ReadingGroupGuides
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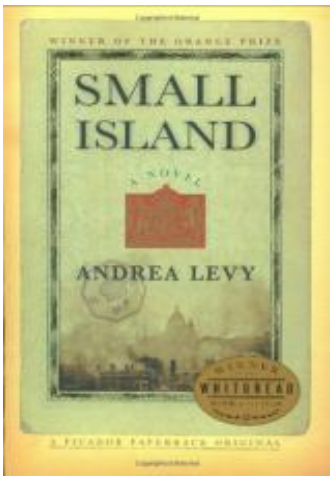
Small Island

by Andrea Levy



About the Book

Small Island is an international bestseller. It won the Orange Prize for Fiction, The Orange Prize for Fiction: Best of the Best, The Whitbread Novel Award, The Whitbread Book of the Year Award, and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. It has now been adapted for the screen as a coproduction of the BBC and Masterpiece/WGBH Boston.

Hortense Joseph arrives in London from Jamaica in 1948 with her life in her suitcase, her heart broken, her resolve intact. Her husband, Gilbert Joseph, returns from the war expecting to be received as a hero, but finds his status as a black man in Britain to be second class. His white landlady, Queenie, raised as a farmer's daughter, befriends Gilbert, and later Hortense, with innocence and courage, until the unexpected arrival of her husband, Bernard, who returns from combat with issues of his own to resolve.

Told in these four voices, **Small Island** is a courageous novel of tender emotion and sparkling wit, of crossings taken and passages lost, of shattering compassion and of reckless optimism in the face of insurmountable barriers --- in short, an encapsulation of that most American of experiences: the immigrant's life.

Discussion Guide

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 chose? 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.

Author Bio

Andrea Levy was born in London in 1956, almost a decade after her parents emigrated to England from Jamaica. She began writing in her mid-30s and is the author of several short stories and novels, including **Small Island**, which won both the Whitbread Book of the Year Award and the Orange Prize for Fiction: Best of the Best. She lives in London.

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