BOOK CLUB EXPRESS

Douglas County Libraries

Long Island Compromise
by Taffy Brodesser-Akner

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Review

So you've chosen Long Island Compromise for your book club! I can't tell you how grateful I am for it, and how much I hope it's better than the one you chose last month, and that Trish doesn't get too drunk again! The book has plenty for you to talk about—to debate, to be anguished over, to enjoy or not enjoy. That's the magic of a book club, to openly discuss these matters together without the author hearing or the world weighing in. I've been asked to contribute some ideas for your book club, but I think I'm the exact wrong person to talk about the book. I've had my say. Instead, I'll tell you that I've just come from a tour around the country, and that I was always surprised by the questions I got. By the second week of my journey, people who showed up to my readings had sometimes read the book, and their insight and feedback always floored me. I've been the gracious recipient of an audience that rounds up on me, that thinks my messiest sections were intentional—but that's readers, right? The reader wants to love, which is why my authority is the last word. But it's not. This is your book now. I have primacy in it, but it's time for me to shut up. I've had my say. Instead, I'll just give you some background: I began writing Long Island Compromise in 2014, when I was on a trip to Russia to report a magazine story about the U.S.'s only male synchronized swimmer. I had come to the point in my career where I realized that there was no amount of success as a journalist that would lead to true solvency, that the middle class really was at its end, that there was no future where my hard work led to security. The rage of this presented itself to me whole. I wrote the first 70 pages of this book right there, in a matter of days, between synchronized swimming events in an aquatic arena. It wasn't to be my first book, though. For reasons better left for another time, I ended up writing Fleishman Is in Trouble. But on the day I handed in the last pass of that book, I returned to the story of the Fletchers, a wealthy family from Long Island who find that their fortune has suddenly dwindled to nearly nothing, and they're left to wonder who they would be if they didn't have their money. I wanted to explore whether inherited wealth dooms you in a way—if it's better to come from money and have the perception of safety or if a person is better off having to learn how to fight for their own survival. It's a good question, and one I tried to answer in this book. However, it wasn't the whole story. Questions of another kind of inheritance—inherited trauma—kept tapping on my shoulder, and the book came alive when I finally turned to those questions and let them take control of the story. Who are we without our money is a good question, but who are we without our trauma? That was the question for me. Long Island Compromise is my best attempt at an answer to all those questions with a good story. I hope it makes you laugh and cry. I hope it makes you ask yourself questions about your own prejudices and proclivities about money, family, and forgiveness. I hope you love Mandy Patinkin as much as I do. And I hope at some point I'll get to hear what you thought of it. Whatever happens at your meeting, I hope it's a great one that engenders the best discussion, the most violent enthusiasm, the best cheese and crackers. Please make sure Trish gets home safe. My gratitude forever, TAFFY

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever known a family like the Fletchers? What were they like? What myths were built around them?

2. Reflecting on the Fletcher family's story, how do you think the title Long Island Compromise relates to the novel's exploration of trauma, wealth, family dynamics, and the pursuit of happiness? What does the idea of "compromise" signify in the context of the family's journey?

3. The Fletcher family is portrayed as resuming their "prized places in the saga of the American dream" after Carl's return. Discuss how the novel examines the concept of the American dream through this family's experiences. Do you think their understanding of the dream changes over time? How has your family defined the American dream?

4. What elements of satire did you notice in the portrayal of suburban life, wealth, and family dynamics? How do these satirical elements contribute to the novel's commentary on American society?

5. How does money stunt each character? How does it enable them? How have feelings about money influenced you and your own relatives?

6. "But all that money was like the white-picket fence around the Fletcher estate: It obscures the view. You couldn't see the Fletchers clearly through the mist of their fortune." What do you make of this statement? What are other traits or factors that can make it hard to see people clearly?

7. The family fortune dwindling to almost nothing forces the Fletcher family to confront their past and future. Discuss how wealth (or the lack of it) influences each family member's sense of identity and success. How does the discovery at the end of the book complicate this even further?

