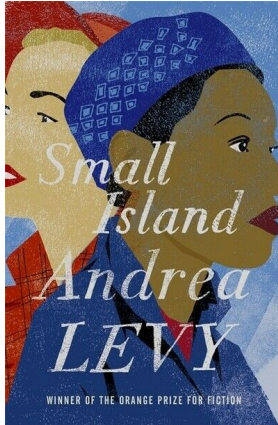


Small Island

By Andrea Levy



It's 1948 and Queenie Bligh's neighbours do not approve when she takes in Jamaican lodgers. But with her husband missing after the war, what else can she do? Gilbert Joseph is one of several thousand Jamaican men who joined the RAF to fight against Hitler. He and his wife, Hortense, come to England for a better life in the mother country that he fought for, only to find London shabby, decrepit and far from welcoming. *Small Island* is a novel about England on the cusp of profound social change as it adjusts to a post-colonial world and the end of the old order.

Things to think about

Here are some topics and questions to think about while reading the book with space to write any comments you have. Feel free to come up with your own discussion points and comments if you prefer.

1. Gilbert and Hortense are part of 'The Windrush Generation' of Caribbean immigrants who came to the UK after WW2. Harsh injustices to this generation have been in the news recently. Does this lend particular poignancy to Gilbert and Hortense's story?
2. Do you think the author successfully manages to tell the story through the four main characters? Are they all equally credible? Do they all deserve our sympathy? In particular, can we empathise with Bernard at all?
3. The story is not told in a straightforward chronological way; do you think it is satisfying to jump between the 'present day' story (set in 1948) and flashbacks to the past? Does it make you change your mind about some of the characters' actions and motivations?

4. Might some of the characters' judgements about race actually be judgements about class eg. snobbish people disliking people from poorer backgrounds? Levy uses humour to mock snobbery and pretension of all kinds – can you find examples?

5. Which island do you think is the Small Island of the title?

6. Much of the overt racism of the type suffered by Gilbert and Hortense has been outlawed in Britain. Does covert racism still exist and is it worse than overt racism? What about micro-aggressions?

7. Bernard says, near the end of the novel, that “ I, for one, am proud to be a part of the British Empire. Proud to represent decency.” How should Britain’s colonial past be remembered? Should we pull down statues (all, some or none) of those who profited from the slave trade? Should we sing ‘Land of Hope and Glory’ at the Last Night of the Proms?

About the author

Andrea Levy was born in England to Jamaican parents. She is the author of several critically acclaimed novels which have been turned into television series and films. *Small Island* is her most famous novel, having won the Orange Prize for Fiction and the Whitbread Book of the Year, and recently having been adapted for The National Theatre to glowing reviews. Sadly Andrea Levy did not live to see the opening of the play, dying last year of cancer.

You can make any other notes about the book on the back of this page.