Newman, Lesléa. *Lovely: Poems*. Sequim, WA: Headmistress Press, 2018.

Newman, Lesléa. *I Carry My Mother*. Sequim, WA: Headmistress Press, 2015.

Reviewed by Beth Dwoskin, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

Lesléa Newman is a remarkably prolific and successful author who has published across all genres, though she has been most successful as a children's author. *I Carry My Mother* and *Lovely* are both filled with allusive games and puzzles that the writer plays with poetic form and theme, with references to well-known poems and playful rhyme schemes. This whimsy adds a welcome intricacy to the issues of grief, growth, and self-awareness, but sometimes sacrifices linguistic depth and complexity. Both books are autobiographical poetry. The poet uses her own life as material as she explores her interest in poetic forms and structures.

As an example, within the two books, she offers three pastiches of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" the modernist classic by Wallace Stevens. They range from the elemental pain of her mother's death as the subject of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at My Mother" to the light-hearted teacher's rumination on "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackboard" to a study of her fundamental self in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Poet." It's refreshing to have a popular writer bring poetry out of the academy, where it's been languishing outside of public view, and into the world of modern-day readers. Newman provides a gentle introduction for thoughtful book lovers who might have been avoiding poetry. She mixes abstract rhyme schemes with modern and familiar themes.

I Carry My Mother is a heartbreaking account of her mother's death through the lens of a daughter's honest, unflinching love. The book is guaranteed to resonate with women who have been through this agonizing experience. Newman details first her mother's dying and then her own grieving process. To tell the story, she presents an alphabetic acrostic, pantoums, internally-rhyming couplets, tercets, quatrains, haikus, blank verse, and allusions to other poets as well as Wallace Stevens, for example her "Prayer" that invokes Dylan Thomas:

Go gentle, Mother, into that good night,
Embrace, embrace the dying of the light.

There's also an homage to Robert Frost in "Stopping by Dreams on a Lonely Evening," Emily Dickinson in "My Mother Would Not Stop For Death," and Christina Rossetti in "Who Has Seen My Mom?." Newman's memorial to her mother contains a range of meters, end-rhymes, internal rhymes, and uncommon forms, a variety that matches meters and rhymes to mood and image. Each poem stands as an idiosyncratic outlook on some aspect of her mother's death—a very different approach from a standard prose memoir. The problem of keeping the reader's interest in what is both a universal and a solitary experience is solved in here in a unique way.

Newman employs some of the same devices in her more expansive autobiographical collection, *Lovely*. Several of these poems first appeared in journals and anthologies, as is often the case with collections of this type. In this book, the subject is not the mother's death but the poet's life, told more as a series of seminal incidents than as a linear narrative, and not as a life story but rather a set of formative episodes or impressions that happened along the way, including again the devastating loss of her mother. Again, these poems are set in a variety of forms, with a fair amount of attention to conventional feminine concerns: hair, make-up, clothing, aging, chocolate—though Newman's nimble word skills rescue these subjects from their usual banality.

She returns again and again to the memory of her mother, once in a prose poem that strings together the titles of all her mother's beloved soap operas to make a short character sketch, and another time in a running collection of all her mother's sage nostrums and clichés about getting along in life, many of them with a Jewish inflection. In both books, Newman's Jewishness is integral to the work but in an understated, matter-of-fact way. She identifies as a Jew and that is the background to everything she does, particularly in relation to her mother. But her Jewishness is not the subject of either book. The most foregrounded subject in *Lovely* is her spouse, Mary Grace Vazquez. The entire fifth section of the book, "Nasty Women," is devoted to her beloved partner and to her sense of fulfillment as a lesbian.

The key to Newman's poetic success is her accessibility. Even readers who consider themselves averse to poetry will be drawn in by the universal subjects of the poems, their concrete imagery and modern allusions, and their personal style. In the process of learning about the woman, Lesléa Newman, the poet teaches her audience how to read poetry.