



## **Home Girl: Building a Dream House on a Lawless Block**

*Judith Matloff*

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## **Home Girl: Building a Dream House on a Lawless Block** Judith Matloff

After twenty years as a foreign correspondent in tumultuous locales including Rwanda, Chechnya, and Sudan, Judith Matloff is ready to put down roots and start a family. She leaves Moscow and returns to her native New York City to house-hunt for the perfect spot while her Dutch husband, John, stays behind in Russia with their dog to pack up their belongings. Intoxicated by West Harlem's cultural diversity and, more important, its affordability, Judith impulsively buys a stately fixer-upper brownstone in the neighborhood.

Little does she know what's in store. Judith and John discover that their dream house was once a crack den and that "fixer upper" is an understatement. The building is a total wreck: The beams have been chewed to dust by termites, the staircase is separating from the wall, and the windows are smashed thanks to a recent break-in. Plus, the house—crowded with throngs of brazen drug dealers—forms the bustling epicenter of the cocaine trade in the Northeast, and heavily armed police regularly appear outside their door in pursuit of the thugs and crackheads who loiter there.

Thus begins Judith and John's odyssey to win over the neighbors, including Salami, the menacing addict who threatens to take over their house; MacKenzie, the literary homeless man who quotes Latin over morning coffee; Mrs. LaDuke, the salty octogenarian and neighborhood watchdog; and Miguel, the smooth lieutenant of the local drug crew, with whom the couple must negotiate safe passage. It's a far cry from utopia, but it's a start, and they do all they can to carve out a comfortable life. And by the time they experience the birth of a son, Judith and John have even come to appreciate the neighborhood's rough charms.

Blending her finely honed reporter's instincts with superb storytelling, Judith Matloff has crafted a wry, reflective, and hugely entertaining memoir about community, home, and real estate. *Home Girl* is for anyone who has ever longed to go home, however complicated the journey.

### Advance Praise for Home Girl

"Although I always suspected that renovating a house in New York City would be a slightly more harrowing undertaking than dodging bullets as a foreign correspondent, it took this charming story to convince me it could also be more entertaining. Except for the plumbing. That's one adventure I couldn't survive."

—Michelle Slatalla, author of *The Town on Beaver Creek*

"After years of covering wars overseas, Judith Matloff takes her boundless courage and inimitable style to the front lines of America's biggest city. From her vantage point in a former crack house in West Harlem, she brings life to a proud community held hostage by drug dealers and forgotten by policy makers. Matloff's sense of humor, clear reportage, and zest for adventure never fail. *Home Girl* is part gritty confessional, part love story, and totally delightful."

—Bob Drogin, author of *Curveball*

"Here the American dream of home ownership takes on the epic dimensions of the modern pioneer in a drug-riddled land. Matloff's story, which had me crying and laughing, is a portrait of a household and a community, extending far beyond the specifics of West Harlem to the universal—as all well-told stories do."

—Martha McPhee, author of *L'America*

*From the Hardcover edition.*

## **Home Girl: Building a Dream House on a Lawless Block Details**

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## From Reader Review Home Girl: Building a Dream House on a Lawless Block for online ebook

### Ciara says

i have a lot of conflicted feelings about this book, which was written by a former foreign correspondent who bought a house in harlem. okay, the backstory: while working as a foreign correspondent in russia, the author became pregnant. sooner after, she had a miscarriage & it was all very sad. she decided to try to get pregnant again, & succeeded, & was then sent to chechnya to cover some atrocities going on there, & had another miscarriage. she was really devastated by her miscarriages & couldn't stand being in russia anymore, so she moved back to new york city (her hometown) & discovered that her mom had been investing her income in really lucrative stocks & that she had a quarter million-dollar nest egg. she decided to buy a home for herself & her husband, but even \$250,000 doesn't go far in manhattan. she was going to buy in brooklyn, but a realtor showed her a house in west harlem & she bought it on the spot, kind of without thinking it through. it needed A LOT of work & what she took for quaint, charming, vibrant street life was actually an epicenter of drug trafficking. whoops!

so the book is all about the author & her husband renovating their house & the changes that took place in the neighborhood during the first few years they lived on the block. & also, about the author getting pregnant again & successfully giving birth to a baby boy, & then the challenges of parenting in a neighborhood where a crackhead lives in the abandoned house next door & dealers work right outside your front gate.

