

Billy and Girl

a novel by Deborah Levy

Soon all the kids in
England will be pushing
up daisies.

That's what Girl says every
night before I go to sleep. Girl
is my sister and I'm scared of
her. She's seventeen years old and
got ice in her veins. Tonight she reads
me my rights.

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In this brilliant, inventive, tragic farce, Deborah Levy creates the ultimate dysfunctional kids, Billy and his sister Girl. Apparently abandoned years ago by their parents, they now live alone somewhere in England. Girl spends much of her time trying to find their mother, going to strangers' doors and addressing whatever Prozac woman who answers as "Mom." Billy spends his time fantasizing a future in which he will be famous, perhaps in the United States as a movie star, or as a psychiatrist, or as a doctor to blondes with breast enlargements, or as the author of "Billy England's Book of Pain." Together they both support and torture each other, barely able to remember their pasts but intent on forging a future that will bring them happiness and reunite them with the ever-elusive Mom. Billy and Girl are every boy and girl reeling from the pain of their childhoods, forgetting what they need to forget, inventing worlds they think will be better, but usually just prolonging nightmares as they begin to create--or so it seems--alternative personalities that will allow them to survive and conquer and punish. In the end, the reader is as bewildered as Billy and Girl--have they found Mom and a semblance of family, or are, they completely out of control and ready to explode?

Billy and Girl Details

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Author : Deborah Levy

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From Reader Review **Billy and Girl** for online ebook

Bill Hsu says

For a while, it was hard to tell where this was going; Levy's icy sharp language seemed all that kept me engaged. Then our unreliable narrators kept shooting themselves in the feet, the bad life choices just kept piling up, and we seemed headed for an ending in tears. But not quite. I think?

Jim says

This book was okay and had great potential, but somehow in the end, the author lost her book. A missing mother, an absent disfigured presumed dead father, two abandoned teens living alone on grandpa's gambling winnings, a stereotypical Indian store-owner's son, and a runaway girl with boring shoes - all the ingredients are there, but in the end, the soufflé flopped. Moments of intense intensity intensely rendered, but somehow the moments fizzled out, and at the end, the only thing missing was a rousing rendition of "99 bottles of beer on the wall".

MJ Nicholls says

Oh God, God, God this is good. *Soooo goood*. This is silk in prose form. A thorough back rub followed by a two-week cruise on the Med with Sophie Dahl in prose form. This is motherlickin' awesome.

Billy & Girl is a novel about a brother and sisters. That plural wasn't an accident. Girl is the protagonist, a whip-smart but damaged teenager who set fire to her father for beating up her brother, Billy. The novel follows their attempts to reinstate their lost parents following this inflammatory snub. Girl appears to suffer from a bipolar personality disorder, her 'retarded' self working in FreezerWorld as the dowdy Louise.

What makes this novel so good is how Levy pulls us into an implausible and demented world of two broken and fucked up children, lost in the shrub of a parentless wild, and makes us laugh and vomit and weep and stare gawp-eyed at the page in horror. Her style is more addictive than a chocolate-covered brownie fudge cake. At the centre of this chocolate-covered brownie fudge cake is hair and spiders and worms. Truly amazing.

As the story progresses, Louise materialises into a separate character, an actual distinct entity, and the novel opens up a box of hairy metaphysical goblins to gnaw your brain. The whole book burns with the most energetic and hair-tugging prose you're likely to read about two teenage rascallions living in their own psychopathic dream-delusion.

Read this or I will hunt you down and kill you.

Marion Roux says

Rebecca says

It seems I'm torn with the style of Deborah Levy. I'm a big fan of two of her books, yet this and "Black Vodka" just weren't for me. I found it hard to connect to the characters and I found it hard to know what was going on. Unfortunately "Billy and Girl" was not for me and I'm giving it a poor one star.

