



Hot Milk

Deborah Levy

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Sofia, a young anthropologist, has spent much of her life trying to solve the mystery of her mother's unexplainable illness. She's frustrated with Rose and her constant complaints but utterly relieved to be called to abandon her own disappointing fledgling adult life. She and Rose travel to the searing, arid coast of southern Spain to see a famous consultant, Dr. Gomez--their very last chance--in the hope that he might cure Rose's unpredictable limb paralysis, but Dr. Gomez has strange methods that seem to have little to do with physical medicine, and as the treatment progresses, Rose's illness becomes increasingly baffling. Sofia's role as detective--tracking Rose's symptoms in an attempt to find the secret motivation for her pain--deepens as she discovers her own desires in this transient desert community.

Hot Milk Details

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From Reader Review Hot Milk for online ebook

Elaine says

3.75

I enjoyed a lot of this book, the prose and the odd feeling of dread, and the fabulous job of recreating a not very nice Spanish tourist town.

And I actually enjoyed that it is a book that gives you tons to chew over because you know that nothing is as it seems and all is about story telling. The book calls out continually to Greek myth, and the mother is a fabulist and the daughter an "ethnographer", a modern interpreter (and maker) of myth, and the healer seems focused on stories, not the body. The central figure of the Medusa (with the accompanying trope (so common in myth) of women's bodies as mutable, grotesque and monstrous), as well as the heroine's Greek heritage, remind us where Western story making began.

And also, that echoing line - "the dream is dead" -heard early and often in this book. Which dream? Our heroine's dream of a happy or redeemable childhood family, on the one hand, but also, the quintessentially English dream of an escape to a more temperate and fair Spain is dead as well, as so vividly realized in the nightmare landscape of the medusa-poisoned unswimmable sea beside a barren desert filled with slave-manned greenhouses, industrial plants and highways. Indeed, perhaps because I read it in the weeks after Brexit, the book seems to make a case that the dream of "Europe" is dead. Our heroine's absentee father, at one time a Greek immigrant to England, is back in Greece - all too literally not living up to his obligations/debts. Spain is paralyzed by unemployment, vividly embodied by the grad student beach attendant, and also by its own myth making (the doctor). The most vital character is a German woman - striding around in boots conquering men and women of all nations and industriously producing goods for export (really). (And because everything in Levy is always a bit overdetermined, the productive, seductive, modern, vigorous and powerful German has a shameful violent past that she'd rather not discuss). And our heroine's light at the end of the tunnel is grad school in the United States. Anyway, there's always all this STUFF in a Levy novel and sometimes the stuff is too much to sort out or tie together.

And sometimes also, the stuff is too little. As much as I enjoyed the book at times (including the final "twist" (a spiked little dagger)), I also got a little frustrated by the in-your-head-ness of it all. I'm glad to see women on the Booker list, as authors and as protagonists, but I would much rather read about a woman with agency. A grown-up woman. Ah well, still a very interesting read.

Fionnuala says

I've written a lot of book reviews recently in which alcohol had a leading role. It was unavoidable - I'd been reading the works of François Rabelais and Flann O'Brien, both of whom favour situations where quantities of beer and wine are consumed.

Goodreaders who follow my reviews may have had enough of such alcoholic ramblings so I thought I'd write about hot milk today for a change.

Not that I expect to find many goodreaders who like hot milk. Is there anyone who really finds hot milk palatable - unless it has chocolate powder mixed in. The hot milk I remember from childhood had no chocolate powder added. What it did have was a skin floating on top and I always considered that skin to be something quite horrible. The idea that the skin might touch my mouth was unbearable to contemplate. My

mother used to stir the milk and break up the skin but I still knew it was there and was certain I would feel it even though she insisted it wasn't there anymore. In any case, I stubbornly refused to drink the milk and she stubbornly persisted in offering it to me. She must have despaired that her daughter would ever grow up with good teeth and strong bones.

There's a stubborn mother and daughter duo in Deborah Levy's latest book, and many references to the strength of bones - though oddly enough there's no indication that any of the book's themes has anything to do with the title. I didn't find a single mention of hot milk but there are several references to warm milk as in breast milk, and also lots of references to heat since the events of the novel mostly happen along the jellyfish infested coastline of Almeria in southern Spain. A puzzle.