i really could have done without all the "i'm a bad-ass urban pioneer" stuff. the author makes a big point of distinguishing "pioneers" from "gentrifiers," but i think she's kidding herself. she seems to think the pioneers are more exciting or noble or something, because they're the ones who are actually neighbors with the crackheads, but their presence makes it easier for the gentrifiers to move in & physically displace the crackheads. this isn't to say that she doesn't have any awareness at all of what is going down in her neighborhood or her role in it...she just seems a touch defensive. it's weird. she has this bizarre moral quandary about how maybe she should be more tolerant of the dealers, because she dabbled in experimental drug use herself as a young woman in the 70s or whatever, so who is she to judge? they're just trying to make a living, sending money back home to the dominican republic, & it's all kinds of unfair laws & stuff that make conditions so tough on the island without the influx of drug money, etc etc. & then she's like, yeah, but i have a kid. do i want him exposed to this shit? & then she seems to think she's some kind of tough bad-ass because she carries on conversations with local dealers & crackheads & they have a nickname for her & stuff. i guess...it's realistic, at least? i mean, how many of us could really move into such a neighborhood, & occupy the role that this woman occupies as a gentrifier/"pioneer" & not have some degree of conflict over that role & our relationships with the people who have been in the neighborhood longer? but then it's like, why write a book? i don't know.

at the end of the day, it could have been a LOT worse than it was, & i actually found the book fairly engaging. i have my own (pipe?) dreams of buying a house someday, so this gave me a lot of food for thought.

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### Maya says

Enjoyable--and funny enough, while I was in the middle of reading it, this book got packed in a random

box during my move from one house to another. So there was a significant interruption in the middle (and a couple online renewals at the library while I hoped it would turn up).

Matloff's natural ability, as a longtime journalist, to find common threads with anyone she comes in contact with, serves her well in this book. She befriends drug dealers, addicts and homeless academics in the process of rehabilitating a home in Harlem.

The downsides for me are that I would have enjoyed more description of the home itself and the transformation it underwent, and also that I couldn't escape a nagging sensation that the whole exercise is somewhat patronizing. That's my white, upperclass, liberal guilt showing.

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### **Meagan says**

I'm generally more of a fiction reader than a non-fiction reader, but having said that I cannot recommend *Home Girl* enough. Judith Matloff is like that friend that everyone wishes they had. She has traveled the world, visiting the sites of terrible wars and international incidents as a foreign correspondent, and she has great stories to tell as a result. She speaks several languages, has friends all over the world, and despite all this comes across as incredibly approachable and sometimes insecure, which I found charming. She uses her book to tell the story of uprooting her life with her husband, also a journalist, to move from Russia to New York City, where her family lives. Upon arrival, she realizes that the only place they can afford to buy a home is West Harlem, which is in the very heart of the drug trade. Her new home, an ex-crack den, requires a lot of renovation, and the book covers that process as well as her attempt to join her new and unorthodox community while also avoiding the crime and drugs on her block. Through Judith, I got to know the kind of people I will likely never meet, including a gentleman drug lord, a homeless man who quotes Latin, a vaguely threatening but hopefully harmless crack addict, a hard-working ex-con, and the small community of activists trying to revive their neighborhood. I couldn't put *Home Girl* down, and I wouldn't hesitate to recommend it to anyone who enjoys a good memoir, is interested in the history of West Harlem and New York City, or who is curious about how the drug trade can affect regular Americans. Loved it!

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### **Babs says**

I place this book in my "non-celebrity does something a little different and interesting and is able to write well about it" genre. I am ALWAYS drawn to it. This book started off a bit slow in my opinion, and I was worried. I didn't feel a connection with Matloff in Part One; I would have liked more personal background about her and more historical background about West Harlem. Part Two picked up, and I enjoyed the last 200 pages of the book.

I think the book could appeal to a wide-range of readers because Harlem, if not West Harlem specifically, is a very recognizable setting. John, the husband's, presence in the book strengthens it, and Salami, Miguel, and Mrs. LaDuke are all interesting likeable "characters" in the book. I would recommend it to my larger neighborhood book club (members are all female, ranging in age from 30s to 60s) when it goes to paperback. And I will offer the ARC to my smaller more erudite bookclub ([www.readinggals.blogspot.com](http://www.readinggals.blogspot.com)) as an interesting read, although I don't think we would select it as a bookclub pick.

