



"There beneath the blue suburban skies..." Linda Grant's new book is a paean to Liverpool's Jewish history

A love letter to Liverpool

Linda Grant's ninth novel traces the story of one family from the flour mills of Latvia to the suburbs of Liverpool and post-war Soho. **Louise Ellman**, formerly the MP for Liverpool Riverside, speaks to the writer about the pull of Merseyside's famous city and the ties that bind to a past elsewhere

As the former MP for Liverpool Riverside, I both smiled and shed a tear as I read Linda Grant's latest book, *The Story of the Forest*. The story traces a family's journey from Latvia to Grant's own home town of Liverpool, and much of the action is set among areas of the city I know well: from the immigrant hubs of Brownlow Hill and Toxteth to the (then) emerging suburb of Childwall. Scotland Road and Penny Lane make appearances.

The story begins in 1913, when the young and carefree Mina, the daughter of a Jewish flour merchant in Riga, goes into the forest and meets a gang of young men with Bolshevik revolution on their minds. The adventure leads to flight with her brother Jossel, emigration, marriage with Jossel's wartime comrade Louis Pollack, and the building of a life in a new world – Liverpool.

In telling the intriguing story of one family, it brings to life an important part of the Jewish refugee experience, but it's also a story about powerful women: as workers, with careers, or as family and community figures. What's more, it is rooted in the revolutionary politics of the time, which

resonates through succeeding generations.

This compelling and sensitive novel is warm without being nostalgic, and is surely Grant's best work to date. It is a timely reminder of the role immigrants play in building society at a time when hostility to refugees is becoming all too acceptable.

LOUISE ELLMAN

LOUISE ELLMAN: What inspired you to write the book?

LINDA GRANT: I started writing it in the autumn of 2019. I wanted to write about the stories that Jews tell about their lives, which often are not documented. In my family, for example, there aren't many family records and my father didn't have a birth certificate. I had the idea that in the spring of 2020, I would go to Riga in Latvia [where the first part of the novel is set]. With Covid, that proved to be impossible. So it became a 'lockdown' novel. I eventually went to Liverpool and found a document showing all the businesses in Brownlow Hill, where my parents had grown up, including my father's family bakery and barbershop. Then it all came together.

LE: Does it tell your family's story?

LG: No. My family on my father's side came from Poland in 1904. On my mother's side they are from the Kyiv hinterlands and came to the UK just before World War I. I grew up in Liverpool suburbia; until I was eight we were in Childwell and then we moved to Allerton. My parents were founder members of Allerton shul.

But some of the book is based on family stories such as the story of Jossel leaving his wife Lia to marry his office manager. I had a cousin who got married, and I was one of the bridesmaids. The following week, he left his wife for his secretary, with whom he'd been having an affair for 20 years. My father took his brother's side and the rest of the family took the wife's side.

The world of Liverpool in the first half of the 20th century was familiar to me through my grandparents. My grandfather was a great Talmudic scholar. He smoked Woodbines, which gave him a yellow forefinger. When I went to cheder, there were men with their lapels covered in cigarette ash. My parents spoke Yiddish to each other when they didn't want us to



know what they were talking about. It was the secret language but you picked up bits of it.

Something that was also impressed on me growing up was those left behind – my mother used to refer to it as in the ‘chaim’ – the homeland. She was born in England, but her older siblings were born in Russia. There was always this sense of shadow families, relatives back in eastern Europe, from whom my parents heard until the war and then there was no further communication.

There are two types of history: the history of the ones who got away and the history of the ones who got left behind, and I was interested to see how both could come together 100 years in the future.

When I was a teenager, I used to think, “I’m in Liverpool, I have the Beatles; what do I need with these old Jews, these old stories?” My father said, “The Beatles? They’re a nine-day wonder.” There was also this feeling in Liverpool that you were looking out to the promised land, which was America, the place that you hadn’t got to. You were permanently thwarted.

LE: Tell us more about one of the book’s themes, about why people leave their countries.

LG: Why do people leave? Often because of antisemitism. But, in the case of Mina and Jossel, they leave because he’s worried about Mina getting involved with a bad crowd. It’s important to hear these human stories, in which history is an excuse for getting you out of a fix. There were things I didn’t know about my grandfather because he didn’t speak English, but he used to spit on the floor when the name of the Tsar was mentioned. And once, when he was taken to the Lake District, he said, “Here, they could build houses for the workers.”

LE: The description of Liverpool is very evocative.

LG: I used to read English novels and they were full of descriptions of nature. I had no idea what they were talking about. My family was urban, they didn’t do nature. Once I started writing, since I didn’t have the vocabulary to know the difference between a rill and a brook, I thought, “I’m going to describe cities instead”.

LE: You talk a lot about families changing their name. Why is that so significant?

