The role of judgment in Taffy Brodesser-Akner’s sophomore novel

Most reviews of *Long Island Compromise* blame the characters’ misery on their family’s wealth. But the reality of their predicament is far more serious.

by Caroline Langston in the March 2025 issue
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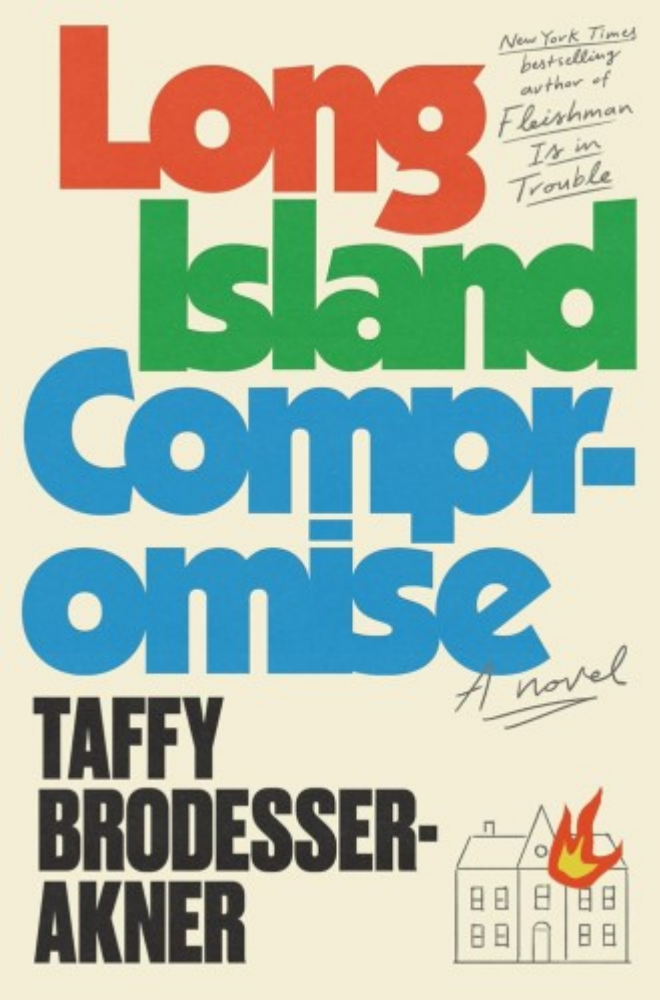
In Review



Long Island Compromise

A Novel

By Taffy Brodesser-Akner
Random House
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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Why read the book of the summer when the season is long over?

Well, one reason might be that the book in question has an eschatological hole in the middle of it, big enough to drive a truck through, that other reviewers seem to have ignored—despite all the attention the book has received. Last July, there was a stretch when you couldn't dip into an online lit mag or open a lifestyle section without seeing the praise (and the hype) for Taffy Brodesser-Akner's second novel, *Long Island Compromise*.

The new novel came on the heels of the multi-platform phenomenon that her first novel, *Fleishman Is in Trouble*, became. Brodesser-Akner was already well known as a journalist for *The New York Times*, particularly for celebrity interviews, so the 2019 release of *Fleishman* was an event. Then, in 2022, came the limited Hulu miniseries of *Fleishman* (with Jesse Eisenberg and Claire Danes!), with a teleplay that we learned was coauthored by Brodesser-Akner herself.

Long Island Compromise dropped into the world last July, buoyed up with wall-to-wall sophomore-novel marketing and following on all the cross-platform buzz about *Fleishman* that had never fully ebbed. The new novel, we learned, is a fictionalized version of an actual event from 1980 in which a wealthy Jewish factory owner on Long Island was kidnapped, with his family paying an enormous cash ransom to ensure his return—and the long traumatic reach of this event on the family's multiple generations.

"Do you want to hear a story with a terrible ending?" reads the novel's casual yet unforgettable first line, followed by a painstaking narrative of the fictionalized kidnapping in its 27-page opening section, "A Dybbuk in the Works." It's an ordinary Long Island day when Carl Fletcher, second-generation Styrofoam factory magnate, walks out of his house and is wrested, blindfolded, into his Cadillac Fleetwood Brougham and driven away to parts unknown. The rest of the section tracks Carl's wife Ruth's efforts—first to find out what is going on and then to navigate FBI agent stakeouts and the logistics of a ransom drop-off—all while tracking the already incipient (it is implied) traumas of their sons, Bernard and Nathan, and their in utero

daughter, Jennifer.

