

Angel Aware: Celeste Newbrough's The Angel of Polk Street

This is a beautiful and hopeful book, but you won't think so at first. Keep reading, even if it's tough. It is.

Reviewed by Rosalie G. Riegler

The Angel of Polk Street by Celeste Newbrough (2017, Berkeley CA, Onecraft Publishing House) is a beautiful and hopeful book, but you won't think so at first. Keep reading, even if it's tough—and it is.

The Angel of Polk Street tells a harrowing growing-up story of Leslie Lawrence, at first nicknamed Lee. Raised by his mother, a Jungian dream therapist, Lee is abducted and raped and abused and tortured for long years by a warped man who calls himself Sam. Lee's innate intelligence and ingenuity relieve the almost unremitting evil in these early pages and we see him educate himself through television and struggle to grow vegetables in sandy soil.

In the suburb he left, Lee's mother Veronica struggles with guilt and turns from her middle-class clients to forensic psychiatry. Nicknamed "Ice" by judges and prosecutors, she gives testimony that sends those who rape and murder to death row, acting out of vengeance for the man who took her son.

When he is a teen, Lee escapes, becomes comfortable in on an emerging transgender identity, and returns to her birth name of Leslie. She finds her way to the Tenderloin District of San Francisco and crafts a strip act on Polk Street, dressed as an angel. Finally, Leslie is identified as the long-missing Lawrence child and returned to her mother.

This isn't a spoiler review, so read the book to learn the rest of this exciting story and especially to hear how mother and daughter struggle to rebuild their lives together. Newbrough is an accomplished writer, and her skill shows in the exquisite way she develops both the two main characters and the several in supporting roles—Leslie's hesitant academic of a father, Veronica's best friend Alex, the detective who doesn't give up on either the law or on love, the other very young boys that Sam kidnaps and Lee/Leslie attempts to shield as best s/he can, even the sad and desperate and yes, evil personality of Sam himself. The struggle for identity that all transgender people must feel in our still-so-bifurcated society is told with insight and sensitivity.

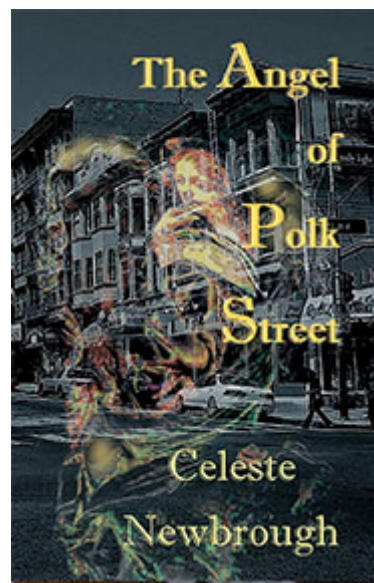
The honesty in the book stuns me. For instance, Lee got into the car with his kidnapper "because he was curious," a chilling reminder that the curiosity that makes us human can also kill. And it's curiosity that keeps the detective, Leslie herself, and even the elusive Sam going as they circle each other in a carefully constructed plot. Lee's mother never gives up, either, but she becomes frozen, leaving Lee's room exactly as he left it at the age of eight, with the clowns he loved as chilling icons.

There is also another icon, the unifying angel, who appears in the play that bookends the novel, in Leslie's strip club act, and throughout the book in her dreams. This angel is tall and angular and knowing, sometimes dark, never white and fluffy. But guardian she is. In the end, we see saving growth in Veronica, as she moves, with the help of her wise daughter, from tribal "eye for an eye" justice to a more nuanced and civilized and perhaps even redemptive justice.

It's hard to write a novel that both immerses the reader in fast-paced narrative and pulls one inward to self, to considering good and evil and the formation of identify. *The Angel of Polk Street* does both. Highly recommended.

Rosalie Riegler is professor emerita in English at Saginaw Valley State University and a grandmother of seven whom she hopes will have a planet to live in when they are adults. She has published four oral histories, including one on Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement. Two books profile resisters who have been imprisoned for nonviolent resistance to war: *Doing Time for Peace: Resistance, Family, and Community* and *Crossing the Line: Nonviolent Resisters Speak Out for Peace*. Rosalie is on the National Committee of the War Resisters League and currently very involved with Su Casa Catholic Worker in Chicago.

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