

Two Caravans

Marina Lewycka

Author Background

- Birth—1946, Germany
- Raised—Yorkshire, England
- Education—Keele University, University of York, Kings College London
- Currently—lives in Sheffield, England

Marina Lewycka was born to Ukrainian parents in a refugee camp in Kiel, Germany shortly after World War II. She and her family emigrated after her birth to England, where she grew up.

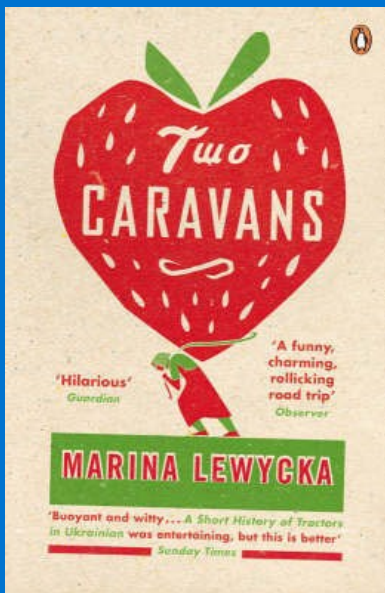
She graduated from Keele University in 1968 with BA in English and Philosophy and from the University of York with a BPhil in English Literature in 1969. She began, but did not complete, a PhD at King's College London.

She was a lecturer in media studies at Sheffield Hallam University until her retirement in March 2012

Her first novel, *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, has sold more than one million copies worldwide, has been translated into more than thirty languages, and was nominated for the Booker and Orange prizes.

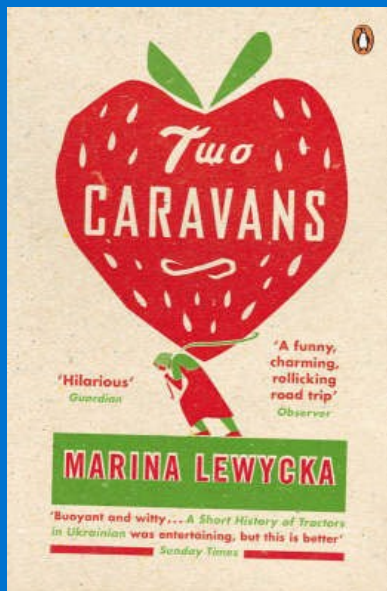
She lives in Sheffield, Yorkshire, with her husband, and has one adult daughter.

(adapted from Reading Groups Guides, Wikipedia & author's website)



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Book Summary

Two Caravans

(also published as *Strawberry Fields*)

Marina Lewycka, 2008

Penguin

320 pp.

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On a sunny hillside in Kent, in the Garden of England, a group of nine migrant workers from various parts of the world are picking strawberries for Mr. Leapish, the farmer. Housed in two trailers, and fed a daily diet of bread, margarine, jam, and sausages, life isn't easy for them. But the friendships they forge, and their dreams of love and hopes for a new life in the West, carry them along.

Nineteen-year-old Irina has arrived from Kiev, Ukraine buoyed up by enthusiasm for the Orange Revolution, and full of dreams of a romantic and refined life in the West. Andriy, from Donetsk in Eastern Ukraine, has fled a harsher life --- and maybe death --- in one of its failing coal mines. Yola, the sharp-tongued but warm-hearted supervisor, has come from Poland with her gentle niece, Marta, to earn money to support her disabled son. Tomasz, also from Poland, is a latter-day aging hippie and Bob Dylan fan following his own dreams of freedom. With them are two Chinese girls and Emanuel, a devout young Catholic from Africa, seeking his sister, who is working somewhere in England as a nurse. The mysterious Vitaly, of unknown Eastern European origins, and a runaway dog round out the bunch.

Although the tone is often humorous, and the action moves fast, there is an underlying seriousness in this modern tale of globalization, where people are expendable, and the worst exploiters are often other immigrants, traffickers in cheap labor and worse, who prey on the vulnerable new arrivals.