The book is a puzzle quite apart from the title. I understood the anthropology themes and the hypochondriac themes and the psychological themes around neglect and guilt but I had a feeling all the time that there was something else under the surface that I wasn't able to see but that I should be seeing. It unsettled me and affected my reading. My mother would have said it was all in my imagination and that there was nothing else there.

That old milk skin problem.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

Despite the multiple negative reviews on this one, including the New York Times review that describes this novel as wanting in narrative, I really loved this book! It just goes to show you that not every book is for every reader, and that we all look for different things when we read. I thought when I liked it and others didn't that it didn't have a shot for the Man Booker prize, but the day after I finished it, it was named to the shortlist for 2016.

"I am overflowing like coffee leaking from a paper cup. I wonder, shall I make myself smaller?
Do I have enough space on Earth to make myself less?"

I have read Deborah Levy before, but this is by far my favorite of hers. In the past I felt her playwright bent would sometimes dictate how she told a story, as if she was visualizing it in a staging sort of way. In this novel, the characters have rich and complicated internal lives. The way she writes them had traces of Jeanette Winterson in her earlier works, the always thinking and feeling characters where plot is secondary. And I mean that as a compliment, since Winterson remains in my top three authors and likely always will. So the style, the narrative, shall we say, really worked for me. The reader is left faced with either filling in the gaps or discovering that "what happens" isn't the point so much as the transformative journey of the inner lives.

"I am pulsating with shifting sexualities.
I am sex on tanned legs in suede platform sandals.
I am urban and educated and currently godless."

Other elements that made me enjoy this novel are the character having a background of anthropology (female anthropologists being a notable trend in several of my favorite reads.) There is something about the approach of anthropology, how it notices, how it attempts to gain an inside perspective, that makes it really work in internal dialogue.

"If anthropology is the study of humankind from its beginning millions of years ago to this day,
I am not very good at studying myself. I have researched aboriginal culture, Mayan hieroglyphics and the corporate culture of a Japanese car manufacturer, and I have written essays on the internal logic of various other societies, but I haven't a clue about my own logic.

Suddenly that was the best thing that ever happened to me."

I should also mention the impact of the the limited landscape of an unpleasant Spanish coastal town (where jellyfish fill the water and factories and concrete line the shore) and the element of an adult child dealing with the real or imagined illness of a parent. She captures the strangeness of a mother who demands attention, even from her child.

"Her symptoms do all the talking for her. They chatter all the time."

"I told her the beach was desolate and that I had been staring for two hours of a pile of gas canisters. It was my special skill to make my day smaller so as to make her day bigger."

ETA: After thinking about this one more, I'm raising my rating to five stars.

LeAnne says

A marbled white dome, its creamy walls veined with blue minerals, is the place of last resort for a mother-daughter pair looking for answers. It is a posh medical clinic set in an artificial oasis of flowers in the area of Andalusia, Spain. There are smaller yellowed domes also dotting the nearby Spanish desert, and inside them work migrants - slaves, really -who toil inside the geodesic greenhouses to bring about fruit where there should be none.

This dreamlike story is dotted with blatant symbolism throughout. It is as bold in its flaunting of mother's milk, the stars of the Milky Way, and the mythological pathos of the Greek family as the tale's protagonist is lacking in any boldness whatsoever. Sofia is a milquetoast, a submissive servant to her 67 year old mother who suffers from a yet-to-be diagnosed condition that numbs and paralyses her feet.

We learn that Sofia Papastergiadis is a degreed anthropologist who has stalled her doctoral dissertation to live as caregiver for her long-divorced mother, Rose, in England. Her father returned to Greece when Sofia was small, abandoning them financially, and Rose took on the role of both mother and father over the years. As her mother's physical condition has recently and sharply deteriorated, Sofie has not just paused, but abandoned her degrees and become a barista and waitress. Her experience at home makes her excellent at waiting on people. At waiting period.

