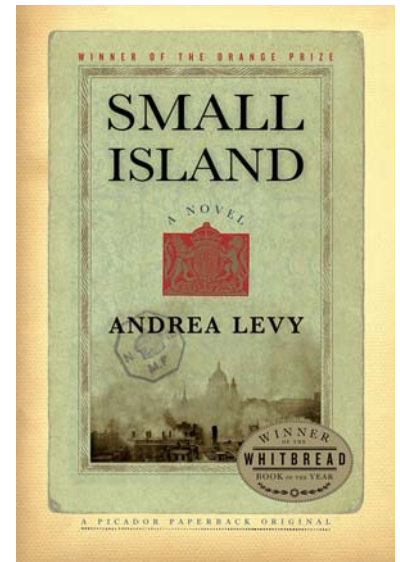


READING GROUP GUIDE

Small Island

by *Andrea Levy*

ISBN: 0-312-42467-1



About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Small Island* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this novel. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Small Island*.

About the Book

Winner of the 2004 Orange Prize for Fiction
A Picador Original Trade Paperback

Set largely in England during and soon after WWII, Andrea Levy's award-winning debut novel *Small Island* is about four different people at a time of profound social upheaval: Queenie, the spoiled blonde daughter of a British butcher; her husband Bernard, the repressed working-class soldier committed to his ideals; Gilbert, Queenie's Jamaican tenant and Royal Air Force veteran struggling to belong in the Mother Country he fought for; and Gilbert's lovely and demanding Jamaican wife Hortense, who married not for love but for a better life that she failed to find. As each of these character's lives intersect in surprising and disruptive ways, all are forced to confront, and ultimately adapt, to the changing world around them.

"*Small Island* is honest, skillful, thoughtful, and important. This is Andrea Levy's big book."
—*The Guardian*

"Andrea Levy gives us a new, urgent take on our past."—*Vogue*

“A superb ear for dialogue.”—*The New Zealand Herald*

“It’s a magnificent achievement, and—the best compliment one novelist can give another—made me jealous. Congratulations.”—Linda Grant

“Everything about the plot, characters and clever end twist of *Small Island* [is] beautifully drawn . . . This is an epic book that brings the patois of Jamaicans alive, fills the world of war-torn London with amazing detail, and is a great history lesson about the era when England changed forever as migrants braved bitter racism to flood her shores.”—*Herald Sun* (Melbourne)

“A work of great imaginative power which ranks alongside Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*, George Lamming’s *The Emigrants*, and Caryl Phillips’ *The Final Passage* in dealing with the experience of migration.”—Linton Kwesi Johnson

“[A] moving, funny, honest novel.”—*Elle*

“*Small Island* is as full of warmth and jokes and humanity as you could wish . . . Such a rich saga, stuffed full of interlocking narratives.”—*Time Out*

About the Author

Born in 1956 to Jamaican parents, Andrea Levy is the author of three previous novels and has received a British Arts Council Writers Award in addition to the Orange Prize and Whitbread distinctions. She lives and works in London.

Discussion Questions

1. In the “Prologue,” how does Levy show that perception of race is often a result of misperception? Which other scenes in the novel reveal similar racial misperceptions? What are they and how do they lead to conflict?
2. *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? Did you find certain narrators more compelling? If you were to choose one narrator to tell the story, which would you choose? Why?
3. Do you think it is significant that the novel begins with Queenie and ends with Hortense? Why?
4. In chapter 6, Hortense tells Gilbert that “Celia’s mother is not well” (p 78). What do you think are Hortense’s motives for saying this? Do you think she is aware of her motives? Why? If you were Celia, would you respond differently or the same as she did? Explain.
5. It could be said that all the characters—Queenie, Hortense, Gilbert, and Bernard—are “flawed.” Explain. Considering the historical context of the story, are certain characters’ flaws more forgivable? Why? How does each of character evolve throughout the story? Which characters evolve most? Explain.

6. Consider the sexuality of each of the main characters. Which of the four characters' sexuality undergoes the biggest transformation? Which the least? Compare Queenie's relationship with Michael and Bernard's relationship with George "Maxi" Maximillion. How are they different? In what ways are they similar?
7. How have social attitudes toward race changed since 1948? In what ways might they be the same? Compare Levy's depiction of racial attitudes in England versus the United States. Do they seem different? If so, how?
8. On page 145, Gilbert observes "Everyone fighting a war hates. All must conjure a list of demons. The enemy." What do you think he means? How might this statement apply to our own era?
9. Consider Elwood's plea to his cousin Gilbert about joining the British army: "Man, this is a white man's war. Why you wanna lose your life for a white man? For Jamaica, yes. To have your own country, yes. That is worth a fight. . . I join you then, man. But you think winning this war is going to change anything for me and you" (p 106). Do you agree with Elwood? Why? Do you think Gilbert made the right choice? Why? What would you have done if you were in his situation? Explain.
10. Gilbert is a black man whose father is Jewish. Do you see any parallels between racial prejudice and anti-Semitism in the world during WWII and today? Explain. Have you or anyone you know been forced to choose between two socially determined identities, be it race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion? Explain.
11. Do you agree with Queenie's decision concerning her child? Why? If you were in the same situation, what would you have done in 1948? Today? Explain.

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