8. The theme of survival is recurrent throughout the novel, with the family hovering "at the delicate precipice of a different kind of survival." Discuss the different forms of survival depicted in the book and what they reveal about the characters and their values.

9. "A dybbuk was a miserable soul that could not progress to a heavenly rest and instead stayed on Earth and infested something—a person or a thing—or it took on a life as a disembodied ghost, in order to do its final bidding and cause as much chaos as possible." Do you believe there was a dybbuk in the works in the Fletcher family? Discuss. Is there a curse or haunting in your own family line?

10. A major question this book asks is whether or not money can ever buy you security and safety. Do you think it can?

11. Does your family have shared heritage—or shared trauma—that manifests in different ways in different family members? What factors do you think contribute to this difference?

12. If the family had taken time to process the kidnapping after it happened, what do you think might have changed for the Fletchers?

13. By the end of the story, did you arrive at an answer to one of the novel's central questions: Is it better to be born with money or without?

Author Interview

In Long Island Compromise, Taffy Brodesser-Akner Considers the 'Pernicious' Nature of Trauma

by Luna Adler

Taffy Brodesser-Akner sits at a cloth-draped table in early June at the Upper West Side's Cafe Luxembourg. She orders coffee, and then more coffee; the evening prior, she'd lost 1,000 words of a draft for The New York Times and stayed up until 4:30 a.m. rewriting it because her editor needed "proof of life." Her youngest son is graduating from the eighth grade today, so she's good-naturedly waiting for a phone call saying he's wearing the wrong thing, which she anticipates will come "when it's too late." And she has another meeting directly after this one to receive notes on a screenplay. Not the screenplay for the TV adaptation of her second book, which we are here to discuss, and whose Apple series she will write and executive-produce, but a separate project. This author—known for her scintillating celebrity profiles; best-selling debut novel, Fleischman Is in Trouble; and for writing and executive-producing the Emmy-nominated FX series of the same name—is remarkably cheerful considering how much she has going on.

Brodesser-Akner's 464-page, multi-perspective second novel, Long Island Compromise, was clearly written by a masterful juggler. The book features the Fletchers, a Jewish-American family whose progenitor fled Poland during the Holocaust, and who have since become devastatingly rich off a code-violating polystyrene factory. We meet the family patriarch, Carl, in 1980, just as he is being kidnapped from his Long Island driveway. (If you think you have a horrific LaGuardia story, consider that of his wife, Ruth, who drives her emotionally dysregulated son and $250,000 in out-of-sequence bills to the airport in her Jaguar for a chaotic ransom drop.) Carl is returned home relatively unscathed—but when we are reacquainted with the Fletchers, nearly 40 years later, it's evident that the family has been trying to escape the resulting waves of trauma ever since.

What ensues is a far-ranging story that contains a dominatrix with a missing tooth, a charlatan psychic, a broker who favors a kangaroo-based diet, and a side plot that centers on the absurd intricacies of land-use rights.

Vogue sat down with Brodesser-Ackner to discuss money, messiness, and the fragility of goldendoodles.

Vogue: In a 2015 Longform interview, you said that you experienced a traumatic first childbirth but didn't want to write about it for fear of being pigeonholed. A few years later, I read Fleishman Is in Trouble and thought it was brilliant how you Trojan Horse-d birth trauma into the center of the book.

Taffy Brodesser-Akner: You could look at it like that…I'll take anything that's misinterpreted as brilliant…[But] the nature of trauma is that I didn't mean to write that…I didn't want to write a pastel-colored book that would make me into—I think the phrase I used was "the sad birth lady"— because I was so at the beginning of my career…[But trauma] just keeps coming up. It comes up when you are walking down the street and it comes up when you see a stroller and it comes up when someone tells you their birth story and it comes up when you're just typing. It's so pernicious.…We work so hard to get over things and I don't think we ever do.

V: As you were writing through the issue of trauma in Long Island Compromise, did your perspective on how we live with—or incorporate—it shift?

