



## ROSIE: SCENES FROM A VANISHED LIFE by Rose Tremain

### A reading guide

#### About the book

This is the story of the young Rose Tremain, or Rosie as she was then. With her trademark eye for detail and brilliant storytelling, Rose Tremain takes the reader from bleak post-war London, through family tragedy to a spartan boarding school and finally to Paris and the beginning of what would be a life-long career.

Rosie grew up in a London still partly in ruins, where both food and love were fiercely rationed and the only grown-up to show her any real affection was her nanny Vera. Release from this austerity came in the form of holidays at her grandparents' farm, buried deep in the Hampshire countryside, a green paradise of feasts and freedom, where she could at last roam and dream.

But when Rosie was ten, everything she had come to accept as normal came crashing down. She lost her father, her home, her school, her friends, and – most agonisingly of all – her beloved Vera. Dispatched to a freezing boarding-school in Hertfordshire, she felt like an imprisoned castaway. But slowly the teenage Rosie escaped from the cold world of the Fifties, into a place of inspiration and mischief, of loving friendships and dedicated teachers, and a young writer was ready to be born.

#### About the author

Rose Tremain was born in London in 1943. She was sent away to boarding school at the age of ten where she discovered a love of writing and spent much of her free time scripting plays for her classmates to perform. After school she studied first at the Sorbonne in Paris before returning to England to study at UEA.

She worked as a script-reader, a teacher at a boys' prep school and an editor before becoming a full-time writer. Her first novel was published in 1976 and has been followed by thirteen further novels, five collections of short stories and her memoir, *Rosie*. She was one of only five women to be included in Granta's original list of the 20 Best of Young British Novelists in 1983 and her books have won the Orange Prize, the Whitbread, the Prix Femina Etranger and the Sunday Express Book of the Year. As well as writing, she has helped launch the careers of several novelists, including Tracy Chevalier and Andrew Miller whom she taught at UEA and where she later became the first female Chancellor.

Rose lives in Norfolk with the biographer, Richard Holmes. She is the mother of one daughter, Eleanor and has two grandchildren, Archie and Martha. She was made a CBE in 2007.

## Endorsements

'Rose Tremain manages to fit more wisdom, more unforgettable scenes, more illuminating recollections, into this 194-page memoir than other writers do in memoirs three times the length. A book as nourishing, but concise as this makes you wonder why other writers have to be so long-winded... For anyone who loves Tremain's novels this memoir is a vital companion' **The Times**

'Intriguing and moving... Alert and open and alive... *Rosie* is a work of self-discovery in the best possible sense of the word – it pulls you in, unsettles, comforts and exhilarates and, finally, makes you see your life anew' **Spectator**

'A beautifully written ode to the tenacity of our younger selves' **Stylist**

## Questions and discussion points

1. How typical do you think Rosie's upbringing was for its time? Was there anything that shocked you or anything that you recognised as familiar?
2. How do you feel about Tremain's depiction of her mother Jane? How much do you think her mother's upbringing influenced the way she treated her daughters?
3. The memoir begins with Jane dismissing what Rosie believes to be her first memory and calling it 'invented'. Why do you think Tremain chose to open the book this way?
4. 'I can sometimes conceive of my childhood as a long journey towards the one-syllable noun I could properly own: Rose'. How important are names? Why do you think Tremain chose *Rosie* as the title of her memoir?
5. Rosie goes to boarding school, then finishing school, then to two different universities though she is forbidden by her mother to go to Oxford. What role has education – both formal and informal – played in her life? Do you think her life would have been different if she had gone to Oxford?
6. Why do you think Tremain chose to end her memoir where she does? Did it leave you wanting to know about her later life or did it feel like the right place to end?
7. Tremain points out the scenes from her own life which reappear in her fiction. Did it make you want to read or re-read her novels? Does reading about a novelist's life change the way you see their novels?

## Further reading

### Novels by Rose Tremain

*The Gustav Sonata*: two boys in post-war Germany form an intense and lifelong friendship

*The Road Home*: one man makes a lonely journey from Eastern Europe to Britain in search of work, leaving his beloved daughter behind

*Trespass*: in a silent valley in southern France stands an isolated stone farmhouse, heavy with the violence of its inhabitant's past

### Memoirs by other writers

*Dancing Fish and Ammonites* by Penelope Lively

*Life Class* by Diana Athill

*A Life of My Own* by Claire Tomalin

*Slipstream* by Elizabeth Jane Howard