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"I have a secret to tell you, dear, and this is it: I am not Mary. That is a mistake. I am not a girl. I'm a boy." Mary's fight to become Martin, her claustrophobic small town, and her troubled family make up the core of this remarkable and intimate, emotional yet unsentimental novel. As daring as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, *Sacred Country* inspires us to reconsider the essence of gender, and proposes new insights in the unraveling of that timeless malady known as the human condition. As Mary's mother, Estelle, observes, "There are no whole truths, just as there is no heart of the onion. There are only the dreams of the individual mind." Sweeping us through three decades, from the repressive English countryside of the fifties to the swinging London of the sixties to the rhinestone tackiness of seventies America, Rose Tremain unmask the "sacred country" within us all.

Sacred Country Details

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From Reader Review Sacred Country for online ebook

Laura says

This is the second Tremain book I read, and her writing continues to astound me; it has a quiet magnificence to it. She also does a splendid job of weaving together stories which, in the hands of a less talented writer, could become unpleasantly entangled.

Dru says

I was directed towards this book because it appeared to centre on a transsexual character, and I have an interest in that sort of thing, and in how trans characters are portrayed by cis writers. Sometimes this portrayal can be almost unrecognisably false and bad. Not here! Rose Tremain obviously did her homework. Mary/Martin is well and convincingly portrayed as a complex character for whom things are never quite perfectly resolved. This moment, after his undergoing a mastectomy, rings so true-

“I imagined all the other operations waiting for me in the future and the pain still to come, and I had a thought that I hardly ever allow myself to think: why couldn’t it have been simple? Why couldn’t I have just accepted being Mary Ward?

“The answers are: because it wasn’t. Because I couldn’t. Because I am not Mary Ward. And no one- not Harker, not Sterns, not I - can explain it better than that. All we have are theories. It remains one of the million mysteries left in the world.”

...though Mary's evolution towards Martin is far more nuanced than may be suggested by the episode involving surgery, quoted here (I did so because the quote captures the nature of that unprovable yet very powerful innate sense of gender identity that we have).

The other characters are important and interesting too, and I finished the book wishing it wasn’t ending there. Engrossing, hopeful and sometimes sad.

Gerasimos says

I absolutely loved this. It was so heartfelt and heartwarming but at the same time extremely funny and though provoking. Tremain's writing style is so rich and intelligent and it made me laugh out loud several times. But the story in general was much more than what I expected it. Tremain handles a large cast of characters with notable elegance managing to create multidimensional people that populate a rich and realistic world. She takes the reader almost through 4 decades of these characters' lives and she manages to create completely believable and fully fledged stories for each and every one of the characters.

At the centre of the book lies Mary or Martin, a young boy who was born in the body of a girl, but the characters that surround Martin are equally complicated and interesting. Finishing the book you certainly feel that you've read an epic work and I will miss the characters and the setting. A great novel and I will certainly be reading more of Rose Tremain's books in the future.

Julie Christine says

Mary Ward stands shivering in a Suffolk, England field in February, 1952 and realizes she is meant to be a boy. She is just six years old. Within its opening pages *Sacred Country* promises to take you on a literary journey that will be long and painful. Rest assured, it will also be beautiful and transformative.

Although Mary and her quest for her physical identity are at the heart of *Sacred Country*, it is a book full of souls searching for emotional purchase. Mary's mother has a tenuous grip on sanity, losing her way at intervals and regaining her footing in a nearby mental hospital; Mary's father is in danger of losing the family farm and slips further into madness borne of anger and alcohol; her brother loses his dream of becoming an Olympic swimmer because he is too afraid to dive. A village friend, Walter, dreams of becoming a country-and-western singer, but must take over the family butcher shop when his father dies. It seems that there is nothing but heartbreak in gray and lifeless post-war Britain, that the future is alive in vibrant cities and on warm continents but in rural England the past rots in small and suspicious minds.

Yet Tremain offers enough light in the gloom that hope propels you forward. Mary's awkward courage as she stumbles through her transformation from Mary to Martin makes her so lovable. And she is surrounded by a small but formidable defense of friends and loved ones: her grandfather, who accepts her unconditionally; her beloved teacher who embraces her intellect and shelters her when home life becomes unbearable; the cricket-bat maker who believes in reincarnation; his maid (who becomes his lover, then his wife) and her daughter, Pearl, who breaks Mary's heart and helps it to heal.

Rose Tremain's writing is flawless. Although this is a narrative focused on character development, the plot moves steadily forward. Although there are numerous characters and several sub-plots, there is a sense of the whole within each part. Vivid details of time and place hold you firmly in each era, the characters evolving with their age, changing with the times. The characters' senses of humor and irony clear the air that could easily turn maudlin under the pen of a less-deft writer.

This is a book about transformation, about letting go of those who cannot change and embracing those who try. *Sacred Country* touched me profoundly with its humanity, its hope, its brutality and its intense love. It is rare that I close a book and cry at its end. This is a rare book, indeed.

Nigeyb says

'Sacred Country' (1992) has rocketed into the list of my all time favourite books.