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### **Carrie says**

Another book from LibraryThing Early Reviewers, this time a memoir about an American foreign correspondent who decides to move home to NY and buys a house in West Harlem in the heart of an open-air drug market. The first third or so of the book really annoyed me (how much credit does one lady need for being a brave urban pioneer? if you buy a house in a bad neighborhood, you should be aware that bad things may happen). Once she got into the discussion of the renovations of the house and provided a character study of the neighborhood, I got more into it, but it still was not a book I loved by any stretch.

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### **Alison says**

I picked this one up because on the surface, I have a few things in common with Judith Matloff. I'm a white middle-class woman who owns a home in a poor neighborhood populated mostly by people of color. There are drugs being sold on my block. Just last night, I overheard some dude yell to his friend, "I'll meet up with you later, I'm 'bout to go catch this ho." (that means OBTAIN A PROSTITUTE). So as a first-wave gentrifier myself, I was curious to read Matloff's take. While I appreciated the journalistic approach she took to her new neighborhood, learning everything about how the cocaine trade came to West Harlem and how the stalwart supporters of the block made their way, I was infuriated by her near constant thoughtless decisions. I get that someone who worked in foreign war zones for 20 years might be prone to impulsiveness, but she was downright feckless at times. She buys this house on a whim, ignoring warnings about termites and structural problems. She hires workmen with no knowledge of their prior experience. When all the rehabbing is finished, she's spent thousands more than her original estimate, because of her lack of planning. Even in small ways, she's irresponsible---she takes in a stray cat while her house is still a construction zone, and the damn thing pisses all over the house. I mean, everything works out for her, but I wish she'd acknowledge that the only reason things work out is because she's middle-class and therefore has the financial cushion to prevent against abject failure. It gave me anxiety just reading about her mishaps. Still, I can't completely condemn this, because at times it was an interesting read, given her background in journalism and neat examination of the neighborhood. I have to give her kudos, too, for actually meeting her neighbors and immersing herself in the culture of the block. Few gentrifiers do the same.

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### **Arminzerella says**

Judith Matloff was a foreign correspondent for many years, and her writing assignments took her all over the world. When she and her husband, John, decided to have a baby, Judith needed to find a place for them to settle down (at least temporarily) and they ended up choosing New York so that they would be close to some of their friends and family. Unfortunately their space requirements and somewhat meager (for NYC) savings priced them out of any desirable neighborhoods and the couple ended up purchasing and then rehabbing a dilapidated brownstone in West Harlem, which was at the time a den of drug trafficking activity. Often fearing for their lives, Judith and John hired a ragtag team of contractors and handymen to help them with repairs. Over the next few years they saw their primarily Dominican-drug-dealer hood change over as it gentrified. Wealthy eccentrics (worse in some ways than the drug dealers) moved in around them, and crime fled to other boroughs. Judith's story of this stressful time in her life is interesting in its sociology as well as its personal details. Not sure if I'm brave enough to make the sacrifices she did for her dream house, but

definitely enjoyed her journey vicariously!

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### **Donura says**

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4.5 out of 5

I have read a lot of memoirs written by foreign correspondents. I have to say that [Home Girl] puts a whole new perspective on reporting from the far reaches of the world even if it is only from West Harlem, USA. Ms. Matloff's brief summary of her work in other countries in the beginning is important, and one is able to see the danger and drama that she was exposed to over many years. One would think that would have prepared her for anything, and yet we learn very quickly that fear of the rebels can occur anywhere, even right here at home.

The book offers a glimpse at life on the edge of our "civilized" cities that so many choose to ignore on a daily basis. Ms. Mattloff's humor helps ease the absolute despair she describes about how many people live each and every day. She gives name and face and history to each of the characters that she encounters, both the "rebels" and the survivors of the war that is rages on in not only in West Harlem, but in other cities around the country. Her experience from overseas serves her well as she learns to negotiate with the homeless, the drug lieutenants, the cops, the realtors, the construction workers, as all of these people play some part in her survival and existence on a daily basis.

I heard someone say recently that "if only we knew their stories, we would understand their pain". She was referring to those who act out with violence and anger on the streets today. Ms. Mattloff's reveals some of the stories and pain that cause the violence and anger. And gladly, she tells us how change can happen for all the players over time when one just perseveres.

