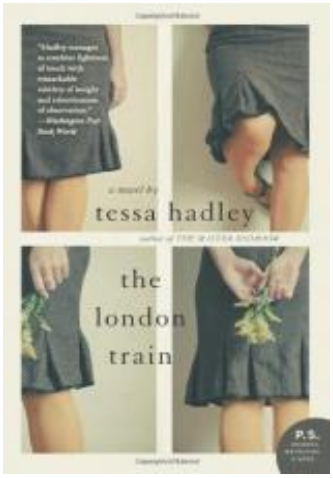
The London Train

by Tessa Hadley



About the Book

Unsettled by the recent death of his mother, Paul sets out in search of Pia, his daughter from his first marriage, who has disappeared into the labyrinth of London. Discovering her pregnant and living illegally in a run-down council flat with a pair of Polish siblings, Paul is entranced by Pia?s excitement at living on the edge. Abandoning his second wife and their children in Wales, he joins her to begin a new life in the heart of London.

Cora, meanwhile, is running in the opposite direction, back to Cardiff, to the house she has inherited from her parents. She is escaping her marriage, and the constrictions and disappointments of her life in London. But there is a deeper reason why she cannot stay with her decent Civil Service husband --- the aftershocks of which she hasn?t fully come to terms with herself.

Connecting both stories is the London train, and a chance meeting that will have immediate and far-reaching consequences for both Paul and Cora.

Discussion Guide

1. In the course of the novel, both Cora and Paul lose their mothers. How does this affect each of them, individually, and in what ways are their reactions different? How do their losses affect the next steps Cora and Paul take, and the choices they make, in their lives?

2. At the time that Paul reconnects with Pia, father and daughter are somewhat estranged. In what ways does Pia?s new living arrangement provide her with a substitute family? In the end, Pia returns home. What do you think Hadley is suggesting about modern family life, its cohesiveness or incohesiveness?

3. Why is Paul drawn to Marek? What is it about driving to make deliveries, and sleeping on the apartment couch, that

attracts Paul?

4. *The Guardian* (UK) describes Paul and Cora?s stories as ?two mirroring halves?; mirrors are also alluded to frequently in the book. In what ways do Paul and Cora serve as reflections of one another, and in what ways do they contrast, or serve as foils to one another?

5. Early in the book, Willis, a neighboring farmer, threatens to cut back aspen trees on the border of Paul and Elise?s property. How does Paul react to this threat? What does the conflict signify?

6. Paul and Cora?s meeting --- and its consequences --- actually take place before the main action of the book. How would the impact on your reading have been different if the connection between Paul and Cora had been straightforward from the beginning of the novel, and revealed chronologically? Did you find the oblique way in which their connection was revealed frustrating? Did you find it successful? Why?

7. Paul and Cora are both, on some level, conscious of their own social class as being different from that of their spouses. Does this ?class consciousness? affect both of them the same way?

8. Following her split with Paul, how much of Cora?s anguish has to do with losing him? How much stems from her loss of the baby?

9. *?Both Cora and Paul?s lives are uprooted, physically and emotionally; both suffer loss, heartache and lust, and find temporary stability in an unexpected place? (Financial Times).*

For much of the book, Cora and Paul are between places, in transit, or in temporary living situations. What does this imply about their emotional lives? What is the significance of Paul and Cora?s chance encounter taking place on the train? What role does transit play in the book, in general?

Author Bio

Tessa Hadley is the author of four collections of stories and eight novels. She was awarded the Windham-Campbell Prize for Fiction, the Hawthornden Prize and the Edge Hill Short Story Prize, and has been a finalist for the Story Prize. She contributes regularly to *The New Yorker* and reviews for *The Guardian* and the *London Review of Books*. She lives in Cardiff, Wales.

Critical Praise

?In spare, incisive prose, Hadley probes this pair of only children marked by the deaths of their mothers, playing with chronology to lay open the pasts that shaped them. This is a keenly perceptive and wise novel, illustrating that however important the past is in our lives, only the present, glimpsed in the final pages, truly matters.?

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