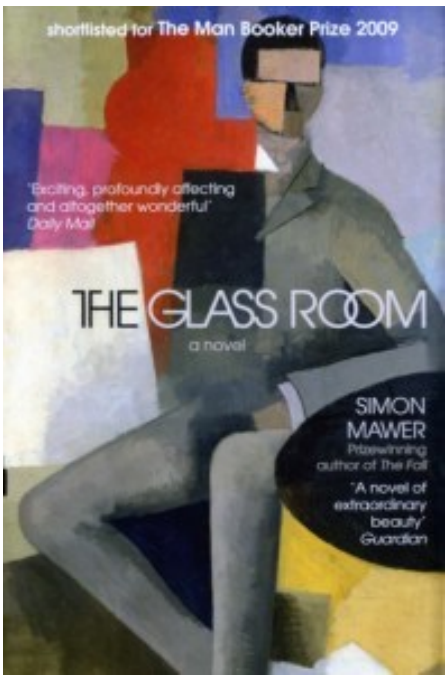

The Glass Room

Simon Mawer

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High on a Czechoslovak hill, the Landauer House has been built for newlyweds Viktor and Liesel Landauer, a Jew married to a gentile. But, when the storm clouds of WW2 gather, the family must flee, accompanied by Viktor's lover and her child. But the house's story is far from over, as it passes from hand to hand, from Czech to Russian.

The Glass Room Details

Date	:	Published February 1st 2009 by Little Brown and Company (first published 2009)
ISBN	:	9781408700778
Author	:	Simon Mawer
Format	:	Paperback 405 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Architecture, War

From Reader Review The Glass Room for online ebook

Philip says

In his novel, The Glass Room, Simon Mawer starts with a picture of privilege. Through that he explores human relationships, families, history, sexuality and change, to list just a few of the elements and themes that feature. Not only does he blend these and other penetrating ideas, he also consistently and utterly engages the reader, draws the observer in so effectively that sometimes the experience is participatory. The Glass Room is a novel that succeeds on so many levels that it becomes hard to review. The only comment is that you should read it.

So why start with a shortcoming? Well, the start is as good a place as any to record The Glass Room's only weakness, which relates to the identity of the family that forms the book's focus, the Landauers. Victor has married Liesel. He is a rich man, an industrialist, an owner of a firm that makes cars. One would expect such a person to live and breathe his work rather more than he does. Consequently, he always seems less of a character than he surely ought to have been, rather aloof, something of a vehicle for the women involved. So the main criticism of a multi-themed, multi-layered book is that it could have pursued one more idea!

But The Glass Room's real focus seems to be on the lives of its women. There are three central female characters that form the book's backbone. Much of the book's success is to see events separately, from their different individual perspectives.

Liesel is a German speaker, married to the car-maker, Viktor, who is Jewish and Czech. They are rich, unapologetically so, and commission a famous architect to design and build a house to be their family home near Prague. It is to be a house to end all houses. The Glass Room is the result, al ultra-modern, modernist, Bauhaus house with more light than can be imagined. Significantly, its areas of glass make it open to the world, a transparency within which a marriage grows gradually murkier towards the opaque.

Hana – let's use a shortened version of her name – is a family friend. She is rather off-beat compared to the apparently conventional Landauers. Initially we know little of her own domestic life, circumstances that become highly significant later on. Hana becomes Liesel's confidante, her closest friend. Her economic status is not that of the Landauers, but this does not seem to create a barrier.

Kata is a different kind of twentieth century heroine. She creates a life for herself with apparent pragmatism beneath the protecting umbrella of Viktor Landauer's wealth and power. It may appear that he retains the upper hand, that he always writes the rules, but this story is more subtle than that.

When war comes the Glass Room is left behind. It changes. A deranged fascist project occupies its space. (Does that sentence contain a tautology?) A self-deceiving but damaged psychopath exploits an ideologically-driven, self-justifying search for a science of race. At least these scientists know what they are looking for. It's a pity they must remain blind to the results. What they found they sought to enjoy, but it wasn't knowledge.

