ROSE TREMAIN

a critical introduction

Emilie Walezak

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palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-3-319-57128-7   ISBN 978-3-319-57129-4 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-57129-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017938545

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Cover design: © Fatima Jamadar

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Rose Tremain for her 'Observations', to be found in the appendix.

I would like to thank Ben Doyle for supporting this project and Camille Davies for her editorial assistance. Thank you to the design team at Palgrave for the beautiful cover.

Finally my thanks go to my partner, Guillaume. I first came across a novel by Rose Tremain at the bookshop where he works and what an adventure that first reading has turned out to be!

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Abbreviations

GS	The Gustav Sonata
LSB	Letter to Sister Benedicta
MMHT	Merivel: A Man of His Time
MS	Music and Silence
R	Restoration
RH	The Road Home
SB	Sadler's Birthday
SC	Sacred Country
TC	The Cupboard
TCO	The Colour
TR	Trespass
TSPS	The Swimming Pool Season
TWIFH	The Way I Found Her

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

'I find I'm very happy in places which are partly real and partly dreamed up' said Rose Tremain in an interview (Bridge 2008, p. 29). The phrase sums up the writer's lifelong ambition to explore the uncharted in answer to a personal challenge which became her motto: 'write about what you *don't* know' (Rustin 2003). The great variety of her work, comprised so far of 13 novels and five collections of short stories, testifies to her investigatory endeavour ranging from the ramblings of a 76-year-old paedophiliac butler turned master in her first novel from 1976, *Sadler's Birthday*, to the capers of seventeenth-century fop Merivel in her novel from 2012, *Merivel: A Man of His Time*, the sequel to her best-selling *Restoration*. The success in 1989 of *Restoration*, shortlisted for the Booker Prize, has led to Tremain being primarily identified as a historical novelist much to her displeasure (Tremain 2012) and despite evidence to the contrary in the large body of her work with only four historical novels out of 13. The past, for Tremain, is but one of the many *terra incognita* which sets her imagination alight as 'writers should not be tourists in the country of the imagination but explorers and mountaineers' (Lawley 1997). Discussing the 'terrains' she likes to inhabit as a writer, she wrote: 'This terrain might be an actual country or city; it might be that lost domaine we call childhood; it might be an area of psychopathology; it might be one of a thousand places of the mind – and one of these is the past' (Tremain 1999b, p. 62). She has assumed identities as diverse as that of a 13-year-old boy, a female-to-male transsexual, an elderly woman writer, a middle-aged housewife, a

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E. Walezak, *Rose Tremain*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-57129-4_1

seventeenth-century Danish courtesan, among others. Although she has a predilection as a skin-changer for disparate first-person impersonations and says: 'I think I will always be tempted by the first-person narrator who is distant from me in age or place or time' (Menegaldo 1998, p. 119), her work again displays a wide heterogeneity varying between third-person omniscient narratives and polyphonic novels.

The miscellaneous aspect of her *œuvre* may account for the scarcity of academic publications on her work, with no monograph published to date. Such oversight is all the more surprising as Tremain is a popular award-winning author. In 1983, she appeared on *Granta* magazine's list of the 20 most promising young British novelists along with Pat Barker, Graham Swift, Ian McEwan and Kazuo Ishiguro. She was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial prize in 1992, as well as the prix Fémina Etranger in 1994, for *Sacred Country*, the Whitbread Novel Award for *Music and Silence* in 1999, and the Orange Prize for *The Road Home* in 2002. *Merivel: A Man of His Time* was short-listed for the Wellcome Trust Book Prize in 2012 and the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction in 2013. Her short stories have also been distinguished with two of them making the short list of the BBC National Short Story Award: 'The Ebony Hand' in 2006 and her latest 'The American Lover' in 2014. She has also written radio plays, among which *Temporary Shelter* won the Giles Cooper Award in 1984. The work of her publishers and agent notwithstanding, the prestige of the prizes won would countenance a closer examination of her work. Tremain has also written ahead of her time, a fact which has been overlooked especially in her early career, with her first novel *Sadler's Birthday* and its focus on the WWII reminiscences of a marginal butler figure anticipating Ishiguro's celebrated Booker-prize winning *The Remains of the Day* by 12 years. Similarly her third novel *The Cupboard*, dating back to 1981, narrating the recollections of free-thinking writer figure Erica March on her death bed, bears strong resemblances to Penelope Lively's 1987 Booker-prize *Moon Tiger*. It seemed only fair that Tremain would finally come to the attention of the Booker judges in 1989. That they would single out her first historical novel however led to a misunderstanding of the scope of her writing.