Part of my motivation for reading 'Sacred Country' was the announcement that it has been chosen by City Reads in 2018. City Reads is Brighton & Hove's annual citywide reading festival: one book by one author is selected for the whole community to read, discuss, debate and creatively engage with in a series of special events, workshops and performances.

A lot of the reviews and summaries characterise 'Sacred Country' as a tale about a transgender person...

Beginning in a Suffolk village in the early 1950s and moving through three decades, we come to know not

only our central character Mary/Martin born as a girl into the wrong body, but also the family and characters within that small community; those who find happiness and their place in the world and those who struggle to do so.

In actual fact the Mary/Martin narrative is just one of a dozen or so different narratives. Each of the small-town characters hails from the area around the fictional village of Swaithey in rural Suffolk. The stories start in the early 1950s and end in 1980. The overlapping narratives are told in a series of short chapters, which switch from the perspective of the various characters.

Mary/Martin's tale is wonderful - but so are the other stories and characters that Rose describes. Outwardly these are fairly insignificant people going about their quiet existences, however all have interesting and rich inner lives, and this is what makes the book so compelling. By the end of 'Sacred Country' I had fallen in love with Estelle Ward, Walter Loomis, Pearl Harker, Thomas Cord, and Edward Harker, and was also fascinated by the large supporting cast that includes Sonny, Gilbert, Stern, Cleo, Pete, and many more.

'Sacred Country' features a lot of tragedy and drama, however it is also extremely playful and humorous, and very poignant.

It's beautifully written, awash with memorable characters, firmly rooted in the different times and places that feature across a three decade narrative, and slowly but surely builds to a powerful and emotional conclusion.

I'm so glad I read it. I adored it. I look forward to reading more of Rose Tremain's work.

Wondrous

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Rose Tremain's best-selling novels have won many awards, including the Baileys Women's Prize, the Whitbread Novel of the Year, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, and the Prix Femina Etranger. Restoration, the first of her novels to feature Robert Merivel, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. She lives in Norfolk and London with the biographer Richard Holmes.

<http://rosetremain.co.uk/>

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Carolyn Mck says

In 1992, Rose Tremain took a brave step in telling the story of Mary, who becomes Martin. Today, 'trans' people are given more understanding and respect than Mary could possibly experience growing up in the 50s and 60s. Tremain uses great skill and compassion to tell not only Mary's story but also those of other characters in the small English village of Swaithey. These include people who provide emotional and physical refuge for Mary when her father denounces her and her mother retreats into mental illness. Told from a mixture of first and third person voices, this is a tender and thoughtful story with memorable

characters, an interesting social background and a wide emotional range.

Brian says

Sacred Country has at its core, the story of Mary Ward who in 1952, at six years old, while standing in the middle of a field in Suffolk in a silence intended to mark the death of the king, realises that she is a boy trapped in a girl's body. The novel follows her struggle with the implications of this realisation, culminating thirty years later in hormone treatment and a double mastectomy.

The story is also filled with the voices of the people around Mary - her brother, father, mother, grandfather and primary school teacher, her mother's friend and the man whose house that friend cleans, the friend's daughter, the local butcher and his brother, the slaughterman. These characters make up a community of eccentrics and misfits whose absurdity the author nevertheless somehow invests with a kind of nobility.

Using a variety of narrative modes and adopting a range of different voices, Rose Tremain manages to take us right inside the skins of these characters - in Mary's case a skin that she is trying to remake so it conforms to her sense of herself. In the process we see the contrast between the grainy reality of the characters' lives and the dreams to which they all aspire.

Poignant, moving and often painfully funny, Sacred Country is a novel about the way individuals are trapped by the weight of the past and by the expectations of others. It's about the overwhelming need to forge an identity for oneself in the face of these expectations and the difficulty of finding, or even recognising happiness, when it arrives. It is without doubt one of the finest novels I have ever read.

Hugh says

A poignant tale following a group of characters as they attempt to break free of the constraints and expectations of an English rural backwater, by turns poignant, funny and beautifully observed. The central story of Mary/Martin, a boy growing up in a girl's body, is particularly moving.

Julia Sutton says

I gained insights from this novel, which feels uncannily current given that it first came out in 1992.

Six-year-old Mary Ward stands in a snowy field with her family to observe the two-minute silence for the burial of King George VI. But a screech from her pet guinea fowl near the farmhouse where they live elicits an answering secret cry from the heart of the small schoolgirl: 'I am not Mary. That is a mistake. I am not a girl. I'm a boy.'

And so a long journey begins, which is to be both painful and at times exhilarating, but which will lead Mary Ward gradually closer to her goal - the life of an independent adult male by the name of Martin. Both hindered and supported by a large cast of fairly odd-ball characters, some of whom will also need to break free from their stifling Suffolk village, Mary's search for an authentic identity means leaving home for a decade-long stay in nineteen-sixties London. And when her therapist suggests she leave, moving on, as Martin, to Nashville USA.

Tremain treats all her characters with a rarely-found evenhandedness and lightness of touch, which nevertheless can excavate the most expertly hidden secrets and bring some strange truths to the page. Sacred Country tracks the struggles of a group of ordinary left-behind people, a few of whom will succeed in giving form to their long-thwarted dreams. While their context within an isolated, rural coastal community is a great portrayal of a much-neglected corner of post-war England.

