

Women's
Prize for
Fiction
2020

25

2008 WINNER

THE ROAD HOME BY ROSE TREMAIN

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Rose Tremain, born in London in 1943, was one of only five women writers to be included in Granta's original list of 20 Best of Young British Novelists in 1983. Her novels and short stories have been published worldwide in 27 countries and have won many prizes, including the Sunday Express Book of the Year Award (for *Restoration*, also shortlisted for the Booker Prize); the Whitbread Novel of the Year Award (for *Music & Silence*) and the Orange Prize for Fiction 2008 (for *The Road Home*). Her latest novel is the acclaimed *The Gustav Sonata* which sees Rose 'writing at the height of her inimitable powers' (*Observer*). Rose lives in Norfolk, England, with the biographer, Richard Holmes. She is the mother of one daughter, Eleanor and has two grandchildren, Archie and Martha. She was made a CBE in 2007 and in 2013 was appointed Chancellor of the University of East Anglia.

PLOT SUMMARY

Lev is on his way from Eastern Europe to Britain, seeking work. Behind him loom the figures of his dead wife, his beloved young daughter and his outrageous friend Rudi who, dreaming of the wealthy West, lives largely for his battered Chevrolet. Ahead of Lev lies the deep strangeness of the British: their hostile streets, their clannish pubs and their obsession with celebrity.

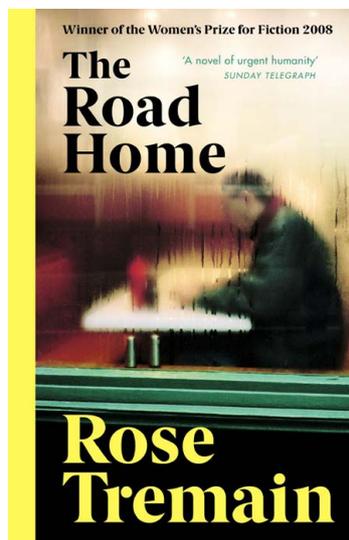
It's hard making a living and a home in a strange city, but Lev perseveres and finds a place to live with Christy, a kind-hearted and mostly-reformed alcoholic, and job washing dishes in a posh restaurant. London holds out the alluring possibility of friendship, sex, money and a new career and, if Lev is lucky, a new sense of belonging . . .

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Rose Tremain creates a brilliantly loveable and alive character in Lev, who has faults but works hard, is polite and kind, and believes in a better future. Losing his wife Marina and having to leave his young daughter behind in Poland so that he can come to the UK to work, we feel for Lev from the first page as we follow him on a cramped coach for days on his journey to the UK. We have deep sympathy with him as he sleeps rough, struggles to find work and then has to deliver leaflets for £5 a day; we're happy for him when he starts to find friends and things get better.

The Road Home paints a vivid picture of rural Poland, and what life is like there for Lev and his family. Tremain contrasts

London and Baryn; neither is painted as perfect, both contain good and bad people, and both are beautiful in their own way. It would be simplistic to paint one location as better than the other: London is not exactly the paradise Lev expects, and Baryn has many qualities that he misses.



DISCUSSION POINTS

The Road Home, whilst being a brilliant read about a very sympathetic protagonist, could also be seen as a love letter to immigration (and to Europe). When *The Road Home* won the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2008, large numbers of Polish immigrants were coming to the UK in search of work, with Poland having become a part of the EU in 2004. Bearing in mind that there was a certain degree of resistance in the UK to Polish immigrants at that time, how does *The Road Home* make us feel about Lev as a Polish immigrant to the UK? Has your image of immigrant workers changed after reading *The Road Home*? Are you more aware of social and financial obstacles immigrants may face than you were previously?

QUESTIONS

What is your opinion of Christy? Is he a good friend to Lev?

How does Lydia's experience of London compare with Lev's?

Were you surprised at how many funny moments there were in the book? Why?

Lev has been told in his English class that, "The British venerate their history chiefly because they have never been subjected to Occupation. Only intermittently do they see that some of their past deeds were not good." Is this a fair statement?

How does Tremain make Lev such a rounded character? Talk about his actions, the way he talks to others, how his thoughts are phrased, the way Tremain presents his ambitions.

What does Rudi's Chevrolet say about the dreams of someone living in a rural Polish town? What does owning it say about him?

“ WHEN WE CHOSE THIS AS THE WINNER, WE ASKED OURSELVES DO WE REALLY KNOW WHAT IT MEANT FOR EASTERN EUROPEANS TO LEAVE EVERYTHING BEHIND, TO ARRIVE IN THIS ALIEN CULTURE . . . WHAT'S FANTASTIC ABOUT THIS BOOK IS THAT IT IS A GREAT ACT OF EMPATHY BECAUSE IT TAKES US INSIDE LEV'S HEAD ”

SHAMI CHAKRABARTI,
CHAIR OF JUDGES 2015



NEXT STEPS

Write the transcript of a phone conversation between two friends or lovers, each in a different country. Try to show – and not say specifically – a tension between the two people, being restricted only to what they say. You can't use any description here; just be limited to the actual words that are spoken, back and forth. See if you can hint at a secret, a bone of contention or something that isn't fully talked about, just something tense that the characters hedge around.

In Poland there is a traditional art of papercutting: carefully cutting out intricate figures and scenes to create art and animation (you might look at the art of Polish children's author-illustrator Jan Pienkowski to get an idea). Have a go at making a scene using papercutting, perhaps from a fairy tale. Make it as intricate as you like!

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

TRESPASS BY ROSE TREMAIN
HOW TO GET INTO THE TWIN PALMS
BY KAROLINA WACLAWIAK