

*The Road Home* by Rose Tremain (Chatto & Windus) R192.

6 January 2008

Perhaps best known for historical novels like *Music and Silence*, *Restoration* and *The Colour*, Rose Tremain here turns her formidable attention to a thoroughly contemporary theme: the immigrant experience in London.

Tremain's immigrant is one Lev from an unnamed Eastern European country, where he lost his job when the saw-mill where he worked closed down because all the trees had been cut down. Recently widowed, Lev has had to leave his five-year old daughter and his mother behind, as well as his best friend Rudi.

The novel operates on two levels: on the one hand it is an engrossing account of Lev's struggle to find his feet in an alien environment; on the other it is an oblique – and bleak – critique of modern Britain. The cover blurb tentatively suggests that Lev is “perhaps Rose Tremain's contemporary version of *Candide*”, and, though the novel lacks the fierce philosophical bite of Voltaire's classic, Lev's wide-eyed gaze at his brave new world does have something of *Candide*'s innocence and perseverance. *Candide*'s famous conclusion – “We must work in our garden” – may find a parallel here in Lev's shrugging off of metaphysical speculation and flights of fancy in favour of simple hard work. As Rudi bluntly sums it up: “Only the resourceful will survive.”

The London that Lev encounters is in some ways surprisingly benign – a young man gives him money for the turnstile at the Victoria station toilet; the Arab owner of a kebab stand gives him a free meal; the Indian owner of a B&B gives him kindness and such help as she can; and he finds congenial lodgings with an Irish plumber whose wife has abandoned him.

The point is, of course, that most of these people are themselves, or were at one point, newcomers to London, and as such can identify with Lev's plight. As for the born and bred Londoners, they emerge with somewhat less credit from Tremain's rendering.

Lev, cherishing notions of the British physique derived from Alec Guinness in *Bridge on the River Kwai*, is horrified to find how fat many of the English are, and how indecorous their public eating habits.

When Lev finds a job as a dishwasher at a posh restaurant, he is brought into contact with cool London: the poncey celebrity owner-chef, the warm, sexy but celebrity-struck sous-chef Sophy and her arty friends, a celebrated conceptual artist, a trendy playwright and Samantha, who is making a name for herself as a hat-maker: “Sam believes that the days of the unironic hat are completely past” Sophie solemnly explains to a bemused Lev.

As Lev's Irish landlord comments, “You've got a clutch of emperors walking around without a stitch and nobody's noticing.”

Tremain, who lives in distant Norfolk, clearly agrees. In her account, the London arts scene is shallow and pretentious, preening and posing in the glare of publicity and the beat of adulation. That these, rather than the new immigrants, are also the people most likely to read her novel, is an irony presumably not lost on Tremain.

At the other end of the social scale are the beer-swilling, vomiting yobs, the murderously rapacious children, the squalor of a city overtaken by the ugliness of mindless consumption. If London offers Lev an enticing vision of a prosperous alternative to eastern European grit and grind, it also provides a sobering reminder that the free market system produces more losers than winners.

What London does provide Lev with, though, is a future. The restaurant enables him to discover an aptitude for cooking, which he gradually constructs into an ambition to open a restaurant in his native country, where good food is as yet a rarity.

The restaurant section also incidentally enables Tremain to have her cake and eat it, in that it is clearly designed to appeal to the eating classes it satirises, the foodies for whom food is the new sex (although there's enough of the old kind here to satisfy more traditional tastes).

But if Tremain is hard on the new London, she does not sentimentalise life in Eastern Europe either. Reassuring as the simplicity of his native village is, Lev comes to see that its stagnation corrodes the spirit. When he hears that his home town, Auror, is to be flooded by the building of a dam, he is outraged; but, returning home, he recognises that its dispirited lethargy can no longer sustain a vital community: "Auror was a place so lonely, so abandoned by time, it was right to drown it, right to force its inhabitants to leave behind their dirt roads, ... and join the twenty-first century world."

Lev's mother, Ina, fiercely resentful at having to leave her life-long home, sees no reason to join the twenty-first century world: to her it means the death of all her memories and of the only way of life she knows. Lev tries, without much success, to explain to her: "The world's changed. And all I've done is to try to adapt. Because somebody had to."

Adapting to a changed world rather than trying to change the world is, of course, less than heroic. But it is of a piece with the clear-eyed, unbeguiled approach of Lev and of his novel: he does not tilt at windmills, rather sets about figuring out how to fix a dysfunctional windmill.