I would recommend this book to anyone who wants a "bird's eye" view from the street of the inner city.

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### **Tripp says**

Where do you move after decades in the foreign press spent dodging bullets in Africa and losing a baby while covering violence in Chechnya? Why to West Harlem of course. Judith Matloff writes about buying a house on street given primarily to drug dealing. It is at once a story of figuring out how to live with dangerous people, how not to work on a house and how to keep a healthy marriage in a bizarre situation.

The center of everything is the house. As you might imagine, years of squatting has led to a house in less than ideal shape. Having never worked with contractors before, things of course go badly as when the contractor's window plans lead a wall to collapse. This is bad enough, but when your seemingly homicidal neighbor (known as Salami) threatens to take the house when he gets the chance, it is all the worse.

This makes the book sound rather bleak, which it isn't. In fact, it is rather cheery overall, in the sort of what-kind-of-crazy-thing will happen next sort of way. For the most part, the denizens of her street are colorful rather than frightening, from the realist drug lord to the literature loving homeless person.

Matloff is a professional journalist and she knows how to tell a story. While she will make you think about where you might want to live, she will also make you think twice about a remodel.

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## **Kat Shelton says**

Book Jacket:

After twenty years as a foreign correspondent in tumultuous locales including Rwanda, Chechnya, and Sudan, Judith Matloff is ready to put down roots and start a family. She leaves Moscow and returns to her native New York City to house-hunt for the perfect spot while her Dutch husband, John, stays behind in Russia with their dog to pack up their belongings. Intoxicated by West Harlem's cultural diversity and, more important, its affordability, Judith impulsively buys a stately fixer-upper brownstone in the neighborhood.

Little does she know what's in store. Judith and John discover that their dream house was once a crack den and that "fixer upper" is an understatement. The building is a total wreck: The beams have been chewed to dust by termites, the staircase is separating from the wall, and the windows are smashed thanks to a recent break-in. Plus, the house is on a block, crowded with throngs of brazen drug dealers, that forms the bustling epicenter of the cocaine trade in the Northeast, and heavily armed police regularly appear outside Judith and John's door in pursuit of the thugs and crackheads who loiter there.

Thus begins the couple's odyssey to win over the neighbors, including Salami, the menacing addict who threatens to take over their house; Mackenzie, the literary homeless man who quotes Latin over morning coffee; Mrs. LaDuke, the salty octogenarian neighborhood watchdog; and Miguel, the smooth lieutenant of the local drug crew, with whom the couple must negotiate safe passage. It's a far cry from utopia, but it's a start, and "they" do all they can to carve out a comfortable life. And by the time they experience the birth of a son, Judith and John have even come to appreciate the neighborhood's rough charms.

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### **Dawn Meyers says**

I thought this book was a little slow in the beginning, but I got into it a lot more after awhile to the point where I didn't want to put it down. I found all the discussion of living in her urban environment fascinating, because I have always lived in the suburbs or a rural location.

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### **AJ P says**

This book was pretty decent, and an uplifting story of neighborhood family and renaissance. It almost makes me want to be a home owner again... NOT. Though, not because this book doesn't make it seem appealing, just that not much could make me want to do that again any time soon.

I liked the writing style, and found the author interesting, honest, and with enough self reflection that I appreciated it. I also liked the cast of characters in her adopted neighborhood.

I did find it a bit repetitive, and it focused very heavily on the first six months and then sort of glossed over the next several years - especially with the epilogue. Though, I suppose once the renovation was done and the neighborhood started cleaning up there wasn't a whole lot more to dwell on.

Overall a pretty decent read, especially for folks who are interested in rehabbing a home or moving into a not-quite-ready-to-gentrify neighborhood and what it could be like.

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### **Tricia says**

This is a memoir written by a foreign news correspondent who got married and decided to set down roots in Harlem with her Dutch husband. It is an interesting look into life on a crack-infested street where drug dealers traded right on their doorstep.

Perhaps I was looking more for *The Money Pit* when I read this book, but the slow process of restoring their home got a little tedious for me after awhile (granted, I can't imagine what it was like for them!). I also didn't totally buy Judith blindly buying this house without realizing what kind of mess she was going to have on her hands--both structurally within the house and socially on the outside. But, I do think the house was a fabulous investment and she's has an incredible amount of square footage for a Manhattanite.