TB-A: A thing I came to was the idea that your trauma isn't just a thing that happens to you. It's the thing you are primed for, combined with the thing that happens to you. I have a sister who's had seven kids. And I have a sister who's had three kids, and I have a sister who has one kid. My mother had four kids. And I kept wondering, Has this ever happened to anybody that I know? How could this only have happened to me? And I've come to the conclusion that it's happened to a lot of people I know, but it doesn't destroy them. And what are the ingredients in my life that led to that being my destruction? Your trauma is a disease of specificity. It comes for you in this moment and it knows where you live.

And there's this idea in Long Island Compromise where [the characters] come to the end of their journey together and they realize they never stood a chance. And the healing only begins when they realize that, though part of the healing is realizing that you might never heal. That, after trauma, you could fight it or you could live with it. And I know that's a grim view, but it's actually also a little optimistic.…When you realize that it was your circumstances and not just the thing that happened to you, you're set free in a way.

V: There's this refrain in Long Island Compromise: "It happened to your body and not to you." Where did that come from?

TB-A: I knew someone who had been raped. I heard about it years later and I said to her, "How are you doing with it?...Why do you seem so okay?" She told me the story of it and it was horrific, as all rapes are, and this one extra. That night, someone told her, "This happened to your body. This didn't happen to you." I couldn't get that out of my head. What if I had thought that in my birthing room, for example? I wonder if that could have changed anything for me, I wonder if I would've believed it, I wonder if it's possibly true. But the thing I land on is, what's the difference? Where do you stop? And, if you're not your body, what are you—your soul? I don't know. I don't know about the soul. I don't have any sort of tangibles about the soul.

V: It seems very hard to parse.

TB-A: Yeah. And also, how do you find out? You only find out once it's too late. If you're going to find out, it's going to be too late; you won't be able to write a novel about it. You won't be able to call up your interviewer and change your answer. So what's the point?

V: A lot of your work—from your Gwyneth Paltrow profile to your latest novel—feels like it's examining messiness versus a façade of order. Has your relationship with messiness changed during your career?

TB-A: When I first started out freelancing, I worked very hard to pretend I didn't have children and that if you knew about them, they wouldn't be a problem. My hair was always blown out. And then I saw what people responded to in my writing and I realized no one needs even an attempt at cleanliness or perfection from me. That's not what I have to offer.

So I think I had the same relationship [with messiness] that I hope you eventually will have…When you've gone through the degradations of school orientations with other school moms that you realize you're trying to get to like you, even though you're in your 40s; when you've given birth; when you've had a mole removed. Everything contributes to [the realization that] it is okay that things are this way. What a relief that is. That's why I don't understand why youth is marketed to us as this wonderful thing. My memories of my 20s, and even a lot of my 30s, is fear of rejection and fear of not being liked. And now I think I still have a fear of rejection, a fear of not being liked, but I find it interesting as opposed to devastating.

V: There are so many niche hobbies and careers in Long Island Compromise. What was the weirdest rabbit hole you found yourself in?

TB-A: I have two very close friends who are land-use lawyers. And I've overheard enough of their jobs to be like, This is completely absurd. I'm going to use it. So I wrote a plot that, based on what I knew about land use, had to have been true. And they both read it and they're like, "Yes, this is close to true." Which means it's as absurd as I thought...So I'm excited to engage with the land-use lawyers of the world.

But I think the most interesting thing I learned about was from my friend Elisha Goldberg, who taught me enough about finance for me to start out with the question: How does money work? How could this family lose their money? And I came to understand that you can't lose your money if you're wealthy enough in 2024 or 2017, which is when the book takes place. It's too diversified. Unless you are completely irresponsible, you can't really lose your money. And when I figured that out, which was, like, nine drafts into the book, the book ended. The book was not a publishable book until I came to that conclusion. And then I realized, Oh, my God, the whole thing is that you can't lose your money.

V: And here I thought we were going to discuss the merits of a kangaroo-based diet.

TB-A: I mean, that stuff I did not need to research….I have a goldendoodle and he's allergic to everything. And my sister, a veterinarian, said, "Try kangaroo." So there's a company in Brooklyn that delivers us kangaroo once every two weeks. It is perhaps the highest line item on my profit and loss sheet. But we love this dog.

V: Goldendoodles are fragile.

