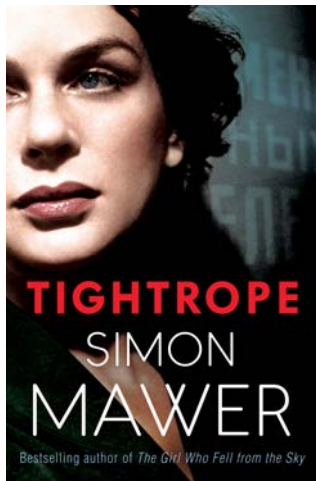


THE WALTER
SCOTT PRIZE
FOR HISTORICAL
FICTION **10YEARS**



Readers' Guides



2016 Winner

Tightrope

Simon Mawer

Abacus

About the author

Simon Mawer was born in 1948 in England, and spent his childhood there, in Cyprus and in Malta. Educated at Millfield School in Somerset and at Brasenose College, Oxford, Mawer worked as a biology teacher for many years.

His first novel, *Chimera* (1989) won the McKitterick Prize for first novels. *Mendel's Dwarf* (1997), reached the last ten of the Booker. *The Gospel of Judas*, *The Fall* (winner of the 2003 Boardman Tasker Prize for Mountain Literature) and *Swimming to Ithaca* followed. In 2009 *The Glass Room*, his tenth book and eighth novel was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the Walter Scott Prize.

His 2012 book *The Girl Who Fell From The Sky* and its sequel *Tightrope* (2015) feature the female Special Operations Executive agent Marian Sutro. In 2018, his eleventh novel, *Prague Spring*, was published, signalling a return to a Czech setting following both *Mendel's Dwarf* and *The Glass Room*.

Simon Mawer is married, has two children and three grandchildren. He has lived in Italy for over thirty years and now splits his time between his home near Rome and a house in England.

About the book

As Allied forces close in on Berlin in Spring 1945, a solitary figure emerges from the wreckage that is Germany. It is Marian Sutro, whose existence was last known to her British controllers in autumn 1943 in Paris. One of a handful of surviving agents of the Special Operations Executive, she has withstood arrest, interrogation, incarceration, and the horrors of Ravensbrück concentration camp, but at what cost? Returned to an England she barely knows and a postwar world she doesn't understand,

Marian searches for something on which to ground the rest of her life. Family and friends surround her, but she is haunted by her experiences and by the guilt of knowing that her contribution to the war effort helped lead to the monstrosities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When the mysterious Major Fawley, the man who hijacked her wartime mission to Paris, emerges from the shadows to draw her into the ambiguities and uncertainties of the Cold War, she sees a way to make amends for the past and at the same time to find the identity that has never been hers.

Discussion points

In one conversation with Absolon, the narrator explains that Marian "felt like [she was] walking a tightrope, feeling the balance, knowing that a slight shift to either side might be fatal". What does the "tightrope" of the title refer to?

What the judges thought

"Tightrope is a spy story in the grand tradition, sweeping the reader irresistibly into the harrowing life of a secret agent in World War Two. Impeccably researched, it perfectly inhabits its time and place.

Marian Sutro, who made her first appearance in *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, is a commanding character, enigmatic and fascinating. Damaged by her experiences, by the dangers she has faced, by those who have betrayed her and those she has been forced to betray, Sutro walks the tightrope between the people in her life who have sent her into danger, those whom she must fear, and those she seeks to protect.

Tightrope, however, is more than a very good spy thriller. We are used now, in a century already scarred by wars, to the concept of post traumatic stress disorder. There was no such diagnosis in the aftermath of the twentieth century's terrible wars, but it afflicted millions, nevertheless. Simon Mawer has given us, in the character of Marian Sutro, a study of how the terrifying events she endured in her youth shaped and transformed the rest of her life.'

Marian and Sam (the narrator) spend a weekend putting together a puzzle of "Millais's painting of Ophelia drowning". Sam returns to the image of the drowning Ophelia again and again. What does this image symbolize? Are there any similarities between Marian and Ophelia?

When she hears about the bombs being dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki Marian experiences deep feelings of guilt. What is Marian's relationship with guilt? What else does she feel guilty about? When does she express an absence of guilt?

Tightrope is narrated not by Marian, but by Sam, an acquaintance of hers. He often intrudes on the narrative to draw attention to the fact that it's something he's constructing. How does his voice affect the narrative of the novel?

What is the difference between how the public world sees Marian and how she sees herself? Is there ever a person Marian interacts with who comes close to understanding her as she understands herself, or does she remain singular, aloof?

Throughout *Tightrope* Marian often finds herself feeling or actually being naked. How does her relationship with nakedness change and fluctuate over the course of the novel?

Marian uses several names over the course of the novel: Marian Sutro, Genevieve Marchal, Laurence Follette, Anne Marie Laroche. What does the use of so many names signify about her sense of identity?

At the end of the novel we learn that Marian has written a biography. She says it's about "When [she] was a heroine". What kind of a heroine is Marian Sutro?

(Questions adapted from Reading Group Choices)