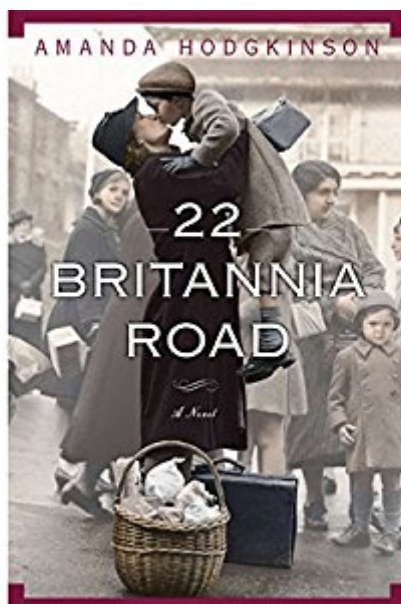


The book was found

## 22 Britannia Road



## Synopsis

A tour de force that echoes modern classics like *Suite Française* and *The Postmistress*.

"Housekeeper or housewife?" the soldier asks Silvana as she and eight-year-old Aurek board the ship that will take them from Poland to England at the end of World War II. There her husband, Janusz, is already waiting for them at the little house at 22 Britannia Road. But the war has changed them all so utterly that they'll barely recognize one another when they are reunited. "Survivor," she answers. Silvana and Aurek spent the war hiding in the forests of Poland. Wild, almost feral Aurek doesn't know how to tie his own shoes or sleep in a bed. Janusz is an Englishman now-determined to forget Poland, forget his own ghosts from the way, and begin a new life as a proper English family. But 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

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 led 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.

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.

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