

*Reisefieber*  
by  
Mikołaj Łoziński

Book report

**Basic facts**

This book, written in Polish, is a short novel (38,000 words). Set in the present day, it is about the relationship between Daniel Reis, a journalist-turned-writer aged 38, and Astrid Reis, his mother, who has brought him up alone but from whom he has become estranged. The action takes place in Paris at Christmas time, though the setting is not a crucial feature of the book. The main protagonists are émigré Swedes; Daniel lives in New York, though he grew up with Astrid in Paris, where she has now died and where he now returns.

The third-person narrative, including a large proportion of dialogue, moves between two time scales – the present, focusing on Daniel’s thoughts and actions following his mother’s death, and the recent past, focusing on Astrid’s thoughts and actions in the days before her death. Both their reflections on their relationship bring back scenes from the more distant past, including Daniel’s childhood. The relationship is characterised by a failure to communicate, with Daniel seeming to resent his mother’s atypical, independent approach to life and almost wilfully misunderstanding her; finally it is her affair with a married man that has caused him to break with her for good. As the story progresses, certain mysteries are implied that

are eventually revealed to the reader, giving some keys to the nature of the mother-son relationship. Most importantly, Daniel gradually learns things that teach him to understand his mother better, and ultimately himself. By the end of the book he realises his mistake and is desperate to redress the balance in his life by trying to build a future with his girlfriend, but fears it may already be too late.

This is Mikołaj Łoziński's first novel. Aged 25, he is a graduate of the Sorbonne in Paris where he studied sociology. His short stories have appeared in literary journals. He is also a photographer, and has had several exhibitions. He has worked as a house painter, photographer, interpreter, and assistant to a blind psychotherapist.

## Synopsis

The book is divided into ten chapters, each including several shorter parts, ranging from half a page to eight pages. As we read, we move between the story's two time scales, before and after Astrid's death.

### I.

Just before Christmas, Daniel has received a phone call from a woman called Louise, prompting him to leave New York at once for Paris. His girlfriend Anna sees him off at the airport. We learn that Anna has never met Daniel's mother, Astrid. He promises to call Anna on arrival, but is rather cold towards her. As the immigration officer looks at his passport photo, then him, Daniel thinks: "A man with a mother looks like that, and a man without one looks like this" – the first cryptic clue we have that his mother has died. From his thoughts on the plane we learn more about Daniel – he is a would-be novelist. He thinks of his mother's blind psychotherapist, and imagines that his mother lied to her, at least by omission. He was brought up by Astrid alone with no male presence; in his only conversation with his father, who telephoned him on his tenth birthday, he told the man he did not want to know him, a painful memory. He sleeps on the plane, but when he awakes his neighbour tells him he slept fitfully; clearly he is disturbed in ways that he himself is unaware of. As the plane lands we learn that Daniel is not sure he will recognise Louise, though we don't yet know her identity.

### II.

1. The time-scale shifts to a few weeks earlier, and the focus is now on a woman, whose thoughts concern her own wish to avoid finality – by writing with a pencil so that the words can always be changed, and more generally by remaining independent. She remembers leaving her home in Sweden at sixteen, already mature and self-reliant. This is Astrid Reis, Daniel's mother.
2. Back with Daniel, next morning he gets up and looks at himself in the mirror, imagining how in ten years' time he'll look like his father, whom he has never seen, or like his mother. We learn that he is already 38.
3. Astrid is at home in Paris, preparing to go out that evening. She remembers a disturbing dream, in which she looked at a photograph of her parents as if it were the first time she'd ever seen them.
4. We learn that Daniel has given up a potentially successful career as a journalist to be a writer, with the encouragement of all his friends. He used to regard himself as self-reliant, unlike his mother, as he sees her. (As we read between the lines, the evidence implies that his own view of himself, and of his mother, fails to take account of the truth.) He tries to call Anna but gets a busy tone. He feels dissatisfied with what he has written the day before. "How can I write about women if I don't understand them?" he complains. His lack of real interest in people is hampering his

efforts to write, which in fact make him feel trapped. He is clearly never going to write the “modern novel” he talks about; instead he imagines the great success he’s going to be.

