I could list a thousand such passages that moved me but I want you, the reader, to experience them for yourself. If you haven't read Linda Olsson then I strongly recommend this book to you. I believe that it will become a favorite read for 2009, just like it has for me!

Dov Zeller says

This is a book about silence--the way so many relationships are built around what isn't said as much as around what is--all the tacit "contracts" we make with people to keep certain silences, and how damaging relationships built on these kinds of dynamics can be--and the harm that can come when people refuse to share their stories, particularly with their kids, but also with lovers and friends.

I appreciate the theme, and the emptiness Adam Anker feels--the void he falls into, as he doesn't know who he is because his mother hid her history and therefore his history from him. There is a lot of beautiful writing, the writing and atmosphere drew me in, the sureness of the prose, the emotional lives of the characters--and I particularly appreciated Linda Olsson's way of describing places and connections to place.

The structure of the novel is interesting. There are five sections that all begin with a poem or a quote except for the section narrated by Cecilia (Adam's long lost lover--the rest narrated by Adam). Cecilia's section isn't preceded by a poem, just a blank page, and that was a bit disconcerting, but I appreciated its meaning. Because Cecilia is someone who is, even at the end of the novel, still, it seems, trying to hold onto the silences that she and Adam had built their relationship around. At least I think she was. And yet, she is writing about it to Adam, presumably (or maybe these are all "letters not sent"?).

The first three sections are preceded by poems by Tymoteusz Karpowicz. Here is the first.

A Lesson of Silence

Whenever a butterfly
happened to fold
too violently its wings--
there was a call: silence, please!

As soon as one feather
of a startled bird
jostled against a ray--
there was a call: silence, please!

In that way were taught
how to walk without noise
the elephant on his drum,
man on his earth.

The trees were rising
mute above the fields
as rises the hair
of the horror-stricken.

Within the sections there are chapters, 43 in all, mostly narrated by Adam, in epistolary form. He is writing to his lost love Cecilia who, when she was pregnant, told him he must choose to stay with her or to raise their daughter. He chose to raise their daughter. She told him never to contact her again, at least while their daughter was alive. In the opening of the novel his daughter has just died and on the day of her death, just before he finds out about it (he has been away all day and has not yet heard) he finds, in a museum exhibit related to the Holocaust, a photo of his namesake, Adam Lipski. (He is named Adam Anker, but on his birth certificate he is Adam Lipski, and at this exhibit he finds the name of the other Adam Lipski's sister and decides to contact her. Adam's (the narrator's) mother hadn't ever told him who his father was, so he spends much of the book trying to unravel the mystery of his birth while also grieving the loss of his daughter.)

There is a lot I appreciate about this book. But there are a few too many silences even for me (I am very drawn to the theme), and too many people who've only ever had one love. I find it really hard to believe that so many people connected in the world of this novel went for anywhere from twenty to sixty plus years lovelorn over one person and (at least as far as I can tell from the text) never having other romantic relationships. It's like everyone in this novel has only one true love (or are stuck in a certain time when they had that one love?) and I know trauma can make time strange, often keep people from thriving or being in the present, but it begins to feel contrived at a certain point.

And the end. The end is very abrupt and when I got there I just felt confused.

And there is very little, really, about Miriam in here. And that, well, perhaps it is all part of the silence, but I find it a bit troubling. And the music, the sonata itself, I don't quite have a sense of it--of the Sonata for Miriam, of music in general in here--of Adam as a musician.

So, I found the book a bit frustrating and maybe a tiny bit under or overcooked, but I'm glad I came across this novel and the writer, who I had not heard of. Not sure if I will check out other work by her, but I very well may.

Jen says

One of the best books I've ever read. It was very difficult at first; kept making me cry at the beginning but maybe that's just me. It is beautiful, sad, complicated and hopeful. The tracing of all the characters and their relationships to each other is handled so delicately, so lyrically. Again, maybe just me but there is a musical undercurrent although the author claims not to be musical.

I had read Astrid and Veronika, her earlier novel, and found it good but a bit too Ingmar Bermanly Scandinavian. This one represents a huge next step, I think. I recommend it highly.

Michele Harrod says

A beautifully written book that truly depicts the consequences that our silences and unspoken truths bear on our lives. There are gorgeous scenes in this book where I could close my eyes and feel like I was sitting with the characters. It reads like a piece of music itself.

Diane S ? says

Wonderfully beautiful but plain prose. This is a quiet book by a very talented author that manages to give the reader so many details in such a wonderful way that one can't help but placing themselves in the characters place as they are reading. If I had to choose a theme for this book it would be silence, this is mentioned so many times in so many different ways in this story. The silence of self delusion, of not wanting to know, of questions not asked nor answered, of peace and beauty and the silence of a remembered love. We travel from New Zealand, to Poland, to Sweden with a man who know longer feels that he has a future, so decides to seek the truth about his past. Need to go back and read this author's first book [book:Astrid and Veronika|181086, which I have heard amazing things about.

Susy says

So well written; such sorrow and thankfully some redemption. I'm not familiar enough with music composition to recognize that the pace and length of the chapters follow the cadence of a sonata. But apparently they do. With settings in New Zealand, Poland and Sweden and a passage of time from World War II to the present this is a very well done and well told story.

Margie Adler says

Imagine not knowing your early history, the people the places and what occurred to that time. Imagine, too, intentionally giving up connection with someone for a big chunk of your life. This is a kind of life amnesia. It does make for a an interesting exploration for Olsson's main character, Adam, a single father living in Auckland, a violinist and composer. Some people have difficulty living in the present. Adam lives only in the present. It is all he has, until life suddenly changes, and as often happens if we are sensitive and aware, other dots, even those seemingly very separate start to ignite connection.

Adam's exploration is as much an interior journey of his unknown history as it is a journey that takes him from Auckland to Wellington in New Zealand to Krakow, Poland and to a remote island in Sweden and into the lives of people, who made choices impacting him. Part of the reader's journey along with Adam is to confront these choices without judgement. We meet some interesting characters, some more developed and influential than others. Most of the writing is exquisite, although there are some murky parts that left me unsure of where I was and what was happening. I am still a little unsure about one part, but don't want to include any spoilers here.

This is a beautiful novel about love, loss, grief, friendship and deep connection and understanding. For the most part it is compelling and very worth the journey.

Nadine says

Love this woman's writing and would buy any of her books. They are beautiful in a sad and lonely way.
