

ROSE TREMAIN " THE ROAD HOME " 2007

2008 winner of the WOMEN'S PRIZE FOR FICTION

Lev is on his way from Eastern Europe to Britain, seeking work. Behind him loom the figures of his dead wife, his beloved young daughter and his outrageous friend Rudi who - dreaming of the wealthy West - lives largely for his battered Chevrolet. Ahead of Lev lies the deep strangeness of the British: their hostile streets, their clannish pubs, their obsession with celebrity. London holds out the alluring possibility of friendship, sex, money and a new career and, if Lev is lucky, a new sense of belonging...

Tremain gives the reader an emotionally potent look at the melancholia of migration

Olev, a 42-year-old widower from an unnamed former east bloc republic, is taking a bus to London, where he imagines every man resembles Alec Guinness and hard work will be rewarded by wealth.

He has left behind a sad young daughter, a stubborn mother and the newly shuttered sawmill where he had worked for years. His landing is harsh: the British are unpleasant, immigrants are unwelcome, and he's often overwhelmed by homesickness.

But Lev personifies Tremain's remarkable ability to craft characters whose essential goodness shines through tough, drab circumstances. Among them are Lydia, the fellow expatriate; Christy, Lev's alcoholic Irish landlord who misses his own daughter; and even the cruelly demanding Gregory, chef-proprietor of the posh restaurant where Lev first finds work.

Lev has left his mother and child in his village in Eastern Europe to seek work in London, bringing with him an E.U. passport, a handful of English phrases, and a small stash of cash and vodka. At first, he is repelled by what he finds: the shaved heads, the greasy food in disposable packaging, the women thrusting their breasts at him from the pages of the daily paper.

But opportunities also push themselves forward in this cold new world; soon he is scheming for a way to unite his future and his past.

A world where the "gray" market flourishes as West meets East through streetwise entrepreneurs. A world where fish sometimes glow in the dark and young women too often die of leukemia, where the electricity may or may not work, where a refurbished bicycle is a primary means of transportation, where sawmills routinely "run out of trees". A world used to deprivation.

From the ten hour bus ride to London to the short "road home" at the end, I was captivated by Lev, an endearing, lovable, honorable, flawed, quintessentially human man. I was equally captivated by the London he occupies and the company he keeps there.

We have the pretentiously named G.K. Ashe, known as "Chef", owner/proprietor of a five-star restaurant;

Lydia, Lev's travel companion on the long bus ride, a warm and generous woman with "moles like splashes of mud on her face";

Sophie, whose plump arms (and rough sex) catch and keep Lev's attention, after five years of celibacy following his wife's death from cancer at age 36;

Christy, Lev's Irish and alcoholic landlord-cum-friend, whose ex-wife seems to have Amazonian qualities.

And Rudi, Lev's link to home--Lev finds solace and respite in memories of a lifetime with this cheerful, resilient childhood friend. Rudi's vibrant personality fills the crevices of Lev's homesickness, providing much-needed laughter through both memories and infrequent phone conversations. Rudi's "Tchevi", an ancient Chevrolet Phoenix, provides local taxi service back home; Rudi keeps the car running through sheer grit. The car itself is a minor character, a vehicle through which we see the routine shortages of Lev's home country--and the routine resourcefulness of its people.