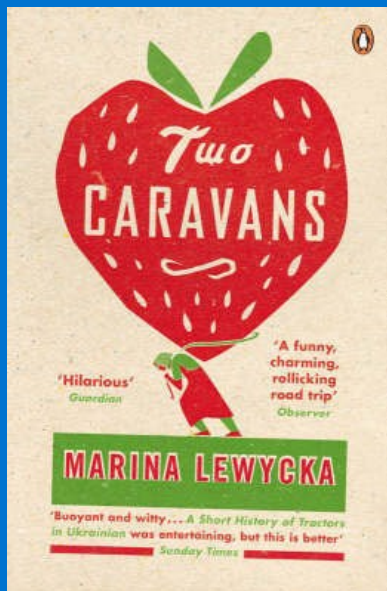
Author Marina Lewycka creates comedy from the language and cultural differences of this ragtag group, while never flinching from describing the horrors they encounter when they are forced to leave their idyllic strawberry field and embark on an adventure which takes them through an England that turns out to be very different from the country of their dreams.

Strawberry Fields is both a road story and a love story. As each one of the original strawberry pickers is forced to let go of some of their illusions about life in the West, they gain friendship, love, and a better understanding of their own nature. Before they can finally extricate themselves from the clutches of the gang masters and go their separate ways, the group has the bittersweet journey of a lifetime, tinged with hope, joy, tragedy, and love.

(from Reading Group Guides)

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Discussion Questions

1. Each of the characters in **Strawberry Fields** has a very distinctive voice. All of the characters' stories are intertwined, but they each develop separately. How does the fact that each character's story and voice unfolds independently affect the narrative of the novel as a whole? Does it make it easier or harder to understand how the characters relate to each other?
2. Andriy and Irina are both Ukrainian, but they are clearly from different sides of the tracks. At the beginning of the novel, Irina looks down on Andriy, and Andriy thinks of Irina as stuck-up. But as the story progresses, they grow to appreciate and even love each other.

How did you react to their blooming romantic relationship? Do you think their adventures together allow them to put aside their differences, or did they create an artificial closeness?

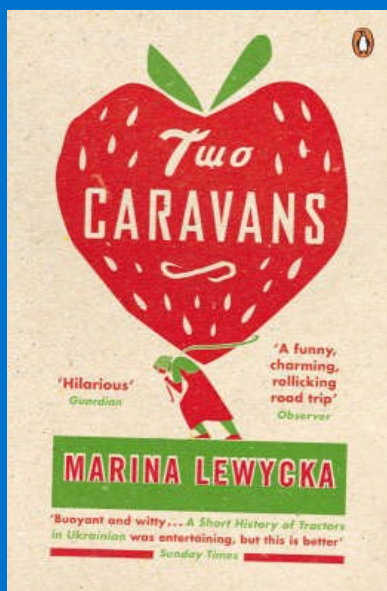
3. All of the workers on Leapish's farm are migrant seasonal labourers, but none of them seem to know exactly what they have gotten themselves into. Was this initial setup believable? Did the following events make the story more or less plausible?
4. Vitaly is a strange character --- first he seems to be one of the Leapish crew, but then he seems to turn against them, becoming a "mobilfonman." He coerces many of his less savvy friends into bad jobs in worse conditions. And yet, as we find out something about Vitaly's life, we learn that he has been just as much a victim of the system as those he is taking advantage of. Did you sympathize with Vitaly? Do you think he could have helped his behaviour? How would you have acted in his situation?
5. In the novel's epigraph, Lewycka quotes Chaucer: "For myn entente is nat but for to pleye." The tone of the book is indeed light-hearted, but Lewycka brings up some very serious social and political issues. Does her political stance come across strongly? How did some of the situations she presents in the novel change your mind about real-world politics?
6. Like many novels, **Strawberry Fields** is about a journey. In what ways do the real journeys the characters take --- from their native lands to Leapish's farm, to various parts of Europe, and sometimes back home --- stand in for their emotional or psychological journeys?
7. Vulk is obsessed with "making possibility" with Irina. He is a frightening and revolting character, but he seems to have a genuine crush on Irina. Because of this, is he a sympathetic figure? What are some of the characteristics that would elevate him from the position of merely "bad guy"?
8. One of the stranger episodes in the novel occurs when Emanuel, Irina, Andriy, and Dog show up on Toby Mackenzie's doorstep. Toby's family seems stereotypical --- an overbearing father, a repressed but kind mother, and a rebellious, drug-using teenage son. Was the author's description of the family funny, upsetting, or a combination of both? What about the immigrants' reactions to the family? In what ways was the scene realistic?
9. Discuss Emanuel's and Marta's religious convictions. Do their religious beliefs make them harder or easier to understand? Why do you think the author chose to include two devout Catholics from such different backgrounds?
10. Do you think the subject matter of the book works best as a novel? Would it have been more powerful as non-fiction --- for example, an exposé of immigrant life?
11. What did you think of the characters' reactions to Western culture? Were their impressions accurate?
12. Which character did you relate to best and why? Was there any character you disliked? Did the story have a clear hero? A villain?