I enjoyed the last half of the book much more than the beginning because the author put on her obviously capable reporter hat. She details how September 11th affected her life and neighborhood, how the AA 587 crash in the Bronx affected the street dealers, and how the August 14, 2003 energy blackout brought together a community. I would recommend this for those interested in the social activist side of the book (Judith attended many police community meetings to encourage the politicians to clean up the neighborhood) as well as those interested in how change was brought to the neighborhood.

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## **Betsy says**

This would've been 1\* except that Judith Matloff's writing style turned this into a couldn't-put-it-down read. She has an incredible talent and brings her neighborhood and all of her neighbors to life.

Otherwise...I hated this book. It's a story of gentrification from the viewpoint of the newcomer. When she's done fixing up the house, she sets about fixing up the neighborhood to suit herself as well. She's thrilled when a trendy new restaurant or coffeeshop opens. She revels each time a "white" person moves into the neighborhood (read middle- and upper-class Anglos). By the end of the book, a nearby house sells for over \$1 million.

She seems to see it as a war against the drug dealers who run the streets. They have an open marketplace on her block, and hang out in front of her house. She, and several other neighbors, are on a campaign to get rid of them. In the epilogue she says, "Of course I'm a white gentrifier, but I have yet to see the evil in driving the dealers out". As someone who has lived in several neighborhoods which became gentrified, I know it's never, ever that simple. Yet the one and only sentence in the book that addresses the other side of gentrification is in the same paragraph: "The major criticism of gentrification is that it elevates rents and in the process drives out low-income tenants. Yet, on our street, these apartments are rent-stabilized and the poorer families remain". And we all lived happily ever after? I seriously doubt it.

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## **Florinda says**

Home ownership can be an adventure, but not always as big an adventure as it was for Judith and John. Buying a "fixer-upper" is one thing. Buying a fixer-upper on a street where you're surrounded by abandoned and run-down buildings, and where your neighbors are drug dealers and their clients, is something else again. But after living and working abroad as a journalist for twenty years, during which time she bought her first house (in South Africa), married, and had two miscarriages, Judith was ready to return to her native land - New York City. Thanks to differentials in foreign income and costs of living and her mother's wise money management, she was pleased to find out she had a healthy nest egg to use in buying a house - but it's New York City, where a quarter of a million dollars doesn't go very far. At the suggestions of her sister and brother-in-law, who had bought a home in a dicey part of Brooklyn, and a friend who owned a former crack house, Judith explored some of the outer reaches of the city - areas full of old buildings with potential - and wound up with a West Harlem brownstone that had "good bones" but needed a lot of work.

Judith and John were "pioneers" in an "emerging" neighborhood, which basically means they bought in prior to gentrification, when there was no telling whether the area would improve or deteriorate. Some of their neighbors were long-established Harlemites who continued to defend their territory, but the block was a stronghold of the Dominican-immigrant drug trade, and Judith eventually comes to a shaky truce with the leader of the crew. It's not just the dealers, though - there are also addicts for whom the block is "home," including the crackhead squatting in the abandoned house next door but who makes daily claims and threats on Judith's new home.

Judith, John, and the house all survive the stress of a full renovation and the selection of tenants (just because they could manage to buy a New York brownstone didn't mean they could afford to live in it on their own, so the renovation created three apartments) just in time for the arrival of their first child. While Judith has been

torn between appreciation for the diversity of the neighborhood and concerns about personal safety, becoming a parent pushes her toward more community activism. Eventually, those efforts help to banish the drug dealers and usher in the block's official "gentrification" phase. Still living in West Harlem today among neighbors of all ages, professions, and ethnicities, Judith has realized that home - and family - are where you make them.

As a born New Yorker (though not raised there), I frequently feel a pull toward New York stories, and this one fascinated me. Since I currently live in another insane real-estate market, I understand why people buy downtrodden properties in the hopes of improving both the house and the community, but I don't think I'd ever be that adventurous myself. (Much as I hate admitting it, I've become a suburbanite at heart in quite a few respects.) This was another journalist's memoir that balanced the personal story with its context very well, and I liked Matloff's writing - she really pulled me in, and I was interested in getting to know her and the characters who surrounded her. I found *Home Girl* to be a compelling story of taking chances that, for the most part, actually worked out, and I'm just sorry it took me so long to pull it out of the TBR-for-review stack.

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