When the two re-mortgage the house to travel to the pricey clinic on the dry, southern coast of Spain, Sofie must spend an entire summer waiting - doing nothing but swimming in the sea and waiting for her mother's treatments at the clinic to take hold. The oily waters are plagued with stinging jellyfish - medusas with long tentacles that still fire when separated from the body of their floating parental orbs. The recurring medusa jellyfish are the obvious tie to the snake-headed Medusa of Greek mythology, but what Sofia wants most is to use that sort of power to make the her mother's symptoms petrify and die so that she might be freed . But she is not bold enough, not bold at all. *"If I were to look at my mother just once in a certain way, I would turn her to stone. Not her, literally. I would turn the language of allergies, dizziness, heart palpitations and waiting-for-side-effects to stone. I would kill this language stone dead."*

Sofie's experiences on this strange geographical coastline are surreal, and she confuses little bits of reality. Is her mother, stuck in the wheelchair, really able to walk to the hair salon or did she merely dream it? She mistakes different women for men, misreads written words for those that are violently different, and is attracted to both a young female and a young male in the seaside village. Androgyny is referenced here and there in the story, and Ziggy Stardust comes into the tale several times. As the stinging medusas are, as the author puts it, "floating in a most peculiar way," so too is Sofie.

This is an exquisitely well written character study, and while our heroine is 25 years old, she is emotionally delayed in her development. I would call *Hot Milk* a coming of age story with the colors of blue and white playing mainstage with stabs of bright yellow popping in. Blue, venomous snakes and starfish appear in this sexually symbolic drama where even names have meaning. While it is not noted in the book, I noticed that the mother is an English Rose and the Greek Orthodox father is called Christos. Sofie's surname is unpronounceable by most, but it starts with the sound of 'Papa', and *aster* is the Greek stem word for "star." I think this author is far more clever than we know. This would be an outstanding choice for a college lit class. The overt symbolism is pure fun to identify but there is incredible depth too.

For those who might be put off by two women kissing (it is not Sofie and her mom, don't worry!), I'd say that it wasn't something I was at all expecting, but since the title is so obviously emblematic of the female breast, it fits. Hot milk is the sustenance we all live off as infants, and for a mother-daughter tale, the title is perfect. Considering the manipulation and complications of this particular relationship, however, there is one little trivial tidbit that is exceptionally fitting.

The story tells us that Sofie, a barista, has taken hours-long instruction in how to perfectly froth hot milk. But while it is not stated in the story, anybody working at a coffee house knows this: if you boil milk too long - it turns *acidic*.

There truly is some acid in **Hot Milk** and I loved it.

MJ Nicholls says

Debbie has passed from the cool and profitless corners of the unknown (where the finest books are published), to the Booker-nominated realm of mainstream presses who insist on insipid covers with bikini-clad women to flog their books to “markets” not readers. Despite this brutal shift, Debbie has not altered her lean poetic prose style, her steely Ballardian tone, and her panache for poking into the painful nooks of her damaged personnel. This short novel features a daughter chained to her hypochondriac mother, and a series of events that occur at a dubious Spanish medical resort where the mother seeks a salve for her ailing foot. Blackly humorous, compelling and sweltering with sorrowfulness, on a par with the brilliant *Billy & Girl* and *Swallowing Geography*. Drink from Debbie's teat tomorrow.

Amanda says

This is the fourth selection I have read from the 2016 Man-Booker longlist and it is my favorite so far.

Written in a dreamy, lyrical style rich in symbolism it tells the story of Rose and her daughter Sofia who are on an extended holiday in Spain to visit a clinic to cure Rose's physical (mental?) problems with her feet.

There is a whole cast of dysfunctional characters in this and the relationship between Rose and Sofia is fascinating.

Emma says

This whole novel feels like a dreamscape. From the outset, the voice of Sofia is out of sync with the real

world. Her thoughts tumble over each other, escaping in to connections that make sense only to her. Her interactions with other characters are stilted, rapid affairs in which each person seems to be having their own, separate conversations, with meaning only relevant to themselves. Being stung by a jellyfish only enhances and extends the feverish, fanciful narrative. It creates a bizarre, disjointed, and uncertain world that is intriguing and confusing and hypnotic. At times, it reminded me of *The Beach*, the reflection of a character lost in their own mind.

Levy has created an experience more than a novel, something to get lost in.

Many thanks to Deborah Levy, Penguin Books, and Netgalley for this copy in exchange for an honest review.

Elyse says

Questions I thought about....

Why is this story set in Southern Spain? And what's the connection of the location to the title of the book?