In addition to the inherent drama of the kidnapping, the mise en place of the opening section is stuffed with what's regarded as the standard furniture of affluent, midcentury East Coast Judaism: nose jobs, Hadassah bowling leagues, landline gossiping from avocado green to harvest gold kitchens and back again. There's also the web of relationships and roles that will be familiar to readers of other Jewish American novels of assimilation. Take, for example, this musing from a teacher in the local elementary school, gossiping in the teachers' lounge after the kidnapping has occurred: "Had Carl run away? Did Carl take all his money and try to go live out his life not under the thumb of his terrifying mother and that oppressive, judgmental wife who always seemed so filled with suspicion at Nathan's parent-teacher conferences?"

From the outset then, *Long Island Compromise* initially appears to represent the next generation of the Jewish American novel. The lives of the Fletcher family in the wake of the kidnapping would seem to confirm an arc of third-generation sunlit success. The family remains wealthy from their Styrofoam achievements, Nathan becomes a New York attorney, Bernard (now "Beamer") is a screenwriter in Los Angeles, and the younger Jenny is the stereotypical trust fund academic and activist.

They are all miserable, of course: Nathan from anxiety and from the potential consequences of some suspect business dealings, Jenny from a lack of real drive or satisfaction in all of her intellectual inquiry, and Beamer from simply feeling stuck. Unable to advance as a screenwriter because he's unable to get beyond the signal dramatic event of his life (the kidnapping), he regularly lies to his wife while visiting dominatrices in an LAX airport hotel.

The bulk of reviews of *Long Island Compromise* that I've seen lay the blame for the Fletcher children's misery at the foot of the millions in Styrofoam-factory money that have enabled each of them to be "successful," more or less, and because of this, more or less, there's nothing about which they really have to care. It's the materialism, stupid!—as well as the implied distance of the three children from the struggles and compromises of their working-class immigrant forebears. Some secrets come out in the course of the novel about the impact of all the family's dealings and each of their personal histories.

And yet the reality of their predicament is far darker, which the title “A Dybbuk in the Works” would seem to suggest right from the beginning. *Dybbuk*, as defined by *Merriam-Webster*, represents “a wandering soul believed in Jewish folklore to enter and control a living body until exorcised by a religious rite.” The phrase initially seems to appear in *Long Island Compromise* as yet another instance of suburban Jewish folklore, perhaps akin to calling someone *meshugenah*; the Fletchers credit “a dybbuk in the works” for anything that goes wrong in the family.

It’s worth thinking about dybbuk a bit more literally, though. For the Fletcher children—Nathan, Beamer, and Jenny—are not merely deadened by affluence and lassitude; they are actively experiencing a most literal form of judgment in the here and now.

This is exemplified perhaps most vividly in a 13-page explicit narrative of Beamer’s BDSM encounter in the LAX Radisson with not one but two dominatrices, which traces in unflinching detail their physical and sexual humiliation of him while he’s addled on substances of all kinds. There’s nothing sexy or even edgy about any of this, right down to the demand that Beamer lick the acrylic carpet floor of the hotel room. For Beamer, his own humiliation is the point. It is as literal a depiction of damnation as I have seen written.

And yet, there’s no religious rite or form of Judaism, it appears, that is accessible to them and which can exorcise their demons. There’s a glancing moment when the novel seems to allude to this predicament. It takes place during the final, explosive denouement, amid which, paradoxically, Nathan’s twin sons are having their bar mitzvahs, and which has gathered the full Fletcher family together.

Undone by the wreckage his life has come to, Nathan is unable to execute his fatherly blessings on the bimah, and so the role is taken over at the last minute by his Orthodox in-laws:

> The Semanskys moved in a coordinated ballet of knowing how to do this, a beautiful harmony in what was—was that?—it was joy. . . . That was what Jenny thought right then, and when she truly understood it, it found her breathless: that if you don’t know to do the things that the Semanskys were doing it’s because that was an inheritance, too. If you never saw it, you couldn’t have it—no, if you never saw it, you couldn’t even know that

you were supposed to want it.

In the end, the siblings have only each other, and you will have to read it yourself to see how that realization transforms each of them (or doesn’t).

Nonetheless, though, the judgment remains. Make no mistake, this is a deeply prophetic book.