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22 Britannia Road: A Novel



Synopsis

"Hodgkinson's portrait of the primal bond between mother and child . . . leaves an indelible impression." —The New York Times Book Review

Debuting its first week on the New York Times bestseller list and earning comparisons to *Sophie's Choice* and *Sarah's Key*, *22 Britannia Road* is an astonishing first novel that powerfully chronicles one family's struggle to create a home in the aftermath of war. With World War II finally over, Silvana and her seven-year-old son, Aurek, board the ship that will take them to England, where Silvana's husband, Janusz, determined to forget his ghosts, has rented a little house at 22 Britannia Road. But after years spent hiding in the forests of Poland, Aurek is wild, almost feral. And for Silvana, who cannot escape the painful memory of a shattering wartime act, forgetting is not a possibility.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is the story of a Polish couple, Silvana and Janusz and their son Aurek. They met and married in 1937. As both the Russians and the Germans invaded Poland in 1940 the couple is separated. He joins the military and after a long journey, typical of Poles who chose to fight on after the defeat of their country, ends up in the RAF in England. She is initially raped by a German soldier, flees with their son to live in the forests of Poland. The story opens in 1946 as the couple is reunited after their six year separation. Building on the memories of a deeply loving relationship before the war the couple tries to reestablish their family life. Each has secrets that they do not share with the other. These secrets, the crux of the story, are slowly revealed in two separate threads. No more spoilers from me on the story! This book is vividly written and has complexity to the plot that continues to

draw you in right up until the last chapter. The long lasting effects of war on people are brilliantly portrayed in the story. In post war Britain, the couple has every advantage- an intact family, a house, a car, a good job - but the lingering effects of what happened to them during the war destroy their chances to go forward. The son has been deeply influenced by his time in the forests avoiding both Germans and Russians and living off the land. In one scene his father shows him how to collect and save birds eggs and the boy can only think of how he wants to eat the eggs contents as he did so often in the forests. He has a particularly difficult time socializing and entering into normal relationships. It was heartbreaking and at times almost too sad to bear. In the end though this story is a triumph of the human spirit over adversity.

That is how Janusz describes his wife Silvana as he embraces her in a scene about two-thirds through this book, and it seems to be the first insightful thing he thinks about her. I chose this book from the Vine program because it sounded like a wonderful, moving premise for a novel, but I was disappointed. I expected it to be sad, but I also expected to feel for and empathize with characters who had been through so much. I found I just couldn't care about Janusz and Silvana; when they first meet as teenagers, they are just a couple of horny kids, feeling an instant physical attraction and apparently not much else. Silvana comes from a miserable, dysfunctional peasant family and seems motivated only by the desire to escape; Janusz seems to ask her to marry him out of duty, suggesting perhaps he's gotten her pregnant. Either way, I didn't feel like I knew the characters - what were their likes, dislikes, dreams, motivations? They seemed very young and unformed, understandably so, but the love they shared did not feel strong enough to last through six years of war. I agree with another reviewer here who noted that Janusz' time spent wandering around Europe before finally getting to England seems far-fetched. Janusz seems quite amenable to staying put wherever he lands and sitting out the war - first the goose woman's cottage, then Helene's parents' farm - he seems quite weak and easily lead and just goes along. Granted, his life has been totally turned upside down, but I don't get the impression he's burning to fight for his country, or to see his wife and child again, or to do much of anything, except have an affair with Helene. Silvana has a much rougher time (women in war often do), but she seems very shallow and unformed as well, basically a hollow shell doing whatever she's told by Hanka, then Gregor, then Janusz, then Tony . . . She and her son Aurek endure a much harsher deprivation in the forests of Poland, but something about that also didn't ring true for me. It went on way too long and became boring, and it seemed uneven - they stay for months with one farmer, then the Germans are coming and they must move on; then they wander a day and Gregor finds them and brings them into his dubious fold; next time