For more of what I thought, see my full review on my blog: <https://whatrebeccasread.wordpress.co...>

Rand says

Roughly seven years ago I snagged a galley of this from the discards pile outside the library of the local community college. Apparently there was once a feminist-leaning group at the college who did zines and classes on theory and stuff and this was part of their library collection.

I have gotten better books for free.

Read this one if you appreciate zaniness for the sake of zaniness. There were a few good lines (and Billy's narration of his conception-to-birth sequence was cool) but the characters were super annoying, which, for a "character-driven" novel spells trouble.

Part of the trouble with this book is how dated it feels now. Maybe if I had watched more TV in the nineties I would care more about this but I dunno.

Nathanimal says

If like me you enjoy being bounced around on the biceps of brawny sentences that throw lots of slangy declarative punches and fragmentary jabs, and hardly ever duck behind a namby-pamby qualifying clause, then you will probably enjoy this book where voice is king. But beware, this king is a dictator to whom all characters must bow by sounding exactly the same and not wanting much that is (to this reader, anyway) deeply felt or believable except to have that king's royal tongue in their mouths.

Mariel says

You know that tv cliche of a bunch of really little kids getting asked what they wanna be when they grow up? And every kid answers something flashy like "Movie star!" and "Cowboy!" because it was the first flashy thing that came into their head? And then the story moves on as if there are no other thoughts in the heads of those children?

Billy and Girl is like that. I waited for the posturing to mean something other than off the top of their heads tv baby reflected sheen in their eyes... I waited to feel as in love with the characters as the author clearly was. I couldn't feel that. It felt like reading a magazine or watching a tv ad.

Girl has vague notions of romance. She has even vaguer notions about her daddy. I'm not sure where the Freezer World stuff comes in (I'm guessing it is a UK equivalent of Wal-Mart?), except some tossed in message! about unthinking latch key kids nursing on the teet of consumerism. I thought it was lazy. I wish that the multiple personalities had felt like, well, personalities rather than images to put on and play like a one-girl girl band line-up.

Billy was routinely and savagely beaten by their dad. Girl loved their daddy but mama made her do lots of chores and forgot her name (hence "Girl"). Billy loves the mom but she couldn't have loved him much. She lets him get beaten, for one (so does Girl), and then both parents ditch 'em. Girl takes out everything on Billy and Billy lives in fantasy land. To be happy the other one would probably have to suck it. A long series of vague fantasies like a two year old wants to eat candy all day long...

I don't want beep statistics. I didn't want the bravado! I wanted to feel like I wasn't hanging out with name dropping big talkers from my old high school, probably. These kids would be walk-on roles in a Law and Order spin-off show and *felt* like walk-ons. They just walked in and out, repeatedly. I didn't know anyone then. Maybe that's how it usually is... but why the hell am I reading this book for, then? The world just isn't made up of "we were abused so our every fart is special" (for all that happened to each other, they might as well have been on the tv in the room for all they took notice of reality.)

Billy's pizzas sounded absolutely disgusting. One time my ex ate this anchovi pizza, and just the smell made me feel sicker than I ever had in my life. I can't think about it without feeling sick. Nothing is more disgusting to me. Billy dumps the entire ocean on his pizzas. I want to throw up.

Next time a book description names "She's on a quest for the perfect cocktail" as a plot point, I'm not gonna read it. Just not gonna do it. If "My baklava angel" passes for fantastical endearments, I guess...

What did I need to write a review for? I should just say it's a series of fantasies that want to say we-hurt-the-ones-we-love without making anything near to a case for that. I don't believe you hurt the ones you love. I think you hurt people you can get away with hurting. The rest don't stick around.

Oriana says

crazily enthusiastic review from MJ, wherein he says "As the story progresses, the novel opens up a box of hairy metaphysical goblins to gnaw your brain. The whole book burns with the most energetic and hair-tugging prose you're likely to read about two teenage rascallions living in their own psychopathic dream-delusion." Holyshityes.

