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# Mistaken Identity

## Sacred Country

Rose Tremain  
Washington Square Press  
321pp

REVIEWED BY ERNIE  
MCLEOD

*Sacred Country* opens in 1952 with an English farm family standing in a potato field observing a two-minute silence for the dead King George. Six year-old Mary—the older of two children—is having difficulties praying for the departed king, however, because she's focused on the whereabouts of her pet guineafowl, Marguerite. The reader soon learns why Mary is looking for Marguerite, and the novel is set in motion: "I have some news for you, Marguerite, 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."

It is telling that Mary, even at such a young age, is clear about two things—that she was meant to be a boy; that she must keep this secret. And it is telling of Rose Tremain's original, down-to-earth, often comic writing style that a pet guineafowl is to be the sole recipient of this momentous news.

Tremain is the British author of several story collections and novels, including *Restoration*, which was made into a film. I came across *Sacred Country* (published in 1992) because I enjoyed a later novel, *The Way I Found Her*, and wanted to check out her other work. Tremain is—as far as I know—a straight woman with little interest in writing autobiographically. As a novelist, she fearlessly and skillfully explores diverse time periods and characters. Still, I had some doubts heading into *Sacred Country*: did she have the authority to convincingly imagine a transgendered character in a way that wasn't gimmicky or condescending? Complicating matters is the fact that the novel spans nearly thirty years (1952-1980) and is told from alternating points of view (though Mary's point of view remains central).

Not surprisingly, Mary's unwavering belief that she's really a boy is eventually discovered and challenged. Nine years after the silence for the king, Mary's little brother Tim sees the bandages she uses to flatten her breasts, and sensing

they "were part of some awful secret of Mary's," decides to tell their father. His reaction is swift and brutal: "When he'd cut through the wedge of bandage, he pulled back her shirt. He held her breasts in his hands. He pulled them up, showing them to her. He said: 'Look at them. Go on. You look at them!'" After being labeled "an abomination," Mary knows she must leave: "She thought, now it's over. Except that it isn't. It's now that it all begins."

This violent confrontation between an ignorant father and the child he has no wish to understand—like a later scene in which an unlightened doctor blames Mary's "delusion" on menstrual irregularities—seems both inevitable and predictable, though Tremain renders it with admirable understatement.

Less predictable and more intriguing are the reactions of other characters in the novel, including Mary's grandfather, her spinster teacher, Miss McRae, and an older man named Edward, who becomes Mary's/Martin's surrogate father. Though these characters don't necessarily identify with Mary's desire to become Martin, their basic benevolence allows them to empathize with her struggle, and to attempt understanding. It is within these shades of gray that Tremain works best. Unlike many fiction writers who tackle gender and sexuality issues, Tremain recognizes that the most devastating reactions can come from those who want most to be kind. Such is the case with Pearl—Mary's one true love—whose failure to embrace Martin is based not on disgust but on the sorrow of

losing the person she thought she knew.

After Mary escapes to London, severing all ties with her past, she begins her gradual reinvention as Martin. An older female lover unknowingly leads her to the word "transsexual" and to a doctor who does understand. Surgery becomes a reality, and for the first time, Martin experiences doubts about his identity, finding it can be "easier to believe in the dream of something than in the something itself." Specifically, he asks: "will Mary be gone utterly? Do I want her gone utterly, or only parts of her? Is there anything about Mary I should remember to save?"

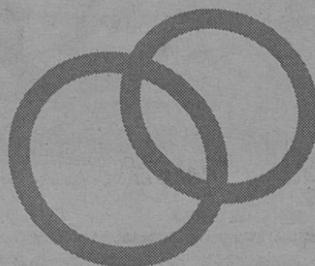
At this point, the reader's belief also falters, not in the fact of Mary becoming Martin, but in the idea that any one of us can find our "true" identity without losing something else. For however clear we are about what we are not, what we are is never simple, nor does it come without sacrifice. Martin's sacrifice is the hope of spending his life with Pearl.