Tremain's work is much more geographical than it is historical. The unifying principle behind her disparate body of work is the central preoccupation with place, a concern whose foundations she laid in her third novel, *The Cupboard*, with its metafictional intratextuality shedding

light on her own praxis. Through the figure of Erica March, Tremain highlights a two-fold need for distance and location: inventing 'made-up places' furthers a better apprehension of topical issues, as they serve 'to make sense of what was on my doorstep' (*TC*, p. 163). The distance may be temporal or psychological as well as geographical but the congruous coordinate is systematically a spatial manifestation of the character's quest, be they the parallel strolls of old Sadler around the house and his rambles down memory lane, Merivel's fall from grace taking him away from his Bidnold manor to a Quaker asylum, the transmigration of transsexual Mary/Martin actualized by a journey from the UK to the US, the intertextual journey through the Parisian landscape of a pubescent boy in *The Way I Found Her*, to quote but a few examples. Discussing the seventeenth century as her favourite historical 'terrain', Tremain reiterated the prior relevance of locale in her fiction as her aim, she said, is 'both to locate and to disturb' (Bridge 2008, p. 30). Distance allows a fresh outlook on contemporary settings while putting situatedness at stake. Indeed, Tremain problematizes the demise of symbolic efficiency (see Žižek 1997) with characters struggling to locate their sense of self in the chaos of unsteady signifiers. Literature and geography converge in a post-Newtonian space-time where a topography of power play emerges from the characters' identity shifts. Thus Tremain's novels are primarily concerned with contemporary issues. History is used as a tangential space from which to accost the present. *Restoration* reads as a satire of Thatcherite England while *Music and Silence* is a magic realist text which furthers an inquiry into the historical circumstances of women's lives as well as a display of anachronistic feminist discourses. *The Colour* contrasts a male-driven Victorian plot of bastardy, abortion and murder, and a proleptic narrative paralleling post-colonialism and feminism through the fight for independence of Harriet Blackstone and Chinese migrant Pao Yi. Although Tremain successfully strives for credible depictions of the periods, she also lays claim to the '*imaginative reconstruction* of an age' (Bridge 2008, p. 30) which allows her to narrate timeless stories. Her historical novels are postmodern in that they invest the past both as a fathomable place bound by dates and events and a far-off unknown land whose blanks the writer's imagination may fill. They have been labelled as historiographic metafictions as per Linda Hutcheon's categorization (Hutcheon 1988) because they are 'centrally concerned with the interrelated meanings of authority and narrative, and the function of leaders and heroes' (Wallace 2005, p. 194).

