

A Review of “The Angel of Polk Street” By Stephanie Ann Blythe

Stephanie Ann Blythe is a retired USPS mid-level manager who has been active in the transgender community since transitioning between 1998 and 2003. After being involved in several transgender support groups in the San Francisco Bay Area she now focuses her social justice activities through her lay leadership in Unitarian Universalism. She keeps a broader perspective on LGBT issues as a member of Lavender Seniors of the East Bay. Her hobbies include bicycle riding, 3-D



photography, and competitive cribbage. Stephanie Ann also writes a monthly column for a transgender publication.

Celeste Newbrough weaves together two stories in *The Angel of Polk Street*. One is a narrative tale of survival, redemption and transformation, and the other is a dialogue between the protagonist, Lee/Leslie, and her angel. Several contemporary themes regarding gender identity are explored in the story as well.

The “nature versus nurture” argument about homosexuality and/or transsexuality is taken to the extreme when dealing with the captivity and abuse that Lee suffers. This reviewer has seen how two different transgender people have responded to childhood sexual abuse. We may not find the answer in *The Angel of Polk Street*, but the theme is intelligently explored.

In a time when gender transitions become tawdry spectacles on cable channels, Newbrough thoughtfully takes the reader through Lee’s transition into Leslie. The

grudging acceptance by her mother, contrasted with her father's hostile stance, mirrors the experience of many transgendered persons and their families. The tension is heightened by the difficulties of a family attempting to reunite years after being suddenly torn apart.

Leslie finds a stabilizing influence in her life through a relationship with Hanai, an intersexed person, who is also exploring self-identity. If I have one point of contention with *The Angel of Polk Street*, it is the way intersexuality is treated and discussed. I found Hanai's character to be very believable, but I found Newbrough to be a bit loose in how she describes intersexuality. To be sure, if transsexuality is not well understood by the public, intersexuality is even less understood. The author actually plays on that by having Leslie's father call her intersexed because she has not yet had gender reassignment surgery.

I am very drawn by the angel in the dialogue with Lee/Leslie. In my mind, I see the angels who appeared in "The Laramie Project" and the angels at the funeral of Gwen Araujo who shielded her family from the goons of the Westboro Baptist Church. But the angel here appears from without, but it is really the angel within. It is the voice within responding to our questions of who we are. Indeed, the artist cannot see and cannot draw the wings that Leslie knows she has.

The Angel of Polk Street is an enjoyable and compelling read. It asks many questions and sometimes answers questions with more questions. Read it, and then look around you. How many angels (with or without wings) do you see?