

A Journey to Herself

A Review of *The Angel of Polk Street*

by Andrea Wesley



The Angel of Polk Street is a unique and powerful tale of coming of age in America. The prose is intense and dramatic, leading the reader into complete submersion in this dark yet inspiring tale. As shown in her past works of fiction, such as the stories of *Unspent Motion*, Celeste Newbrough is a master of creating suspense from the unfolding of character.

As an avid reader, I am used to enjoying fiction of all kinds and levels of quality. While *Angel of Polk Street* is a crime novel, it attains a literary complexity well beyond the genre. After only a brief perusal of this book, I began to sense a crackling of energy with each new turn of the page. It is a work of passion, interweaving such depths of meaning that the reviewer is able select among several themes for exhaustive exploration. I could, for example, look in-depth at the mother-child relationship between Veronica and Lee/Leslie, as the intimacy of creative child and sky mother is destroyed by loss and grief, then finally restored under a totally different set of circumstances. The relationship of Lee and Sam also provides a study in criminal psychology and a gut wrenching anatomy of raw power.

The theme I choose to focus on here is the translucent, ecstatic character of Lee/Leslie, a boy who walks a strange yet irrevocable path to womanhood, in other words, a transgender child.

My own attitudes on transwomen follow a mid- point in the spectrum of lesbian views, somewhere between indifference or positive feeling, and the kind of trans-hatred that can only be inspired by ideology. Lee/Leslie exists above all in an ethereal and spiritual

Encountering this very original story, I am impressed with the completely non-ideological approach Newbrough takes toward the transgender theme. Typical of her fiction is a submersion and fascination with the subtle nature of a character who is not a type or template but one complex individual in a world of her creation.

dimension. As Lee's guardian Angel points out, *"Peace comes to the mystic in unexpected ways. At the edge of a garden patch in a scruffy, scalded land, when possibility has been seeded. And might bloom."*

In his captivity, Lee invents a beautiful Angel who guards over his life and spirit. *"I watch her with a strange longing. She glides over the battlefield of my mind."*

We are first introduced to Lee facing down a stranger in a life altering encounter. But we are then transported to an earlier time, that morning, when Lee relaxes, a playful boy at the breakfast table with his mother, speaking ventriloquism to his clown:

"Did you hear that?" ... She thinks you're intelligent, and she thinks you're a 'he'!"

Veronica paused momentarily in preparing her own breakfast. "What's the clown's name?" -she asked curiously. "Is it a girl or boy?"

"It's a clown," Lee announced. He bounced the figure up-and-down on the table."

Looking back on his life as a schoolboy, Lee observes: *"I was popular, they all liked me, but what they saw wasn't what was there."* Thus, early in the book are hints that Lee is not your ordinary run of male child. However, just as I didn't notice, the average reader might not pick up these early clues. Certainly, his parents did not. On her return home as a transgender teen, Leslie challenges her mother, who notes that transgenderism is usually expressed early in life:

(Veronica) *"I never noticed an inclination in you. You seemed to be a boy, a delicate boy, it's true. But muscles aren't the measure of a male. So it would be news to me if you felt that way. If this weren't a more recent development."*

(Leslie) *"How was I supposed to know I could be a girl? No one told me. You never let me watch TV!... It was nothing I ever saw or heard about."*

Veronica, while accepting, still suspects that Leslie's transgenderism is the product of the abuse received as the victim of a criminal pedophile. Nathan, Lee/Leslie's father, rejects the

transgender “act” as a response to the kidnapping, announcing: *“In no way will I capitulate to my boy’s masquerade.”* The spoken or unspoken subject of “Why?” between a transgender and her or his parents is well expressed in dialogues between Leslie, Veronica, and Nathan.

More profoundly moving is the poetic awakening in the very early teens of Lee, isolated and in captivity, to a transsexual identity.

... “You should be getting more like a man,” Sam insists. It’s true. Even though my stuff is like his, more and more I’m girlish. It scares Sam.