Tremain's imagination however expresses itself in spatial terms and history is but another 'pretend place' (*TC*, p. 232). Her work mirrors the Spatial Turn initiated in the 1970s by historians and philosophers Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault who challenged the predominance of the historical imagination in critical social theory to turn to a spatialization of social sciences and emphasize the social and ideological constructedness of space (see Soja 1989 and Tally 2013). This new emphasis laid on spatiality emerged in the post-war era when unprecedented world reconfigurations took place that would eventually lead to globalization. Throughout her career, Tremain has been attentive to the spatial reconstructions of the world map by contextualizing her characters' journeys of self-awareness against the backdrop of such spatial alterations as the Commonwealth, the war occupation and the enlargement of the European Union. In the academic world, the historical transformations of the world order brought about a reassessment of critical knowledge with the development of postmodernist thinking whose radical reconsideration of the truth claim of metanarratives (see Lyotard 1984) extended to 'the concomitant recognition that position and context are centrally and inescapably implicated in all constructions of knowledge' (Cosgrove 1999, p. 7). Thus Foucault's spatialization of power struggles led to a re-examination of geography as human geography and his pronouncement that 'the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space' (Foucault 1986, p. 22) is extensively quoted as heralding the advent of spatiality in all fields of human sciences. Taking stock of the varying scales of the globalized world, the fruitful reconfigurations of the margin in post-colonial (Bhabha) and feminist theories (bell hooks), and the transdisciplinary approach of Lefebvre and Foucault, geographer Edward Soja has conceptualized Thirdspace as a 'triple dialectic of space, time and social being' (Soja 1989, p. 12). The three dimensions are brought into play in Tremain's novels which spatialize her characters' engagement with the historical, social and gender components of their identity through the recourse to referential and imaginary places. The 'partly real and partly dreamed up' places Tremain finds most comfortable to dwell in, in the fictional space, echo the '"realandimagined" places' (Soja 1996, p. 11) or Thirdspace theorized by Soja. Approaching Tremain's work through the author's central preoccupation with location allows us to similarly affiliate apparently disparate elements: the characters' journeys testify to their difficulty in coming to terms with a new world order modified by the joint fall of the Empire and of patriarchal hegemony,

a world with shifting boundaries in which space and place become crucial to anchoring a sense of self. In the field of literary studies proper, the increasing recognition of the significance of location has resulted in the elaboration of a new critical approach, inaugurated by Bertrand Westphal's seminal book, *Geocriticism. Real and Fictional Spaces*, which Robert T. Tally Jr. further promoted and complemented. Although this study on Rose Tremain is not *per se* a geocritical study as it does not aim to 'explore the overlapping territories of actual, physical geography and an author's or character's cognitive mapping in the literary text' (Tally 2008, p. 4), it does nonetheless examine 'spatiotemporality, transgressivity and referentiality' which 'delineate the conceptual framework that geocriticism establishes' (Westphal 2011, p. 6) to illustrate Tremain's central concern with spatiality. While geocriticism lays the emphasis on place and attempts to draw literary cartographies of real and fictional places, this study examines the opposite dynamics of space and place as defined by Michel de Certeau to account for the characters' itineraries as representative of their identity struggles.

Referring to Lefebvre's theory of the postmodern production of social space where assignment to a fixed place is no longer operative, De Certeau has examined stories as spatial practices and made a distinction between place as stable and ruled by 'the law of the "proper"' and space as mobile 'function[ing] in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs and contractual proximities' (De Certeau 1984, p. 117). Tremain dramatizes her characters' trials through spatial metaphors when they are evicted from their proper place—as is the case with Sadler or Merivel—or else their clash with their proper place and their endeavour to spatialize it, that is to transform it through conflict, as is the case with many women characters. All of the characters in Tremain's novels can be commonly depicted as displaced characters. There are the most obvious migrant characters like the Eastern European migrant worker Lev in *The Road Home*, the British settlers in New Zealand in *The Colour*, the British lifestyle migrants settling in the south of France in *The Swimming Pool Season* and *Trespass*, or the British adolescent tourist in *The Way I Found Her*. In other cases, Tremain spatializes social mobility with the social ascension of butler turned master Sadler in *Sadler's Birthday*, of parvenu Merivel in *Restoration* and social climber Kirsten Munk in *Music and Silence*. Finally the characters' journeys also correspond to paths of self-discovery like the more symbolic late empowerment of middle-aged housewife Ruby Constad in *Letter to Sister Benedicta*, the transmigration

