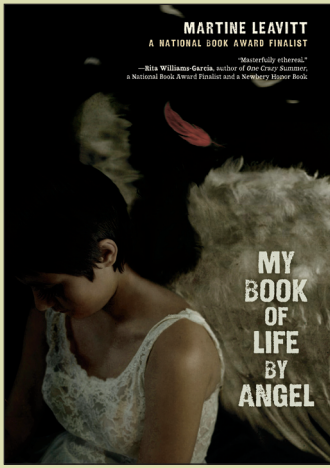




MARTINE LEAVITT
A NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

"Masterfully ethereal."
—**Rita Williams-Garcia**, author of *One Crazy Summer*,
a National Book Award Finalist and a Newbery Honor Book

**A DISCUSSION
GUIDE TO
MY
BOOK
OF
LIFE
BY
ANGEL**



Ages 14 and up • Grades 9 and up
HC: 978-0-374-35123-6
MARGARET FERGUSON BOOKS
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ABOUT THE BOOK

From National Book Award Finalist MARTINE LEAVITT, a novel-in-verse about a teen caught in a cycle of addiction and prostitution

When sixteen-year-old Angel meets Call at the mall, he buys her meals and says he loves her. He gives her a drug that makes her feel like she can fly. Pretty soon she's addicted, and without even realizing she has run away from home, she moves in with him. Call says that if she really loves him, she'll sleep with his friend—then it's a friend of a friend, and soon she's turning tricks. It's not until eleven-year-old Melli enters her and Call's life that she realizes that she truly can make a difference in her own—and Melli's—life.

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

While I was writing *Tom Finder* (2003), a novel about a street kid, I did a tremendous amount of research on homeless children. The things I read devastated and haunted me as I learned how many young people—runaways, throwaways, right here in my own affluent country—suffered poverty, neglect, and abuse. How was it allowed to go on? Even as I finished *Tom Finder*, I knew writing this story wasn't going to be enough to get rid of the ghosts. Random thoughts, like: What would a homeless child do if he got a toothache? led to another book, *Heck Superhero* (2004), about a teenager who is locked out of his mother's apartment when she neglects to pay the rent and is nowhere to be found. After *Heck*, I knew that I would, that I *must*, one day write about a homeless girl. I knew that to write this book honestly, it was unlikely I could avoid the topic of prostitution. I didn't want to live in that dark world for the time it would take me to write the book, so I avoided the project for a long time.

I didn't set out to write a novel in verse. I set out to write poetry. I didn't initially intend for all the poems to be about a girl who had been lured into prostitution. But she told me her name, and I loved her

immediately. In my research, I learned about the story of the missing women of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, many of whom entered "the life," as it is often called, when they were teens. I was deeply saddened by the fact that so many died because of apathy toward these marginalized women. It seemed fitting to choose this area as the setting for my Angel.

When I saw how the poetry and the content were informing one another, I let it be. I had to mess up the poetic form in order not to distract from the story, but the two had to be together. My Angel does not think in a straight line, logical and linear. She is erratic and mercurial and in withdrawal. I wanted the punctuation to be visibly and noticeably absent, and the line breaks to serve as big punctuation when I needed it. I wanted the lack of quotation marks to indicate airlessness and voicelessness, the lack of italicized titles to mean a rejection of convention, the lack of capitals to reflect a questioning of what is proper in a proper noun. None of this would have worked as well in prose. In addition, I needed the elevated form of poetry to reflect the beautiful souls of these girls I was writing about.

