# Shell by Kristina Olsson

## Synopsis

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, an 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’re 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 foreign landscape, and finds artistic inspiration—and salvation—in the monument to modernity that is being constructed on Sydney’s Harbor. 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.

As the seas of change swirl around them, Pearl and Axel’s lives orbit each other and collide in this sweeping novel “that brings the cultural upheaval of 1960s Australia vividly to life, and readers who appreciate leisurely paced, thoughtful literary fiction will savor each word of this emotional story of two people—and a country—reckoning with their past and future”

## Discussion questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. How do Axel and Pearl’s story lines parallel each other? How do their scenes together illustrate their different approaches to the similar emotional challenges of their lives? Do you think their connection influences their development over the course of the novel—and if so, how?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?

*Discussion questions from https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Shell/Kristina-Olsson/9781501193149*