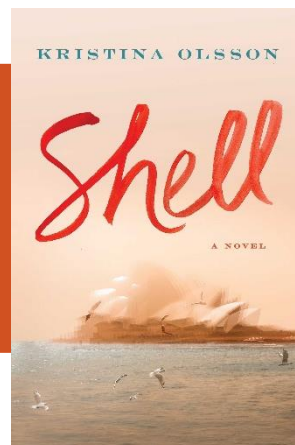




Shell

Kristina Olsson



Author Background

Kristina Olsson is an Australian writer, journalist and teacher. She was raised in Brisbane and is of Swedish and Australian heritage.

As a journalist she has written for The Australian, The Courier-Mail and Sunday Mail, the Sydney Sunday Telegraph and the Griffith Review.

Kristina has been the recipient of the Barbara Jefferis Award, the Queensland Literary Award and the Nita Kibble Literary Award.

Olsson has also worked as a government advisor, and as a teacher of creative writing and journalism. She supervises and mentors post-graduate writing students and also works as a manuscript assessor and editor.

Book Summary

A Swedish glassmaker and a fiercely independent Australian journalist are thrown together amidst the turmoil of the 1960s and the dawning of a new modern era.

1965: As the United States becomes further embroiled in the Vietnam War, the ripple effects are far-reaching—even to the other side of the world. In Australia, a national military draft has been announced and Pearl Keogh, a headstrong and ambitious newspaper reporter, has put her job in jeopardy to become involved in the anti-war movement. Desperate to locate her two runaway brothers before they are called to serve, Pearl is also hiding a secret shame—the guilt she feels for not doing more for her younger siblings after their mother’s untimely death.

Newly arrived from Sweden, Axel Lindquist is set to work as a sculptor on the besieged Sydney Opera House. After a childhood in Europe, where the shadow of WWII loomed large, he seeks to reinvent himself in this utterly foreign landscape and finds artistic inspiration—and salvation—in the monument to modernity that is being constructed on Sydney Harbour. But as the nation hurtles towards yet another war, Jørn Utzon, the Opera House’s controversial architect, is nowhere to be found—and Axel fears that the past he has tried to outrun may be catching up with him.

Discussion Questions

- ❖ The title, *Shell*, most obviously refers to the shell-like shapes of the Sydney Opera House, but we see the image and concept of shells appear with many meanings and contexts at various points in the book. Look at some examples of moments when Axel or Pearl mention shells. What are the main themes that shells evoke for these characters? Do any of these interpretations of shells affect how you see the Sydney Opera House?
- ❖ Apart from shells, there are other visual motifs that run throughout the novel, such as water and birds. Which other repeated images most struck you as you were reading? What were the thematic effects of these motifs—that is, how did they convey certain themes or affect the tone of the narrative?
- ❖ Axel describes how the climate of Sweden “made him different” (p. 15). Do you agree that where you grow up—the weather, natural landscape, architecture—shapes who you are as a person? If so, what are some examples you see in your own life?
- ❖ Axel and Pearl both experienced the loss of a parent in their childhood. How did these pivotal and traumatic experiences influence their adult lives in similar ways, and in what ways did it affect them differently? To what do you attribute these differences?
- ❖ Pearl makes a distinction between the Vietnam War, which she considers “all politics,” and World War II, which she believes was “a moral imperative” (p. 183). Do you think this is a valid distinction? If a nation’s involvement in a war is not for self-defence, how do you distinguish between unnecessarily going to fight in someone else’s war—a criticism levelled against Australia’s involvement in conflicts in the twentieth century—and getting involved out of a moral duty?
- ❖ In the final chapter, beginning on page 247, the glasswork piece that Axel has been working on throughout the novel is described for the first time. Were you surprised to learn what he had created? If so, why?

References

- ❖ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristina_Olsson
- ❖ <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/38532219-shell>
- ❖ <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Shell/Kristina-Olsson/9781501193149>