

guardian.co.uk

Homecoming dreams

Linda Grant's *When I Lived In Modern Times* follows a young hairdresser searching for her identity after the war in Palestine

Ruth Gorb
The Guardian, Saturday 18 March 2000 02.44 GMT

A [larger](#) | [smaller](#)

When I Lived In Modern Times

Linda Grant

Granta, £15.99, 272pp

[Buy it at BOL](#)

In the broadest sense, this novel succeeds. It has an overwhelming sense of rawness and is flawed but passionate, echoing its theme - the early, often violent struggle to establish a Jewish homeland. The action is set largely in Palestine in 1946, a country ruled by a weary British mandate and the place where displaced Jews have come together to create the new Zion.

Evelyn Sert is a 20-year-old hairdresser from Soho, "a girl without a past" who wants to be a new Jew and a new woman. Her introduction to the Mecca where all this is possible is a kibbutz where she is put to hosing down the lavatories, discovers the boredom of joyless sex and realises that this is no place for the liberation of the spirit. She makes for the gleaming white Bauhaus city of Tel Aviv - the city for which the Jews have been waiting for centuries.

Like everyone else there, she is a displaced person. Born in a home for Jewish wayward women (her immigrant mother Miriam had been seduced by dreams of Hollywood in the shape of an American who smartly left her), she has grown up in a higgledy-piggledy flat set up by Miriam's protector, "Uncle Joe". Mother and daughter are inseparable, sharing secrets and ABC Tea Room buns, while Miriam, adept in a mistress's wiles, is always alluringly dressed and perfumed, ready for her lover's visits.

When Miriam dies, Evelyn is kindly but firmly advised (and financed) by Uncle Joe to make a new life for herself in Palestine. She goes on her search for identity willingly

enough, but finds no answers on the kibbutz: "I have no religion, just the same as you," says a fellow worker, Leah. "The British call us Jews to distinguish us from the Arabs but when the British have gone, who will we be?"

Tel Aviv is teeming with refugees from Poland and Russia, German Jewish intellectuals and Holocaust survivors, idealists from all over Europe. Evelyn, with an eye to the main chance, acquires a flat, a hairdressing job and a lover. She dyes her hair blonde and passes herself off to her clients as one Priscilla Jones from Lewisham whose husband has been inconveniently posted to Tiberias. Her disguise is useful to her terrorist lover, Johnny, and she finds herself drawn into the dangerous world of the tough Jews: a world of bombs, kidnapping and murder.

The novel is bursting with ideas: about idealism, the shattering of dreams and the struggle to belong. In Evelyn's search for identity it is hard not to read the quest of Grant herself to understand who she is - something she did so movingly in her book about her mother's descent into dementia, *Remind Me Who I Am, Again*.

Here it is the relationship between mother and daughter that is most sympathetically drawn, and the writing of it is tender and true: Evelyn, battered by events in Palestine and returning to England, remembers her childhood, "the slightly grubby chintz domesticity, where my mother had built one nest of seduction and allure for her lover and another of safety and love for me".