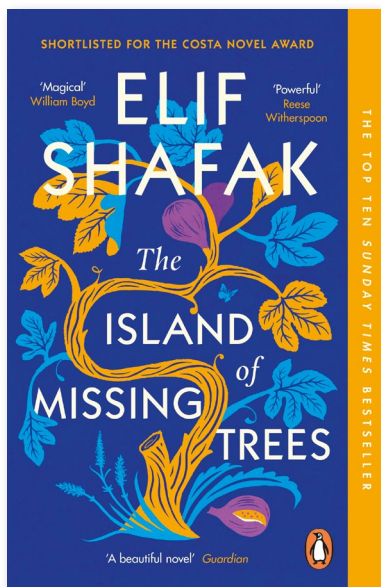


Women's Prize for Fiction 2022



2022 SHORTLIST READING GUIDE

THE ISLAND OF MISSING TREES BY ELIF SHAFAK



PLOT SUMMARY

It is 1974 on the island of Cyprus. Two teenagers, from opposite sides of a divided land, meet at a tavern in the city they both call home. The tavern is the only place that Kostas, who is Greek and Christian, and Defne, who is Turkish and Muslim, can meet, in secret. In the centre of the tavern, growing through a cavity in the roof, is a fig tree. This tree will witness their hushed, happy meetings, their silent, surreptitious departures. The tree will be there when war breaks out, when the capital is reduced to rubble, and when the teenagers are forced apart.

Decades later in north London, sixteen-year-old Ada Kazantzakis has never visited the island where her parents were born. Desperate for answers, she seeks to untangle years of secrets, separation and silence. The only connection she has to the land of her ancestors is a *Ficus carica* growing in her back garden.

In *The Island of Missing Trees*, Elif Shafak brings us a rich, magical tale of belonging and identity, love and trauma, memory and amnesia, nature and renewal.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In *The Island of Missing Trees*, Shafak explores the concept of 'roots' and what that means in terms of her characters' identity with relation to their ancestors, their culture and the historical events that shape their lives.

Throughout the book, Shafak narrates some of the chapters from the point of view of the fig tree that Kostas has brought to England from Cyprus and planted in his back garden. Shafak explains the symbolism of the fig tree, and some of the superstitions attached to it by the people

of Cyprus. The fig tree represents the cultural roots of Cypriots' sacred place between worlds where magic can happen.

By caring for the tree – and by bringing the cutting with him from Cyprus in the first place – Kostas cares for his cultural roots as well as the literal ones. The fig tree's demise in Cyprus seems symbolic of the war, and the terrible sadness connected to Yiorgos and Yusuf's death. Yet, Kostas brings the tree back to life in London, alongside nurturing his new daughter Ada. Both the tree and Ada need support in their early days, but both have strong roots and survive.

Yet, by the time Ada becomes a teenager and Defne has died, Kostas hasn't told Ada much about her heritage, and Ada feels disconnected from her roots. Whilst the tree's roots are protected, Kostas keeps Ada's roots from her out of fear until she decides to go in search of them herself.

Ada's aunt Meryem helps her reconnect to her roots through food. When Meryem makes baklava while staying with Kostas and Ada, she says, '*Food is the heart of a culture. You don't know your ancestors' cuisine, you don't know who you are.*' Meryem is able to give Ada a link to the Turkish part of the culture of Cyprus that Defne couldn't, and her cheery presence and constant cooking give Ada the maternal influence she needs.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Elif Shafak is an award-winning British-Turkish novelist whose work has been translated into 55 languages. The author of 19 books, 12 of which are novels, she is a bestselling author in many countries around the world. Shafak's novel *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and RSL Ondaatje Prize; longlisted for the Dublin Literary Award; and chosen as Blackwell's Book of the Year. Her previous novel, *The Forty Rules of Love* was chosen by the BBC as one of 100 Novels That Shaped Our World.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Elif Shafak humanises what was a complex and nuanced political and cultural situation in Cyprus in the 1970s by centering on Kostas and Defne's love story, but also that of their friends and family. Like Kostas and Defne, Yiorgos and Yusuf are also a couple that come from different sides of the religious and cultural divide, but Yiorgos and Yusuf are a gay couple, which makes their lives even more perilous within the context of that time. Yiorgos and Yusuf play a key part in providing a safe place for Defne and Kostas to meet in the early days of their relationship, with their restaurant The Happy Fig acting exactly as the fig tree itself does in Cypriot mythology: it provides a magical between-place where anything is possible.



The Island of Missing Trees is a hauntingly beautiful tale of loss and identity, love and redemption. It's gently told; clever and poignant.'

Dorothy Koomson, 2022 Judge

There are still many parts of the world where it is illegal to be a gay man or woman. In Cyprus, being homosexual was decriminalised only in 1998, with civil union coming into legislation in December 2015.

How does Shafak represent Yiorgos and Yusuf's relationship and its impact on their community? How does she show what being gay was like in 1970s Cyprus and beyond?

QUESTIONS

Defne tells Ada that the Greek goddess Aphrodite is not a friend to women and that her 'feminism score is pitiful'. Do you agree? Do you know of any more feminist goddesses of Greek mythology?

Shafak describes the British disbelief that any conflict could arise in such a beautiful and 'cultivated' country as Cyprus. What does that say about British politicians at the time?

Meryem uses many proverbs and traditional sayings in conversation. How does this help to establish her character?

How does Elif Shafak use nature to talk about emigration and immigration in *The Island of Missing Trees*?

NEXT STEPS

Is there a part of your family history that you feel disconnected from or don't know enough about? Look at family genealogy sites and see what you can discover about your family history. Did your ancestors live

through civil wars, conflicts or significant moments in history? You could also discover and cook some of the recipes that are part of your cultural heritage.

Research a tree or plant that appeals to you in detail; it might be a plant associated with a particular place that is special to you, or indigenous to the place of your birth. Find out as much as you can – including any mythological references it may have, or any old plant lore – and write a few paragraphs imagining what it would say. What would it have witnessed? Would its tone be wise, jaded, enlightened?



If you enjoyed this book, you might like to read these:

10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World by Elif Shafak details the moments after Leila's death, with each minute recalling a vivid memory. Each fading memory brings back the friends she made in her bittersweet life – friends who are now desperately trying to find her.

Two Green Otters by Turkish author Buket Uzuner is a story of a young woman's struggle to find love and acceptance, while offering an original reinterpretation of the role of both environmentalism and love in the world today.



WHICH ONE WILL YOU READ NEXT?