The war affects each character differently and we follow them and their fortunes across Europe and across continents. Interestingly, it's the economically advantaged who have the best chances. As in history, the poor just disappear. And by the end we have lived the characters' lives almost alongside them. We have sensed the joy, the terror, the suffering and, most acutely, the deception and duplicity. The author's footnote states that Der Glasraum does not necessarily translate to The Glass Room, since "raum" means something less

defined, something more, like space or environment. The book captivates, its characters confide in us, but paradoxically the image of The Glass Room only rarely suggests transparency.

K says

"But human beings are not straightforward, Herr Stahl," says a character in this book. "They are very complex." (p. 244)

Really? Could've fooled me. Because the characters in this book are pretty far from complex, so this was a rather ironic moment in my reading.

Ah, the holocaust. Where would mediocre writers be without it? In an effort to put an original twist on this rather hackneyed backdrop, Simon Mawer writes a novel where the main character is a house. We learn about the house's original occupants, a Jewish man, his Christian wife, and their children, who are forced to flee Czechslovakia when the Nazis come. After their departure, we follow their lives as refugees as well as the life of the house where multiple occupants come and go until it is eventually declared a historical landmark.

Look. I'm just not one of those people who's into home decorating. Unlike many people I know, I aspire to get through my entire life NOT doing construction or redecorating (which is a pretty realistic dream in my case). So pages and pages of loving description of a house, however artfully written, just leave me cold. Especially when each new occupant gives the author a new opportunity to rehash these details. Okay. The wall was onyx. It was shiny and reflective. I got it. I know that other readers appreciated the idea of giving the house a personality, but this really didn't do it for me. Houses don't talk, and they don't feel, and they don't have relationships, no matter how much Simon Mawer may want to imagine otherwise. So why would I want to read endlessly about a freakin' house?

My other main complaint about this book was that the characters seemed ruled by their gonads. Every relationship was sexual. As another goodreads reviewer put it, an architect couldn't just be an architect; a best friend couldn't just be a best friend; feelings of disgust by the wife for the husband's mistress were oddly mingled with a tinge of...you guessed it, sexual attraction. The people weren't interesting, their relationships weren't interesting, but somehow everyone was attracted to everyone else.

Booker nominees and winners just keep getting more and more disappointing.

Wanda says

This book is definitely a must for anyone who loves to read. It is an extraordinary and beautifully written book that is loosely based on the history of the Villa Tugendhat in the Czech Republic, and now a UNESCO Heritage site. The Villa serves as the main character in the novel as well as serving as the architecture of the book. All of the well drawn characters interact with and within the house and all of the plot revelations take place within its walls.
Abandoned by its owners, who fled to Switzerland and then to the U.S. as the threat of World War II approached, the villa is taken over by the Nazis and then by the communist government. It is eventually

turned into a museum and becomes the setting for redemption and hope for the characters who survive the war.
The house is envisioned as: “Space, light, glass; some spare furniture; windows looking out on a garden; a sweep of shining floor; white and ivory and the gleam of chrome.” It is intended to symbolize rationality, science, and the spirit of a new post WW I world where reason and democracy would prevail, whether one was German, or Jew, or Czech. But the dream is shattered just as the glass shattered as the Soviets approached to "liberate" Czechoslovakia.
This book is about many things. It is a book about a culture that slips from decadence into decline, about the winds of war, about anti-Semitism. But it is also about marriage, love, art, architecture, betrayal and loneliness. Most of all, the book itself is a work of art. How can one not marvel at the following description: "It had become a palace of light, light bouncing off the chrome pillars, light refulgent on the walls ... It was as though they stood inside a crystal of salt."
Read it! Lovely, just lovely.

Boyd says

I've given this book three stars, but really it's a combination of two and four. Two for Mawer's writing, which is frequently heavy-handed, riddled with cliched foreboding (gathering storm clouds on the horizon--give me a break!) and sledgehammer symbolism. At times it seems the author is trying to re-write THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING: there's so much sexual huffing, puffing, and general melodrama taking place that it becomes comic. And coincidences? Full of 'em.