When I think of Southern Spain, I think of gorgeous beaches, bright blue skies, fluffy flamingo dresses, sangrias, and many vibrant cheerful healthy people.

When I think of "Hot Milk"... I think of a young child. I think about a warm white soothing drink before bedtime.....and sleeping and dreaming.

Our main characters are not vibrant, cheerful, or healthy (of sound mind and or body).
Turmoil cloud the skies -the beaches- and their thoughts.
There is an undercurrent theme of paralysis in this kaleidoscopic story.

Many alluring descriptions...dreamlike and symbolic trappings. I was able to link the connection between the location of Spain and the title -"Hot Milk"...but I had to keep thinking outside the box ...as this entire tale is a little offbeat with mystifying characters.

"I continue to unknot the old knots in my mothers laces and make new knots".

"Later, we swam naked in the warm night and he kissed every medusa sting on my body, the welts, the blisters, until I was disappointed there were not more of them. I had been stung into desire".

Sophia, anthropologist/barista ...has lost all focus on her own life...and is tied to her mother, Rose. Sophia can't image her mother ever walking along the beach. She identifies with her mother stuck in a wheel chair, unable to ever use her legs again to walk.

Her mother can't imagine her 25 year old daughter driving....(she has failed her drivers test 4 times). They are both so broken...lighting more fire to each other's already burning scars.

This is a powerful - well written novel....quick to read...but not so quick to immediately comprehend without some serious thinking.

Thank You Bloomsbury, Netgalley, and Deborah Levy

Robin says

Mothering, or lack of it, is at the heart of this eccentric, breast-laden book. Breasts everywhere, this is a bosomy paradise that features white, blue veined marble domed buildings, the tell-tale wet shirt of a nursing mother, a woman selling melons by the road, an entire scene that plays out with our heroine Sofia accidentally and unknowingly topless, and even the book's apt title. The female form is everywhere, reminding Sofia of the mothering she missed out on. The chesty symbolism protrudes from every other page.

It's understandable that Sofia feels un-nurtured. She's the spineless daughter of Rose, a narcissistic "career invalid" whose legs work intermittently, as if by whim. Sofia has abandoned her PhD anthropology degree (and pretty much everything else) to be at her mother's beck and call. No one can figure out what ails Rose. As a last resort, they re-mortgage the house and go to the prestigious Gomez Clinic in Spain, in the hopes that she can be cured.

I am my mother's burden. She is my creditor and I pay her with my legs. They are always running around for her.

This story is told in a dreamy yet accessible, stream-of-consciousness style. We are privy to pretty much every inner thought and observation of Sofia's. This is the telling of her internal transformation - a transformation coming a little late, at 25. She has taken on her mother so much that she feels her pain and even emits her (imagined) symptoms such as her limp. Eclipsed by her mother, Sofia does not know her own self yet, and has not come into her womanhood. This time in Spain is her chance to figure it out. Themes of androgyny and sexuality pervade the hot, seaside landscape. She has affairs with a man and a woman. She is also repeatedly stung by the nasty, placenta-shaped Medusa jellyfish.

The oddly wise "shaman" Dr. Gomez tells her that she lacks boldness. She ends up searching for it, by visiting her selfish and estranged father, and by deciding whether she is going to let her mother's illness mug her of her life and future.

My mother's feet are mostly on strike, but I'm not sure what she is negotiating for or what the deal breaker would be.

I loved my reading experience, seeing Sofia's transformation. I relished the journey all the way through to the 'deal breaker'. It was funny, clever, and rich with symbolism. Deborah Levy impressed me by evoking the complex inner world of these characters in a memorable and uniquely feminine way.

Bianca says

I am actually sorry I finished listening to this terrific novel. I found it hypnotic, dream-like and compelling. I should probably wait a little longer and ponder before I write my review, but that's not really my style.

This is a relatively complex novel, deceptive in its simplicity. It's filled with symbolism and it's wonderfully rich in characterizations and vivid descriptions.

Twenty-five year old Sofia is the carer of her sixty-four-year-old, hypochondriac mother, Rose, who's lost the ability to walk. She rules over Sofia and pushes her around. Sofia is an intelligent young woman, who's

abandoned her anthropology PhD, devoting herself to looking after her mother. She works in a cafe and sleeps in a room above the shop for five nights and lives with her mother the rest of the time. She's got nothing to her name. She's clueless, extremely passive and trapped.