5. Astrid gets dressed carefully – she is still attractive in her sixties. On the metro she imagines what it’s like to be the other people around her. She wonders what she will say to Spencer, whom she intends to tell that they can never meet again. We learn that they first met six years ago when she was a mature student at the university where he was a professor.
- 6 & 7. These two sections focus on Louise, who we now learn is Astrid’s half-sister. Based in Stockholm with a husband and children, she has a busy life, but is in Paris on a month’s grant. Enjoying the change of scene, she does not immediately contact Astrid. When she does call there’s only an answerphone, but she decides to go to an old address where Astrid used to live with Daniel, though this flat is now rented out. A young man answers the door; she wonders briefly if it is Daniel, whom she hasn’t seen for many years, but it’s not. She explains who she is and why she is in Paris, saying she hasn’t seen Astrid for ten years since they had a quarrel; eventually the lodger tells her that Astrid is dead (this is the first time it is directly stated).

### III.

1. Astrid arrives late at the restaurant for her date with Spencer. She’s expecting to tell him why she hasn’t answered his calls lately. When he’s concerned at her lighting a cigarette, she says “It’s all the same to me now”; this cryptic remark, and the suggestion that she has something important to tell him imply to us that something has happened to her. He tells her that his wife Caroline sends her best wishes. They had invited Astrid to their golden wedding party, but she didn’t go. (We haven’t been told that Astrid and Spencer are lovers, but it is obvious by now, also that his wife accepts the fact.) She tells him she was exhausted after her tests. (This is our first hint that she has medical problems.) Now we learn that she was lonely when they met and took time to realise she was in love. Daniel was still in Paris, living independently, and making her feel inadequate by criticising her as a parent, which she found very painful. Astrid says she wanted to tell Spencer something, but hasn’t the strength.
2. Daniel and Louise are in the taxi from the airport where she has gone to meet him. She tells him that Astrid has left a letter for him. He remembers a strange dream he had on the plane, in which his tongue swelled up, almost choking him. At Louise’s hotel, Daniel reads the letter Astrid wrote him just before dying. In it she says she wants him to try and understand her and asks him to forgive her. She knows she has a terminal illness and doesn’t want to be a burden on him – the implication is that she is planning suicide. She says she has run away from the truth all her life and that there are things she has kept unsaid, though now she regrets it. She regrets having abandoned her own mother, and that Daniel has a poor opinion of her; she does not even know his phone number and cannot call him. She writes

that she wasn't the best, or the worst mother, but doesn't deserve his contempt. Clearly he disapproved of her affair with Spencer and has turned his back on her. Now she writes that she regrets not having told him the truth about his father.

3. Daniel is shocked and asks Louise why she didn't tell him that Astrid committed suicide. Louise explains that her attempt to jump out of a window was thwarted by a neighbour and that she died of her illness in hospital. Daniel feels unwell.
- 4 & 5. Next day Daniel has flu, and as Louise nurses him, he feels like a little boy again, with his favourite aunt, and doesn't have to be responsible for anything or anyone, and remembers his mother nursing him in a similar way

