

Sisu's Winter War by Liisa Kovala

Book Club Questions & Topics for Discussion

1. The novel hinges on the promise Meri makes to her dying mother to keep the family together. Why is this promise central to the events in the story? Is Meri able to achieve her goals? If not, how does she fail? If so, in what ways does she succeed?
2. Sisu is a major theme in this novel. It is a uniquely Finnish concept that doesn't have a specific English translation, but has been defined as grit, perseverance, bravery, and determination in the face of great adversity, especially in a hopeless situation. Does Meri's sisu lead to positive outcomes for her or her family during the Winter War? How about after her diagnosis of early onset Alzheimer's?
3. Meri claims not to believe in fortune telling, yet she seeks Akka's unusual gifts. To what extent does fate play a role in Meri's experiences? Does she create her own fate or is some unknown hand guiding her?
4. The novel includes several moments of magical realism. For instance, the tin shape that predicts her fortune coincides with moments of realization and seems to guide her at times. In later years, Meri sees the figures of her lost loved ones and sometimes speaks to them. Is Meri imagining things? Is it wishful thinking? Are her visions the result of her Alzheimer's? Is she able to connect with those on the other side?
5. Loss is a significant theme in the novel. Meri loses loved ones and eventually her memories. But it is also a novel about the necessity of risking everything to reap rewards. In what ways do Meri's losses affect who she becomes? What positive outcomes result from the risks she takes? Could she have avoided negative outcomes by being more cautious? Are you a risk-taker or do you prefer to play it safe?
6. Along with possessing sisu, Meri is impetuous. How does her impetuous nature affect her decisions? How do we see her impetuosity played out in her early years? In her later years?
7. The primary relationships in the novel are between Meri and the other women in her life: her mother, sisters, daughter, and granddaughter. In many ways, Meri feels like she has failed them all. How has she failed them, and how has she tried to make up for her failures? Has she succeeded?

8. Meri's relationship with Markus goes as far back as their childhood, but her relationship with Andrei begins in an intense environment when they have only each other to rely. In the end, Meri realizes Markus has always been her soul mate, but she doesn't regret her relationship with Andrei. Why does Meri struggle with both relationships? What does she value about each of them?
9. Another major theme is loyalty and betrayal. Meri pledges loyalty to her country and the Lotta Svärds, she promises to remain devoted to her family, and she makes vows to Markus. Although she has every intention of remaining loyal to the people in her life, she betrays those loyalties repeatedly. Is Meri responsible for the events in her life or is her fate predetermined?
10. Meri has a particularly strong relationship with her granddaughter Katia. How does that relationship show the divide between their generations in terms of upbringing, language, and culture? In what ways are Meri and Katia similar?
11. Alzheimer's is a particularly devastating disease for everyone involved. The novel is written from Meri's perspective as she experiences the effects of the disease firsthand. Would the story have been as effective had it been told from another character's point of view? To what extent are Meri's experiences like those of people affected by Alzheimer's in your own life?
12. At the end of the novel, Meri walks toward a light in the trees near her home and reunites with her soul mate Markus. What does the ending mean to you? What were your initial thoughts about what happened in that moment? Did you think it signified her passing on? Or did you believe she is moving farther from reality because of her Alzheimer's?
13. When Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the world made connections between this war and the Finnish-Russian Winter War of 1939-1940. In what ways are those conflicts similar? Different? Does history really repeat itself?
14. How does Meri's experiences of the war, her immigration to Canada with her husband, or her life with her daughter and granddaughter in Northern Ontario resonate with you? Do you have an immigration story? How has life changed for the children and grandchildren of immigrants? In what ways can you identify with the relationships within the novel?

Is your book club interested in a group discussion with the author?

Contact Liisa Kovala at kovalaliisa@gmail.com to arrange an in-person or Zoom event.