experience of Mary/Martin in *Sacred Country*, and the metafictional incursions into imaginary places of Erica March in *The Cupdboard*. Tremain depicts a world in which space is both problematized by globalization and boundary issues and historicized by colonial outposts and war occupation zones—whether the Nazi administration of France during WWII referred to in several novels or the Soviet dominion over Eastern Europe—so that finding one's place becomes a symbolic issue involving geography, ideology and memory, which accounts for the congruence of identity and topography: the characters strive to locate their sense of self. This is where De Certeau meets Foucault in his endeavour to spatialize power relations. Along with place and space, De Certeau distinguishes between maps and tours. A map is 'a plane projection of totalizing observations' (De Certeau 1984, p. 119), akin to a tableau, which 'colonizes space' (De Certeau 1984, p. 121) by ordering places while the tour mode of discourse 'organizes *movements*' (De Certeau 1984, p. 119). Tremain contrasts characters stuck in a mapped out landscape—most strikingly the male characters in Suffolk in *Sacred Country*—and migrant characters exploring the 'in between' (De Certeau 1984, p. 127) space of the frontier, rewriting as she does the pioneer myth with Mary Martin's exile to Texas or Harriet Blackstone's mountaineering expedition through the New Zealand landscape in *The Colour*.

Tremain's appropriation of the social dimension at work in the spatial imagination accords with another major feature of her writing practice: her preference for a realistic mode of writing which serves to promote 'a way of thinking in terms of the ever-shifting geometry of social/power relations [which] forces into view the real multiplicities of space-time' (Massey 1994, p. 4). Tremain writes in the realist tradition by detailing the characters' environment and social background, by investigating their psychological traits and motives to shed light on the causal unfolding of plotted events, and by adopting the discourse mode of first-person immersion or third-person omniscience. Intertextuality regularly brings up the nineteenth-century tradition of the great realist novel with repeated mentions of French writers Zola and Balzac, English Dickens, and Russian Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy. As the cosmopolitanism of her sources demonstrate, Tremain's appropriation of realism, however, has been modified by the globalization of textual culture. Similarly, her approach to realism accommodates the aforementioned alterations to her characters' world view of feminism and post-colonialism so that it matches Amy J. Elias tentative definition of postmodern realism as

problematic *mimesis* stemming from the fragmentation of identity in a social and world environment which conflicts antithetical values. Thus Tremain repeatedly portrays the masculine identity crisis either through generational gaps between old-fashioned grandfatherly patriarchal personages, obscene impotent father figures and disoriented struggling filial characters or through outrageous misogynistic personalities. Likewise, she contrasts the power play of unemancipated female potentates and the journey towards enfranchisement of freethinking women. Tremain's feminism is thus contextualized:

> Tremain's fiction is marked by its richness and subtlety, and her peculiar brand of feminism is, likewise, comprehensive in its focus; women's lives, in her novels, are lived in heterosocial contexts. Understanding women, their problems, traumas, desires and aspirations, of necessity involves understanding men and the cultures in which they operate. Tremain may seem less feminist than liberal humanist, yet I believe that throughout her novels, with their insistence on the variety and multiplicity of life, there runs a thread of concern with the perpetually problematic nature of being female. (Sceats 2005, p. 166)

Inquiring into the shifting boundaries of national, gender and social identity markers, Tremain enlarges the feminist Woolfian agenda of mapping out a proper female space to a historicized spatialization of gendered power struggles. The combination of her recourse to the realist tradition and her 'peculiar brand of feminism' may account for the academic neglect of her work. Indeed realism, especially when appropriated by women writers, still labours under the suspicion of conservatism while the great number of male chauvinists in Tremain's novels blurs the issue of mainstream feminism. Structuralist thinking in the 1960s initiated the charge against realism as the unproblematic representation of reality, a critique which was further augmented by Roland Barthes' implication that the 'reality effect' is deceptive and relays the conservative values of bourgeois society (Barthes 1968). Notorious poststructuralist critics like Colin MacCabe (1974) and Catherine Belsey (1980) demonstrated how verisimilitude and point of view in classic realism rigidify into a monolithic view of reality whose blindness to its own contructedness entails a naïve adherence to the standards of the times. The evaluation of unchallenged narrative authority and the absence of self-reflexivity as determining features in classic realism meant that

