

# Women's Prize for Fiction

2020

25

## 2000 WINNER

### WHEN I LIVED IN MODERN TIMES BY LINDA GRANT

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Linda Grant was born in Liverpool in 1951. Her first novel *The Cast Iron Shore* won the David Higham Prize for Fiction in 1996 and was shortlisted for the Guardian Fiction Prize. She's the author of seven further novels, including *When I Lived in Modern Times*, winner of the 2000 Orange Prize for Fiction and shortlisted for the Jewish Quarterly-Wingate Literary Prize, *The Clothes on Their Backs*, shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2008 and winner of the South Bank Show Literature Award, *The Dark Circle*, shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2017, and *A Stranger City* (2019). Her non-fiction books include her memoir *Remind Me Who I Am Again*, winner of both the Mind and Age Concern Book of the Year awards, *Sexting the Millennium*, *The People on the Street: A Writer's View of Israel* winner of the Lettre Ulysses Prize for Literary Reportage, and *The Thoughtful Dresser*. She is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and lives in London.

#### PLOT SUMMARY

It is April 1946. Evelyn Sert, 20 years old, a hairdresser from Soho, sails for Palestine, where Jewish refugees and idealists are gathering from across Europe to start a new life in a brand new country. In the glittering, cosmopolitan Bauhaus city of Tel Aviv, anything seems possible: the new self, the new Jew, the new woman are all feasible.

Evelyn – who becomes Eve – dyes her hair and reinvents herself. Immersed in a world of fiery idealism, she falls in love with the passionate Johnny and finds herself at the heart of a very dangerous game.

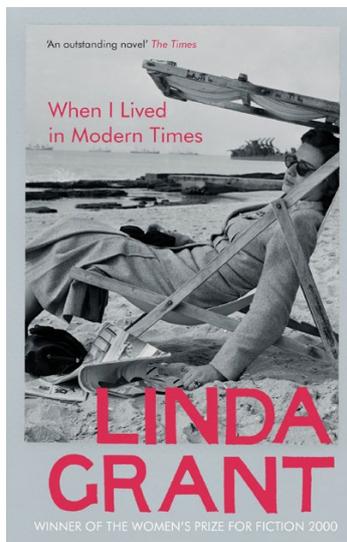
#### WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Linda Grant's layered, human and insightful novel puts her protagonist Eve/Evelyn into the centre of a pivotal time in history, capturing the air of possibility that erupted after the end of World War Two at a time when "all over the world, people were in mass transit". Evelyn's personal journey of discovery shines a light on the development of something much larger: the tragedy of war, displacement, refugees and the mass emigration to Palestine, a new hope for the Jews.

Eve's narration takes the reader on the journey with her, meaning that they too develop from (perhaps) a place of relative naïveté to a more knowledgeable perspective about the creation of

independent Israel in the mid to late 1940s.

Grant also takes the opportunity to show us a spectrum of experience, from the utopian thinking of the early kibbutzers to the glum Herr Blum, who longs for Germany and the Irgun activist Johnny, who believes that terrorism is the way forward. Eve's constantly questioning voice and her status as outsider means that little is taken for granted or judged, whether it be religion, sexual politics, political ideology or love.



*When I Lived in Modern Times* considers the changing role of women after the war, the ideology of what it was (and is) to be a Jew and the lived experience of Tel Aviv in the late 1940s, yet it's also a masterly portrait of a young woman searching for her place in the world, which ensures that we relate to Eve and follow her story avidly.

“ THE IMPACT OF WINNING THE WOMEN’S PRIZE WAS HUGE. IT CHANGED THE DIRECTION OF MY LIFE BECAUSE IT GAVE ME MONEY TO STOP DOING JOURNALISM AND WRITE FULL-TIME. IT BROUGHT ME INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS AND INCREASED ADVANCES ”

LINDA GRANT,  
AUTHOR

## DISCUSSION POINTS

At the kibbutz, Leah says to Eve:

“It is always other people who define what a Jew is . . . In Germany before the war there were Jews with blonde hair and blue eyes. Who was saying they were Jews? Non-Jews. Did think they were Jews? Maybe not . . . When we have our own state people will enter here as Jews but then we will remodel them and then they will be turned into something else. They will be citizens of a country and that is an entirely different matter. Everyone knows what a citizen is. It's someone who holds or is entitled to a passport. And when that happens, all our troubles will be over.”

*When We Lived in Modern Times* is a book that follows the formation of Palestine, officially created in 1948. What effect did World War Two, and particularly the Holocaust, have on the creation of Palestine?



Linda Grant really explores the importance of the feeling of belonging, and the legacy of not belonging, in *When I Lived in Modern Times*, and this seems key to Eve's journey and the experiences of other characters in the book. Now that Palestine formally exists, and the Jews who live there can hold a passport belonging to a free and independent Israel, are all their troubles over?

## QUESTIONS

When Evelyn first gets to Palestine, how does the reality compare to the ideal she's built up in her mind?

What do you think about the ethos of the kibbutz? In practice, how well does the belief in free love work out for women in particular?

Idealism is a big theme in this book; Tel Aviv itself is named after a utopian Jewish state described in Theodor Herzl's (the founder of political Zionism) book *Altneuland*. How idealistic are Eve and characters like Johnny, Meier and Uncle Joe? Is this idealism good or bad?

What is the symbolism of the Bauhaus architecture of Tel Aviv? What does it seem to represent?

## NEXT STEPS

Write a manifesto for a fictional (or real) activist or political group. Look at examples of manifestos online for political parties, art groups like Dada and the surrealists, feminist groups, etc. What is their language like? Can it be almost poetic at times?

Alternatively, inspired by the Bauhaus design of Tel Aviv in the 1940s, research some local architecture and think about how it reflects the ideals of its time. You might like to write a poem inspired by a particular building or even a series of poems inspired by different buildings in your town, village or city.

## BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

*THE CLOTHES ON THEIR BACKS* BY LINDA GRANT  
*THE WEIGHT OF INK* BY RACHEL KADISH