Some topics to consider while reading *An Unknown Sky*:

- Travelling
- Searching for connection and belonging
- Friendships and relationships
- Unspoken longing and regret
- The past catching up with the present

Tourists in Moscow and Vienna confronted by the weight of history. A young student teacher discovering her capacity for compassion. A teenage boy defending his mother’s reputation. A brother anguish by his sister’s illness. An ageing widow infatuated with a troubled young man. Conflicts between the silent burdens of the past and the drama of everyday lives.

Written with eloquence, grace and emotional generosity, these stories seek understanding rather than judgment, inviting us to reflect on the unspoken longings and regrets that make up who we are.

About Susan Midalia

Susan Midalia has taught English at tertiary and secondary levels. She also has a PhD in contemporary Australian women’s fiction. Her first collection of short stories, *A History of the Beanbag* (2007), was shortlisted for the Western Australian Premiers Book Award. She now works full-time as a writer and editor and conducts workshops on the short story. She lives in Perth, and is married with two adult sons.
Discussion Questions

1. In ‘The boy with no ears’ Amy’s worries about her future ease and she finds within herself a sense of maturity after preventing the women from hitting the little boy. Why do you think this is?

2. ‘An unknown sky’ examines the sense of loss and change a mother experiences when her child leaves home. What was it like for your mother when you left home or for you as a mother when your own children left home?

3. When Carlo in ‘Sacred’ reacts so protectively of his mother, in your opinion, is this due to the lack of a strong male figure in his life? Is this reaction actually hurting his mother?

4. In ‘Backward facing curls’ the friendship between Jill and Karen naturally grows apart over the years. Do you think this is inevitable in all long-term friendships? Should Jill have tried harder to maintain contact with Karen?

5. In many of these stories, Susan Midalia examines the theme of travel. What does this bring to the stories? Is it interesting and/or effective?

6. Discuss the author’s choice of title for the story ‘Compensation’. Why do you think this story was given this title?

7. What do you think of the character Ramona in the story ‘Happy families’? Is she relatable?

8. Why do you think Grace in ‘The perfect stranger’ is constantly reminded of the patients she has worked with in hospital?

9. Discuss your thoughts on the final story, ‘The workshop facilitator said’. Why do you think the author wrote a short story that examines its own form?
Q. The blurb to your book describes this collection as dealing with ‘travellers’ in search of connection and belonging. What particularly interests you in this idea?

I think that the desire to connect with others and belong to some kind of community is often about the need for individual affirmation. In this sense, it may even be a biological imperative: I remember reading about orphaned babies who had their physical needs met but who, because they were never emotionally nurtured, never held and affirmed, actually died! The desire to connect with others is also, I think, about wishing to escape the isolation that is an inescapable part of the human condition. This is rich material for a writer, because these desires speak to so many readers, regardless of age, gender, class or culture.

Q. What attracts you to writing short stories in particular?

It’s partly because I’m interested in the way people live their lives according to specific moments in time: moments of intimacy or unbridgeable distance; turning points; moments of realisation or disillusionment. The short story is particularly good at capturing those fleeting glimpses that can illuminate an entire life. I also love the aesthetic challenge of writing short stories, because every word must be necessary and precisely the right one. Writing short stories has more in common with writing poetry than novels: it means trying to meet the challenge of combining brevity and depth, economy and resonance.

Q. The stories in An Unknown Sky deal with a range of characters: men, women, children, teenagers, the middle-aged, the elderly; working-class and middle-class. What was your aim in creating this diversity?

I did this partly because it’s fun to try to imagine what it might be like to be someone very different from myself. Not unlike actors taking on different roles, I guess. But in focusing on the inner lives of a range of different characters – their thoughts and feelings, fears and desires – my main aim was to encourage readers to understand rather than to judge those characters.

Q. Two of these stories deal with the experience of Australians abroad: ‘Underground’ is set in Moscow, and ‘The Study of Falling Cats’ is set in Vienna. What prompted you to write about this experience?

I’m aware that many white Australians, including myself, have been sheltered from the ravages of history; that we’re historically ignorant or naïve. So, drawing on the classic trope of the “innocent aboard,” I wanted to explore what might happen to an innocent Australian when she or he encounters the struggles and suffering of another culture. The stories were also prompted by personal experience: one happened a few years ago and the other nearly forty years ago. Both experiences were deeply unsettling, and so I had to ask myself why.

Q. What are you hoping your readers might find in, or take away from, these stories?

Firstly, and very simply, I want my readers to read for pleasure! To enjoy the experience of not knowing where a story might be leading; to enjoy the use of language and the way a story is crafted. I also want to encourage readers to reflect on their lives: on what they value and believe in, and why. On how they treat others, because in the end, in both the private and the public spheres, that is all we have. Finally, I want my readers to ask questions rather than to seek a “message” in my stories; for them to understand that there are no simple answers or solutions to the complex business of living.