The trip to the South of Spain to a very expensive private clinic run by Dr Gomez is the last resort for Sofia's mum. While there, Sofia has opportunities to explore her sexuality and discover things about herself. She also pays a visit to her Greek father and his new family. They haven't had any contact in over eleven years.

Sofia is fascinated with memory. She's an observer with an anthropologist's observational skills. She's not particularly skilled at applying those skills to herself, which is not unusual, most of us tend to look outwards more than inwards.

The time in Spain, the people and relationships that develop there bring on revelations and prompt Sofia to seek escape and change. Will she manage to pull herself out of this emotional entrapment?

I really liked this novel. Levy did a terrific job describing the complexities of a mother-daughter relationship and other types of connections. This is not for everyone, but it sure worked on/for me.

Jibran says

I abandoned it after a couple of chapters full of pure fluff. Couldn't muster enthusiasm for the narrator's voice. The prose is all over the place: wild interjections, rambling projections, forced humour, mythical-creature namedropping and heaven knows what else. I couldn't have imagined a start that's more off-putting.

Also, a humorous narration does not necessitate that all or most characters the protagonist deals with in the course of the story must be goofy half-wits acting against the faculty of reason right? If your purpose is to create humour out of verisimilitude, then make sure you don't make it sound forced, affected, unpersuasive, Bollywoody...

I clearly don't see what the judges have seen to put it on the longlist.

Some examples to back up my low rating:

She [mother] will wake up and shout, 'Get me water, Sofia,' and I will get her water and it will always be the wrong sort of water. I am not sure what water means any more but I will get her water as I understand it: from a bottle in the fridge, from a bottle that is not in the fridge, from the kettle in which the water has been boiled and left to cool.

Pure fluff.

Anything covered is always interesting. There is never nothing beneath something that is covered.

Beg your pardon?

The hum of the little fridge standing in the corner of the injury hut [on-site first aid] was like something dead and cold but with a pulse.

And the award for the most ridiculous simile goes to....

And then I noticed that the halter-neck strap of my bikini top had broken and my bare breasts were juddering up and down as I stamped about. The string must have snapped when I was swimming, which means that when I ran across the beach and into the injury hut I was topless.

Let me get this straight. So she runs across the beach to get emergency help for a jellyfish bite, the man there administers the salve and they have a little introductory chat, (sure, the man looks a little evasive and unfocused, but does not react), and all this while - for several long minutes - our protagonist is unaware that her bra has come off and that she's topless. You're such an innocent, sweet, naive girl, Sofia are you not...

All this from the first chapter, which is only 14 pages long. After that I stopped highlighting.

August '16

Trish says

In light of Elaine's review, I rewrote my initial snarky take on this novel and posted to my blog. To get full enjoyment from this novel, I urge you to see what a reread will do for you.

Below is my original review.

This short novel feels too long. An anthropologist, Sofia, quits working on her PhD ostensibly to care for her mother, who is unable to walk. No explanation can be found for the mother's malady so mother and daughter travel to Spain in hopes a specialist there may be able to elicit a cure.

Long-listed for the Man Booker Prize, this novel comes after a long history of successful poetry, novels, and screenplays by Levy, so we are primed to find it praiseworthy. And it is, but she very nearly tips us into the deep, endlessly cycling the trauma of caring for someone apparently suffering a psychosomatic illness.

There is something we are meant to pay attention to: the notion that some people would never consider doing things that are not to their own advantage. The idea arises again and again in the course of the novel, first explicitly stated when the daughter visits her estranged and happily remarried father to ask for financial assistance or, at the very least, moral support for her efforts to care for his first wife. He refuses, and his new wife snorts with derision that he would consider doing any thing *not* to his advantage.

Women—wives, mothers, daughters, sisters--often do things not strictly in their best interests. They do it out of love, usually, or say they do. But when one is the head of one's own household, one is responsible for oneself—to oneself—to manage, to persist, to succeed. [Truthfully, and this is completely unrelated to the book, I know a woman who takes care of herself before everyone else and she is one pain in the *caborum*.]