postmodernist theoreticians demoted realism as irrelevant, all the more so as it was further posited as the obverse of innovation. The harsh appraisal of nineteenth-century realism persists in today's surveys of contemporary realism and the allegedly 'quintessentially conservative form' (Beaumont 2010, p. 9) is deemed to run counter to a feminist agenda so that realist novels by women writers are discarded on account of obsolescence and triviality (see Turner 2013). The enduring prejudice against the normative values supposedly upheld by realism means that scholars will endeavour to uncover the author's moral stance behind the characters' masks and denounce her suspicious ideological standpoint. Tremain's ability to adopt the most unusual perspectives baffles the critics as she endorses the appropriate post-colonial marginal angle sanctioned as the legitimate means to question authority while at the same time accommodating a defence of patriarchal values through reactionary figures. Academics thus often wonder about the intended moral and ideological bias of her novels: Cristina Nistor (2012) ponders the indecisiveness of Tremain's conclusion in *The Swimming Pool Season* as to whether cosmopolitanism serves a purpose of tolerance or not; Emma Parker (2007) contrasts the conservative views on gender norms of Mary and the final refusal of Martin to undergo a phalloplasty in *Sacred Country*; Susanne Fendler and Ruth Wittlinger (2000) point out how *Restoration* might be wrongly construed as endorsing Thatcherite values; Kathleen Starck (2013) and Eveline Kilian (2014) attack *The Road Home* on the grounds of its Cold War thinking and its Orientalist frame of reference while Corina Crişu (2010) praises its deconstruction of Occidentalist misrepresentations of the East. Such conflicting evaluations of her work mirror the biased premise of a long-standing approach to realism as a mimetic deception ignorant of the constructed discursive nature of reality. Hence the corrective purpose of Elias' postmodern realism whose prototypical plot dramatizes the destruction of the protagonist's world view after a life-shattering event and the subsequent cracks in his/her sense of self (Elias 1993, p. 14). Such archetypical basis perfectly matches the core foundation of Tremain's novels with characters unexpectedly confronted with a life-turning event and their ensuing effort to either resist change—they are the conservative characters in her novels—or come to terms with it.

In addition to the persistent suspicion of conservatism coupled with a mistrust of commercial success—Tremain is a best-selling author whose books have been published in 27 countries; *Restoration* made its way to

Hollywood in 1995 and her short story 'Moth' was made into a film, *Ricky*, by renowned French director François Ozon, in 2009—the opposition between realism and experiment also endures as Dominic Head states: 'The realism versus experimentalism debate that has dominated discussion of British fiction, really since the modernist period, shows no signs of abating' (Head 2008, p. 31). Not only are Tremain's novels not experimental but she rarely uses the two salient features of postmodernism: parody and metafiction. Only two of her novels make an extensive use of metafiction: *The Cupboard* whose intratextuality highlights Tremain's own writing patterns and *The Way I Found Her* which reads as an intertextual journey through world literature. Thus, as opposed to such famed realist women writers as A.S. Byatt, whose brilliant use of parody and pastiche in the Booker prize-winning *Possession* has attracted the attention of the academia, the scarcity of metafictional devices in Tremain's fiction means that she has been regarded as more conservative than innovative, as evidenced by Sarah Sceats' summary of what Tremain's work appears to be at first glance: 'In many ways, her novels are reminiscent of mainstream nineteenth-century fiction: realist, with narrative drive and satisfying resolutions, handling major themes and moral issues, and emphasizing the transformative power of love' (Sceats 2005, p. 165). As A.S. Byatt, who is herself regularly labelled as a conservative in relation to her realistic approach, concludes in her essay on the opposition between realism and experiment: 'In fact, to be "good", whatever form you use, takes more primitive gifts of curiosity and greed about things other than literature. That these gifts are harder to discuss in academic essays is maybe part cause of our contemporary unease' (Byatt 1993, p. 168). The non-literary 'major themes and moral issues' in Tremain's work may have hindered a more extensive apprehension of her fiction by scholars while she shares with Byatt the same greed and curiosity for a great variety of subjects she researches for her writing. Making mockery of the instructions of a creative writing course in the short story 'My Love Affair with James I', Tremain sums up her own approach to writing and the instructions she would later give herself when she taught creative writing at the University of East Anglia,[1] urging her students to explore the unfamiliar:

