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Foreword

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In 1999, shortly before I went to Dublin to interview the Irish writer Roddy Doyle about his new book *A Star Called Henry* (1999), I went for lunch with Andrea Levy. Chatting about what I had learned while preparing for the interview, I pointed out that Doyle had never lived or worked more than about three miles from his childhood home in the suburb of Kilbarrack, on which *The Barrytown Trilogy* was based. "I find that quite suspicious," I said. Andrea had a keen ear for pomposity. To her mind this qualified as such, and she wasted no time in upbraiding me. "What is so inherently great about moving around and living in different places?" she asked. I put it to her that curiosity should drive people, particularly intellectuals, to seek out new places and discover new people, and I found it odd when it didn't. It could, she replied, but there was value in remaining in one place and getting to know it, and there was nothing more suspicious in doing that than going looking for something else without fully exploring the environment that formed you. (She did not buy my insistence that just because I found something suspicious didn't mean I'd found someone guilty. But that didn't stop me trying to sell it.) Hers was a valid point on its own merits. But it took me a while to realise that we were having this conversation less than three miles from Andrea's childhood home by the Arsenal Stadium and that, to my knowledge, she had spent most of her life around there. All of her books up to that point—*Fruit of the Lemon* (1999) had just come out—were at least in part set there. North London was both her home and her raw material.

This had never occurred to me, thematically. I had enjoyed her books for their focus on working-class black life as experienced by Caribbean migrants and their children, the various identities that emerge from

those experiences, and the intergenerational and social challenges that come with them. Each novel had a strong sense of place, or rather places, but all spoke to me for their far stronger sense of a more abstract belonging, or struggle to belong, that went beyond place. I had considered her cosmopolitan, and she was—not so much in terms of travel and being untethered, but having a range of interests and associations that were not geographically limited. Jamaica was always an important character in her books, even when it didn't present itself directly. In the time that I knew Andrea we spoke often, and engagingly, about America, where I lived for most of that period. She lobbied hard, right up to the end of her life, for broadcasters in particular to provide fuller, more layered coverage of the Caribbean. In regard to documentaries about the Caribbean, especially in a British context, Andrea lamented that broadcasters would often say, "Oh we did one of those last year or a few years back." Her response: "How many documentaries have they run about World War Two or Churchill?"

But I hadn't considered that she might also be parochial, and she was that, too. She was rooted in and never strayed far from North London for much of her literary material and most of her personal life. She wasn't small-minded or uninterested, but instead was emphatically local and arguably more content to burrow deeper into what was familiar than to venture to new terrain. "I was not at all curious about Jamaica as a child," she told me when I interviewed her before the release of *The Long Song* (2010): "We were told, not in so many words, to be ashamed of it" (Levy, "'I started to realize'"). She only discovered that her father came over on the *Empire Windrush* when the ship was shown on television and her dad casually mentioned his journey while ironing.

Her cosmopolitan and parochial impulses were not contradictions: they were complementary. She was both. But the tension between these strands of her intellect and aspiration played out in her work and is one of the things that makes her writing unique. Put bluntly, working-class black women are not supposed to write books of literary merit. Agents, we are told, do not know how to sell them; publishers don't know how to edit or market them; readers do not know how to read them; reviewers don't know how to write about them. And yet there she is on the

bestseller lists, on the curricula, and in the canon. The woman who, in our 2010 interview, described her younger self as "[t]his girl who had 'shop girl' written right the way through her" (Levy, "'I started to realize'"), before emphasising "shop girl" while acting out writing the words on her forehead.

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In *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), Primo Levi reflects on what it takes to emerge from trauma with the capacity to articulate what you have been through: "[W]e, the survivors, are not true witnesses. . . . We survivors are not only an exiguous but an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute" (82–83). The Holocaust carries its own specific gravity and portentousness that does not bear comparison lightly. But the notion that the deeper people descend down hierarchies of power and suffering the less likely we are to hear from them resonates more widely. We have few terms of reference for the literary voice of someone designated "shop girl" at an early age—and even fewer, in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s, when she is black. (It is worth noting that Maya Angelou initially struggled to find a British publisher for *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* [1969]). From this category, Andrea is part of a "tiny but anomalous minority" who returned with words. Her sense of urgency to clear and occupy the space to be heard was always apparent. As I wrote in my *Guardian* eulogy, it was a significant impulse we shared: "Our connection was primarily rooted in our experiences as black writers from working-class backgrounds who were ambitious about our work but deeply sceptical about the culture of the professions we had chosen and bloody-minded about our desire to define achievement on our own terms" (Younge).

But since then I have become aware that she voiced those ambitions quite explicitly, if (at the time) privately. Her widower and my friend, Bill Mayblin, showed me a handwritten note from 5 July 1989 in which she rhetorically asks a range of questions about her identity and repeats the refrain "[t]he feelings of unbelonging are strong" before going on to

spell out what she wants to achieve in her writing (Levy, Personal Note). It is a deeply personal statement of validation, self-validation, exploration, and explanation. She wrote:

> I feel the need to articulate my life and feelings. I feel this need very, very strongly. I want people to understand the world through my eyes. I want it to help others and just shed a little light on life from my point of view. I want to be listened to. Respected. No I need to be listened to and respected. I need to be creative. I need to make something of myself in 'their' eyes as well as my own. (Personal Note)

It brought me to the brink of tears to realize that I had known her well, but never quite known this.

Andrea needed to write to satisfy her own ambition. But she also needed to do it because she had, up until that point, limited—if any—opportunity to see the world as understood through her eyes. Clearly, we can enjoy her books for their literary merit. Yet it is also clear that they have had the impact they've had because we have seen so few of her kind. This, I believe, is what trained her ear for expressions of pomposity, including from those close to her. It's also what necessitated a clear distinction between parochialism and small-mindedness, as well as cosmopolitanism and open-mindedness, in the conversation we were having: there is nothing, she stressed, intrinsically better about people who move than people who don't. Through force of will, talent, resilience, and sheer stubbornness she certainly managed to "shed a little light on life from [her] point of view." She also managed to escape the confines of class proscription and forge a different path. She had been on this path from the beginning, but was only in a position to claim that space with *Small Island* (2004). In our 2010 interview she described her first few books as her "baton race": "I'm a writer learning my craft and gaining in confidence or not. So that was the person who I was. Then you write the next one. Anyone reading my books could say, 'Well, she got a dictionary there,' and 'She got a thesaurus at this point'" (Levy, "'I started to realize'"). It was when Andrea was judging the Orange Prize for Fiction in 1997 that she began to shift the scope and scale of her

work. The process enabled her to see how her own writing had a distinct place in the world. "I suddenly understood what fiction was for," she said. "I had to read books that I wouldn't have necessarily read. I had to read them well and I had to read them in a short space of time. Back to back. Annie Proulx and Margaret Atwood and Beryl Bainbridge and Anne Michaels—boom, boom, boom. And I started to realise what fiction could be. And I thought, wow! You can be ambitious, you can take on the world—you really can" ("'I started to realize'").

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