

INTRODUCTION

Entering the Whirlpool: commerce, politics, marriage and hearth

If, as a young aspirant writer in the early-to-mid 1990s, you raised your head and took a look around the British literary landscape, one figure stood out from all the others: Deborah Levy. Read two pages of her work, and it was instantly apparent that she was a writer as much at home within the fields of visual and conceptual art, philosophy and performance as within that of the printed word. She'd read her Lacan and Deleuze, her Barthes, Marguerite Duras, Gertrude Stein, and Ballard, not to mention Kafka and Robbe-Grillet – and was putting all these characters to work in new, exhilarating ways. Like the emotional and cerebral choreographies of Pina Bausch, her fiction seemed less concerned about the stories it narrated than about the interzone (to borrow Burroughs's term) it set up in which desire and speculation, fantasy and symbols circulated. Even commonplace objects took on eerie, intense dimensions, like Duchampian ready-mades or objects in dreams for Freud.

Swimming Home

So *And Other Stories* couldn't have landed a bigger catch to kick off their first year of publishing. If the setting and plot of *Swimming Home* are borrowed, almost ironically, from the staid English-middle-class-on-holiday novel, all similarities end there. The book's real drama plays out through blue sugar mice who scuttle from candy stalls into nightmares; or stones with holes in that turn into voyeuristic (or myopic) telescopes, then lethal weights, then, simply, holes. What holds this kaleidoscopic narrative together, even as it tears its characters apart, is – in classical Freudian fashion – desire: desire and its inseparable flip-side, the death drive. This comes embodied – nakedly, almost primordially, floating in the water to which it will return – in the figure of Kitty Finch, half doomed and daddy-obsessed Sylvia Plath, half post-breakdown Edie Sedgwick out of *Ciao! Manhattan*: volatile, imploding around a swimming pool. Lured towards her, and the vortex or whirlpool she mermaids at the side of, are the worlds of commerce, politics, marriage and hearth, and literature itself, as represented by two exotica traders, a war correspondent and a celebrated poet, all uneasily coupled. And, at the spectrum's far end, the teenage girl who will emerge as the novel's real protagonist, inheritor of its historical traumas.

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