#### IV.

1. Astrid is on her way home from the restaurant; she has told Spencer everything (by now we can assume that means the fact that she is dying). We learn that five years earlier Spencer had wanted to divorce Caroline and marry Astrid; at first she had accepted, but a week later she had changed her mind. As she walks home in the dark and the snow, she imagines seeing a car crash, calling an ambulance and saving the driver's life, then wonders how she'd really have behaved – she likes imagining herself as a heroic figure in a film. She thinks about writing a letter to explain everything to Daniel and forgive him.
2. Two days later Daniel feels well again and realises he should call Anna. It's Christmas Eve. He has a lot to do in the next few days to deal with Astrid's property and affairs. On the way to Astrid's flat he stops to call Anna, but it's engaged. He calls Astrid's number and hears her voice on the answerphone. He goes to the flat where she lived alone after he left home. He feels disoriented by the familiar objects in an unfamiliar, tidy flat. On the way back to Louise's hotel he tries to call Anna again but hangs up halfway through dialling and calls his mother's number again to hear her voice once more. That night he cannot sleep and has lost faith in his novel.
- 3, 4 & 5. He dreams of being at a crowded station with Astrid, clinging onto her as they try to catch up with his father, who walks away; then he sees his mother leaving on the train without him. Although it's 4am he gets up and goes out, trying to rid himself of all his thoughts, then calls Anna from a phone box. The conversation unsettles him; Anna was upset that he hadn't called sooner. He had wanted to talk to her about his dream but instead she has told him off for causing her to worry. Then his phone card ran out and the call was cut off. Daniel goes back to Astrid's flat and finds he left the door open. He starts to think about her and what she must have been like when he was not present. He wonders why she managed to have such a tidy flat when she had such an untidy life.
6. He remembers how he resented his mother for going to see Aude, the blind psychotherapist, and for not being like his schoolfriends' mothers. He clearly resents Aude for knowing more about Astrid than he does. He remembers disliking hearing Astrid talk about the depression she suffered after an accident at the seaside

(this event is kept mysterious and we only learn exactly what happened towards the end of the book). Now he wants to talk to Aude. He feels besieged by memories and thoughts from the past, and unable to deal with them all or to understand his own state of mind. He remembers killing an annoying insect at Astrid's request while on holiday, and wonders why he should think of that evening – clearly it was followed by the day of the accident. He calls Aude, who asks if he wants to talk about Astrid or himself, and says her work with her patients is confidential.

7. Feeling irritated with himself, he goes to see Aude to find out more about Astrid, but she refuses to disclose personal information. Daniel thinks she is a fraud who never helped Astrid, and that Aude had no right to know Astrid's secrets and to keep them from him. Despite his impatience, Aude tells him she's going to Assisi to see where her father lived when he was ill and dying, and asks if he understands why she's going there. But he doesn't, and leaves her house feeling it was a waste of time to have come.
8. On the way back to the hotel he thinks how close he feels to Louise, though she doesn't try to discuss serious issues with him. He arrives to find she's out, and feels alone, a feeling he often has; Anna has upset him before now by telling him that he's unsociable and doesn't really like people. He realises that Astrid told him the same thing. He tries to remember her voice and to feel the anger with which he used to react to her.
9. Louise tells him she remembers Astrid telling her that as a boy Daniel was always waiting for her at the bus stop when she came home from work. He remembers doing so once, and how he accidentally ruined the flower he wanted to give her.
- 10 & 11. Daniel has delayed calling Spencer. He imagines that Caroline will answer and welcome him as the only person who was on her side in opposing Astrid's liaison with her husband. First he calls the rented flat where he and Astrid used to live, and speaks to the Polish lodger. Next day he goes there to sort out the tenancy. The bus stop he once waited at has been modernised. He looks around the flat, which brings back memories, but the place smells different. It takes him ages to talk about Astrid instead of small repairs that need doing; he wants to know what she talked to the lodgers about, and hears that she told them a lot about herself – once again, a virtual stranger knows more about her than Daniel does himself. He feels that he wants to gather up all these memories of her that other people retain. The lodger didn't know she was ill – Spencer rang to say she had fallen off a ladder, and two weeks later a woman called to say she had died. In the metro Daniel feels calmer and wonders if that's because he has managed to sort something out.

V.

