



Newman, Lesléa (b. 1955)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Much of Lesléa Newman's writing career has been devoted to exploring the many different identities that live within each individual and the various ways those identities interact and express themselves. As a Jewish femme lesbian-feminist writer of poetry, fiction, and children's books, Newman draws on her own experience to describe the complex tapestry that results when a variety of identities are woven together.

Born on November 5, 1955, Newman grew up in a middle-class family in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Brighton Beach. She and her two brothers were raised not only by their parents, but also by their maternal grandmother who lived across the street. Her outspoken, feisty *bubbe* (Yiddish for grandmother) would become a major influence and role model for young Lesléa, and would turn up in many of her novels and children's stories, including *Remember That* (1996), *Matzo Ball Moon* (1998), and *In Every Laugh a Tear* (1998).

Newman began writing poetry by the age of eight, but she did not turn her hand to fiction until she was twenty-seven, the same year she came out as a lesbian. In 1982 she moved from New York City to the East coast lesbian mecca of Northampton, Massachusetts. There she soon discovered her own lesbian identity. By the mid-1980s she was writing poetry and novels, many about the Jewish dyke experience.

In 1989, Newman was impelled to write her first children's book when a lesbian friend complained that there were no books where her child could read about her own experience as the daughter of a lesbian. She asked Newman to rectify this, and the result was *Heather Has Two Mommies*, a straightforward story of a little girl who has "two arms, two hands, two legs, two eyes, two ears, two hands and two feet," and two lesbian mommies.

First published by a small press Newman and a friend founded to issue it because no established publisher would touch the theme, *Heather* soon became one of the most controversial books in the country, outraging right wing conservatives. By 1994 it had become the second most banned book in the United States.

Newman went on to write a number of other children's books, exploring topics from fat oppression (*Belinda's Bouquet*, 1991) and gay families (*Gloria Goes to Gay Pride*, 1991) to Jewish culture (*Matzo Ball Moon*) and pets (*Cats, Cats, Cats!*, 2001). She has also written books on sensitive issues for young adults, such as *Fat Chance* (1994), about eating disorders, and *Jail Bait* (2005), which tackles sexual abuse.

Newman has also written over two dozen books for adults, ranging from love poetry to novels and short stories. In addition, she has edited a number of anthologies of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. In all her work she examines and reveals the complex issues that lesbians and gay men face as they resolve their relationships with their birth families and create families of choice.

In one of her best-known pieces, "A Letter to Harvey Milk" (1987), Newman ties Jewish history and oppression to the struggle for gay liberation through a rambling letter written to the slain San Francisco



A photograph of Lesléa Newman by Mary Velasquez provided by www.lesleanewman.com. Courtesy Lesléa Newman.

politician by an older straight Jewish man. The older man's grudging respect for Milk's work and grief over his murder touched a deep chord with readers, and the story has been adapted as both a stage play and a film.

In addition to publishing her own writing, Newman has also worked to encourage and help other women explore the written word. As part of this effort, she has published *Write from the Heart: Inspiration and Exercises for Women Who Want to Write* (1993, rev. ed. 2003), and she also offers Write From the Heart writing workshops for women.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.