PRAISE FOR MY BOOK OF LIFE BY ANGEL

“Martine Leavitt creates a tight, desperate space where Billy Budd and Lucifer commingle. Unblinkingly grim. **Masterfully ethereal.**”—Rita Williams-Garcia, author of *One Crazy Summer*, a National Book Award Finalist and Newbery Honor Book

“**Exquisite**—a story that sees into and under and above all manner of things. Martine’s angry-making, beautiful, and profoundly compassionate story is a wonder that embraces both human and divine.”
—Carolyn Coman, author of *Many Stones*, a National Book Award Finalist and Printz Honor Book

“**The title is perfect, the voice authentic**, the depth of research must have been excruciating. Once we begin this **compelling, essential story**, we find we must read to the end. The compassion and sensitivity of the telling make it possible to do so.”—Helen Frost, author of *Keesha’s House*, a Printz Honor Book

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- Call gradually introduces Angel to the life of prostitution. What are his methods? How is Angel alienated from her family? Explain what you think Angel means on page 34 when she says, “he knew when I said yes / that he would have my voice in a bottle / that no one would hear me / again.”
- How do Angel’s seemingly small choices lead to big consequences? Do you have an example of this in your own life or the life of someone you know?
- Why do you think Widow is so adamant about Angel not crossing the line in the sidewalk from the kiddy corner to the midtrack? How do you think Widow feels about Angel?
- What do you think Angel means on page 17 when she says of her neighborhood, “the street is the jail / and there’s no escape”?
- How are Angel’s dates harmful to her even when they might not intend to be?
- Melli suffers from selective mutism. If she could speak, what do you think she would say to Angel when she first arrives at Call’s place? What might she say to Angel if they met a year later?
- What do you notice about the food in Angel’s kitchen? Why do you think she buys this particular food?
- What do you think Angel means when she says, on page 103, “But one day you break the rules, and you don’t die, / and then you think you’ll never die.” How does this relate to Angel’s plea that Melli not take Call’s candy? What does Angel’s experience show about drug withdrawal?
- What do you think Angel means when she says, on page 114, “I saw how every time / I was only in the man’s wishes, not a real girl / just a guess, a question, a story he made up”?
- On page 123, Angel talks about a girl who escaped the street and went home, but returned because everyone looked at her like they would look at someone whose face has burned off. What do you think this means?
- Some of the people who take advantage of Angel and the other girls are respected community figures, like police officers. How might this contribute to the girls’ feelings of helplessness?

- On page 205, people drive by and throw things at Angel and the other girls. Daddy Dave says, “Now Angel, you ask yourself, dig down deep, / what kind of life did those women have anyway?” Why do you think people behave this way toward sex workers? Have you seen this attitude reflected in mainstream society? How does this kind of attitude affect these women’s lives? How might this attitude have contributed to the police investigation into the missing women?
- Write a poem to follow the last page of the book.
- What would you say to Angel if you could talk to her? What would you say to the families of the missing women?
- What are some common stereotypes about prostitutes? How does **My Book of Life by Angel** challenge them?
- What do you think would be the benefits or consequences of legalizing prostitution? How does Call answer this question? What might Angel say?
- How does the punctuation in **My Book of Life by Angel** differ from the norm? What effect does it have on the reader? Choose three poems and describe how the punctuation adds to the meaning.

IDEAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

- What are some of the historical issues that have contributed to the problems in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside? Have they been resolved?
- Prostitution occurs in many parts of the world. How do other countries deal (or not deal) with it?
- Research the Pickton Inquiry. What do you think went wrong? What suggestions would you have for the police going forward?
- Read Book IX of **Paradise Lost** by John Milton. Write your thoughts about it.
- John the john uses **Paradise Lost** by John Milton to prove that all his disappointments are the fault of the women in his life. In what ways have interpretations of Genesis or of Book IX of **Paradise Lost** influenced cultural views of women throughout history? How could these same texts be interpreted differently?
- What do you know about the laws of your state concerning prostitution? Do you know the difference between procuring and prostitution?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARTINE LEAVITT has written several award-winning novels for young adults, including **Keturah and Lord Death**, a finalist for the National Book Award, and **Heck Superhero**, a finalist for the Governor General’s Award. She lives in Alberta, Canada.



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LINKS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

- catwinternational.org
- prostitutionresearch.com
- victimsofviolence.on.ca/rev2/index.php
- paradiselost.org
- gvnet.com/childprostitution/USA.htm