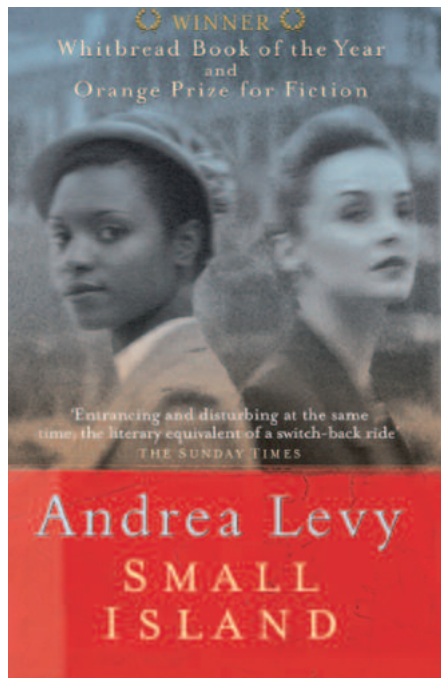


Andrea Levy & Small Island

Small Island has been described by the critics as an 'engrossing read', 'a work of great imaginative power', 'funny, tender, intelligent', 'deft and striking', 'revealing and accomplished', 'beautifully crafted, compassionate' and 'an enthralling tour de force'.



The book is a tragicomedy that provides a fascinating and thoughtful portrait of post-war Britain and the first dynamic encounters between newly arrived black Caribbean immigrants and the resident white British population. It is narrated by four characters, each with their own perspective on the situation.

Gilbert, a Jamaican volunteer in the RAF, has returned to Britain on the *Empire Windrush*, having realised there are no opportunities for him back home. After his wartime experiences, he has few illusions left about the wonders of the 'Mother Country'. Hortense, his prissy school teacher wife, has followed Gilbert to Britain naively believing all she has been taught about the superiority of the British and her privileged place among them. Queenie, their Earls Court landlady, is a brash, big-hearted woman yearning for



excitement who has found herself stuck in a run-down house with disapproving neighbours. Bernard, Queenie's racist and outwardly dull husband, is movingly shown to have his own share of hopes and disappointments.

The story switches between the four voices and between 1948 and 'before' – as well as across three continents – to reveal how each person has reached this particular point in their life. The 'small island' of the title refers to Jamaica, once considered the 'big island' of the Caribbean but now seen as an insignificant place by those who have returned from the war. It also refers to Britain reluctantly waking up to the fact it no longer rules the world, the borders of its once global empire shrinking around it, as well as to the individual characters who are isolated from each other by their failure to communicate.



Andrea Levy (Angus Muir).

The book's author, Andrea Levy, is a Londoner whose parents came to Britain from Jamaica in the 1940s. *Small Island*, published in 2004, was her fourth novel and her breakthrough, an international bestseller that has won the Orange Prize for Fiction, the Whitbread Book of the Year, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Orange Best of the Best.

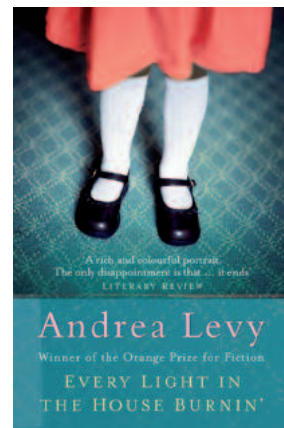
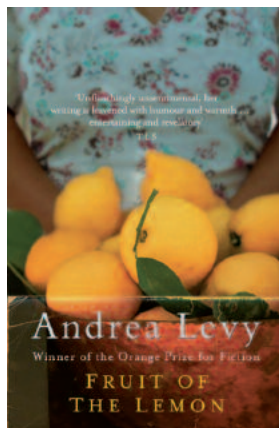
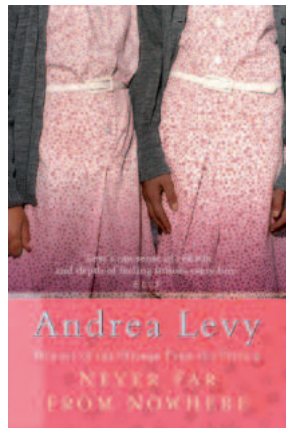
Her three previous novels were also critically acclaimed. *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994) is the semi-autobiographical story of a Jamaican family living in London that shifts between the narrator's memories of growing up in the 1960s and her experiences in the present sitting by her dying father's bedside. It was described by the *Times Literary Supplement* as 'a striking and promising debut'. *Never Far From Nowhere* (1996) is about two sisters, daughters of Jamaicans,

who live on a London council estate in the 1970s. One of the sisters identifies herself as black while the other passes as white. The book was long-listed for the Orange Prize. *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), which won the Arts Council Writers' Award, is about a black Londoner who visits Jamaica and discovers a previously unknown family history.

In an online interview with the *Washington Post* in 2004, Andrea Levy said:

I love books that you feel once you've read them that they've added to the sum total of who you are. That you've learned something or you've been taken somewhere that was really worth going, because you understand something better now.

The first time she encountered a work of fiction that 'spoke' to her was at the age of 23 when she read Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*. She describes this as 'a profoundly moving thing', as until that moment she had associated novels with the slog of school examinations. She became an avid reader and in the interview she refers to other books she has particularly enjoyed since then, including Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers*, Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. She has said elsewhere that she is inspired by the power of story telling which is able to start an intimate conversation between the writer and reader that leads to some kind of social change.



After winning the Whitbread for *Small Island*, Andrea Levy was asked in an interview why she wrote. She replied:

I really write this stuff because I want people to know about it. I don't think I could write for its own sake because sometimes it's not that much fun and it's quite lonely and quite scary because you've only got yourself to rely on and all sorts of things like that. I love it, I really do, but if I didn't have a passion, a real passion for what my subject is, I couldn't do it.

She began writing fiction in her early 30s. Her first three novels, with their exploration of the life of black British-born children of Jamaican immigrants, are more personal than *Small Island*, though this book too has its autobiographical aspect with its links to her parents' experience in coming to Britain.

Small Island has been her most far-reaching book to date. It took four-and-a-half years to complete and involved extensive research. Not all of the material Andrea Levy gathered found its way into the book, but by immersing herself in the period she had the confidence to create characters and situations that are well-rounded, believable and emotionally involving. In his *Guardian* review of the book, Mike Phillips wrote that the author's 'reliance on historical fact gives Levy a distance which allows her to be both

dispassionate and compassionate. The history also offers an opportunity to construct the characters in patient and illuminating detail'.

The *Minneapolis Star Tribune* recommended the book to 'anyone who enjoys a good, long read'. The review continued:

It's all here: exceptional dialogue, clever narrative, and a rich story that tells us something new about our shared history on a planet that is increasingly small and yet will always be inhabited by individuals possessed, at our best, by singular consciousness and desire. That *Small Island* creates such a world, so peopled, is its great success: With their graciousness in conflict and comedy in moments of despair, Levy's characters enlarge our lives even as their own life shrinks around them.

The Sunday Times critic Pennyerrick concluded her review of *Small Island* with the words:

If it weren't for Levy's light, mocking humour... this novel would be almost unbearable to read: a tragic litany of prejudice and the ingrained stupidity that is its cause. Every scene is rich in implication, entrancing and disturbing at the same time; the literary equivalent of a switchback ride.

We hope you enjoy the journey.