1. Astrid's clock has stopped but she won't bother to buy a new battery. She goes for a walk and sees a batty old neighbour who used to talk to her dog; since its death she still talks to the non-existent dog. Astrid hasn't the strength to pretend her son is still with her. She knows her time is now very limited and feels calm, sure of what to do. She cleans and tidies the whole flat. She remembers seeing a girl with her legs in plaster at the hospital where she went for her results, and it reminds her of when she herself was in terrible pain and then in plaster following the accident that happened by the sea when she was on holiday with Daniel – clearly it was a dreadful experience.
- 2 & 3. Louise tells Daniel that the doctor has written down Astrid's final words, spoken in Swedish. Next day he finally calls Spencer. Caroline answers and tells him that Spencer died two days after Astrid. He goes to meet Caroline at a cafe. While waiting for her, he feels faintly guilty that he hasn't called Anna, but realises it's the old Anna, as he first knew her, that he misses, not the person she is now. When Caroline comes, Daniel says he's sorry about Spencer, though he remembers wishing Spencer was dead years ago. It turns out he was ill but kept it a secret; he never got up after his final meeting with Astrid. Caroline accepts that Astrid was the love of Spencer's life. Daniel feels sorry for her but doesn't know what to say.
- 4 & 5. Daniel dreams of narrowly escaping being hit by a car, and of talking to Astrid about the accident she had, who exonerates him from blame for it (we still don't know exactly what happened, but clearly he caused her to be injured somehow). He awakes feeling refreshed. He goes to see the doctor who treated Astrid as she was dying. The young doctor has very fond memories of Astrid, who gave him motherly advice about his romance with a Swedish girl, whom he has now married. Daniel feels surprisingly at ease with the doctor, and tells him about a memory of visiting Astrid in hospital when she hurt her spine (we can guess he's referring to the mysterious accident) and asked him who would fall faster from the 8-th floor window, a small or a large person? With coins she demonstrated that the lighter falls first, and Daniel thought she did so because it was his fault she was in hospital. But now he thinks she was depressed and contemplating suicide. The doctor remembers her as very youthful, someone who understood him well. Daniel is resentful that this man was so close to his mother. The doctor shows him Astrid's final words, which are a request to get rid of a buzzing fly.
- 6 & 7. Daniel calls Anna at last, who is unsympathetic and wants to know when he'll be home; he wants to tell her the coins story and about Astrid's last words, but he can't. Walking back to the hotel, he remembers an incident from childhood when Astrid was mugged in the street in his presence and he couldn't protect her, though he tried. Unable to sleep, he thinks of the sounds he used to hear of Astrid moving about at night, and wishes he could go and comfort her, something he hasn't done for a long time, but now she has gone and it's too late.

## VI.

1. We return to Astrid, who has cleaned her flat and is bidding herself farewell. She is calm as she prepares to jump out of the 5<sup>th</sup>-floor window, but at the last minute a man on the balcony opposite shouts to stop her and she steps back and faints. The police take her to hospital, where she wonders if she has in fact died.
2. Daniel goes to the cemetery to see Astrid's simple grave and only thinks of placing flowers on it when he sees some already there. He notices that she is the youngest person in this row of graves, and regrets having so few photos of her. He remembers her angrily stopping him from investigating a box full of old photos from her youth, and then her sorrow for hitting him with a newspaper. He reads out the inscription on her grave (most likely put there by Caroline on behalf of Spencer): "The love of my life" – we see that it has meaning for Daniel too.
3. He goes back to her flat to look for the box of photos. He thinks how Anna often talks of marriage, especially since they have started to drift apart – clearly he fears commitment and cannot respond to Anna. He cannot find the photos.
4. He goes to see Aude again, unsure why. He tells her Astrid has left him no trace of herself. He asks her if it's possible to be jealous over someone who's no longer alive, and hears that if he is, then it's possible. He wants Aude to tell him more about Astrid, saying he doesn't really know what she was like. Aude tells him that what matters is how he remembers her. He says he fears some bad memories from childhood, including the accident, which she has clearly discussed with Aude, but never with him. He admits he's finding it hard to leave Paris because the past is what now seems most important to him. He says he knows too little about Astrid – and Aude says that was his choice.