Ultimately, *Sacred Country* is not a novel about transgender issues or gay issues (another main character, Walter, has an affair with a man) but about—at the risk sounding like a Céline Dion song—the power of love to wound and heal.

As Martin undergoes his first major surgery, the wounds become quite literal, again causing him to question his path:

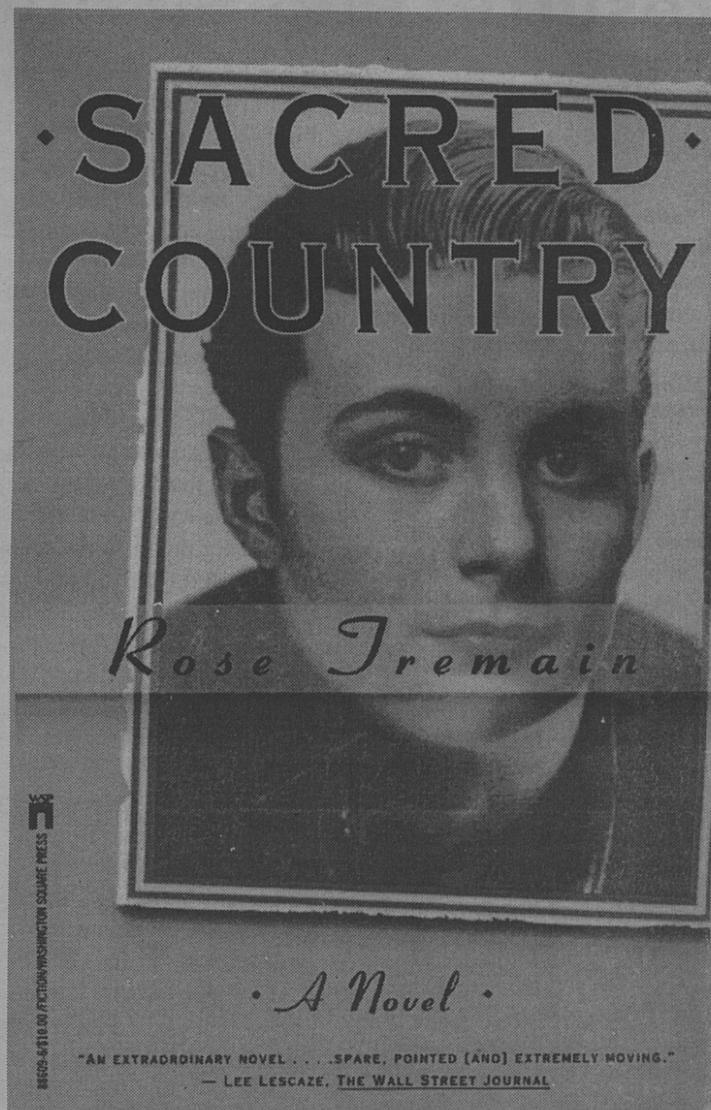
"I imagined all the other operations waiting for me in the future and the pain still to come; and I had a thought that I hardly ever allowed myself to think: why couldn't it have been simple? Why couldn't I

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have just accepted being Mary Ward? The answers are: because it wasn't. Because I couldn't. Because I am *not* Mary Ward."

Some may be disappointed by the ambiguity of the novel's final chapters when Martin relocates to—of all places—Nashville, Tennessee, and truly begins life as a man. As Martin settles into a quiet existence not unlike his rural childhood—rejecting final reconstructive surgery—the reader is left wondering whether he'll

ever rediscover passion and whether this version of the American South isn't a bit romanticized. Instead of predicting Martin's future, Tremain reaches back into his past, searching for a forgiveness that comes too late to offer tidy resolution.

Readers unafraid of ambiguities and seeking vividly imagined characters typically neglected in literary fiction would do well to visit Rose Tremain's *Sacred Country*. ▼

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