... I’m not a child anymore. I’m a... a man? I don’t know. Sam lets me know how awful women are, how you never can trust them, and they’re just a bunch of cunts. But it’s weird, I feel like one of them. Sometimes my part gets big, but it has no special feeling. It’s like something in the way. I never thought I’d become a man. It didn’t occur to me.

A feeling of holism characterizes Lee's emerging sexuality.

... I was a bud, and now I am turning into the flower. Yes, even locked up in this tiny shack in the middle of nowhere, I bloom. The feelings I have that are sexy live all over my body and in my mind. They ache deep inside my belly in some invisible space, like a hidden baby ready to be born.

Lee grapples with the longing to become female.

... The other day I saw an anatomy program about women, how complicated they are inside and how they have babies. I imagined I have that empty space inside and the tunnel thing babies pass through. I’m ashamed when I think of it. Who wants an empty space? But it’s true, I always felt more like Lauren Bacall than Humphrey Bogart. I felt more like Mom than Dad.

Everybody called me Lee. Lee was a boy. But my real name is Leslie. Leslie could be anyone. From now on Leslie is my name.

Lee’s struggle is unique; it is not a “typical” trajectory, for there is no typical trajectory across and through gender. It is an awakening that belongs to Lee and Lee alone. Yet she is inspired by a transsexual she sees on TV.

A woman told the announcer how she used to be a man, but she changed her sex. She called herself 'transsexual'. How could that be, I thought? Did she just wish it so strong it happened? I asked myself, is it something I want? I was a boy before. Well, I tried my best to be. Maybe she tried her best, too.

Moving toward a decisive shift in identity, Leslie affirms: *From this day forward I am Leslie... I'm a badass girl, that's who I am. One day I'll be a badass woman. It can't happen, it can't happen, but it will!*

When Lee becomes Leslie, the guardian Angel who came to Lee in his abject misery as a captive, recedes into the background:

Angel: There comes a time when a creature requires no greater power than the power of will. No matter how imprisoned its past, the creature sets forth through a new landscape, forages for food, love, assessing risk, charging through the present. The fate of the creature is defined not by survival of the fittest, but by survival of the least foolish of fools.

These stirrings for a new identity, a new soul- body relationship continue as Lee faces the external crisis of an escape from Sam. Following the escape, Leslie's experiences on the street as a transgender teen, selling sexual services to survive, travelling across the West to San Francisco, tell an exciting story of courage and self-preservation.

Arriving in the Embarcadero and the Tenderloin, Lee makes friends and inculcates stage ambitions. For her popular strip act on Polk Street, Leslie spends days cobbling together a costume from scraps foraged from Haight Street second hand shops. Creating and enwrapping herself in the mantle and wings, Leslie evokes the Angel as an aspect of herself.

The reunion of Veronica and Leslie is perhaps the most heart-rending part of the story. In her own loss, Veronica had descended from creative Jungian to becoming a dedicated but hopeless seeker of her son, and a vengeful psychiatric witness for the prosecution. When Leslie is returned to her, initially, Veronica is goes into shock. Confronted with this strange

transgender girl, she realizes for the first time that all hope of Lee's return are gone; that she has indeed lost the beloved son taken from her as a child. On Leslie's part, being with Veronica prompts her to understand the cheapness and deficits of her own life as a kidnapping victim and street teen.

Yet Veronica calls upon the depths of her maternal love to nurture and cultivate Leslie. Over a few years, Leslie the teen moves from marginal literacy and a rough, idiomatic exterior into a graceful if idiosyncratic young adulthood. Along with other studies, Veronica makes sure she takes courses in acting and theatre.

Eventually, Leslie writes and produces her own play. In this play-within-the-novel, Lee and the Angel recreate scenes of captivity with Sam. Leslie herself takes on the stage role of the Angel, thus finally incorporating this guiding spirit as a part of herself.

The beauty of Lee's story as a journey to being and becoming Leslie, and integrating within herself the archetypal positive female figure, is a powerful affirmation of the human nature of a transgender person. For all those who wish to have a greater depth of understanding of gender, I wholly recommend this wonderful book.