## VII.

1. Daniel thinks back to his own horror of Astrid's sexuality, how he didn't like men looking at her on the beach, and how he reacted badly when he found her alone with Spencer.
2. Astrid is in hospital, where Spencer has been to visit her, trying to reassure her that she'll recover, but she knows she won't. As she thinks about her life, she regrets grudges she has against Daniel and wonders if he thinks about her. And what other people think of her, if they know her better than she does herself. She hasn't forgotten Daniel's words when they parted six years ago, and regrets that he hasn't said sorry.
- 3, 4 & 5. Daniel remembers the time he caught Astrid and Spencer together, and angrily objected, forcing Spencer to dress and leave quickly. He treated her like a daughter, not a mother, as poor Spencer meekly complied and left. Astrid calmly told Daniel she would never forgive him. Daniel asks Louise if she knew about his quarrel with Astrid, but before then she and Astrid had already fallen out over their inheritance. He tells Louise a different version of the incident involving Spencer,

implying that Astrid had shouted at him for not calling before coming round. Later he feels bad for lying to Louise and cannot sleep. He's generally dissatisfied with himself. He thinks how Astrid would have comforted him. He dreams of her, then thinks of their sad final exchange, when he smashed a mirror in anger and she regretted giving birth to him, saying he'd understand her when he had his own children.

### VIII.

1. In hospital, Astrid dreams of her own absence. She's very weak from chemotherapy. Spencer comes to visit and tries to amuse her. Meanwhile she's thinking how, despite being an able linguist who worked as an interpreter, she lost her command of Swedish, her native tongue. She remembers once trying to swap roles with Aude, asking her what a blind person sees and dreams. She imagines Aude's file on her that will be thrown away now. Spencer says Caroline wants to visit Astrid, who isn't eager for visitors. She remembers as a child imagining her own death and all the regrets people would have, how fondly they would think of her. Spencer suggests tracking down Daniel, but Astrid refuses his offer.
- 2, 3 & 4. Daniel thinks about how Anna often talks of having children and accuses him of being afraid to be a father. He cannot answer. He goes to call Anna without checking the time in New York, wanting to talk to her openly about the things he never dares say, that he fears being a father and husband, but he dials the number wrong. He remembers how Astrid never remembered her PIN number and he had to keep reminding her what it was. He wonders if he has forgotten a number, a tiny detail from something, as a result of which he'll never get together with Anna and never understand his relationship with Astrid. He misses Anna as he first knew her.
5. Daniel realises he must talk to Anna and that their life together must change. He goes out early and wanders aimlessly, feeling that it's too late to talk to the people who matter to him. He even feels he's let down the characters in his novel. He finally calls Anna again, but it's 1am and she's trying to sleep and hangs up, to his disappointment.

### IX.

1. Astrid is too weak to eat. Now we hear her impression of the doctor we've already met – she enjoys his visits, talking about his Swedish girlfriend. Caroline comes to see her; we learn that they only know each other by sight. Spencer has told Caroline all about Astrid from the start. She used to wait for him to come home from seeing her, as Astrid knows. Astrid tries to apologise, but Caroline says she has no regrets and that Astrid gave Spencer what she could not. Astrid finds it hard to respond and says she's tired. Caroline leaves, and Astrid starts wondering how Daniel is again.
- 2 & 3. Daniel is in a café and imagines introducing Astrid and Anna, who ask why he has left it for so long. He goes back to the hotel, where Louise admits that she didn't

give him all of Astrid's letter and hands him the missing final page, asking him not to read it yet. He starts packing to leave.

