

LINDA GRANT WHEN I LIVED IN MODERN TIMES 2000

WOMEN'S PRIZE FOR FICTION 2000

In April 1946, a 20-year-old East End London hairdresser named Evelyn Sert set out for Palestine. "This is my story," she writes in *"When I Lived in Modern Times"*, which won Linda Grant the 2000 Orange Prize. "Scratch a Jew and you've got a story."

Her account is no less complicated than that of any other displaced European Jew in the postwar years. Separated from her family, she searches for some kind of reliable identity in an inhospitable new land--and in shining, Bauhaus-influenced Tel Aviv, she finds that she is more English than Israeli.

Lo and behold, she becomes Priscilla Jones, a peroxided Londoner with an absent policeman husband. She is at her most "real," it seems, when pretending, and revels in her ability to be entirely accepted among the English women whose hair she cuts and curls.

Outside of their petty and casually anti-Semitic circle, meanwhile, she struggles with Hebrew, the heat, the unfamiliar food, and an alien way of life.

In Palestine, of course, the English are the enemy.

Evelyn is soon drawn into a world of shifting identities, lies, and secrets by her passionate Zionist boyfriend, Johnny.

Even then, she is never quite sure which side she is on, or where she belongs. All of this makes her a prototypical inhabitant of Linda Grant's Tel Aviv, a city of contradictions and of hope

More to the point, Grant's heroine is a fully believable figure, a chameleon of a kind readily recognizable to those of us who grew up as part of the seismic displacement of peoples that accompanied World War II--and, alas, to anyone who has been caught up in the more recent exoduses from Bosnia, Kosovo, and Albania.

An unsentimental, iconoclastic coming-of-age story of both a country and a young immigrant,

Grant's first novel introduces an unusually appealing heroine, narrator Evelyn Sert, and provides an unforgettable glimpse of a time and place rarely observed from an unsparing point of view.

Naive and idealistic, 20-year-old Evelyn, an incipient Zionist, leaves London for Palestine in April 1946 under false pretenses.

Devoid of useful skills, she barely survives a stint on a kibbutz. Later, in Tel Aviv, she gets a job in a hairdressing salon, passing herself off as Priscilla Jones, the wife of a British soldier. To her neighbors she acknowledges that she's a Jew, but she's puzzled that she has more in common with the British colonials than with the motley collection of Jews from many lands and widely disparate religious, social and economic backgrounds, all of them busy reinventing themselves.

After falling in love with a chameleon-like man she knows as Johnny, who impersonates a British army officer, she's not really surprised to find that he's a terrorist with the Irgun underground, working cold-bloodedly to end the British Mandate.

Unwittingly, Evelyn gives Johnny information that results in violence. The quiet force of this astonishingly mature novel comes in watching Evelyn's simplistic worldview gradually give way to disillusionment as she becomes aware of the moral ambiguities and paradoxes on all sides.

Readers will be struck by the timeliness of Grant's narrative, for she captures the excitement and danger of a volatile society and the desperate measures of homeless people convinced that they must create a state.

The implications of this cautionary tale keep unfolding even after the bittersweet denouement. It's no wonder that this novel won the 2000 Orange Prize, beating out Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. (Feb.) Forecast: The stark facts revealed in Tom Segev's *One Palestine, Complete* (Nonfiction Forecasts, Oct. 23) acquire a human face and a compelling voice in this fictional evocation of the period. The novel's relevance to current events provides a natural handle for booksellers, and Hollywood may see the potential in a story whose ramifications are reflected in today's headlines.

Grant gives life to the Jewish experience in Palestine between WWII and Israeli independence. She is a competent novelist, and is able to draw on source material in the form of letters, memoirs and diaries. Evelyn, the Jewish protagonist, grew up in London, speaking Latvian at home with her immigrant mother; on the surface it would seem she successfully adapted to life in London, but she was uncomfortable enough to illegally move to Palestine after her mother died, in search of an ethnic identity. There are moral quandaries in the foundation of Israel which Evelyn experiences. She has an Irgun boyfriend who is a sexist, unlike Evelyn and the other Jewish characters – I am unsure why Grant made this choice. Evelyn is the only deeply realized character, while many others are interesting and serve their purpose. I wish my sister had read a book like this before she emigrated for life on a kibbutz, which lasted longer than Evelyn's stay.

SOME MEMORABLE PASSAGES. "In a country with its face turned toward the future, our stories sat on our shoulders like a second head, facing the way we had come from."

"Time stopped. It just gave up and stopped dead in its tracks. Nothing happened. It was as if someone had pulled its plug out from the mains. There was nothing to power it forward (when Evelyn is in a safe house)."

"We're (British in Palestine) pretty well living behind barbed wire, as it is. In fact, we've rounded ourselves up."

"Yes, that's what we've done. We're so frightened of the terrorists we've put ourselves in protective custody."

"... but the future is a door into a darkened room and however much you fumble for the light switch you will never find it."

Idealism and disillusionment, the collisions of past and future are recurrent themes in this novel set in 1946 and 1947 Palestine, where identity is a haphazard commodity. The narrator who chronicles what she calls living history is 20-year-old Evelyn Sert, sometimes called Eve, sometimes Mrs. Priscilla Jones. Unlike many tales of Jewish refugees reclaiming their homeland, Evelyn is not a refugee, but she is a displaced person of sorts. It is right after the war and Evelyn and her mother have survived the long years of the London blitz and rationing.

Growing up in England, the daughter of a woman who has cut ties from her own immigrant family and a shadowy American father only glimpsed through one old photograph, Evelyn is always reminded that she is second class, and the only thing that fiercely endures is her Jewish identity. When her mother dies an early death, her mother's lover, "Uncle Joe", who has fed and clothed them all these years, and fed Evelyn as well on Zionism, encourages her to go to Palestine, and basically pays her off to do so. One senses that it is not entirely out of conviction but a convenient way to get Evelyn out of the way of his real family.

A frustrated artist, she goes to work at the only way she knows how to make a real living, as a hairdresser. In her hairdresser's capacity, she is recruited for mundane underground assignments by the mysterious sexy "Johnny", who becomes her lover. Eventually caught

out by the British and forced to leave the country, Evelyn's idealistic dream disintegrates, and that is the tie-in to the book's title, but it does not end there. A mature and wizened Evelyn returns to Israel to live out her twilight years.

The great thing about this story and its strength will probably also cause offense to those expecting heroic characters and lofty moral platitudes.

This is an unsentimental description and examination of life under the British Mandate. It is not always a pretty or hopeful picture, although not completely dim. The Jewish characters and the British are equally put under a harsh spotlight. As each tells his or her story, argues over the old and the new world order, and predicts what will happen when the British leave (the only thing that all parties agree will happen), a picture of a society and a people in transition emerges.

Finally, this is as much a story about the building of Tel Aviv as it is about the State of Israel.

Not surprisingly, it is this city and not Jerusalem that captures Evelyn's imagination. The young shining Tel Aviv, not only stands as a nostalgic historical and cultural remembrance, but also as a fitting metaphor for the modern Jewish city and therefore a new definition of the Jewish people.