

Real Estate

Deborah Levy

The following questions are intended to enhance your discussion of *Real Estate*.

About this book:

The third and final installment of three-time Booker Prize–nominated Levy’s living autobiography, *Real Estate* is a thought-provoking and boldly intimate meditation on home and the specters that haunt it in our patriarchal society. In this blend of personal history, gender politics, philosophy, and literary theory, Levy has crafted a searing examination of womanhood and ownership. Her inventory of possessions, real and imagined, pushes readers to question our cultural understanding of belonging and belongings and to consider the value of a woman’s intellectual and personal life.

For Discussion:

1. In moments throughout her book, Levy (also referred to as the narrator) grapples with the impossible expectations of motherhood. She writes, “I wondered if it was possible to be a matriarchal character who does not hold everyone hostage to her needs, ego, anxieties, and moods” (93). In flashes, she feels her mother’s presence near her own, gazing at her apartment and back at her in the mirror. The narrator asks the reader, “What does maternal really mean?” (78) Reflect on this question. What defines maternal instinct? Are society’s expectations unreasonable, and if so, why? What would a realistic standard for motherhood look like?
2. Discuss the narrator’s friendship with her best male friend, whose troubled marriage with Nadia and budding affair with Helena are a central storyline. He believes that Nadia pretends to be unhappy because happiness would give him too much power. Because she does not appear as he wants, he feels rejected. In Helena, he finds respect without the burden of accountability. Using the lens of these relationships, how is female agency suppressed or enhanced? Who has the power, and what does that power allow? Levy writes that Helena “liked him just as he was, but he didn’t like himself just as he was” (201). Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. Levy continually returns to the cinematic concept of the “leading female character” (86). She strives to envision her: both powerful and vulnerable, courageous, flawed, opinionated, solitary, sociable. On her travels, Levy sees parts of her in many of the women she meets along her way. Who are the female characters to whom we aspire, and why? What do you wish you could see in the female characters of future literary fame?
4. Throughout *Real Estate*, the narrator compiles inventories of her prized, and sometimes banal, possessions: antique wooden horses, a set of cutlery, a small jar of buttons. Her “property portfolio” is a list that is charged with meaning. Each item signifies a purpose or a wish, revealing her most intimate dreams and realities. Explore what your own property portfolio would contain. What are the items in your home that are important to you and why? Which item signifies a truth and which a wish?
5. Levy explores the ways in which, especially for women, life choices are prescriptive and limiting. She writes, “It seemed to me all over again that in every phase of living we do not have to conform to the way

our life has been written for us, especially by those who are less imaginative than ourselves” (88). Discuss how Levy challenges these limitations throughout her book. What does the narrator cherish and disregard? How can we harness our imagination to make our lives richer and more unique?

6. Consider Rilke’s quote, “There is another world, but it is inside this one” (107). Speaking of her own apartment, Levy writes, “There were at least three other homes inside my London home” (125). Explore the concept of a life within a life. What homes and worlds exist inside of your own?

7. Rabindranath Tagore teaches, “It is very simple to be happy, but it is very difficult to be simple” (70). And Levy writes, “Most literature, like life, is about how to have less and how to have more” (65). Compare these two quotes. How does we balance this contradiction in our own life? After reading *Real Estate*, how do you notice this paradox in your life, if it all?

8. The “major” house of the narrator’s imagination is one of *Real Estate*’s main characters. By the end of the book, she decides to release her dream. Levy writes, “My unreal estate was losing its reality. As it wasn’t real anyway, maybe that was a good thing . . . It hurt to let go of my grand old house with the pomegranate tree in the garden, but I was prepared to consider it possible that, like my rented house, I would not fall apart” (197–98). In your opinion, what helps Levy reach this point of resolution? In your own life, what fantasies have you held onto? And which have you given up? We are taught how to grieve a person, but how do we grieve a dream?

9. (94). Explore how the narrator embraces her daughters’ freedom, and her own. How does she both mourn their absence and celebrate their independence? How do they do the same for her?

10. Levy reflects on the legacy of many writers and artists. In particular, she expresses a desire to visit the home of James Baldwin, who fled the United States in search of a less oppressive climate in France. Even though he was considered one of the century’s greatest thinkers, because he did not own it, his home was never memorialized after his death. Levy writes, “The house was not just a domestic space, it was a political space” (35). Discuss the ways in which the domestic and political are intertwined and informed by our political realities.

11. Discuss the quote: “If real estate were a self-portrait and a class portrait, it is also a body arranging its limbs to seduce” (7). What does this mean? In what ways is your own real estate each of these things? How do our own homes both represent us and tempt us to stray elsewhere?

12. The narrator lives between her real estate and her “unreal estate.” She has the opportunity to live in houses and flats across Europe and the Mediterranean that bring her immense joy. But she also remains attached to an ever-changing dream home—one that constantly shifts in size and appearance to suit her future needs. Her “unreal estate,” with its egg-shaped fireplace, lake access, and many rooms, reflects the priorities of her future self. It emanates warmth, calm, and communal spirit. Consider your own “unreal estate.” Where would you place it? What does it look like? Who is there? And what does this dream, however realistic, say about you?

13. As the narrator travels from home to home, she brings parts of her past along with her. The many individuals that she has been throughout time join her in every new space that she inhabits. As Mark Fisher writes, “Home is where the haunt is” (10). At times, she feels both celebrated and judged by her past selves. What are the inevitable benefits and costs of carrying our past from room to room? How do we build our homes to reflect aspects of our past?

14. In *Real Estate*, Levy writes, “It is hard to claim fragility and strength in equal measure, but that mix is what we all are” (180). In what ways do you too claim the softer or more forceful parts of yourself? How do you hold onto those parts when faced with judgement?

15. Examine the systems that have influenced your own self-image. In what ways do our dreams reflect what we believe we deserve?

Recommended Reading:

Things I Don't Want to Know by Deborah Levy; *The Cost of Living* by Deborah Levy; *Just Kids* by Patti Smith; the Outline trilogy by Rachel Cusk; *Motherhood* by Sheila Heti; *What Are You Going Through* by Sigrid Nunez