TB-A: Goldendoodles probably shouldn't exist.

V: Didn't the person who first bred doodles regret it?

TB-A: I don't know. We should find him…My goldendoodle is very anxious and our apartment building faces the street and I can hear him bark as I'm walking away, like a child crying. It's so sad. There's nothing I could do to comfort him because I'm not an energetically calming person. My husband is. My husband, you just sort of want to climb onto him and just lean into him. But I'm not.

V: You've done so many different types of writing very successfully. Is there a project you have yet to do that would still give you that giddy feeling in your chest?

TB-A: I think that that question is dangerous because it forces you to think about your career. And if you think about your career too much, then you're not thinking about the moment that you're in with…the document. I'm scared that if you ever face the document thinking, This is just another document, as opposed to, [This is] the most enormous, exciting challenge and privilege, then it will show. And there will go your energy and there will go your ebullience and your enthusiasm and the desperation in your head that forces you to fix problems. I don't want that. So I'm not going to think about that.

https://www.vogue.com/article/long-island-compromise-taffy-brodesser-ackner-interview

Author Biography

Taffy Brodesser-Akner is a staff writer for The New York Times Magazine and the New York Times bestselling author of Fleishman Is in Trouble, which has been translated into more than a dozen languages. She is also the creator and executive producer of its Emmy-nominated limited series adaptation for FX. Long Island Compromise is her second novel.

https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/2168914/taffy-brodesser-akner

Reviews

When a Father Gets Kidnapped, His Family Pays the Price

"Long Island Compromise," the new novel by the author of "Fleishman Is in Trouble," fictionalizes a true story.

by Sloane Crosley

Sloane Crosley is the author of seven books, including the novel "Cult Classic" and the memoir "Grief Is for People."

What does it mean to come by one's life honestly? This is the question at the heart of Taffy Brodesser-Akner's generation-spanning sophomore novel, "Long Island Compromise," which tells the story of a wealthy, dysfunctional suburban Jewish family.

Given the unavoidable success of her debut, "Fleishman Is in Trouble," I will spare curious readers the suspense and answer a more cynical question: Is this book as good? It's better. Sprawling yet nimble, this is her Big American Reform Jewish Novel. In an assimilatory turn, it's less reminiscent of Roth (Philip or Henry) than of Franzen (Jonathan), whom Brodesser-Akner profiled in her role as staff writer for The New York Times Magazine.

A fictionalized account of a true story, "Long Island Compromise" begins in 1980, when the prominent businessman Carl Fletcher is ambushed in his driveway, taken to unknown parts and tortured by unknown parties. Bubble burst, the house is suddenly teeming with F.B.I. agents as Carl's frantic wife, Ruth, finds herself taking her younger son, Bernard, on an elaborate ransom drop, a day that will scar both him and his older brother, Nathan, for life.

Not to mention Carl himself, who, upon his release, is advised by his mother to compartmentalize his trauma ("Listen to me, boychick. This happened to your body. This did not happen to you. Don't let it in"). No dice. Carl spends the next several hundred pages on an ineffective cocktail of antidepressants, alternating between jags of hysteria and vegetation, a glass ornament of a father to Nathan, Bernard and Jenny, who has the questionable luck of being born just after the family tragedy. Ruth, who was so sure she'd escaped the paranoia hurricane of her scrappy childhood, finds herself back in its eye. "It started right now, the real division of her life," Brodesser-Akner writes: "before the kidnapping and after it."

The novel is loosely divided into three sections, told from the third-person perspectives of the three children, now in their late 30s and early 40s, laying out the cornucopia of ways in which they are screwed up by latent generational trauma, their father's repression and the affluence that insulates them. "They spent their money like third-generation American children do: quickly, and without thinking too hard about it."