However, four stars for the idea of the house itself, with its successive waves of inhabitants mirroring the progress of political events. (The eugenics "research" going on in it during one interlude is quite chilling.) It's so lovingly described that it becomes tangible, and its peculiarly stubborn form of modernity both anchors it in and sets it off from its ever-changing environment. Very interesting how the Nazis--so "new order" themselves--categorically reject its conception of the future. The clarity of glass, it appears, has no place in the Thousand Year Reich.
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Trish says

Europe between the wars is heady in its mix of optimism and foreboding, and both impel the reader’s involvement in this story of the unlikely meeting between a Czech Jewish capitalist and his wife in Venice to a brash and forward-looking minimalist Austrian architect. The result is the Landauer House of the story with its famed *der Glasraum*. The author adds a note that *”raum”* in German means much more than “room”: it also encompasses “space,” “volume,” and “zone” in its expansive meanings. And this is literally what the architect of the novel intended: that outside is in and inside is out and the space and light he captured *are* the art he intended to achieve.

The novel mirrors the architecture: magnificent and sprawling, yet contained, the expansive room with glass sides reveals all. The motivations of the characters are not hidden; flaws and beauty are apparent. If this book were a piece of music, it might be a piano sonata in several movements, for music rings throughout the house and this book. Special note is made of a young composer, Vitezslava Kaprálová, who died at 25 years of age

the day France fell to the Germans in the world-encompassing European conflict of the 20th century.

But the book is more than the house, or the glass room. It is the intimate history of several intersecting lives of that period, and later, when they meet again. It is compulsive reading, for its revelations were shocking then, and even to us now. The *european-ness* of the novel is strong, like a flavor, a color, or a sound. We become reacquainted with the Czech word *l?tost*, the unbearable sadness of being, and are reminded of the deep and now ghostly scars of war.

A bravo performance by Mawer, whose other works I shall follow with avidity.

Kinga says

[that Nazi guy go down on her and then PAY her for it. My girl. (hide spoiler)]

Ron Charles says

During the pause between world wars, a Jewish businessman and his new wife commissioned a startlingly modern house for themselves in Czechoslovakia. They hired the German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and gave him free rein to design an avant-garde structure that looks like a Mondrian painting in three dimensions: a long, low building of dramatic straight lines, marked by a large room with floor-to-ceiling glass walls. Unbelievably, this elegant house survived the dismemberment of the First Republic of Czechoslovakia, German bombing, Soviet invasion and the natural forces that conspire against a neglected building. The Villa Tugendhat, which has been a public museum since the mid-1990s, remains a masterpiece of minimalist architecture, and now it's the evocative setting for a stirring new novel that almost won this year's Booker Prize.

The author, Simon Mawer, moves through six decades of European history, much of it unspeakably tragic, using the glass house as a window on the hopes and fears of its various inhabitants and the conflicts that rip Europe apart. Pianists and Nazis, doctors and servants, everyone is drawn to the living room's extraordinary vista and feels aroused by the promise of such clarity: This is "a place of balance and reason," Mawer writes, "an ageless place held in a rectilinear frame that handles light like a substance and volume like a tangible material and denies the very existence of time." But the architecture proves purer than the human spirit. Again and again, the residents of this glass house find they can't tolerate the light of full disclosure even as they're attracted to it.

Mawer has recast the original owner of the house as a sophisticated automobile magnate named Viktor Landauer. An idealist determined to throw off the trappings of religion, aristocracy and nationalism, he's prone to grand slogans about the future and eager to enlist a mesmerizing young architect from Germany, "a poet of space and structure" who shares his sense of the exciting new world. "Ever since Man came out of the cave he has been building caves around him," Mies tells Viktor. "But I wish to take Man out of the cave and float him in the air. I wish to give him a glass space to inhabit." Viktor finds these ideas captivating, no matter how expensive. This is the "dream that went with the spirit of a brand new country in which they found themselves," he thinks, "a state in which being Czech or German or Jew would not matter, in which democracy would prevail and art and science would combine to bring happiness to all people."

Mawer spreads the dramatic irony pretty thick here in the first part of the novel. With trouble already smoldering in Germany, two or three toasts to the gloriously peaceful future would have been plenty. Fortunately, he's more interesting and subtle in bringing out the small, private ways in which these characters fail to live up to their ideals. The Landauers' glass house has the effect "of liberating people from the strictures and conventions of the ordinary, of making them transparent," but that turns out to be a Foucauldian nightmare, more problematic than anyone realizes. Honestly, could you live in a place "where there will be no secrets"?

While the architect insists his clients don't need walls, Viktor discovers that, in fact, parts of his life must remain cloistered. His wife, Liesel, announces to a curious public that "living inside a work of art is an experience of sublime delight," but she doesn't know what Viktor is doing in the back streets of Vienna. And soon their happy marriage becomes a kind of stage performance, free for all to see but deeply deceptive.

