

## 2004 WINNER

### SMALL ISLAND BY ANDREA LEVY

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Andrea Levy was born in England to Jamaican parents who came to Britain in 1948. After attending writing workshops when she was in her mid-thirties, Levy began to write the novels that she, as a young woman, had always wanted to read – entertaining novels that reflected the experience of black Britons, which look at Britain and its changing population, and the intimacies that bind British history with that of the Caribbean.

She is the author of six books, *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, *Never Far from Nowhere* (which was longlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction), *Fruit of the Lemon*, *Small Island*, *The Long Song* (which won the Walter Scott Prize and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize) and most recently *Six Stories and an Essay*. *Small Island* was winner of the Orange Prize for Fiction, the Whitbread Book of the Year, the Commonwealth Writer's Prize and the Orange Prize 'Best of the Best'.

Andrea Levy died in February 2019.

#### PLOT SUMMARY

It's 1948 and England is recovering from a war. But at 21 Nevern Street in London, the conflict has only just begun. Queenie Bligh's neighbours don't approve when she agrees to take in Jamaican lodgers, but Queenie doesn't know when, or even if, her husband will return. What else can she do?

Gilbert Joseph was one of the many Jamaican men who joined the RAF to fight Hitler. But when he returns to England as a civilian he doesn't receive the welcome he was expecting, and it's desperation that drives him to knock at Queenie's door.

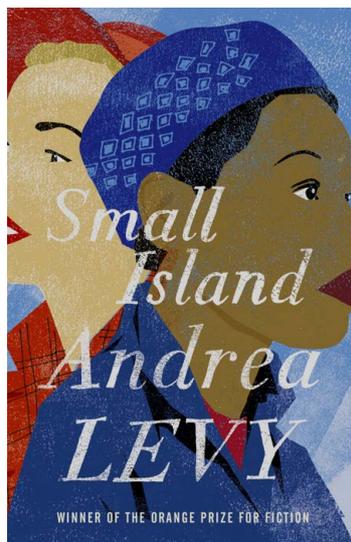
Gilbert's wife, Hortense, who for years has longed for a better life in England, soon joins him. But London is far from the golden city of her dreams, and even Gilbert isn't the man she thought he was . . .

#### WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

*Small Island* tells the story of post-war Caribbean migration through four narrators – Hortense and Gilbert, who migrate from Jamaica to London in 1948, and an English couple, Queenie and Bernard, in whose house in London they find lodgings. The book explores the experiences of the Windrush generation, so called because of their immigration to Britain from the then-British colony of Jamaica in 1948 on the ship *Empire Windrush*, on which Levy's father was a passenger. In Gilbert's story, Levy examines the experience of Jamaican soldiers who fought with the British Armed Forces in World War Two and, after the war, experienced only racism and intolerance for their bravery and sacrifice.

Levy uses a number of narrators, presenting differing voices and viewpoints to explore post-war immigration and notions of 'Englishness' at a time when Britain still held a number of colonies and believed itself to be a 'civilising' influence. Hortense and Queenie's experiences

contrast as two women, one who has lived a reasonably privileged life in an imperial colonial outpost, and a working class woman who has grown up at the centre of the British Empire. Together, the different voices build a complex representation of Britain and Jamaica in the post-war years.



Levy also excels in depicting the bleak post-war London, and the rather more beautiful and vibrant Jamaica; her depth of historical research underpinning this story also lends it a sense of fullness and multi-layered experience.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

*Small Island* has been called the definitive fictional account of the experiences of the Empire Windrush generation. In the book, Levy addresses what she has said she felt was the unspoken trauma of her parents' generation, encountering racism when arriving in England and thereafter. In interviews, Levy discussed how the ideas for *Small Island* began to form after she 'finally' persuaded her mother to discuss her traumatic experience of migration:

**“ THE WAY I REMEMBER IT, NEITHER SHE NOR MY DAD EVER SEEMED TO WANT TO TALK ABOUT THEIR LIVES IN JAMAICA, OR ABOUT WHY IN 1948 THEY MADE THE MOMENTOUS DECISION TO LEAVE THAT ISLAND TO COME TO ANOTHER. WHATEVER THE TRUTH, THAT SILENCE WAS FINALLY BREACHED AND MY MOTHER, RELUCTANTLY, BEGAN TO SPEAK TO ME ABOUT HER LIFE BEFORE I WAS BORN. I WAS GRIPPED FROM THE START AS THOSE TWO FAMILIAR PARENTS OF MINE BEGAN TO EMERGE AS FULLY ROUNDED HUMAN BEINGS WITH AN AMAZING STORY TO TELL ”**

AN INTRODUCTION TO ANDREA LEVY'S *SMALL ISLAND*  
BY HANNAH LOWE ON THE BRITISH LIBRARY WEBSITE

Having read *Small Island*, can you understand why Andrea Levy's parents, and others of their generation, may not have wanted to talk about their experience of migration? What impact might the recent threat of the deportation of Windrush immigrants have on families that originated in Jamaica and came to Britain in the 1940s?

And why do you think it was so important to Levy to write of her parents' experience? How important is it for readers to have access to this story now?



## QUESTIONS

How does Hortense's expectations of England compare with her experiences of London? Is her own 'Englishness' recognised by the people she meets?

In Queenie's prologue, what does her experience of meeting a black man at the Empire Exhibition say about historical (and continuing) misperceptions around race and identity, particularly when it comes to black men?

*Small Island* reveals the shocking degree of racism in 1940s Britain. How do you feel when reading those parts of the novel?

What associations do you have with the title of the book? Is England the *Small Island*, or Jamaica? As the centre of a large British Empire in 1948, is London ironically small-minded? Have things changed now, in a post-Brexit landscape?

*Small Island* is alternately narrated by four characters: Queenie, Hortense, Gilbert, and Bernard. How does this narrative style contribute to the drama of the story? What do we learn through the four main characters about society's expectations of men and women?

## NEXT STEPS

Research the 1924/1925 Empire Exhibition, attended by Queenie at the beginning of *Small Island*. Write a piece from the point of view of one of the participants, whether a beauty queen taking part in the 'Pear's Palace of Beauty' or an exploited native person from one of the then-British colonies. How might a person being 'exhibited' feel about being stared at as an object of curiosity, or something worse? How might they feel about

London, about being part of the British Empire? How did they get to the Exhibition? How do they feel about the appearance of the pavilion attributed to their homeland?

Research Jamaican novelists and poets. Read their books, and research British colonial history. What didn't you learn about at school or in further or higher education? Whose voices have been left out of the 'canon' of English Literature?

## BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

*FRUIT OF THE LEMON* BY ANDREA LEVY

*THE HILLS OF HEBRON* BY SYLVIA WYNTER

*THE ICE MIGRATION* BY JACQUELINE CROOKS