

Real Estate

Deborah Levy

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Who, in this interminable year, hasn't longed to be somewhere else? Perhaps a grand old house, with a pomegranate tree and a fountain, a blue sky and an even bluer sea? A place where you can swim all day and where a roving population of friends and family are easily accommodated? This is Deborah Levy's fantasy, not mine, although I'd happily share it. *Real Estate* – the third instalment of her “living autobiography” – was written before the pandemic but its release couldn't have come at a better time for the armchair travellers we've all become. It's a deeply engaging travelogue, a memoir and a meditation on motherhood, friendship, ageing, creativity – and the meaning of home.

*Real Estate* opens in the winter of 2018 with the 59-year-old British, South African-born writer buying a banana tree at Shoreditch High Street train station. Seduced by “the new leaves that were furled up, waiting to stretch into the world” – an image that, it soon becomes clear, is a description of herself – Levy is transfixed by the fake eyelashes of the woman who sold it to her. She imagines them stretching “all the way from the bagel shops and great cobblestones of East London to the deserts and mountains of New Mexico”. Her train of thought then leads her to the “peculiar, sexual, uncanny” nature of Georgia O'Keefe's painted flowers, and the home the artist restored in Santa Fe, “a place to live and work at her own pace”. Levy recalls her journey to visit it, the hotel she stays in and the oval fireplace that, as she drinks mescal for her altitude sickness, transforms into a “burning egg” that “was something I had to have”. In a few brief paragraphs, she has taken us on a trip across seas, mingling anecdotes and insights with grand historical narratives. She doesn't let up for almost 300 pages – and it's unputdownable.

Levy writes as we think: in fits and starts, in flashes of illumination, non-sequiturs and leaps in faith and reason. Her ear for dialogue is acute; at times, I forgot I was reading and not eavesdropping. The first book of this trilogy, *Things I Don't Want To Know*, which came out in 2013, was an entertaining riposte to George Orwell's 1946 essay *Why I Write*. Perhaps “entertaining” is the wrong word, considering it opens with a howl of despair, but Levy is someone to whom even the most dreadful situations have darkly comedic potential. In that first book she has broken up with her husband of two decades and moved into a small apartment in north London, whose grim

passageways she nicknames “the corridors of love”. She repeatedly cries on escalators and, in order to avoid them, flees to a remote hotel in Majorca. What follows is a reflection on her role as a wife, a mother and the daughter of a political activist in South Africa during the years of apartheid – and her evolution as a writer.

The second volume, *The Cost of Living*, again moves sinuously between observation and quotation. Even when her life is chaotic, her prose is as clear and as smooth as the pebbles she loves to collect. Marvelling at her talent for structure, I often flipped a few pages back to unpick how she had moved so seamlessly from topic to topic: for example, a conversation with a man who cries at a funeral segues to advice about putting sea salt in a bath and “a reactionary desire to silence knowledge”. Like all her books, *The Cost of Living* is at heart about the cost of liberty – about what it means to be a self-sufficient woman navigating the choppy seas of the patriarchy.

*Real Estate*, as Levy repeatedly clarifies, could have been titled “unreal estate”: as a writer, she can’t afford the home she longs for, even though the one she lives in, despite its insalubrious corridors, is full of love, companionship, “three e-bikes and three wooden fairground horses from Afghanistan”. Levy posits the idea of home as both an actual place and something more metaphorical: a state of mind. As the book progresses, it shapeshifts from a mansion to a shack by water and back again. About to turn 60, her fears around ageing and isolation spin through its rooms; a geographically vague dwelling, it becomes a symbol of the things in her life she can articulate but not quite attain. Yet, despite her longing, she realises that every time she imagines herself moving, she feels sad. “It was as if the search for the home was the point, and now that I had acquired it and the chase was over, there were no more branches to put in the fire.” She quotes philosophers including Mark Fisher, who evokes the home as a place of haunting, and Gaston Bachelard, who suggests that “the house shelters daydreaming”. She reads essays by the Spanish film director Pedro Almodóvar and wonders if she embodies his definition of being lost: a “cow without a bell”. Like sisterly spirit animals, Simone de Beauvoir, Marguerite Duras, Elena Ferrante and Virginia Woolf hover in the wings. Levy imagines meeting her younger self, who lived in a large Victorian house with her husband, but sadly concludes she would be depressed by the encounter: “so there you are, nearly sixty and alone”. Her spirit, though, is robust, questioning, impatient of received wisdom; she is rarely self-pitying and will not be bullied by conventional judgements about what constitutes success or failure. She becomes preoccupied with female characters in books who are missing – or not

acknowledging – their desires and refuses to become one of them. She ponders: “Are women real estate owned by patriarchy?” She gradually realises that real estate might be “a self-portrait and a class portrait”.

By the end of *Real Estate*, Levy has found a measure of happiness. She danced all night on her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday in a Parisian club and is now renting an apartment on a Greek island. Her daughters have joined her; it’s summer, and she swims every day. She has realised that “her books are her real estate” – a place without “signs forbidding anyone to dive, splash, kiss, fail, feel fury or be tender or tearful, to fall in love with the wrong person, go mad, become famous or play on the grass”. Who wouldn’t want to live there?

Jennifer Higgin