



When I Lived in Modern Times

By *Linda Grant*

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When I Lived in Modern Times By Linda Grant

Winner of the Orange Prize for Fiction

In the spring of 1946, Evelyn Sert stands on the deck of a ship bound for Palestine. For the twenty-year-old from London, it is a time of adventure and change when all things seem possible.

Swept up in the spirited, chaotic churning of her new, strange country, she joins a kibbutz, then moves on to the teeming metropolis of Tel Aviv, to find her own home and a group of friends as eccentric and disparate as the city itself. She falls in love with a man who is not what he seems when she becomes an unwitting spy for a nation fighting to be born. **When I Lived in Modern Times** is "an unsentimental coming-of-age story of both a country and a young immigrant . . . that provides an unforgettable glimpse of a time and place rarely observed" (**Publishers Weekly**, starred review).

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In April 1946, a 20-year-old East End London hairdresser named Evelyn Sert sets 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 peroxidized 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. --*Lisa Jardine*

From Publishers Weekly

An unsentimental, iconoclastic coming-of-age story of both a country (Israel) 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. Naïve 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 a 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.

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From Library Journal

Displacement and identity, both of an individual and of a nation, are the themes of this novel by Linda Grant (*Sexing the Millennium*, LJ 4/1/94). The novel opens with a piece of evidence given before the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (July 8, 1947) by Chaim Weizmann: "If you ask what a Jew is, well, he is a man who has to offer a long explanation for his existence." The birth of the nation of Israel is the backdrop to the story of Evelyn Sert, a young English Jewish woman who is left rootless after the end of World War II and the death of her mother. On the advice of her mother's friend, she makes her way to Palestine, entering as a Christian tourist, and begins her new life working on a kibbutz. Evelyn's identity is protean, changing according to circumstance, and her growing awareness of the confusion and sense of displacement among the Jewish migrants, British Army of Occupation soldiers and their families, Arab settlers, and Zionists in Tel Aviv is mirrored in her own changes in name and appearance. The sounds, smells, and tastes of wartime London, desert kibbutzim, and urban Tel Aviv are evocatively described, and Evelyn's story is compelling. Winner of the Orange Prize for fiction in 2000; highly recommended for all fiction collections.

- *Kerie Nickel, St. Mary's Coll. of Maryland, St. Mary's City*
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Corey Gardner:

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