

# THOUGHTS ON DEBORAH LEVY'S *REAL ESTATE*

Review by

Nadja Abt

Artist and writer Nadja Abt reviews Deborah Levy's latest book *Real Estate*.

"The word 'real' derives from the Latin word *rex* meaning 'royal'. 'Real' also means 'king' in Spanish, because kings used to own all the land in their kingdoms. For Lacan, the 'real' is everything that cannot be said. It has nothing to do with reality."<sup>1</sup>

Actually, I know people, especially women, who got hooked on her sentences after reading a book by Deborah Levy. In fact, you never want it to end, yet the blurb tells us that *Real Estate* (2021) is the last book in the autobiographical trilogy. Beginning with *Things I Don't Want to Know* (2013) about Levy's childhood in apartheid South Africa and the loss and gain of ones

home, the second book, *The Cost of Living* (2018), skips the author's young adult life and begins with her separation from her husband, after more than twenty years of marriage and having raised two daughters. While *The Cost of Living* beautifully but tragically describes the loss, not only of a beloved life partner, but also of her mother, *Real Estate* begins with a desire. It is the concrete desire to own a house, a house of one's own, bought with one's own money.

In a way, Levy closes the brackets of her trilogy with this book. By thinking through the difference between *house* and *home*, now with almost sixty years of life experience (she turns sixty in the book). Basically, she's doing well. She's an internationally ac-

claimed writer, has a lovely flat in North London, several e-bikes, and a rented writing shed in a beautiful garden. But she is in a moment of transition: being a mother, back to—or rather forward to—being a woman, who is about to live alone after her adult daughter has packed her things to move for studying. A banana tree bought at the market is supposed to fill the void in the flat; it jokingly becomes the "third daughter" throughout the story.

## THE CONCRETE DESIRE TO OWN A HOUSE, A HOUSE OF ONE'S OWN, BOUGHT WITH ONE'S OWN MONEY.

Levy recounts this transition in parallel to the theme of real estate, expressed through her work as a writer across many sites. From London she embarks on a reading tour to Mumbai, followed by a nine-month residency in Paris, with a short stay in Berlin, and then a writing stay on the island of Hydra.

"Are women real estate owned by patriarchy?"<sup>2</sup>

Gender-specific problems are interwoven with questions about property, wealth, work, friendship, and above all the desire for all of this together, that in such a way it becomes difficult to untangle the individual parts of the self for closer inspection. She is a successful writer, a mother, a divorced single woman, a motherless daughter, while also being the girlfriend of a male best friend, who leaves his third wife, Nadia, to be involved with Helena, who is 25 years younger. This best male friend is sometimes sympathetic, sometimes unbearable in his (male) comments and actions, but—so it seems in the book—he is always there. Every positive must have a negative, just as every dream house has a filthy corner.

But Levy is not the owner of actual real estate and does what many of us, who have internalized the principles of capitalism, probably do in this situation, when we desperately desire something that is beyond our reach: she replaces the desire with smaller things that she can afford or wants to afford. Things that she "has to have" which satisfies the dream of possession, at least for a short time. In Levy's case, besides the banana tree mentioned above, there are various pairs of shoes, good food, souvenirs, enough furniture to host friends, and a holiday home for writing on a Greek island. In addition to the "real" objects purchased for the dream estate, there is a notable imaginary list of furnishing and garden ideas, sometimes very close to my own (she begins the book with Georgia O'Keeffe's house in New Mexico).

"It seemed that acquiring a house was not the same thing as acquiring a home."<sup>3</sup>

Skilfully interwoven, Levy takes us from her physical travels to her inner journeys in order to reflect on the

concepts of home, a house, and domestic spaces associated with the female versus the neutral living space, the inner and outer world of a writer, and the meaning of home in the physical sense of the changing, vulnerable, strong, sensitive, female body. Linguistically, she succeeds by repeatedly shifting from a novelistic first-person narrator, who describes the action and makes quite large leaps in time, into an intimate drifting digression, in which narrated time becomes narrative time. What is fascinating here—and this is perhaps the addictive quality of the book—is that she manages to make the drifting so completely natural and sympathetic that the potential for identification with the autobiographical self becomes extremely high. It always seems as if the next thought has just come to her spontaneously but these drifts in the book very often end with quotations from fellow authors, underlining her trains of thought. And so one is abruptly whisked away to the ground of written facts by the spoken, which feels as if Levy is your friend, confiding her most personal thoughts to you. But no, Deborah Levy is not my close, smart friend who 'just says' what she thinks. She has researched numerous quotations for this book—from Brontë, Woolf, and Austen to Benjamin, Bachelard, Duras, and Lorde. So one is never sure what came first: the quotation or the thought about it? It is thus a desire of the author to take us on her journey which demands the empathy of the reader, but at the same time feeling permanently endowed by her constant sharing of thoughts and life. It feels like sharing and keeping it to her/herself. You like to own, but you also like to share. The more you share, the more you own (and I don't mean on social media). That is what she does. She shares with us pieces of her life, literature, art, and films that are important to her, and in doing so, she spares what belongs to her alone. It is her real estate, on whose large property with a pomegranate tree and an egg-shaped fireplace, where we are warmly welcomed and allowed to make ourselves comfortable for a few days, but soon released back into our own lives, into our own kingdoms.

It was a similar story with Levy's *Real Estate* after I finished reading it. It felt so intimately close to my own private problems and longings (for both of us regular swimming is vital) that I found it almost absurd that other friends who had read it felt similarly. For a short time I wanted to keep it all to myself and not recommend it to anyone else. But the longer I thought about it, the more I reflected on the connection between owning, sharing, and acting in the interest of the book—meaning: as it is about sharing, I share this review with the readers.

1 Deborah Levy, *Real Estate*, UK: Penguin Random House, 2021

2 Deborah Levy, *Real Estate*, UK: Penguin Random House, 2021

3 Deborah Levy, *Real Estate*, UK: Penguin Random House, 2021