(view spoiler)

There is more in this novel: a kind of forbidden love with a luscious, unstable blond of German descent and a lustful affair with the tent supervisor for jelly-fish stings. There are fabulous white-white sheets (must get some of those), blue embroidery thread that spells out a misunderstood and potentially dangerous message, and a leather-booted horse trainer. There is a doctor of the psyche and his sexy Sunny daughter, to say nothing of a pregnant white cat and a chained dog who howls whether or not he is leashed. It all has the tone of a late-adolescent fling about it. Good for some...

There is nothing wrong with a little fun in the sun—I feel like I missed my beach getaway this year so may sound a little dour about the descriptions of daily swimming and tan lines. Maybe it all could have been said in a poem, or a screenplay that features a stage covered in dunes with a backdrop of bluest ocean and a sliver of sky. The claustrophobia of that setting would mirror how I felt revolving in the confusion of Sofia's mind. When finally the doctor tells Sophia, "Your confusion is willful," we echo his diagnosis and frustration.

There is a twist at the end which will thrill some readers. Being who I am, however, it didn't surprise me. But that's just my sour nature coming out. I have only read a couple Booker Long List nominees so far, but I guess this wouldn't be at the top of my list.

Vanessa says

Okayyy.....This book is really strange, the setting is beautiful and transports you to another ethereal place however the story feels fragmented almost as if Sophie is living in a deamlike trance removed from reality, the most perplexing thing is the dialogue. The stilted conversations the unusual randomness of the questions, it's like everyone is infected by the same tap water or something which makes everyone act so strangely or perhaps the scorching Mediterranean sun is to blame. None of the situations felt real or believable but this book has an uncanny ability to draw you in and it's almost hypnotic you can't look away. I found Sophie the most strange she has this childlike quality despite her academic credentials. The codependent relationship between mother/daughter is the main theme, and the ties that bind Sophie with her mother who is quite a ball and chain dragging Sophie through the mud via her neurotic imagined illnesses. The imagery is quite savage despite the idyllic location and the whole book is dotted with symbolic references some easier to comprehend than others, it may take a few readings for me to grasp exactly what the writer is trying to convey here but it was strangely compelling and I was intrigued throughout. Can't decide between a 3 or a 4 rating so I give it 3.5

Srividya says

"Who am I?" she asked,
"What am I?" she pondered
Bound by the chains of responsibility,
Dragged down by the burden called life,
Meaning and purpose, lost forever,
Existing for another, with no choice
I ask myself, what am I?

Am I just a daughter?
Or merely a lowly employee?
What is my status?
What are my rights?

Where lies my purpose?
Where lies my meaning?
Do I even have a right?

An extension is all I am,
An extension to the limbs of another
Born into this life I was
Borne with love, I thought
Mysteries surround me,
Surreal and unpronounceable ones, I feel,
Just like my last name,
The only thing that marks my fame,
Unpronounceable as it is,
It's also something I inherited,
Am I the person I think I am
Or am I the person the world believes me to be?
Who am I, asked Sophie, with an unpronounceable last name,
Just tell me, who I am!

I came into this world through love,
I came into this world to be loved,
How then did I lose what was mine?
How then did life change the way it did?
Star crossed lovers, I can understand;
But star crossed family? o please explain,
Why did this love change?
Where did this love disappear?

Why is there nothingness around?
Where did it all go wrong?
When did it all go wrong?
Why did it all go wrong?
Questions and questions are all I have,
As answers, they only stay hidden,
Some answers beget more questions,
While some are best confusing.
Who am I, o please tell me,
What am I, o please let me know.

And so, begins Deborah Levy's book, *Hot Milk*. A book that is not so much a story as much as it is a journey. A journey seeking a better understanding of the purpose and reason for existence. A journey that is full of bittersweet memories, angst and complete disillusionment that comes only through rejection. Who am I, is perhaps the most important question that Sophie asks throughout this book. This 'I' constitutes her *raison d'être* for living, her own sexuality, her needs and wants, which are often not met but most importantly, this 'I' is a need to find her place in her family. What role does she play in the lives of her parents, is perhaps the most important question she has.

Abandoned by a father at a tender age, Sophie loses meaning of the word family quite early in her life. Living with a hypochondriac mother increases her angst and pain as she often feels like she is an extension of her mother's limbs. Levy's hypnotic writing takes us deep into Sophie's psyche, where she is often looking at others for either approval or leadership. Just as our limbs don't move without a direct command from the brain, so also does Sophie not act, unless someone has asked her to specifically do something.

