

READING GROUP GUIDE

The Colour

by Rose Tremain

Introduction to *The Colour*

Hailed as one of our finest historical novelists, Rose Tremain returns with a gripping drama of love and greed set during the mid-nineteenth-century Gold Rush in New Zealand. When newlyweds Joseph and Harriet Blackstone emigrate from England along with Joseph's mother, Lilian, they are in search of prosperous new beginnings. But they are ill-prepared for the obstacles they must face, and the harsh land near Christchurch where they settle threatens to destroy them almost before they can begin. A difficult first winter exacerbates the growing tensions between husband and wife, and strengthens Lilian's determination to return to England and leave this strange and unforgiving new country behind.

Then Joseph finds gold in the creek behind their small farm, and, possessed by the promise of riches awaiting him deep in the earth, he hides his discovery from his wife and mother. When the creek fails to fulfill his hopes, he sets off alone for the goldfields over the Southern Alps, joining the hundreds of others who are under the seductive spell of the "colour", the miners' slang for this elusive mineral. Harriet struggles to manage the farm alone, but eventually decides to follow her husband to the gold diggings. On her own journey westward, she makes a startling discovery that illuminates the truth of her marriage at the same time that it holds the tantalizing promise of a future she could never have imagined.

Panoramic in scope yet exquisitely attuned to the fragile emotional terrain that underlies all relationships, *The Colour* beautifully captures the rugged landscape of New Zealand while it forces us to question the price we will pay in our search for happiness.

Praise for *The Colour*

"Exhilarating...splendidly eventful...the story swells."

--*The New York Times*

"Every bit as enthralling as any of her previous work...*The Colour* is a beautifully written novel that teems with life on every page."

--*The Boston Globe*

"Rose Tremain is one of contemporary literature's most mature and sympathetic artists...She writes some of the most musical and elegant sentences in modern English."

--*The Washington Post Book World*

"Writing at the top of her form...With its combination of vivid historical adventure and sensual, late-blooming romance, it's hard to see how this novel can miss winning a new audience for the immensely talented Tremain."

--*Publishers Weekly* (starred)

"Fully rounded human beings and a nimble prose style...Peerless imagination."

--*Newsday*

"Ms. Tremain uses imaginative specifics to portray the hardship of settler life for those who botch it... Harriet's testing is splendidly eventful...the story swells."

--*The New York Times*

"Extraordinary ... a wonderful novel about change and transformation, love and desire, the valuable and the useless, East versus West, and the living and the dead."

--*Chicago Tribune*

"*The Colour* is storytelling in the grand style ... Tremain has woven a hypnotic, compelling tale set in one of the most beautiful countries on earth."

--*The Houston Chronicle*

"A magical storyteller...It is rare these days to find a modern novel by which one feels enlarged as to the beauty, sorrow, subtlety and joy of the world. *The Colour* is such a treasure."

--*The New Statesman* (London)

"Tremain...deftly depicts greed, hopelessness and redemption."

--*The Dallas Morning News*

"A fabulous work, bravely imaginative, deeply moving, always surprising, invigorating and satisfying."

--*The Independent* (London)

"[A] gripping pioneer story...The result is a page-turner that's also a work of startling beauty."

--*Kirkus Reviews* (starred)

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. Discuss the significance of houses and homes in *The Colour*. Why is such attentive detail paid to the architecture and décor of these places. Why, for instance, is Harriet and Joseph's Cob House built *around* the chimney?
2. In the beginning of the novel husband, wife, and mother all think greatly about the future and the past – in some respects, an escape from their previous home and an expectation for their current one. Joseph comments on page 54 that: “All life...is a flight from mistake to mistake.” And while Lilian comments on page 29 that “nothing here is ever quite as one has imagined it” she then reveals she too has a “plan” for the future. What do these characters' ideas about the future and the past say about them as characters? What sort of expectations does Tremain establish by delivering such information?
3. Further to the previous question: the lives lived in *The Colour* seem to operate by two opposite poles -- those guided by an unknowable destiny or fate, and those guided by their own actions or ingenuity. Who lives by which in the novel, and what does it determine about them and about the author's role in creating their lives. Whose destiny is actually at work, and is this also some sort of commentary about history itself?
4. How is the notion of responsibility handled in the novel? Lilian to her son Joseph; Joseph to his wife and mother; Pare to the boy Edwin; Pao Yi to Harriet. Who has a responsibility to whom in the book?
5. *The Colour* is very much a novel about perception and self-perception, most often when depicting Class structure. How does the society of 19th century England re-create itself in the wilds of New Zealand? What is upheld and what breaks down?
6. The eel man in Christchurch uses the word “Preservation” in describing the pickling of the eel. How does this word resonate throughout the rest of the novel? What might this salesman know that others do not?
7. It can be said that landscape plays an enormous role in these characters' lives, but can it be said that landscape actually changes who these people are? If so, what does it turn them into?
8. Again and again the characters in *The Colour* make attempts to connect with one another, and not simply by speaking but through subtler, more intimate gestures. One such attempt, handled in a variety of fashions, is sex. How does each character approach sexuality?

About the Author

Rose Tremain is the author of nine novels, including *Music & Silence*, winner of the Whitbread Novel of the Year Award, and *Restoration*, short-listed for the Booker Prize. Her work has been translated into fourteen languages. She lives with her husband, the biographer Richard Holmes, in Norfolk, England.

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