LG: My parents changed their name in 1953. And the letter that I reproduce in the book [Louis Polack receives an anonymous antisemitic letter telling him, “We don’t want any more parasites in this Country. Get Out!!!”] is the exact wording of one my parents received after my father applied for naturalisation in 1948. So I was born ‘Ginsburg’ in 1951, and when I was two my name changed to ‘Grant’ – taken from Grant’s Whisky. But the name Ginsburg wasn’t the name that they arrived with in England. I don’t know what that was.

A cousin told me in the 1990s that after the family arrived in the UK they moved into a house where the name Ginsburg was on the rent book and they assumed the rent book name. Who knows the truth of it? Everybody in my family was a storyteller. Jews are about a story, not a place.

LE: You evoke the 1960s so well. It was a time when people, especially immigrants, had the feeling they could go on to something better.

LG: I wanted to show these Jews were becoming more assimilated with each generation. I saw The Lehman Trilogy recently and was fascinated by how each generation of the brothers sat shiva for shorter periods. When the last brother dies, they sit for three minutes. The shiva period goes from one week to three minutes!

Growing up in 60s Liverpool, I was subjected to a great tension. My mother wanted me to lead a suburban Jewish life, to live around the corner from her, for us to go to coffee mornings together, raise money for Israel and have grandchildren. I wanted a bigger world.

The thing about Paula [Mina’s daughter, who goes to live in London] is that she sounds as if she’s a native-born, proper, English Received Pronunciation, London person – a non-Jew. But she’s not. I wanted to show the difficulty of escaping from your identity. She goes to an art gallery with Roland [her lover] and likes the ‘wrong’ paintings. It’s as if she’s immigrated to a new country, one she has been preparing for, but she doesn’t really belong there.

By the time you get to contemporary



From left: Linda Grant: “I wanted to write about women who made tea for the revolution, women on the periphery.”; A former Jewish butcher’s shop in Liverpool

Rosita [Mina’s great granddaughter], her Jewishness is completely incidental. For her, it is nothing but a story. It’s part of identity politics: I’m pursuing my Jewish identity, because identity is important.

LE: Women’s experiences are central to the book. Are you the northern female counterpoint to Howard Jacobson?

LG: I like to think of myself as the antidote to Howard. How I love his books! But he’s a male writer, writing about men. And I’ve tried in most of my novels to put women’s experience at the centre, as well as exploring different generations of women. I would never disavow the term ‘feminist novelist’. I am absolutely a rock-hard feminist. In my earlier books, *When I Lived in Modern Times*, and *The Cast Iron Shore*, I didn’t want to write about women at the centre of history, but the women who made the tea for the revolution, women on the periphery, because that’s where most women were.

Mina’s socialism isn’t an intellectual socialism. It’s a rebellion against her husband. It’s the way she can preserve something of herself against the kind of conventionality that she’s forced into. There’s something inside her, which says, “I’m going to read the communist newspaper”. Of course, when she comes across an actual communist stuffing leaflets through the door, who asks her to come to a meeting, she doesn’t want to go. What she wants is to feel that she’s got something which is of herself, hers alone.

LE: Did the current climate about refugees seep into your novel?

LG: So many asylum seekers get rejected by the immigration authorities because they don’t have an easily comprehensible story of why they’re claiming asylum. My family always said you should tell the authorities what they want to hear – which means lying.

The whole Jewish story is about people who survive and people who don’t. It’s

about survival tactics, the old image of the suitcase kept by the door, the jewels sewn into the hem of your clothes, tell lies, keep your story straight, have money. All those things are necessary for survivors.

LE: But survival was also about getting a job, working hard and doing better wasn’t it?

LG: What [the former Labour leader] Jeremy Corbyn doesn’t understand is the Jews who say, “I would sacrifice anything for my children’s future.” That is a strong immigrant instinct. Corbyn doesn’t get the idea of aspiration. He gets the idea of class solidarity, the idea of Jews who’ve been at the forefront of radical and socialist movements. But he doesn’t get Jews living in suburbia with a Volvo. Then they’re just Tories. That’s what I grew up in. My friend’s parents were businessmen, doctors, dentists and accountants. They thought it was a good life and who’s to say it wasn’t?

LE: Has the book changed the way you reflect on your own past?

LG: I went back to Liverpool a year ago, for the first time since lockdown. The book connected me with my upbringing. I wanted to recreate in fiction the world I come from. People tell me: “I never heard of any Liverpool Jews.” I always say, “You have heard of one Liverpool Jew.” And they go, “No, no, I haven’t.” I go, “Brian Epstein”. “Oh.” My parents knew about the Beatles, because they knew Brian Epstein’s parents.

With the book, I wanted to say, “You’ve all heard of Penny Lane. Well, I grew up near there. John Lennon and Paul McCartney lived close by. You know Menlove Avenue [where Lennon grew up]? That’s Jewish suburbia.” For so many people, Liverpool means stereotypes of football, perms and tracksuits. Yes, it’s a working-class city, but it has always had a beautiful sandstone suburbia. ■



The Story of the Forest by Linda Grant, Virago, 2023, £18.99. Louise Ellman is the former Labour MP for Liverpool Riverside.