(from Reading Group Guides)

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Reviews



'English men are supposed to be incredibly romantic. There is a famous folk-legend of a man who braves death and climbs in through his lady's bedroom window just to bring her a box of chocolates.' So muses Irina after 42 hours on a coach from Kiev, arriving in Dover to begin a summer as a seasonal agricultural worker in the country of her dreams and excited by the promise of adventure and possibly even romance with an Englishman as handsome and dashing as Mr Brown from her textbook, Let's Talk English.

Met off the boat by Vulk, a greasy-haired, gun-toting gangster who instantly confiscates her passport and working papers, Irina is deposited in a sunlit corner of Kent where two caravans house a motley collection of migrant strawberry pickers, all chasing similar dreams of a better life in opportunity-rich Britain. There is Yola, the Polish supervisor who is having an affair with the farmer; her religious niece, Marta; Tomasz, who is infatuated with Yola and guilty of stashing a purloined pair of her knickers under his bed; Emmanuel, an improbably naive Malawian who has come in search of his sister; two Chinese girls known only as Chinese Girls One and Two; and finally Andriy, a Ukrainian who falls for the beautiful Irina at first sight, despite his own fantasies about the natives. But it seems Irina has attracted the attention of more than just Andriy and soon, Vulk has returned in an attempt to exploit her charms in one of his more profitable, if less salubrious, business ventures.

As in her bestselling first novel, *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, Marina Lewycka's talent for comic writing is apparent from the beginning. With their assorted levels of English, the strawberry pickers have echoes of Jonathan Safran Foer's Ukrainian translator in *Everything Is Illuminated*, as language is creatively mangled, often stretched to fit images that could not otherwise have come to life.

This is a more difficult novel than its predecessor, however. As it progresses, Lewycka attempts to delve into the darkest facets of economic migration and Western capitalism - the brutality of intensive poultry farming; the slum-like immigrant hostels on the coast; the vicious exploitation of illegal workers; and, most sinister of all, human trafficking. And therein lies the problem.

Black humour can be one of the most effective conduits for tragedy, but in this case, it simply feels as if desperately important issues are described with too much levity. Similarly, tremendous pathos can be found in an innocent voice describing horror; indeed, some of the darkest and most powerful stories are those seen through the naive and uncomprehending eyes of children. But these are not children and their naivety, particularly when dealing with pie-in-the-sky promises from manifestly suspicious characters, is unconvincing. The subject and the tone feel mismatched at times.

Two Caravans is a funny and charming novel, but would be more so had it not attempted to incorporate such a solemn agenda. The first half is phenomenal, a rollicking road trip wittily narrated by each of the workers in turn, even the stray dog they acquire, whose soulful and devoted affections are whimsically communicated. But the book becomes less engaging as the voices remain light and the backdrop becomes progressively more sinister.

