

## INTRODUCTION

Kit De Waal

There's a sort of girding of the loins that happens when you pick up a book that matters. You take a deep breath and read a few lines and keep reading hoping you won't be disappointed, offended, plunged into despair. *Small Island* was this book for me. I wasn't yet a writer yet I shared so much with Andrea Levy – child of immigrants, working class, late reader – and the story of newly arrived Caribbeans in a white man's world was told to me so often by my father that I dreaded someone else's view on it, this public account, in case it didn't match up to my own story, in case it had been watered down or rosied up, not hard enough, not angry. I didn't know the author but I knew the subject well.

I finished the book in two days. It spoke to me and beyond me as the best of fiction does and I went out straight and bought her others, *Never Far from Nowhere*, *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and *Fruit of the Lemon*.

Andrea Levy speaks to a generation for whom The Windrush immigration experience is not yet in the history books. We live it still, through our parents and grandparents, still standing on sea legs, not yet planted firm enough in English soil to have security and tenure.

Growing up, she was, by her own admission, 'ashamed of my family and embarrassed that they came from the Caribbean'. Racism will do that to you. Her answer, once she

found her voice was to write about the experience of belonging and failing to belong, of complicated, conflicting identities, of growing into being Black and embracing the history of why we of African heritage came to be in the Caribbean in the first place. Andrea's response was also one of celebration. Her novels take a far from polemic stance. *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, (a phrase my father used to say almost daily), is her debut and is lightly autobiographical. It's as much about fatherhood and being poor as it is about exclusion and race. *Never Far From Nowhere* is as much about sibling rivalry as it is about not belonging, as funny as it is passionate and *Fruit of the Lemon* is about ambition and the complexities of family life but also about politics and colourism.

And she's funny with it. Through all of her writing, we hear her voice, fresh, wry, ironic and kind. As a writer, you cannot help but be in awe of her talent, her ear for dialogue and the way she could sum up an entire character in a few words. ('There was nothing unnecessary about her.')

We all come to Andrea Levy's work for our own reasons – for entertainment, enlightenment, exploration, to have our experiences confirmed, to find ourselves, to lose ourselves. We often speak of legacy when we talk about writers who are no longer with us, we try and define what they have left behind and what will be talked about now they have gone. Andrea's contribution to literature is as important and everlasting as was her parents' and mine, the Caribbean pioneers who changed the very notion of Britishness, the fundamental ideas about who belongs where and the eternal struggle to be seen.

February, 2026