

## About Stalin's Cows

Although Anna looks like all the other girls, she is not a typical Finnish adolescent. Of course she isn't. – her mother is from Estonia, a small, Soviet-occupied country south of Finland. Where Anna lives, people think that all Estonian women are made in the USSR. There is something suspicious about them. They are simply Russians in disguise. So Anna silences herself in both of her native languages. But Anna knows better, because she knows history.

This novel follows the lives of three women of different generations and societies, and presents the reader with scenes that span the entire 20th century. Stalin's Cows was Finland's most celebrated debut novel of the year when it was first published in 2003. Sofi Oksanen became a sensation, both in Finland and in Estonia, her mother's native country. Stalin's Cows introduced many of the themes of Oksanen's later books – written with an unusual talent.

## Discussion topics

1. Stalin's Cows begins with a chilling description of the "first time". How did it make you feel? Were you surprised that the scene was about vomiting rather than sex? How did it effect your expectations about what would happen later in the book?
2. Katariina, Anna's mother, falls in love with a Finnish man in the 1970's in Tallinn, the Estonian capitol. What was the world like at that time? What problems does the cold war cause for their romance? How does Katariina's life in Finland turn out? Do you think Katariina is happy?
3. How does Anna become obsessed with food, especially anything sweet? Does Anna's mother share her sweet tooth?
4. At an early age, Anna learns how to hide the fact that she is Estonian. Why is that, and what kind of consequences does it have for her? Does it make Anna love Estonia more or less? What kind of childhood does Anna have? Is she happy spending her summer vacations with her family in the Estonian countryside? What are the difficulties the family has to overcome to get into Soviet Estonia?
5. Katariina seems quite different from Anna. Or is she? What kind of differences and similarities do mother and daughter have? What about Anna's Grandmother? What is she like compared to Anna and Katariina?
6. Anna's father is often gone and she spends a lot of time with her mother in their little hometown. What effect does this have on Anna, if any? How would

- you describe Anna's relationship with her father? What are your impressions of the gender roles in the book generally?
7. How would you describe Anna's relationship with her best friend, Irene? How much are they alike? Could it be said that Anna is a success in everything and Irene is more of a failure? How strong is their bond? What happens to it? How does Katariina react to the girls' friendship? How does she feel about Irene's mother?
  8. After she moves to the Finnish capital, Anna begins to lead a rather reckless life. Her world revolves more and more around food and she has casual sex and experiments with drugs. Discuss Anna's everyday life in Helsinki. What is it like?
  9. Oksanen writes that all Estonian women are whores. What is the context of this statement? What do you think Oksanen is trying to say with this exaggeration? How does it reflect people's attitudes about Estonian women in the novel?
  10. Estonians who were deported and/or exiled to the Siberian GULAG – the Soviet penal labor camp system — referred to Siberian Goats as " Stalin's cows", a joke told in a bitter tone. Discuss how much of a shock it must have been to farmers to leave their fertile land to start a new life in Arctic Siberia. A bony goat isn't exactly the same thing as a meaty cow. Why do you think Oksanen chose this title for her novel?
  11. During the cold war there were many differences between capitalistic Western Europe and socialist Soviet-occupied Eastern countries. Do you think the Communist regime made people more materialistic, because they were allowed only limited possessions? For many people, anything western was a "must-have". What role do material possessions play in Stalin's Cows?
  12. What do you think about the structure of Stalin's Cows? Oksanen changes the point of view often; sometimes Anna is "me" and sometimes "her". What do you think the writer is trying to say with this technique? Do you think it's purely a question of style or does it have a deeper meaning?
  13. Although bulimia is a central theme in Stalin's Cows, it's not your typical book about eating disorders. What do you think Oksanen is trying to say in her interpretation of eating disorders? Do you think the book is saying that eating disorders have to do with shame, with being an outsider?
  14. At the end of the book Anna feels somewhat pleased and happy. Do you think her happiness is real, or is it meant sarcastically? How have her life experiences shaped her?

## Suggestions for further reading

- The Lover by Marguerite Duras
- Wasted by Marya Hornbacher
- The Gulag Archipelago by Aleksandr I.Solzhenitsyn
- A Journey to Sakhalin by Anton Chekhov