Irina and Andriy's developing romance becomes the central focus of the second half or, as Dog insightfully offers: 'He stinks of love hormones she stinks of love hormones too soon they will mate.' One must simply ignore the darker references and enjoy it as a straightforward comic novel, but in future, Lewycka might be better to avoid such weighty issues, unless it is to offer a serious and original commentary on them in doing so.

The Guardian

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Reviews (continued)

SECOND NOVELS CAN BE so disappointing: consider Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man*, D.B.C. Pierre's Ludmila's *Broken English* and now Marina Lewycka's *Two Caravans*.

Lewycka's debut, *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, was a critical and popular success, garnering a number of shortlistings and prizes, and emerging as the third-highest-selling title in the British book market last year, thanks in part to its selection for the Richard & Judy Book Club.

A Short History is a funny, affecting tale of 84-year-old Ukrainian emigre and widower Nikolai Mayevskyj, who announces to his daughters that he is going to marry a 30-something Ukrainian divorcee, the gold-digging Valentina, who will go to any lengths to stay in Britain. Nikolai's daughters unite to fend off this threat to their family's honour, learning some grim secrets about their Ukrainian heritage in the process.

What ensues is a comic romp that feeds off generational, cultural and class differences. Valentina, who works hard but illegally in nursing homes, admires everything Western, including boil-in-the-bag dinners and green satin underwear. It's a delightful set-up told with a dry humour that lightens the potentially dark subject matter.

Two Caravans draws on many of the same themes as its predecessor. It follows a motley cast of immigrant workers as they try to obtain and then survive various menial, exploitative jobs in Britain, including strawberry picking, chicken factory farming, restaurant work and, for the unlucky few, prostitution.

The itinerant group includes three Poles, two Chinese girls, a couple of shady Russians, Emanuel, a convent-educated Malawian, and two Ukrainians, Andriy and Irina. The latter pair become the focus of our quest and of the blossoming love story.

This novel has too many characters and the problem is amplified by Lewycka's democratic attempt to write from each of their perspectives and fill in their backgrounds. There were some clumsy narrative manoeuvres in the first book, which was ostensibly told in the first person by Nikolai's youngest daughter, Nadia, but we often witnessed scenes involving just the father and Valentina and had to assume they were being "reported" later.

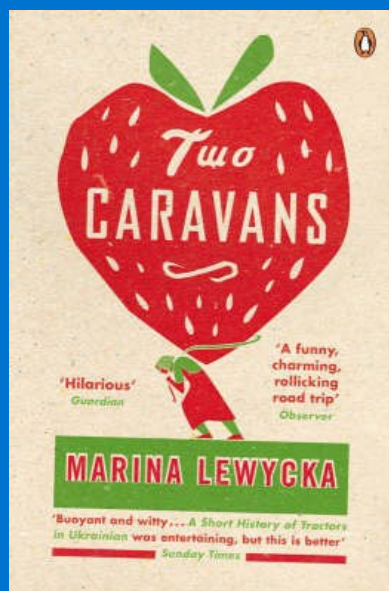
Here, the never-ending shifts in point of view create a whiplash effect as you try to track who's spotlighted now. And still Irina has the role of intermittent first-person narrator and there is even a peripatetic dog whose thoughts are given airtime, consisting largely of "I AM DOG". Frequently the same scene is recounted from different vantage points, yet without any comic result.

The Age

SECOND novels are rather like flying boats. If you can get the thing out of the water and into the air, you're on your way. Marina Lewycka, justly celebrated for the spry *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, is about to find out if she is airborne or waterlogged.

