

There's More than One Way Home

Donna Levin

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This book deals substantively with issues like autism, and stands to appeal to a broad audience.

At the heart of Donna Levin's novel, *There's More Than One Way Home*, is the narrator's search for autonomy. Anna Kagan struggles between financial dependency in a loveless marriage and an uncertain independent future.

When their son, Jack, a child with Asperger's Syndrome, is suspected in a classmate's death, the precarious relationship between Anna and her husband, Alex, dissolves. Long-held resentments and differences erupt. Alex's focus on his campaign for San Francisco District Attorney and the entry of a man called Val into Anna's life contribute to the turmoil. Eventually, circumstances force Anna to navigate between her personal desires and her obligations.

The novel has elements of a romance. Alex is somewhat of an ogre. He is older, critical, and demanding. He sets rules about Anna's dress and behavior. He disapproves of her parenting style but does nothing to share the responsibility. He has little contact with Jack beyond ruffling his son's hair, and has no kind words or affection for Anna. Young and vigorous, Val is Alex's opposite. When they first meet at the hospital where Jack has been sent for evaluation, Dr. Valentine listens patiently to Anna for hours. They are immediately and strongly attracted to one another. Val is passionate but tender, tucking a loose hair behind Anna's ear. At times Anna seems like a victim of her son's condition, her husband's attitude, Jack's teachers, and her neighbors. She refers to herself as "Cassandra," the character in Greek mythology who was a victim of Apollo's revenge.

The novel's strength lies in its ability to go beyond superficialities. The key characters grow. Anna comes to understand her husband, and gains his respect and cooperation in raising Jack. She becomes a strong and independent woman. Alex admits his faults and takes a more meaningful role in Jack's life. Most importantly, the novel sheds light on the treatment of individuals with autism. Through Anna and Jack's interactions with teachers, medical professionals, and other parents, Levin shows how little most people know about autism. When the classmate is found dead, adults quickly accept that Jack is the logical suspect. In the end, Jack is the one to reveal the truth. The path to solving the mystery of the boy's death adds a satisfying layer to the story.

Major characterizations are strong, though some minor players suffer as caricatures—as with Jack's teacher, who has no redeeming qualities and is dubbed "Scarlet O'Hatred." Classic movie references are used as chapter titles, and literary references are scattered throughout the narrative. Though witty, this technique comes to seem overworked.

There's More Than One Way Home deals substantively with issues like autism, and by doing so, stands to appeal to a broad audience as a worthy entry into popular fiction.

GERALDINE RICHARDS (November 2, 2016)

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