"The Glass Room" works so effectively because Mawer embeds these provocative aesthetic and moral issues in a war-torn adventure story that's eerily erotic and tremendously exciting. No matter how transparent and luminescent their architecture, the Landauers still ride the murky currents of history. The house endures, "plain, balanced, perfect; and indifferent," but the family is swept aside by the battles that tear through Czechoslovakia.

In the second half of the novel, Mawer rotates several different casts through the Landauers' home, using the glass room to examine people entirely unlike the original owners. In one of the most chilling sections, a German geneticist sets up his laboratory in the abandoned house and hopes the light of science will confirm Hitler's racial propaganda. His work is peaceful -- lots of careful measuring and photographing, "the cool gaze of scientific objectivity" -- but that only renders the whole enterprise more obscene. And like everyone else who lives in this glass room, he finds that such bright exposure makes him more determined to conceal the darkest aspects of his life.

Mawer, an Englishman living in Italy, has written this novel as though it were a translation, endowing his prose with a patina of Old World formality that sounds all the more romantic. He claims he doesn't know Czech or German, but his characters speak both fluently, and his attention to foreign languages enriches every episode. These are, after all, people caught in the violent confluence of political upheaval; choosing to speak Czech or German or English becomes a matter of resistance or collusion or hope. And at crucial moments, certain foreign words illuminate the story in poignant ways, as when a Czech resident of the Landauers' old house realizes that "the word he used for room, pokoj, can also mean peace, tranquillity, quiet. So when he said 'the glass room' he was also saying 'the glass tranquillity.' "

In chapter after chapter, era after era, the house miraculously continues, working as a talisman, "its spirit of transparency percolating the human beings who stand within it, rendering them as translucent as the glass itself." Like this gorgeous novel, that's an irresistible promise, though far more troubling than it first appears.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/...

Hannah says

This book wowed me. There are numerous books about the plight of Jews in Nazi dominated Europe, but this novel takes a new angle.

The Landauer House was built in Czechoslovakia in the early 1900s by a revolutionary architect, and it is this house which the novel is constructed around. Each character that lives or visits is connected to the house and their stories are played out inside its walls. As well as characters, the history and events leading up to and post holocaust are contained within. From being a house built for a affluent Jewish family, to becoming a labratory for Nazi science, each moment in Nazi history is represented by the house.

Whether or not you have an interest in architecture, there is something fascinating about the building. The descriptions are of a fluid house of light, each detail of its construction, particularly its onyx wall, is lovingly depicted in minute detail. Mawer invites his reader to take part in the planning of the building, its construction and its life thereafter.

They say you shouldn't judge a book by it's cover but I was attracted to The Glass Room by its contemporary cover, reminiscent of a work of modern art which is exactly what this book is.

Caroline says

Every once in a while, if you're lucky, you come across beautiful writing about the frailty and strength of human relationships. This is one of those lucky moments for me.

The house of glass that was designed and built for a rich Czech couple was the epitome of modern art. They fill it with beautiful art, music and friends. But the glass house allows us to see what they try to hide, an unhappy marriage, loneliness , insecurities, and still, love. As the world starts to crumble into chaos with Hitler's invasion across Europe, the family flee the country.

Over time, there other inhabitants of this glass house. Caretakers turn to hoarding goods and selling them on the black market. A Nazi scientific laboratory where people are brought in and measured, to see if Jews had specific physical measurements. Russians turn it into a children's hospital for physiotherapy.

And through all this time, the glass house continues to provide us with a microscope into the lives of all who live in or pass through its panes. We're given an insight into a man who is detached from his family but becomes infatuated with a woman he meets by chance, his wife who compartmentalizes her feelings and coordinates a unique living arrangement to keep her family together, a woman who lives as a free-spirit flitting from one lover to another...until one sends her to a concentration camp in Ravensbruck, an actress who seeks to escape from her jealous husband in order to return to the silver screen, and a woman who turns to a different career once her dreams where shattered by a broken ankle.

Time passes, governments come and go, lives change, and through it all, the glass house remains.

