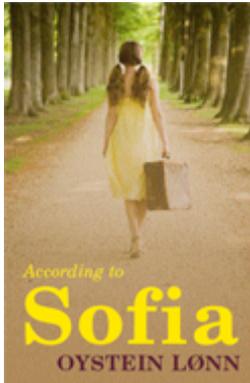


## NORTANA Reading Group Guide

### Publication information



#### According to Sofia

Author: Øystein Lønn

Translator: Barbara J. Haveland

Publisher: Maia Press, 2009

ISBN: 1904559344

Price: 18.95 USD

<http://www.maiapress.com/books/sofia.php>

### Introduction

Three men have pledged lifelong friendship to one another, and all three men love one woman – Sofia. Each character encounters his and her personal demons, and the novel in an intricately bound web of choices and consequences. According to Sofia follows the bonds of love and friendship, in sickness and in health.

### About this book

Maintaining a relationship to Sofia is the constant for the men in this turbulent novel. Simen, a newspaper editor, is her husband. Bird, a journalist and runner, is her brother. Leon, a musician and mechanic, is her lover. Bound for the Basque part of Spain, Sofia leaves Norway with Leon, who then abandons her for the desert of Morocco to attempt suicide. Simen and Bird try to remedy the unraveling situation from Norway. Cell phones are the lifeline between characters, offering a degree of communication as all four embark on their existential journeys to grapple reoccurring questions of isolation and loneliness. Linked by a thirty year history, their secrets and shortcomings color the mosaic of their friendship.

Critics have compared Lønn's narrative style to jazz. Leon is a jazz musician, so the parallels play on many levels in the text. The novel progresses unevenly through space and time, weaving present and past events into a storyline built on narrative fragments. Thus, with each character providing a distinctive melody, the harmony and dissonance of ensemble reflects the moods and tones of the individuals as they experience anger, grief, disappointment, elation, and doubt. Images of masculinity feature prominently in this novel, particularly as the male leads tackle the assumptions of contentment in love, work, and life. Questions of aging and the deteriorating body are central to the painful truths these friends encounter.

## **For discussion**

1. Discuss sickness and health as contrasting themes of this novel.
2. Age is a constant topic, spoken or not, among these three friends. How do the three men respond to the aging process? Does Sofia experience aging in the same way?
3. Women are the wise counselors in this novel. Discuss the wisdom or life philosophy behind each of these women: Sofie, Inger, Linda, Gerda.
4. Is there a particular “Norwegian” character to this tale? If so, what is it?
5. What is the image of “home” as presented by this novel? How does it stand in contrast to images of “away” (familiar vs. foreign places)?
6. Is it possible for these characters to be content “at home” in your opinion? Why or why not?
7. Which role does technology play in this novel? How does the cell phone enable the plot?
8. Many critics compare Lønn’s narrative style to a jazz composition. How do you interpret music and the role of music in the text?
9. Is passion or a lack of passion the stronger catalyst in this novel?
10. Which images of masculinity do the three men represent (Simon, Leon, and Bird)? What does the text say about friendship between men?

## **About the author**

Øystein Lønn (1936) debuted as the age of thirty with the short story collection The Procession. Although he continued to write short stories and novels for the next twenty years, his impact on the Norwegian literary scene was minimal until the early 1990s. Lønn won the Dobloug Prize in 1992, and in 1993, Lønn was awarded The Norwegian Critics Prize for Literature and the Brage Prize for his short story collection Thrane’s Method. This recognition propelled him into the Scandinavian literary spotlight. Three years later, he won the prestigious Nordic Council’s Literature Prize for the short story collection What Shall We do Today. The setting of many of Lønn’s stories is Sørlandet, the region of southern Norway surrounding Lønn’s hometown of Kristiansand, where he currently lives. According to Sofia is the first volume in a trilogy about these friends; Simen’s Storms and After Sofia have not yet been translated into English.

[For an interesting article on Lønn in English refer to Dictionary of Literary Biography: Twentieth Century Norwegian Writers. Detroit: Bruccoli Clark Layman, 2004: pp. 233-238.]

## **About the translator**

A prize-winning translator, Barbara J. Haveland translates Norwegian and Danish literature into English. In addition to Øystein Lønn, a selection of Nordic authors that she has made available to an English-speaking audience includes Linn Ullmann, Merete Morken Andersen, Jan Kjærstad, Ib Michael, Peter Hoeg, and Carsten Jensen.

## **Other books available in English by this author**

The Necessary Rituals of Maren Gripe. Trans. Barbara Haveland; Flamingo, 2001.  
Tom Reber’s Last Retreat. Trans. David McDuff; London: Boyars, 1992.

## **Suggestions for further reading**

If you enjoyed this book, we suggest the following other Norwegian writers available in English:

Linn Ullmann. Before You Sleep. Trans. Tiina Nunnally. Viking, 1999. ISBN 0140298339.

Per Petterson. To Siberia. Trans. Anne Born. Picador, 2009. ISBN 0312428995.

Stig Sæterbakken. Siamese. Trans. Stokes Schwartz. Dalkey Archive, 2009. ISBN 1564783251

Dag Solstad. Shyness & Dignity. Trans. Sverre Lyngstad. Graywolf Press, 2006. ISBN 1555974465.

### **Links to reviews in English**

### **NORTANA reading group guides**

This NORTANA Study guide was prepared by Melissa Gjellstad, Assistant Professor of Scandinavian Studies at the University of North Dakota, Grand Forks.