Bernard, or Beamer, has become a handsome, BDSM-loving, shiksa-marrying, drug-addled screenwriter who cannot think of a single plot without a kidnapping at its core and is constantly pretending to take phone calls, sometimes for the sake of avoidance, sometimes for the illusion of importance. (Each character has a conversational tag; I'm partial to the way Ruth mumbles some iteration of "Leonard Bernstein over here" or "Julius Rosenberg over here" whenever she's displeased with her seditious spawn.) Then there's Nathan, a neurotic and servile land-use lawyer who has put all his eggs in a friend's S.E.C.-violating basket and is married to a moral Orthodox woman who just wants to redo the kitchen. Finally, Jenny is a drifting intellectual snob who eschews attachment to friends, men, money or careers until the day she becomes aware of the concept of union organizing

The Fletchers' source of wealth is a factory started by Carl's father, Zelig, who narrowly escaped Nazi Poland. Threaded throughout the novel is the phrase "there's a dybbuk in the works," a family saying regarding a malevolent spirit from Jewish folklore that applies equally to malfunctioning machinery, "an infestation of ants in a sugar bowl or Cossacks murdering your siblings in front of you." Well, the dybbuk is about to hit the fan in this way-below-code factory that produces polystyrene molds for insulation.

As it is with cholesterol, there are good and bad kinds of cleverness, and though Brodesser-Akner tends to traffic in the former (prepare to be delighted by the triple entendre of the novel's title), things can get awfully symbolic for these self-stymied siblings who grew up in a town called Middle Rock.

But look what you get for the price of a few corny jokes! A satchel of 20th-century American Jewry deep cuts ("Easter eggs," as they might be called in more gentile endeavors): Hadassah bowling leagues, Viennese dessert tables, Israel bonds, the song "Y.M.C.A.," "Jewish-holiday crisp" weather.

"Long Island Compromise" is a heavily populated satire with more cul-de-sacs than the whole of Nassau County; but all those narrative asides about jealous neighbors and forays into Zelig's harrowing tale of survival propel the novel. This is because when Brodesser-Akner dives, she does so without making a splash, seamlessly entering the mind of Jenny, who fetishizes freedom when she already has it; or Bernard, who sincerely wonders: "Did either of them notice that while Charlie typed, Beamer stood behind him, saying 'Yes, right. Exactly!' but did not also contribute any new ideas?"

Brodesser-Akner is empathetic to her characters' pathological inability to know themselves, but she is also merciless when it comes to the idea that acknowledging confusion is not enough. Zelig came over on a boat and it wasn't the Mayflower, so are they still victims when their privilege is undeniable? Unable to answer this question in the mirror, they seek validation from co-workers, lovers and partners. Oh, how they long to be good. Or if not good, better. Or if not better, bearable.

They hail from a generation for whom the Holocaust was both last week and a colloquial cudgel (“Hitler would have loved your help, Jennifer,” Carl’s mother says to her granddaughter), a generation whose grandparents came from nothing unless you count mortal danger as something. Brodesser-Akner does not defend the myriad manners in which these three fumble the inheritance of suffering, as much as she seeks to define their crisis. She strives to dig a hole through the clichés and, for the most part (this reader could have done with less rhinoplasty and I.B.S.), she comes out the other side with a dynamic story about an American family.

Fresh off adapting “Fleishman” for television, Brodesser-Akner incorporates screenwriting tropes into her prose (“CUT TO: Within a few minutes, he was back in his car”), sometimes in ways that feel less than intentional. After Carl is kidnapped, setting the town aflutter, a woman in an “avocado-colored kitchen” uses “her matching avocado-colored long-corded landline phone” to call a neighbor with a “mustard-colored” version of the same setup. Cue the split-screen. “The Royal Tenenbaums” in a yarmulke, or so a studio pitch might go: You’ve got the younger brother flirting with self-harm, the brilliant but icy sister and the eldest, a father to fearful twin boys whose joint bar mitzvah provides the culminating festivity of the novel.

The author also makes a few fairly transparent efforts to break up streams of dialogue toward the end. In the words of countless American children of the 20th century, Jewish or otherwise, her epidermis is showing. But the point of that joke is: Yeah, of course it is. All those well-timed twists, neat callbacks and tidy scenes are a mitzvah for this satisfying, touching novel. The talented Taffy Brodesser-Akner over here.

https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/07/books/review/taffy-brodesser-akner-long-island-compromise.html