Nancy Oakes says

The home commissioned by automobile maker Victor Landauer and his wife Liesel in 1929 has as a focal point The Glass Room. It is a house built by Modernist architect Rainer Von Abt, who follows Victor's insistence that the house reflect something new rather than continue the tradition of the old, ornamental style that was prevalent among the European wealthy of the time. It sits above a town on a hill in Czechoslovakia, with spectacular views, and it offered "the most remarkable experience of modern living," a theme that runs

throughout the novel and throughout time. The story (without going into much plot detail here) follows the lives of the Landauers while they are both in and away from the house, having to leave Czechoslovakia because of the Nazi occupation and Hitler's actions against the Jews. While times change, the house and the Glass Room remain, serving as vehicles through which history plays out through several regimes -- the Nazis, the Soviets, and then through the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The writing is excellent -- and although the Landauer's story depends a lot on coincidence (which normally I don't like to see in a novel), here it actually works. Mawer's characterizations are wonderful, and the house itself stands as probably the most important character in the novel. The author also has this incredible sense of place and time that make the story real, believable, and well worth reading.

It's definitely a book full of symbolism and observations, but in the interest of not wanting to spoil things for other readers, I'll merely note that there are a myriad of places on the internet where you can read more in depth about this book.

I would recommend this book to anyone who wants an outstanding read, and I must say, this is one of the best of the Booker Prize nominees this year. People who enjoy good historical fiction will definitely want to read this as well. The Glass Room is truly an amazing book.

James says

One of the first things I noticed about this book was that the writing style reminded me of other books I had read that were translated from a language other than English, but this book was written in English, not translated. That Simon Mawer's style mimicked a novel in translation, yet was really tremendously well controlled is just one of the aspects that make this book stand out from other historical novels. For *The Glass Room* is an historical novel and both the sometimes subtle presence and sometimes ironic impact of historical context is integral to the story.
The story starts simply enough, a Czech couple, the Landauers, on their honeymoon journey to Italy, but before they arrive there they visit the grave of the Bride's brother who died in the Great War. In just a few pages we already have some of the themes: history, endings and beginnings, death and life. But this novel is just as much about the new house that is yet to be built on a plot of land that was a present from the bride's parents. It is this house, designed by the great modern architect Rainer von Abt, that will have as its centerpiece the "Glass Room" of the title, and at the center of the room an onyx wall that is magnificent in its simplicity. The story spans the rest of the twentieth century and involves living, loving, parting, tragedy, and more than one metamorphosis for the "Glass Room" at the heart of the story.
In addition to the smooth almost glass-like writing style I was impressed by the structure of the book as the story gathers speed, develops the central characters, provides suspense and deftly links the various subplots. Early in the novel the architect, Rainer von Abt, tells the Landauers that:
"'I am a poet of space and form. Of light' -- it seemed to be no difficulty at all to drag another quality into his aesthetic -- 'of light and space and form. Architects are people who build walls and floors and roofs. I capture and enclose the space within.'"(p 16)
The author is also a poet whose aesthetic provides similar form for this story. Yes, this is the exciting era of modern architecture, of the new era represented by artists like Mondrian and others who were establishing "*de stijl*". The world is constantly changing and the artists, the architects, and musicians like Janacek and Kapralova are leading the way. The political world of the story is in turmoil with changes, including another war and its aftermath, lead the Landauers to new ventures, places, and loves as the plot unfolds. However, the key to the story remains the haunting spirit of the"Glass Room".

"She dreams. She dreams of cold. She dreams of glass and light, the Glass Room washed with reflection, and the cool view across the city of rooftops, the cold view through the trees, the crack of snow beneath your boots. She dreams of a place that is without form or substance, that exists only in the manner of dreams, shifting and insubstantial, diffuse, diverse;"

·Karen· says

I liked the idea of using a house as the main character, and it is lovingly portrayed. But Mawer lays the symbolism on with a trowel, there is a somewhat desperate use of coincidence to get people back together that, to me, was meretricious sentimentality, and to use Faulkner's inimitable words, he writes not about the hearts of his characters, but about their glands. Every single adult in ths book is defined in terms of who they sleep with. Not in their social, political, family or vocational role, but only as sexual beings. Which got just a little tedious.

