

Andrea Levy. *Small Island*. Review (an imprint of Headline Book Publishing)
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Reviewed by Gillian Dooley in *The Adelaide Review*, May 2004, p. 31.

The social fabric of mid-twentieth century London suffered many assaults, and not all came from German bombers. Some came, outrageously, from their ‘ungrateful’ colonies.

Small Island concerns two couples, one Jamaican and one English, whose lives intersect during and after the second world war. Neither of these marriages starts romantically. In 1948 Hortense marries Gilbert, a former RAF airman, to escape her uninspiring teaching job in Jamaica. Within days of meeting, they strike a deal: if he marries her she will provide the money for his passage back to England. In return, he will find a home and send for her. To Gilbert’s surprise, he discovers that Hortense doesn’t see sex entering into the bargain at all.

Queenie married Bernard before the war for equally pragmatic but more conventional reasons — to avoid a life as a rural butcher’s daughter. Bernard, though tedious, shy and taciturn, is at least a ‘gentleman’. This much is obvious from Queenie’s account of their marital relations: ‘Bernard would untie his pyjama bottoms, loosen the cord then bunch the fabric into his hand so they didn’t drop and spoil the surprise. “Darling...?”’

However, sex is a side issue. The focus of the novel is on the relations between white and black at time when xenophobia was seen as an Englishman’s right – ‘darkies’ were all very well in their ‘own’ countries but why did they have to invade England and bring down the neighbourhood? Four shades of

opinion are powerfully dramatised in *Small Island*. Queenie is broadminded, if somewhat tactless: she doesn't mind having Jamaican lodgers as long as they behave themselves. Her husband Bernard is a dyed-in-the-wool bigot, brought up on Biggles and imperial glory; and his time in the British army in India hasn't improved his opinions of the dusky races. At the other end of the scale from Bernard is the haughty Hortense. College educated (in Constant Spring, Jamaica), with excellent references from her headmaster at Half Way Tree Parish School, she believes that England will welcome her, and finds great difficulty adjusting to the insults heaped upon her by an uncaring mother country. Gilbert, her husband, is more of a realist; an witty and likeable man whom she only gradually comes to appreciate.

The strength of this novel is in its compassionate portrayal of these four characters. Each is given a voice. Hortense is magnificently absurd in her idiosyncratic elegance of speech and manner, and, like Gilbert, we both laugh and wince to witness her pride and ambition being brutally shattered. Gilbert is eloquent, in his subtle dialect exposing how hypocritical and inhospitable the English are towards their colonial subjects, even those who fought alongside them. And even Bernard, weak and intolerant, has his creditable moments. There is romance in this novel, but it is tempered by the harsh realities of history and the difficulties of social relations in this time of upheaval.