> One of the instructions in the Eric Neasdale Writing Course is 'Always write about what you know. Unless you actually are a blind philatelist, do not try to write about this.' Well I disagree on two counts with this

> instruction. Firstly, I think, if you're going to bother to be a writer, which isn't exactly a laugh-a-minute kind of life, you might as well also bother to see how far your putrid imagination can travel – even (sorry, E.N.) into blindness or philately or both, because why not? Secondly the question of what one *knows* is much more complex than what is suggested here. (Tremain 1999a, p. 173)

While her novels might not be experimental, she does have a unique writing procedure and her appropriation of realism is innovative. She works to adjust the genre's conventions to a contemporary world view: the mirrored reality is that of the exile of the self in a world where traditional identity markers have shifted. Tremain's constant preoccupation with her characters' social self and their place in the environment which she has plotted in various ways through confessional writing, diary writing, letter writing, bildung remodelling, picaresque refashioning, *noir* fiction, historiographic metafiction, the many variations on realist writing with Neo-Victorian writing, magic realism, postmodern realism, are approached in this book along the lines of Rita Felski's feminist criticism which articulates literary theory to the social and historical contexts of the texts' production: 'Where previous discussions of a feminine/feminist aesthetic and its political correlatives have tended to focus on the style, shape and contour of discrete linguistic/literary units, Felski and others are concerned with the broader dimensions of plot and narrative which, Felski argues, are gendered in a way in which literary "style" cannot be' (Marcus 2012, 21). By focusing on the social and spatial dimensions of Tremain's realist writing, the book envisages her work as a feminist exploration of a variety of subjectivities, both male, female and in-between 'to explain the continuing importance of realist fiction in the present day […] as an important medium for articulating the interests of oppositional sectors in society' (Felski 1989, p. 80). Felski highlights the difference with nineteenth-century realism as a shift in focus 'from the general survey of the social world to the feelings and responses of the experiencing subject. The stress is on internal rather than external self, upon the exploration of conflict and ambivalences in relation to the problematic of self-identity' (Felski 1989, p. 82). Using the theories of Lefebvre and De Certeau in a 2000 article on the everyday, Felski sums up the reticences that hindered an examination of the concept: 'scholars have opposed everyday life to critical reflection and speculation. […] A second influential opposition is between the everyday and the aesthetic.

[…] Finally, everyday life is typically distinguished from the exceptional moment' (Felski 2000, p. 17). These oppositions are strikingly similar to the arguments raised against realism as averse to self-reflexivity and innovation and align with Felski's continued defence of realism. The academic oversight of Tremain's work, as opposed to her public recognition, may be accounted for by the persistence of a textual politics which equates experimentation with subversion, 'the assumption that "high" art embodies the only authentic site of critique in an alienated society' (Felski 1989, pp. 163–164), and has thus dismissed such writers as Tremain whose work has 'a veneer of easy charm […] which negates high art' (Turner 2010, p. 140). On the contrary, Felski argues for consideration of the social dimension of literary texts. While Tremain's fiction does not fit the feminist autobiographies examined by Felski in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, her consistent emphasis on her characters' social selves and her persistent evaluation of gender relations in realistic terms reflect the same purpose of investigating the everyday even while travelling back in time, as the focus remains domestic in her historical novels. Linda Hutcheon similarly opposes the fight for political agency in postmodern feminism to the self-contained textual subversions of postmodernism (Hutcheon 1989). The book's purpose is to demonstrate how Tremain is a prime example of the vitality of the postmodern realist novel as appropriated by female writers.