Richard Burger says

I'm not sure why some reviewers found The Glass Room ponderous or cliched. I was mesmerized by this beautifully told story revolving around the Glassraume, a Bauhaus-style home set on top of a hill, the main feature of which is a large room with walls of glass that overlooks the city. It also features an onyx wall that changes colors as the sun sets. These things sound simple and straightforward, but the author makes them appear magical, and places us right there in the room; we can touch the glass, see the streaks of color in the onyx. Other reviewers here have related what the story is. I'll just say it offers a compelling depiction of Czechoslovakia prior to and during the early years of Nazism, seen through the prism of a wealthy auto maker, a Jew, and his Christian wife. My only issue was an occasionally rambling plot and some loose ends, but this didn't matter. The wonder of this book is in the writing and its metaphors, restrained and as subtle as the Glassraume, which is, after all, essentially an empty space. I am actually rereading the book for the second time and am even more impressed with Mawer's ability to paint indelible images with words.

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switterbug (Betsey) says

In the 1920's, wealthy, Jewish Czech businessman Viktor Landauer and his bride, Liesel, hire German avantgarde architect, Rainer von Abt, to design an ultra-modern home for them. An unconventional "upside down" blueprint creates space from a house, rather than creating a house from space. Von Abt considers himself a poet of form, space, and light. These revolutionary ideas usurp the notion of ornamentation. Gables, pillars, columns, turrets, and whatnot are oppressively rooted in the past, and invoke churches and museums. The Landauer House will transcend the new optimism of Central Europe with its straight lines and understatement.

The Glass Room is the nadir of the Laundauer House. Transparency and light prevail, bouncing on walls and chrome pillars, and even reflecting on the garden dew. The house and the garden, as the architect designed, flow as one, without discontinuous separations. Von Abt installs a stunning onyx wall in the Glass Room, a glossy slab with veins of amber and honey. The stone captures and radiates the light; when the sun sets over the house and shimmers and sparkles on the stone, it glows a fiery red. People transform into transparent

selves--they are guileless, liberated, ungoverned. In this expansive, unrestrained sphere, they make love--to each other and to life, in this room of substantive dialogue and naked emotions. Moreover, the house is a citadel of exuberant faith, an anchor of hope for future generations.

The main character is the Landauer House, specifically the Glass Room, which is also the leitmotif of the book and symbol of order and progress in otherwise irrational times. As WW II obtrudes, a Nazi invasion is imminent. Viktor and Liesel and their two children are forced to leave and live as refugees. Accompanying them are Katalin, the winsome, alluring nanny, and her young daughter. By that time, life has become complicated and their marriage corrupted with deceit. As they depart for Switzerland, Liesel begs her best friend, Hana, to keep a close eye on their house, and "der Glasraum."

The Landauer House, which stood for the indomitable future and the erasure of the past, becomes its own history of hope through struggle and war. During the unstable, treacherous German onslaught, the house becomes a scientific laboratory whose ultimate aim is to promote ethnic cleansing. Later, the Landauer's sinister chauffeur becomes the keeper, then a hostage, and finally a champion of the Soviet invasion. The Glass Room stands as a bastion of optimism amid menacing threats and perilous challenges to freedom and humanity.

Written in eloquent, luminous prose, the novel soars from beginning to end, engulfing the reader into a world that is part-dream, part-imagination, and frightfully real. The latter part of the novel has a few encumbrances--it feels hurried and hamstrung, fitting too many events, people, and perfunctory dramas into a condensed frame. And yet, it doesn't deform this shattering, beautiful story. A bird with a broken wing trills its eternal song. Hope, freedom, history, and love prevail in an upside down house, in a glass room.

The fictional Landauer House is based on architect Mies van der Rohe's Villa Tugendhat in Brno. You can view the exact design and features of the house online.

Siv30 says

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Michelle says

A different take on WWII Nazi occupation than I've read before. The main character is basically a house; a massive, uber-modern, glass and chrome house in Czechoslovakia. A young, wealthy honeymooning couple has it built shortly after their wedding but once Nazis invade they must emigrate and abandon their home. It's later taken over by various factions and people.

It took me a long time to get into the book because most of the characters are quite like the house: cold and flat. Also, it's odd to read about Jews living in Eastern Europe in the 1930s who all exit the time period relatively unscathed. The no-longer-newlywed couple moves to Switzerland to escape the Nazis and while it's sad they have to abandon their home, the wife's complaining felt petty given what happened to those who didn't have the money to jump ship. Granted, she likely had no idea what was actually going on. Nonetheless, it made me care less about the humans in this book than I already did.