## X.

1. The doctor is in a panic as Astrid's strength begins to fail; she speaks an unintelligible sentence in Swedish and he scribbles it down phonetically – "I don't like flies. Someone get it out of here." Clearly this is the end.
2. Daniel is in the taxi on the way to the airport. He tells the driver to hurry; he's always punctual, unlike his mother. Now he remembers the time they went on holiday together when he was eight and almost missed the plane. He imagines telling Anna about it, as if she's in the taxi with him, asking questions and conversing with him. Astrid was teaching him to swim in the sea, then went to sunbathe; he was angry that she was topless and men were looking at her breasts. Astrid slept on the beach, while Daniel played and tried to get her attention, asking her to get dressed. Finally some boys came along and encouraged him to play boules with them, too close to where she was lying; he threw a metal ball with all his might in her direction.
- 3 & 4. He remembers Astrid being taken away on a stretcher unconscious and then being in plaster at a hospital with an injured spine. The details of the incident are mixed up with his present awareness of being at the airport. He's also thinking of Anna, wanting to make the right impression on her when he arrives. He remembers a happy day with Anna two years earlier; as he progresses through the airport his thoughts stay with her, as if she's there too. Then it's as if she's lost her ticket and will fly on the next plane after him, as he goes to board alone.
5. On the plane he still feels he should call her and is still talking to her in his head, but getting no reply now. Now he reads the missing page of Astrid's letter, which tells him the truth about his father – he was Astrid's married, older boss, who wanted to have an affair with her; she refused, but he forced his way into her flat and raped her. Then he begged her not to go to the police. When she found out she was pregnant, her mother persuaded her to keep the child. Astrid assures him that nothing in her life has ever been as important as him and asks him to forgive her.
6. In her final moments, Astrid thinks of Daniel and has no grudges, she has forgiven and forgotten everything.
7. Daniel folds up the letter and puts it away; he wants to get up and escape, but he's on the plane – he desperately wants it to land at once, longing to see Anna, tell her everything and show her Astrid's letter. But he worries that maybe it's too late and mentally asks her, "Will you want to listen to me?" Anna doesn't reply.

## **Assessment**

This is a remarkable book for a 25-year-old man to have written. The portraits of Astrid and Daniel are very well drawn, creating credible, real people whose fortunes interest us. The subtle construction is also a success. Nothing is plainly stated, but instead the reader is treated intelligently, allowed to get to know the characters through their thoughts and actions and to work out their relationships for him/herself. There is some tension as certain facts gradually evolve and become clear to us. The balance between the time scales is very well achieved, so we never feel confused and can follow the story easily.

In terms of style, Łoziński writes in a straightforward way, using plain language and a lot of dialogue. The text seems concise and economical, but includes a lot of detail. The lack of imagery and sparseness of description allows us to concentrate on the psychological qualities, on the characters and their emotions.

As the story progresses, we start to feel concern for Daniel, the selfish man who refuses to take emotional responsibility for the most important people in his life. Gradually, reading between the lines, we see that he has missed the opportunity to learn and gain from his mother, a woman of great depth and sensitivity towards others, despite having been badly treated herself. But as it dawns on him that he has made a terrible mistake and been grossly unfair to her, he tries to find out more about her, and to change his life before it is too late. Everyone seems to have known her better than he did – the psychotherapist, her lover, her doctor, and even the lodger. At first he resents this, but then, as her influence starts to take over, he starts to think the way she might have and to appreciate her approach to life. At the end of the book he is in a hurry to get back to his girlfriend in the hope of rescuing that relationship, which has already started to go sour because of his reluctance to mature and commit. As he sits buckled into his seat on the plane at the end we can only hope for him that perhaps it's not too late.

The contrast between mother and son is well drawn. Unlike Daniel, Łoziński does know how to write about women. Astrid is very likeable and young at heart. She takes up studies late in life, and is still ready to do something new and fulfil a dream; she is interested in the people around her and imaginative about their lives, even thinking how the waiter might be feeling and leaving him a generous tip. She bravely faces up to life's difficulties, she is humble and giving, generally too unselfish, letting other people get away with treating her badly. She is open to criticism, keen to learn and improve herself.

Daniel, by contrast, is not really interested in other people. He is self-centred and unable to communicate, commit or be responsible in a relationship. He blames others for his own failings. He is jealous, wanting his mother to himself, although he gives her no emotional support in return and treats her with appalling prejudice, criticising and making her feel inferior. He will never write his novel because he's

clearly not imaginative enough about other people. Although quick to notice other people's minor shortcomings, he is slow to see that his own defects are on a much bigger scale. However, we do sympathise with him because, now that Astrid is dead, he does start to realise his mistakes, to be self-critical and to open his heart to real love and truth.

Some of the lesser characters, notably Louise, are not as well fleshed out, but exist to serve the portrayal of the relationship between Daniel and Astrid. However, the results are successful. This is a fluent, absorbing novel that would appeal to any intelligent reader interested in psychological drama.