

## Wanted after Mother's Death: More Life

*The Cost of Living*, by Deborah Levy (Bloomsbury, \$20), is at once a memoir of a woman creating a new life after divorce and a collection of insightful musings on femininity, motherhood, and the craft and discipline of writing. The unnamed narrator—who we are told at one point is “an I that is close to myself and yet is not myself,” but which it seems fair to refer to as Deborah Levy—has just sold her house and moved into a small flat on the sixth floor of a shabby apartment building atop a hill in North London with her two daughters, one a university student and one still living at home. She finds herself wondering what is left of herself in the wake of this transition, and what this shift signifies for women more broadly: “To strip the wallpaper off the fairy tale of *The Family House* in which the comfort of men and children have been the priority is to find behind it an unthanked, unloved, neglected, exhausted woman... It is an act of immense generosity to be the architect of everyone else's well-being. This task is still mostly perceived to be women's work.”

Levy's work, though, is also to be a writer, which is how she provides for her daughters. (Two of Levy's novels were Man Booker Prize finalists, though you wouldn't know it from this humble and unassuming narrator.) And so we witness as she attempts to work on her novel on the small balcony of their apartment, which is exposed to the elements but is the only space at home for her to write; then we are relieved for her when a “guardian angel” named Celia, a Welsh bookseller in her early eighties, kindly offers to rent her a shed in the back of her garden where she might sit and write undisturbed. Emboldened by the knowledge that she has a place to work, Levy purchases an electronic bike, which she refers to as her e-bike and prizes as a recently-divorced

middle-aged man might prize his new red convertible. She whizzes down the hill freely, rides back up carrying far more groceries than she can handle (at one point the chicken she is planning to prepare for dinner flies out of her shopping cart and gets run over by a car; she cooks it anyway and enjoys it heartily), and arrives with leaves in her hair to an important meeting about a possible film option for one of her novels. All the while, she tries to focus her attention elsewhere, because “the writing life is mostly about stamina. To get to the finishing line requires the writing to become more interesting than everyday life, and...everyday life is never boring.”

Levy's life is not just her writing, and can never just be her writing—she is no “art monster,” to invoke Jenny Offill's *Department of Speculation*, with which this novel has several commonalities. Though

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Levy engages throughout the book with Marguerite Duras, Adrienne Rich, and Simone de Beauvoir, she lives, as she reminds us, in the “Republic of Writing and Children,” caring for her daughters and her ailing mother, who dies midway through the book after Levy's desperate and agonized attempts to locate the particular brand of ice lollipop that is all her mother can consume in the final weeks of her life. Levy's mother, we learn, was born and raised in South Africa, where she escaped her upper-class WASP family to marry a penniless Jewish historian; Levy moved from South Africa to England at age nine. When her mother passes away, she comes to appreciate the bravery she modeled, and Levy demands this courage of herself: “When a woman

has to find a new way of living and breaks from the societal story that has erased her name, she is expected to be viciously self-hating, crazed with suffering, tearful with remorse. These are the jewels reserved for her in the patriarchy's crown, always there for the taking. There are plenty of tears, but it is better to walk through the black and bluish darkness than to reach for those worthless jewels.”

Ultimately Levy finds a way through the darkness. She learns how to navigate her roles as mother and writer, and learns how to live in this world while writing about this world, a task which she describes in terms that are both real and metaphorically suggestive: “I have become a night wanderer without moving from my writing chair. The night is softer than the day, quieter, sadder, calmer, the sound of the wind tapping windows, the hissing of pipes, the entropy that makes floorboards creak, the ghostly night bus that comes and goes—and always in cities, a far-off distant sound that resembles the sea, yet is just life, *more life*. I realized that was what I wanted after my mother's death. More life.” By the end of this book the reader, too, wants more from Deborah Levy—and if she does not need to move from her writing chair to find it, we all stand to gain.

*A memoir by ILANA KURSHAN, If All the Seas Were Ink, won the 2018 Sami Rohr Prize in Jewish Literature.*

## Slippery Questions about Salvation and Faith

*A River Could Be a Tree* by Angela Himsel (Fig Tree Books, \$23.95) takes its title from her father's cautionary words to the author when she was a young girl: “God created a role for everything in the universe. Just think what would happen if a tree thought it could be a river!” And yet Himsel's personal transformation, chronicled in this candid and insightful memoir, is just as dramatic. She grows up as the seventh of 11 children in an evangelical Christian family in rural Indiana, where her parents, both of German descent, fall under

