

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Andrea Levy, *The Long Song* (Headline, 2010)

The Long Song, Andrea Levy's fifth novel and the much-anticipated follow-up to the multi-award winning *Small Island*, is essentially the fictional biography of a former Jamaican slave. The novel charts July's life from her conception as the child of a slave and a white overseer, through her 'abduction' by the plantation owner's wife, to her own involvement with a subsequent British overseer. The backdrop to these events is the Baptist War of 1831, the slaves' rebellion, and the final end of slavery on Jamaica; equally, the novel is about what life was like for slaves *after* slavery. We see one controlling system, slavery, replaced by another, capitalism. The story is told by the now elderly July. Levy states, in a piece at the end of the book, that 'Writing fiction is a way of putting back the voices that were left out' (318). July's frequent addresses to the reader strengthen this, although right from the start we know that her son is her editor, signalling that Levy is interested in going beyond linear, reliable narration. For this reason, *The Long Song* is a more interesting novel than *Small Island*. It shares that novel's emphasis on persuasive storytelling in accessible language; like the earlier novel, too, it shows that Levy is happy to make her central characters sometimes unsympathetic. At one point, overcome by jealousy, July has her lover Robert Goodwin served a large dish of cockroaches.

Slavery is not a new subject for fiction, although most of it is American: Levy is writing in the wake of Marlon James, Valerie Martin and Toni Morrison, although her tone and mode are refreshingly if curiously different. In '*The Writing of The Long Song*', Levy wonders: 'How could anyone write about slavery without turning it into a harrowing tale of violence and misery', commenting that every book on slavery she had read was 'not an easy read, with definitely little room for humour' (316). The unexpected if gentle humour is provided by July's complaints about her editor son, and the depiction of Caroline Goodwin, her mistress, as a once powerful but ultimately trapped, vain coquette. That said, the book is not short of horror and violence: we see July's mother Kitty hanged, and the detailing of gruesome punishments handed out to rebelling slaves.

In the period after slavery, when the former slaves remain nonetheless controlled and exploited, Robert marries Caroline. Their union is the subject of a painting which, July tells us, is not a reliable document and has been subject to change. Such is the case with July's narration, which is framed by the words of her son. Intriguing questions are raised here. He writes of her pleasure in the domestic realm; she complains about the tasks. When we think the narrative is over, July informs us that her son has demanded more; one large section of her life is not narrated, despite the protestations of her son. 'But why must I dwell upon sorrow?' she asks (305).

This brings us to some problems with the novel. July's voice, as the last quotation shows, is reminiscent of nineteenth-century narrators of the Brontë sort, with sentences frequently commencing with 'Reader ...' This is, possibly, an intentional pastiche, giving the authority of the nineteenth-century novel a new voice in a black slave. A typical extract is the following: 'Reader, my son tells me that this is too indelicate a commencement of any tale. Please pardon me, but your storyteller is a woman possessed of a forthright tongue and little ink' (7).

The voice charms and engages to ensure that we like the character; violence is related from a safe distance, in comfortable, accessible language that does not necessarily convince

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as the style of an elderly former slave. Of course, it is not, for her son is the editor. But there lies the problem.

Levy has given us a slave narrative in the form of a self-reflexive novel, a book with all the characteristics of recent British postmodern fiction: unreliable narrators, competing points of view, but something that is ultimately reader-friendly and accessible. The unfortunate outcome is that Levy's desire to bring forgotten voices to life does not achieve its goal, when the narration is held up for question by the end. Truth is dismantled, in favour of a strategy that is entertaining but by now rather tired.

It is tempting to judge Levy against the great Toni Morrison. *The Long Song* is not as powerful as the latter's novels, but it is clearly not attempting to compete. Andrea Levy appears to have been infected by the kind of novels Yann Martel and Lloyd Jones have produced in *Life of Pi* and *Mister Pip*, where the worst horrors of humanity are depicted, and then essentially dismissed by a message of charm and warmth, or a narrator whose voice is fallible. *The Long Song* is a curious thing: it is a lovely book about slavery, but nonetheless it is always engaging, and admirable in its fresh approach to familiar fictional ground. A good book? Yes. A great, innovative piece of art? No. But Levy deserves a wide readership, and many who find Morrison unpalatable will enjoy her work and learn something about Jamaican slavery at the same time, for, as the lengthy acknowledgements show, it is a well-researched book. It is also much better than the novel it lost out to in the 2011 Booker Prize, Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question*, and deserves its success.

Nick Turner