Often one feels that Sophie isn't ready to come out of that cocoon in which she has been smothered and chained by her mother's hypochondriasis. Rather than emerge like a butterfly, she seems content in that caterpillar stage, which is more comforting and more importantly it is the known. Setting out to find a cure for her mother's mysterious illness brings Sophie to a stage where she must come out of that cocoon.

The dilemma that Sophie faces, when asked by the doctor treating her mother to leave her mother alone for the days she spends in the hospital, is truly heartrending. As someone who has always been independent in thought as well as action, it was difficult for me to comprehend or even empathise with a person like Sophie. However, when she was at this crossroad, my heart truly went out to her, for here was a person who has never ever had candy and was given entry into a candy store. Where would she go? What would she do? How would she live? All those questions came into my mind and Sophie's. Ms. Levy set an impeccable stage for Sophie to look beyond being an entity or an extension and seek the knowledge and courage that will make her independent. Whether Sophie succeeds in getting what she wants is not as important as the road that she travels when searching for what she wants.

How often in life do we come to a crossroad where we feel as lost as Sophie? Or to make it more comfortable to all those who don't like to introspect, how often do we come to a stage where we are quite confused? Various triggers can enable this confusion, including, job, studies, relationships, just about anything. Now imagine a person having this confusion in all spheres at the same time? We would call him or her a poor soul and leave it at that, but that poor soul is what Sophie depicts. Understanding a person's psyche goes beyond the surface into the deep dark corners of our own self and I must say that Ms. Levy has done a great job of portraying that confusion, that dilemma, that feeling of being lost, so beautifully that you often have tears in your eyes. Even when the rambling is weird, she manages to bring out the dichotomy that Sophie faces, whether it is her own sexuality or her own place in the family or her place in the world at large. Each step she takes brings her towards understanding herself better and towards gaining the confidence to emerge out of that cocoon and fly like a butterfly.

Ms. Levy's book is not for those who are looking to read a happy or even a sad story with a proper beginning, middle and end. When I say this, I do not mean that this book doesn't have all that. It has all that but its true beauty lies in the deeper meaning that can only be sought by ignoring the surface and plunging deep. Allowing yourself to be transported into Sophie's world, her brain, her heart, her mind, is perhaps the best way to truly understand and love this book. I must say that Ms. Levy's prose truly did that for me. She held me under a spell for the entire time and even today, days after finishing the book, I am still under that spell.

Let me leave you with a small quote by **Betty Freidan** that perhaps best describes and is the answer to the millions of Sophies that exist today;

"It is easier to live through someone else than to complete yourself. The freedom to lead and plan your own life is frightening if you have never faced it before. It is frightening when a woman finally realizes that there is no answer to the question 'who am I' except the voice inside herself."

Maxwell says

I just didn't really get this one. Nice writing, but the story was all over the place and the dialogue was unnatural.

Helene Jeppesen says

4.5/5 stars.

This book takes place in Spain and for that alone I loved it. I felt like drying in the sun, swimming in the blue water and hearing the seagulls cry while reading and it was bliss.

As soon as I dived into the story - which is about a hypochondriac mother and her daughter who have gone to Spain to find a cure - I realized that this was going to be a quirky story, written beautifully. Deborah Levy makes sure that every dot is connected without making it too obvious, and therefore it is up to the reader to be alert and observant - I like those kinds of books.

Sofia, the protagonist, was amazing. Even though she finds herself in a kind of void in her life, I wish I had been more like her when I was her age. I also loved how both of them are from England so that there is a natural contrast between the blue skies of Spain and the rainy days of England.

Bravo! This was just the quirky and deep kind of story I needed and I'm a fan! Also, I need to visit Spain someday; as long as I don't encounter a medusa fish :D

Andrew Smith says

Sophia is twenty-five years old and possesses the dark Mediterranean looks of her Greek father. She's clever too – in the academic sense, at least – having completed a master's degree in Anthropology. She's currently working in a London coffee shop whilst struggling to finish her doctoral thesis. So a trip to southern Spain to accompany her mother, who is seeking a cure for a mystery debilitating illness, seems like just the ticket.