they're abandoned they wander for days and days and see no sign of life - but then a farmer finds them near death. A while later, Gregor comes back into the picture and I thought, how come they didn't find Gregor or this farmer while they were wandering lost in apparently the same vicinity? Are these the densest, deepest, most desolate woods ever or the forest from "Midsummer Night's Dream", with characters constantly wandering on and off stage? It just seemed inconsistent. First Silvana is tough and independent, hunting and skinning animals with Gregor, and he tells her she'd be perfect for the Resistance - but when she and Aurek are alone again, they're eating whatever they find but almost starving. She forgot how to trap and hunt? Again, it seemed inconsistent. I felt like I never got to know Janusz or Silvana, and I don't think they knew each other. They were so secretive with each other; I couldn't help thinking real lovers/partners would eventually share and talk about what they'd endured, seen, learned about themselves; not all at once, of course, but in dribs and drabs. Janusz and Silvana lived in the same house but seemed to rarely speak with or to each other; there seems to be no REAL talking until the last five pages. I frankly didn't care by that point; it just reinforced for me the feeling that here were two people who didn't have much in common to begin with - I couldn't help feeling sorry for Janusz for missing out on his chance with Helene! Finally, the plot twist at the end of the book with Tony (no spoilers, I promise), really seemed out of left field and I agree with another reviewer here, at that point the story seemed to descend into melodrama. If I didn't have to write a review of this book for the Vine program, I probably wouldn't have finished it. I know some readers will find this a satisfying story of survival and "primal maternal love" as the back cover says, and I did find several of the scenes between Silvana and Aurek, and between Janusz and Aurek touching and almost painful; they wanted so much to be a family again. I also feel the author provided a somewhat interesting, if dreary, story of life in post-war Britain; but the love story between Silvana and Janusz just didn't work for me, or it was a case of too little, too late. I pitied the main characters but just couldn't like or care much about them, so I didn't like the book as much as I might have and rated it accordingly.

The place is Ipswich, in the East of England. Janusz Novak, who has escaped from Poland at the beginning of the Second World War and served as an engineer with the Royal Air Force, has taken a house with a small garden at 22 Britannia Road. By some miracle, his wife Silvana has also survived and is coming to join him, together with their son Aurek, whom Janusz has not seen since he was a baby. It seems a happily-ever-after ending, the family reunited. Only this is not the ending, but a new beginning, and not an easy one. There are at least three layers to the story here, and I am not sure that they benefit by being laid on top of one another. One is the simple immigrant story that

has been told many times, with different specifics (Andrea Levy's *SMALL ISLAND* being one magnificent example): what is it like to make a new life in a strange country, especially one beset by rationing, austerity measures, and labor unrest? Amanda Hodgkinson handles this effectively and without fuss. I could imagine Silvana's difficulties with the neighbors and the shops, Aurek's problems at school, and Janusz' determination to make a proper English home. I could imagine them, but not truly feel them in my gut; Hodgkinson's descriptions seem accurate rather than achingly personal. The second layer was the one that moved me most: how people come back together after a separation. Janusz and Silvana were only just married when Aurek was born, and had hardly been tested as a couple. They are separated at the start of the war under circumstances where neither even knows that the other is alive. Now, six years later, they come together almost as strangers. They have each been changed by time, in some ways that they will only discover by putting them to the test. There is gratitude there and the memory of affection, but the main thing that connects them is their child. Yet Aurek sees his father as "the enemy" and resents him as a threat. The slow process through which Janusz gradually comes to win the boy's confidence is truly heartwarming. It would almost be worth reading the book if it dealt with nothing more than the repair of a broken family. But there is more: the third layer. Both Janusz and Silvana have led difficult lives in the war, leaving them with secrets they do not want to share, traumatic suffering and dangerous moments of disturbing joy. We get a hint of this very early on, when it becomes clear that Silvana has not been the only woman in Janusz' life, but for the most part these things are revealed gradually in flashback chapters that alternate with those in the present day. Again, I found myself accepting without being fully involved. No single event is unbelievable, but the total begins to seem both melodramatic and a little too easy, as though one thing follows another merely because the author wanted it to. I don't believe that all this was necessary to make an effective novel, though the author takes the accepting reader on a journey with several surprising twists that many will find quite satisfying. In short, a strong romance -- but there are tantalizing hints that it could have been much more. [3.5 stars]

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