



Sacred Country

By Rose Tremain

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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 unmaskes the "sacred country" within us all.

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Sacred Country By Rose Tremain Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

At the age of 6, while standing in a field observing a minute's silence for the death of King George IV, Mary Ward realized she was not a little girl. "That was a mistake," she said to herself. "She was a boy." Where this realization takes Mary is the ostensible subject of *Sacred Country*, although British writer Rose Tremain (author of *The Way I Found Her*) so lovingly treats the bleak town of Swaithey, England, where Mary grows up, and the people around her that the novel eddies out to encompass the town and times. With a steady eye, Tremain describes the harsh circumstances of Mary's early life and her disconnection from her body and surroundings. That she can find so much humor and magic in Mary's slow transformation into Martin is remarkable, but the book may be most memorable for its quiet realism and light, exacting prose. Not to be missed. --Regina Marler

From Publishers Weekly

Highly regarded in England, Tremain has yet to win her discriminating audience here, although her seventh work of fiction, *Restoration*, brought her fine reviews on these shores. Her latest novel, shortlisted for the Booker Prize, is a deceptively simple but intensely imaginative work that explores the issues of sexual identity and the inchoate longings of those who have secret lives. In an epiphanic moment in 1952, when she is six, Mary Ward, the child of a poor farming family in Suffolk, realizes that she was meant to be a boy. Related with insight and compassion, Mary's struggle to change her sex is one component of a moving story that also illuminates her parents' disastrous marriage and the lives of other villagers. Brutalized by her father and emotionally abandoned by her mentally fragile mother, who frequently takes refuge in the local asylum, Mary is given succor by others. Tremain has a remarkable ability to create characters of shining, honest goodness--people capable of extraordinary decency, generosity and love. Mary's benevolent grandfather, a doughty teacher, an elderly widower who marries the mother of Mary's dearest friend--these people are sure of their places in life, and they try to help Mary deal with her transsexualism. If Mary (aka Martin) is not so appealing, if her misery makes her hard and self-centered, Tremain refuses to trivialize her hero(ine)'s ordeal. Other characters--Mary's brother, the village butcher's son who wants to sing country and western music in Nashville--also must find their own way, realizing as Mary does that "we're all something else inside." Seen against the background of three decades of history and social change, this is an affecting and often quite humorous narrative that asks provocative questions and challenges the reader's perceptions about the essence of being. (Apr.)

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From Library Journal

At the age of six, Mary Ward, standing with her family in a wintry Suffolk field to observe a two-minute silence in honor of the death of King George VI, comes to the realization that she was meant to be a boy. From this beginning in 1952 until 1980, Tremain tells the evocative tale of Mary's lonely quest to transform herself into Martin. Emotionally abandoned by her parents, Mary finds refuge first with her grandfather, Cord, and later with her schoolteacher, Miss McRae. With popular songs serving as touchstones through the decades, Tremain creates such haunting images as the one of Mary and Cord, returning from a visit to Mary's mother in a mental asylum, belting out "I'm sorry" with Brenda Lee on the car radio. This is one of those rare novels whose sensibilities are so trenchant that they forever alter one's perceptions of the world and the wonderfully eccentric people who inhabit it. Sure to be nominated for next year's Booker Prize, this novel is very highly recommended.

- Barbara Love, St. Lawrence Coll., Kingston, Ontario

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

David Soto:

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