In addition to the characters being mostly flat, sex (or lack thereof) defines and shapes almost all the relationships. No, you can't have a male architect who's just an architect or a female best friend who's just a friend. There must be a bit of lust going on – man, woman, old, young. There's even a scene where the author uses breastfeeding in a sensual manner, which was quite bothersome.

That said, the writing is lovely and descriptions of the house beautiful (it's based on a real place). One of the characters, Hana, is filled with life even though her rampant sexual exploits got a little old after awhile. An interesting read but I didn't find it worthy of all the "best of" lists and award nominations.

Stevedutch says

It's been a long time since I read a book that has stayed with me for so long afterwards and, I have to say, I miss reading it. The protagonist is not, of course, human; it's the eponymous room. The author has based his story on a real house, the Villa Tugendhat, which is situated in Brno in the Czech Republic and designed by the German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe for the Tugendhat family who were Jewish and, as such, forced to leave for Switzerland following the German occupation in 1938.

The story opens as the fictional counterparts of the Tugendhats, the Landauers, commission the building of the house from celebrated German architect, Rainer von Abt after meeting him, in 1928, whilst on their honeymoon in Venice and, through the prism of the Glass Room, traces the lives of all who subsequently occupy the house through the cataclysmic events that engulf Europe during the Nazis occupation and beyond.

I found the writing, for the most part, quite sublime in the sense that it suited, perfectly, the story it was used to describe and illuminates the almost ethereal characters at the story's centre. It has been criticized elsewhere, unjustly in my eyes, for using coincidence to further its narrative ends: of course, there is no such thing as coincidence in real life, is there? Does anyone care very much, nowadays or ever, that Dickens, for example, used coincidence as a narrative mechanism throughout his novels? For instance, without it, Pip would never have encountered Estella, in Satis House again!

Duncan says

Reader! Do you want a badly written romance novel with GCSE level attempts at symbolism and 'depth'? Look no further. Not that this is how The Glass Room is described. If it was I wouldn't have gone near it. This, after all, is a book shortlisted for The Booker Prize.

"Life is like that", he said, his gaze caught by the glow of the light reflecting against the Onyx wall as evening fell. "Modern is the future". And then they had sex on the linoleum.

Or something like that.

What we have is a book which focuses on a fictional version of Villa Turgendhat and mentions over and over that it has a glass room with an Onyx wall. Apparently the light and space can be used to symbolise anything you want and loads of people have sex in it. With the subtlety of a brick, this symbolism or reference to the title of the novel is hammered into your brain time and time again.

Seemingly all Mawer has done is lifted the history of the building and then slightly modified the lives of the owners, throwing in some fictional supporting characters and adding a tawdry bit of sex every few pages to fill the book out. Every woman had lesbian tendencies during the period covered, don't you know. And if someone has had an affair, you can bet good money that their lover is going to show up at the house at an awkward moment - but the besmirched party will carry on with a stiff upper lip, mainly because they have dark desires of their own. Of the sapphic kind. Yawn.

And don't worry, just when you are about to chuck the book in the fire, the plot fast-forwards with a whole new set of characters and things repeat themselves all over again. I think he is trying to show how the building is witness to the same follies through various generations, but it was a bit too complex for me to grasp. I got a C in English Literature, you see.

Mawer's attempts to add a bit of historical perspective to proceedings were clumsy too. Oh look, there's Hitler driving past. Hi Heydrich! I was half expecting a scene where a neighbour mowing their lawn turns out to be Stalin.

And then we get onto language. In many places the use of Czech or German are unnecessary. It's nice that the author wanted to engross themselves in the period so thoroughly, but spare us, please. Curak.

As a final insult, after dragging yourself through 404 pages, there is an afterword explaining that the German name of the space is far more poetic and symbolic than the English title of the book. So all that heavy handed bollocks I suffered throughout the story was all lost in translation, obviously. Silly me, I just thought I was reading an awful book.

Lyn Elliott says

Mawer was inspired by the original of The Glass House, in a deliberately unnamed Czech town, here called M?sto.

The house is virtually a character in its own right as well as the central place around which the story units revolve. A masterpiece of minimalist architecture, it represents freedom, transparency and light, especially the great open Glass Room, walled on two sides by plate glass, white except for a wall of pale onyx which glows in the late afternoon light.