Alan says

review coming..

umm, I didn't engage much with the characters, I didn't feel the plot stood up, I didn't really feel any 'traction'. So why four stars? Because I liked some of the writing and the satire was brilliant. three and a half stars really, but rounded up because it's Christmas (nearly).

thought a bit more about this: the tale of kids trying to find parents (Girl knocks on random doors to see if their mother lives within) is blunt and a bit obvious; the 'Freezer-World' consumer satire is funny, and

sometimes biting; the characters were knock-about laugh-a-lot ones, so when something serious like kidnap happens I didn't really feel the pain. That's even though Billy is writing a book about pain (he wants to be a doctor when he grows up). Readable, but a bit broad and flat for me.

Doug says

Having now read most of the Levy canon, this falls somewhere in the middle range - not quite as good as her masterpieces, 'Hot Milk' and 'The Unloved', but a bit more accessible and better developed than 'Swallowing Geography' or 'Ophelia and the Great Idea'. It actually most reminded me of the early work of another of my fave Brit authors, Philip Ridley, and had the author not been on the cover, I'd have suspected it was his.

Jonathan says

Some fantastic prose here, and some powerful exploration/exhumation/extrapolation of psychic pain. At times, unfortunately, I felt the characters fell into simple cypher territory, or became just mouths to speak some short, gnomic, sentences. Nevertheless, there are some breathtaking set-pieces, and I did enjoy the feeling of not quite having a grip on the "reality" of the text.

Definitely a talent, though my wife (who has read all of her books) tells me some of her later work is better. We shall see...

Tuck says

read for dalkey goodreads group. due dec 1st 2013

a bit flat on plot but makes up for it in neighborhood-dystopia. reminds me a bit of being 13 and totally drunk and high for like a week, and everything seems both perfect and surreal, and why can;t it be easier to have booze and drugs all all the time when you don;t have a job, money, car, or hell even hair?! but then too the grocery store scenes in this novel remind me of my local shop, which is both kinda fun and scary as shit. i love deborah levy for reminding me of 'good ol' days' and how to enjoy shopping.

i was wishing they would burn her dad up some more though.

Marie-Therese says

3.5 stars

Gritty, grotty story told in remarkably vivid prose. This takes a fair amount of time to get where it's going but the journey is breathless and mostly enjoyable.

Mike Puma says

My, my, my. What to say? What to say? Perhaps, only, THIS IS NOT A REVIEW. If it were a review, I'd be able to recommend it or dissuade a potential reader. I can do neither.

B&G came to my attention via a 5-star, reverent review by my favorite Scot (who will remain my favorite Scot, at the very least, until I've met a second one). I read his review, ordered it immediately (after all, did he not turn me on to B.S. Johnson and Gilbert Sorrentino?) and let it sit on my TBR shelf for an entire year—until I went looking for something that might be read quickly. Its moment arrived, and I read it.

But before reading it, I noticed another GR friend's review—an ominous 2-star-er, with an advisory "Recommends it for: I couldn't." Uh, oh. Two well-read GR friends with virtually opposite reactions. Not wanting to be further predisposed, I waited until after reading B&G to read the second review. Oy!

As luck has it, they each reflect my feelings on this one. I liked it, sorta, and didn't like it, sorta. I liked the character of Billy and his constant bemoaning a life in pain. Oddly enough, a quote hit my feed today, "...and there was nothing to do except to wait and to hurt." — Mark Haddon. I'm a Haddon fan. I liked the odd brother/sister banter that rings true. I liked the author's style—fast-paced and blistering. On the other hand, I never did get quite accustomed to a comfort level with not knowing what was happening (I still don't know if there was one Louise or two). And that ending? Someone needs to pay.

So, on this one I'm Switzerland. I can neither recommend or dissuade, praise or condemn, love or hate. In general, I liked it, hence the 4 stars, but that doesn't mean: rush out and get it. If you really must read it, I'll say what I've said before, get it from the library, or borrow mine (you know who you are).