Polyphony, in particular, is the hallmark of Tremain's feminist appropriation of realism. She first experimented with it in her fourth novel, *The Swimming Pool Season*, to portray a cosmopolitan community separated by gender, national and generational issues. She similarly made use of polyphony in *Sacred Country* to locate the voice of its transsexual protagonist as inhabiting 'a country in between' genders, which comes to upset the symbolic coordinates of male identity in the British post-war landscape. Polyphony finally modified her approach to historical writing in *Music and Silence*. Combined with magic realism, it allowed her to historicize women's fight for independence while exploring female writing spaces. Her gift for polymorphic impersonations which has led her to flesh out the most varied and extreme personalities and accommodate unusual or baffling perspectives determines the singularity of her work. She is not a ventriloquist like Peter Ackroyd or A.S. Byatt, as she does not use pastiche, but rather a writerly drag performer, like the impersonator Darren/Daniela in her short story 'The Cherry Orchard, *with Rugs*', who uses translocation to question perceptions, perspectives and

places. Her male impersonations further distinguish her in their unconventionality: 'drag, as Marjorie Garber (1993) notes, "is pre-eminently a male-to-female art" (p. 152). This dissymmetry reflects the cultural sense that a woman is "constructed" while a man is the "norm"' (Wallace 2002, p. 324). The book aims to demonstrate the suitability of Tremain's novels as practical illustrations of major concepts in contemporary literary debates and redress the critical oversight of her work by exposing its anticipatory features, which the author herself lays claim to with regards to *Sacred Country*:

> It's interesting to reflect that, today, trans-gender concerns are in the forefront of the news, yet in 1993, when Sacred Country came out, I found myself defending its 'marginal' subject by suggesting that it also had a metaphorical meaning – namely, that we all experience some disjunction between the inner self and the one we show to the world, the inner self being perceived as wiser, kinder, more beautiful and more truthful than the compromised outer self. Novelists aren't very often ahead of society in their examinations of the tides of human affairs, but in this case I was way ahead. I am vaingloriously pointing this out here as nobody else has ever picked it up. (Tremain 2016)

Her miscellaneous choices of plots and characters in fact demonstrate an acute alertness to the times' changes and preoccupations while a close examination of her work testifies to a consistent involvement with feminist issues, which the chapters in this book intend to expose. Chapter 2 examines how, as early as 1976, *Sadler's Birthday* raises post-colonial questions of displacement and marginality and draws a comparison with Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* both to attest to Tremain's foresight and to emphasize her singularity in conjoining post-colonial issues and feminist theory in her use of the discourse of abjection. Chapter 3 furthers the inquiry into self-deprecatory enunciation by considering first-person Ruby Constad's confessional writing in 1978 *Letter to Sister Benedicta* in relation to second-wave feminist concerns with self-discovery, self-expression, intimacy and community. It also looks at the writing praxis of suffragette Erica March, in her novel from 1981 *The Cupboard*, whose characterization as a 'decorator of lavatory paper' ironically informs Tremain's own purpose of exploring her characters' vulnerabilities and basest instincts. Chapter 4 precisely demonstrates Tremain's kinship to the naturalist school's inquiry into sociopathology and the