Bakkar says

It's a real masterpiece. I was overwhelmed by Rose Tremain flawless smooth style of writing in this book. I not only touched but lived each of the characters as if I were the angel watching him. I may even knew things about the characters that the angels watching them may didn't know about them. Well, if you are a guy who is fond of thrillers like me and you wanna read something different as a change, I recommend this book. you will find it wrote on the cover that it's about Mary finding her self a boy. Yet, when you finish the first 100 pages you will find out that it's far greater than a trans-sex issue. It's a life with its joy and sadness, falls and success. And it's not only about Mary Ward. It's about the Sacred Country.

P.S. try to read the first 100 pages as quick as possible.. There's something greater waiting for ya :)

Lisa Matthews says

4.5 stars. Another Rose Tremain novel I have enjoyed thoroughly. I just love the stories she spins and the way she writes. She can write about the most depressing subject and make it beautiful with her turn of phrase. I was instantly engaged by the lives of the main protagonists in this novel. It is one of those novels I found difficult to put down and so could not wait to get back to it. And that, to me, is the sign of an excellent novel.

Fiona says

3.5

Rose Tremain is one of my favourite authors, although I haven't read one of hers in a while. I tend to save them up for times when I just want a good book.

This was a good book, I enjoyed it so perhaps it says more about my reading mood that I didn't enjoy it quite so much as I thought I would. Or maybe Tremain has just come to the end of her ability to shake my reading world. As time goes by, my reading preferences and desires and enjoyments change through experience.

Sacred Country is about a Sussex town called Swaithey, which seems to be a rather far and remote place full of people trapped by its smallness.

Mary at the age of six comes to a sudden realisation that she is not a girl as is her biological gender, but in fact a boy. This sets her apart from everyone and alienates her from her family. Then there is Walter, the son of the village butcher who longs to be singing country music in Tennessee rather than chopping meat in West Sussex. Each character seems to be searching for their place – whether it be in Swaithey or outside – their place of safety and happiness.

I kind of wish it was a more in depth analysis of what it was like to be transgender, but then I can't really expect that of Tremain whose style of writing is wispy as ever. It is the kind of writing that floats on ideas, feelings, senses and themes rather than anything overly concrete.

In a way, Mary's journey to becoming male seems a little incidental to me. Tremain wanted her to be different, alienated and what better form of alienation than from your own body? I'm not sure I truly believed that Mary was a boy – inside. Or maybe that is part of my own difficulty to see her as him when in the book she is always referred to as she, or as Mary. How important is a pronoun in giving someone their identity? Or perhaps it was her attachment to the baby Pearl that made me wonder. Not that boys don't become attached to babies, I suppose, so maybe I am again gender stereotyping.

Tremain never truly writes worlds which seem real, however, always as if from a plain just beyond reality. I've always liked this slightly side-stepped style. It is nothing grand, but offers a much more organic perspective.

The narration skims between person to person – sometimes first person, sometimes third. Mary sometimes in first, sometimes in third perhaps to illustrate her separation of gender and body. Yet it feels natural.

Nothing really to grab onto and pull you into the story, however. An enjoyable read for the time spent on it, but nothing that took me away from my seat and offered me an alternate view.

Kathleen says

"Steam began to come off the shoulders of my coat. And I had a ravenous hunger. I knew that at the reception there would be shrimp vol-au-vents and bits of cheddar cheese and pineapple on cocktail sticks and I thought: this is how life is: we are tempted from our chosen paths by the smallest things. We deserve to die."

rosamund says

When Martin Ward is six years old, he realises he isn't the girl everyone else sees. It is 1952, and he lives in an impoverished and dysfunctional family in rural England. He finds solace in friendships with others, including his grandfather, Cord, and among a few other local people who are also dislocated and hopeless. The narrative explores not just Martin's life, but also his mother's struggles with mental illness, his brother's need to escape the grinding poverty of the farm, and particularly studies Walter, a local man who is forced to work in his family's slaughterhouse when he desperately wants to be a musician. In a way, this is a story

about thwarted dreams, and about seeking personal fulfillment, no matter the cost. It is a moving book, humane and raw, written in atmospheric but precise prose.

I was recommended to read this as a novel with a transgender main character -- as it was published in 1992, I questioned whether it would deal with trans issues in a modern way, and whether it would be insensitive. It definitely falls into the trope of "born in the wrong body" but I was really impressed with how complexly the novel deals with Martin's emotions and his journey, and how it feels very individual and true. I would recommend this.

Laura says

Loved this. Loved this. Loved this. While the storyline and circumstances described are a bit somber, this was ultimately a really inspiring read. You follow the life of a remarkable young girl who from the age of six knows that she is really meant to be a boy. The main story is interesting enough, but there is an interweaving of characters, each with their own remarkable character development and growth. The relationship between Mary and her grandfather is beautiful to read. And very simply, the strongest message to come from this is loving people for who they really are and surviving when much seems lost.