But the relationships of those associated with the house all come to involve concealments and deception, and there are shadows of real nastiness in its wartime uses. This imagery is repeated throughout the book, and what I initially found intriguing became tedious.

On the other hand, much of his descriptive writing is evocative, almost poetic, creating vivid pictures of places and atmospheres.

Mawer has tackled big themes in this work: the nature of love; memory; the meaning of time and the difficulties of life during times of war and political oppression.

In every phase of the story, which takes place over six decades, Mawer offers us lovers and love affairs; affirmations of loyalty and betrayals. Although the various relationships and sexual interactions between the characters occupy much of the story space, I found them unconvincing, perhaps because despite their active genitals, the characters are all slightly wooden.

Perhaps he felt he needed to spell out what he meant to convey through these stories a, as right near the end of the novel he has one of the characters (Zdenka) muse: ‘Love seems a relative quality, not a unitary thing that can exist independent of an object. Love *for*, love *of*, never just love. There are different grades of love, different shades of love, different scents an tastes of love. It is not like happiness or misery, qualities that seem limited. Love is limitless, she feels. You can love one person one way and another person another way, and your store of love, all the different loves, is never diminished’.

Another recurring theme is the differences in the way that people think about time, and their awareness of past, present and future. Far from being an abstract concern, it affects their lives profoundly.

Viktor Landauer, for instance is a planner. In a scene with his mistress, now also nanny to his children, he knows that ‘whether it is going to go wrong is not up to her or him. The wrongness or rightness of the future is the matter of the purest contingency. Viktor has always worked on the principle that the principle is there to be handled, manipulated, bent and twisted to one’s own desires but now he knows how untrue that is. The future just happens. It is happening now, the whole country poised for disaster; it is happening now, his standing there confronting Kata’ (p168)

Viktor plans for the future. Liesel, his wife (and the one who invited her husband’s mistress to come and live with them and be their nanny) resists thinking ahead, would rather continue to drift, to live as they are. But this is impossible, with the rise of Nazism. Viktor’s planning gets them out of Czechoslovakia just in time. The family survives to begin a new life in the US.

Some years later, when the house is owned by the Communist state and the Glass Room is used as a gymnasium for rehabilitating child victims of polio, a doctor, Tomáš, and physiotherapist, Zdenka begin an affair. – Zdenka loves him, wants to think of their future together, he does not. He denies history, claims that memory and imagination are the same thing, does not admit the past or the future into his thinking, only the present. Though he has thought to himself that he loves her, in fact he prefers disengagement.

As so often with the Booker, I can see why it made the short list, and see why it didn't win, especially up against Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*.

3.5 from me, downgraded to 3 because I was happy to set it aside for several weeks and only come back to finish it so it didn't become a DNF.

Ian Sansom wrote an enthusiastic review in The Guardian
https://www.theguardian.com/books/200...

The house that inspired the book is in Brno and now a museum http://www.tugendhat.eu/

Cynthia Haggard says

THE GLASS ROOM by Simon Mawrer is the story of a fabulous house built in Czechoslovakia in the late 1920s for a young couple. When the Nazis took over Austria in 1938, the couple fled to Switzerland with their young family, because the husband was Jewish. Subsequently, they relocated to the United States.

But the book is not about the couple who commissioned the house. Rather, it is about the house itself. So after the main characters disappear in the middle of France in around 1942, we are yanked back to the house and introduced to a new cast of characters. To the Germans who used it as a laboratory. To the Soviets who overran it on their way to Berlin. To the people who lived in Communist Czechoslovakia. And finally to the people who wanted to restore it.

In many ways, this is a wonderful book. Simon Mawrer is an accomplished writer with an ear for the nuances of many languages, not just English. But the major problem for me happened when he abandoned the original family is France and yanked the reader back to the house. At that point, I started to skim, because it was just too hard for me to connect with a new cast of characters I didn't know, especially when I was dying to find out what happened to the young family. It seems to me that either Mr. Mawrer should have kept his focus on the family and what happened to them, or made the beginning part of the book much shorter, so that the reader wouldn't become so invested in what happened to Liesel and Viktor, and therefore not disappointed when the focus of the book suddenly shifted back to the house. Four stars.