influence of the environment while discussing polyphony, which Tremain first used in 1985 *The Swimming Pool Season*, as her choice means to problematize gendered identity. Chapter 5 reads her best-selling novel from 1989, *Restoration*, as a woman's historical novel by focusing on issues of performance and theatricality. It examines the use of satire in the context of the 1980s' enthusiasm for Bakhtin and his concept of the carnival as a reaction to Thatcherism and draws a parallel with Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*, published the same year. Chapter 6 examines the construction of the social self of transsexual Mary Martin in 1992 *Sacred Country* and adolescent Lewis Little in 1997 *The Way I found Her*. *Sacred Country* reflects the emergence of queer theory and transgender politics in the early 1990s and uses polyphony to transcribe its protagonist's contention with gender identifications while *The Way I found Her* mirrors the late 1990s surge in interest in world literature and translates Lewis' teenager sense of fragmentation as an intertextual journey, thus redefining realism as postmodern realism. Chapter 7 considers the two historical novels *Music and Silence* from 1999 and *The Colour* from 2003 as tales of female emancipation in which fairy tales and magic realism in *Music and Silence* and landscape depiction and Neo-Victorianism in *The Colour* complement the polyphonic dimension of the many storylines. Chapter 8 focuses on Tremain's two immigration novels. *The Road Home* from 2008 narrates the London journey of Eastern European Lev by providing a variation on the *Bildungsroman* model. The chapter reviews the antagonistic critical reception of the novel dividing between colonial and post-colonial interpretations. *Trespass*, published in 2010, is a crime novel about the murder of an English property seeker in rural France. The novel's regional landscape as a physical environment as well as a cultural construct problematizes the issue of belonging according to a territorial perspective. Chapter 9 interprets the shift from carnivalesque satire to picaresque autobiography in the 2012 sequel *Merivel: A Man of His Time* which reads as a metafictional inquiry into life writing. Finally, Chap. 10 considers Tremain's latest novel from 2016, *The Gustav Sonata*, and recapitulates the central features of her writing career.

The spatial turn of Tremain's relentless exploration of the vagaries of identity further outlines the topical relevance of her work for our contemporary world currently troubled by border issues and large-scale population displacement. Her parallel emphases on space crisscrossed with

power struggles and unstable identity bisecting gender provinces makes her a noteworthy, if unusual, feminist writer.

Note

1. Rose Tremain was a creative writing teacher at UEA from 1989 to 1995. In 2013 she became chancellor at UEA. Tracy Chevalier and Andrew Miller were students in her creative writing class.

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CHAPTER 2

Displacement in Rose Tremain's First Novel: *Sadler's Birthday*

Rose Tremain's first novel, *Sadler's Birthday*, published in 1976 when she was 33, elicited surprised reactions from editors and fellow writers alike. The novel's focus on the reminiscences of a 76-year-old man was deemed highly unusual coming from a young woman writer. Angus Wilson, whose creative writing class Tremain attended at the University of East Anglia, liked the novel and agreed to be quoted on the front cover saying it was 'as far from the stereotype of a young woman's first novel as it can be' (Brown 2012). Her editor, Penelope Hoare, was similarly 'thrilled' by the unexpected perspective Tremain adopted: 'It was so unlike most people's first novels, in the sense that it didn't seem to be in the least bit autobiographical' (Rustin 2003).

From her first novel onwards, Tremain has favoured marginal characters for her protagonists to further unconventional outlooks on life:

> It has to do with a feeling that I have that people who are not valued or are marginalized or are experiencing difficulties vis-à-vis mainstream life in some way are likely to have a more unique and original perspective on life. And I believe that's what I'm after, this voice from the wings, 'dans les coulisses,' emphatically not on the main stage but from this kind of … tangent. (Menegaldo 1998, p. 107)

Her writing motto, which she passed on to students such as Tracy Chevalier when Tremain herself took up teaching the writing class at UEA,[1] is: 'Write about what you *don't* know' (Rustin 2003). *Sadler's*

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E. Walezak, *Rose Tremain*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-57129-4_2