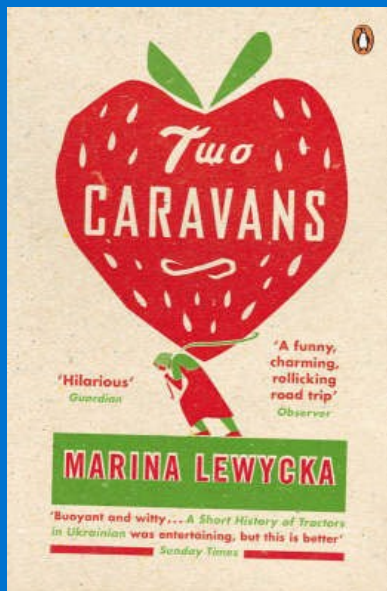
A Short History of Tractors was a sweetly crazy view of what happens when the new consumers from the former Soviet bloc meet the practised consumers of settled England. Lewycka's agile wit employed a fund of wry observations about the human heart and its dastardly reasons, and her novel attracted several awards and a short-listing for the Orange Prize for Fiction. *Two Caravans* also takes the cultural drama as its drive and again Lewycka's writing is a showpiece of drollness and sly observation.

In a field in the idyllic English countryside, two caravans perch not far from endless rows of strawberries. The caravans are the homes of the summer fruit-pickers: one caravan for men, the other for the women. There are more women than men but the men have the larger caravan. (Well, the women are smaller and, anyway, the two Asian women can share.)



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Reviews (continued)

The pickers, from all across the world but mainly from former Soviet bloc countries, have been brought to Britain as legal labourers to do the back-breaking summer work that British residents are no longer pleased to do. The wages are almost non-existent, the accommodation unspeakable, the employers lustful and venal.

Strangely, none of the above really disturbs the gang of pickers. They all have their reasons for leaving their homes and working; besides, the English summer is so lovely, the birds sing in a tranquil landscape. Pleasure can be taken in small things: the meals around a fire, the wild rabbit caught and roasted, a few bottles of beer,

music and laughter. The men and the women eye one another with the usual intent. Eve Langley's *The Pea Pickers* all over again.

When Irina, a young student from Ukraine, arrives, the men certainly sit up. And the other women notice, especially Yola the Polish supervisor. Yola has her eye on one of the men, although it's convenient for her to have sex with farmer Leapish. This dumpling of an Englishman not only pays her for it, he also owns the strawberry fields, and Yola might want the job again next year. Back home in Poland, she has a pretty country cottage and a son who needs special care. These summer months pay for it and Yola wants to do her work efficiently so that, in Poland, she can live a better life. This is her seventh strawberry summer, however, and she's beginning to think she has had enough. Then fate, in the coarse hands of Leapish's wife, has a mighty swipe, and Yola decides that this particular England is not for her.

Irina, 19, well-educated and speaking the immaculate English of the 1930s, has come against the wishes of her respectable parents to improve her language skills and, perhaps, to meet a beautiful Englishman with a bowler hat and furled umbrella, just like Mr Brown in her English conversation book. This, after all is the country of honour, justice and democracy, of decency in action. How odd it is then that the driving force seems to be lust. And even odder that nothing matters except the exchange of money. This is not the England of the grand novels and inspiring history books that she's read and re-read; she must be mixing with not-good-class people, perhaps?

The trouble, the exasperation, the irritation with *Two Caravans* is that although there is a unity of intent, there is no unity of execution. It runs along in a series of romps and although the very appealing young couple Irina and Andriy are supposed to serve as a central focus, there is too much going on around them, too much movement and too little character development. It's all rather a pantomime, with the characters wandering the countryside like rustic fools at the mercy of the vicious and worldly. This is not helped by a mystical dog whose thoughts run through the narrative, or by letters home written by a saintly 18-year-old in antique Malawian English learned from nuns. Both are clunky rather than comedic as the line between twee and droll is constantly crossed.

Irritating as it is - something not to be underestimated - this is instructive about a world most people prefer not to think about. Lewycka's intention is to wittily apprise you of just what lies beneath the beautiful surfaces of everything you buy. You will never eat chicken again. You'll rethink strawberries. In fact, you might revisit anything that can remotely be called "product", now that you know some of the human activity behind it.

There are many virtues to this novel, the appealingly deadpan voice of Lewycka in particular, but it all feels forced rather than cohesive. *Two Caravans*? Second novel? Waterlogged, I'd say: maybe this time Lewycka has bitten off more than she can chew.

The Australian