

BOOKS

My tenants tormented me. I found relief in a story about a woman tormented by her tenants

A Norwegian novel offers escape from the special hell of frustrated principles and violated space.

By **Rebecca Steinitz** Updated January 25, 2024, 10:42 a.m.



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You might think that after being tormented by terrible tenants, the last thing I'd want to read is a Norwegian novel about a woman tormented by her tenants. You would be wrong.

At first, the story of Alma, the protagonist of Vigdis Hjorth's "[A House in Norway](#)" (2017), was so familiar as to be cathartic. Alma rents her annex apartment to a Polish immigrant family; I rented my downstairs apartment to a recently divorced dad and his children. We both believed ourselves to be helping people in need, then ricocheted between a sense of betrayal, guilt, and rage as things went bad.

Alma neither enjoys nor excels at caring for her house and garden, and the scrutiny of her tenants shames her. When the tenants disobey her rules and spread out across the property, she resents them. She complains about their behavior. They complain about the apartment. Official letters and texts are exchanged. Authorities are involved. Substitute me for Alma, and the story becomes truth, not fiction.

Hjorth powerfully captures the experience of being tormented in your own house, especially when your frustration goes against your principles. In propulsive prose, she documents the sometimes seedy details, from the mechanics of parking and snow removal (more complicated than you might think) to the rights of tenants (which Alma and I believe in) to the inescapability of conflict that is literally at home.

But "A House in Norway" is also about the creative and financial fluctuations of Alma's life as a textile artist, the boyfriend who wants more time with her, and the adult children who want her to be more reasonable. Indeed, one of the novel's central ironies is that Alma keeps running away from home — and tenants, boyfriend, and children — to do her work (and drink wine).

In this context, her obsession with her tenants can be read as a manifestation of her ambivalence about the ways her house thwarts her. And as the novel resolves, it becomes increasingly evident that her worst tenant problem might actually be herself.

This, in turn, is where Alma and I diverge. My tenants were a menace — to my house, my family, and my community — as attested by lawyers (on both sides), police, local officials, and neighbors. Though my life is also full, all I wanted was to regain my house and peace of mind.

Readers, teachers, and critics have various terms — relatability, mirrors and windows, identification — for how books can help us see ourselves or others. These terms converged for me in “A House in Norway,” which made me feel less alone, allowed me to escape my own story, and ultimately helped me move on.

Rebecca Steinitz is the author of “Time, Space, and Gender in the Nineteenth-Century British Diary.”

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