Whilst there, she swims and fetches water (always the 'wrong' water) for her mother. The rest of the time she spends studying her mother's symptoms, looking for clues to unlock the mystery of her inability to use her legs. We are introduced to some interesting characters: the unorthodox Dr. Gomez and lifeguard Juan, who is regularly called upon to smear soothing ointment to combat her many jellyfish stings, amongst them. In time Sophia meets Ingrid and a mutual attraction quickly develops.

This is a clever book. I did expect the dialogue to be intelligent, and sometimes funny, because I'd found that to be the highlight of her last novel, *Swimming Home*. And it certainly didn't disappoint in this respect. But I'd also found her last book to be a little soulless, inhabited by characters I found hard to engage with, and I found that to be the case here too. But it's a relatively quick read and I think many will appreciate the well observed study of the mother and daughter relationship that's at the core of this story.

My thanks to Penguin Books (UK) and NetGalley for providing an early copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Diane S ? says

So I finished this book, am shaking my head and thinking what a strange little book this was. Additionally I am sure that there is much I have missed in symbolism and a deeper meaning I am just not getting. A mother and a daughter, either the mother is very ill or using her illness as a passive aggressive gesture? A 25 year old daughter, who has delayed her thesis in order to take care of her mother, a seriously bad co-dependent relationship. The daughter does not have much in the way of gumption, allows herself to be mistreated by her mother, has problems standing up for herself. A clinic in Spain, last ditch effort to find out what is wrong with the mother. Is the clinic's doctor, call me Gomez, a brilliant clinician or a fraud? So in Spain, much changes, and the strangeness begins.

Unlikable characters form the most part, a dreamlike vibe from the story, wonderful writing but a book open to each person's own interpretations. I seriously can't predict how other readers will feel about this one, not even sure how I feel about it.

ARC from Netgalley.

Hugh says

A haunting, enigmatic and dreamlike story analysing a daughter's relationship with her mother and the damage they inflict on one another.

On the surface not much happens - Sofia accompanies her mother Rose to a desert beach resort in Spain where they attend a local clinic to find the mysterious ailment that prevents her mother walking, and has various affairs interspersed with a visit to her Greek father and his new family. The surface story is insignificant but full of symbolic resonances. Like Ali Smith, Levy is very perceptive at identifying connections, and her characters are fully realised, and she fully inhabits their psychological dilemmas.

I am struggling to convey what is great about this book and why I enjoyed it - it is full of striking sentences and observations, often slippery and cryptic, but never hard to read, and it would make a worthy Booker winner. I will certainly be reading more Levy.

Rebecca Foster says

"My love for my mother is like an axe. It cuts very deep." This is a most unusual mother-daughter story, set on the southern coast of Spain. Twenty-five-year-old Sofia Papastergiadis has put off her anthropology PhD to accompany her mother, Rose, on a sort of pilgrimage from their home in England to Dr. Gómez's clinic to assess what's wrong with Rose's legs. What I loved about this novel is the uncertainty about who each character really is. Is Rose an invalid or a first-class hypochondriac? Is Dr. Gómez a miracle worker or a quack who's fleeced them out of 25,000 euros?

As a narrator, Sofia pretends to objective anthropological observation but is just as confused by her actions as we are: she seems to deliberately court jellyfish stings, is simultaneously jealous and contemptuous of her Greek father's young second wife, and sleeps with both Juan and Ingrid. "Am I self-destructive, or pathetically passive, or reckless, or just experimental, or am I a rigorous cultural anthropologist, or am I in love?" she wonders.

Levy imbues the novel's relationships with psychological and mythological significance, especially the Medusa story. I don't think the ending quite fits the tone, but overall this is a quick read. At the same time,

it's such an odd story that it will keep you thinking about the characters. A great entry from the Booker shortlist.

A few more stand-out lines:

"I want to get away from the kinship structures that are supposed to hold me together. To mess up the story I have been told about myself. To hold the story upside down by its tail."

Ingrid to Sofia: "Everyone is a field study to you. It makes me feel weird. Like you are watching me all the time."

Gómez to Sofia: "You are using your mother like a shield to protect yourself from making a life."

"I did not need to go to Samoa or Tahiti like Margaret Mead to research human sexuality. The only person I have known from infancy to adulthood is myself, but my own sexuality is an enigma to me."
