

Review of *We Are the Light: A Novel* by Matthew Quick

Quick, Matthew. *We Are the Light: A Novel*. Avid Reader Press (Simon & Schuster), 2022. 256 pp. ISBN: 9781668005422. \$27.99 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Dylan Hoffman, PhD

Novels that convey with depth, sophistication, and creativity a distinctly Jungian vision of the psyche are rare indeed. *We Are the Light* by Matthew Quick is certainly one of them. The novel is epistolary in style—written as a series of letters by Lucas, the protagonist of the story, to his Jungian analyst, Karl. But the letters begin after something unspoken and horrific has brought the formal therapeutic relationship to a sudden end, which is the impetus behind Lucas writing the letters in the first place. The tragedy at the center of the novel is only glimpsed piecemeal over time as Lucas himself attempts to put together the fragments of himself shattered by the event that has left him simultaneously widowed and without his analytical confidante.

What we learn over time is that a massacre has occurred in the local and beloved movie theater. A teenage gunman killed 17 people from the close-knit community of Majestic, Pennsylvania—including Darcy, Lucas’s wife, and Leandra, the wife of his analyst. The gunman was himself a member of the community, and the last to die on the evening of the mass killing—at the hands of Lucas. Lucas has become a local hero for stopping the onslaught and saving countless lives. But Lucas’s heroism is not as clear-cut as it may seem, particularly to Lucas himself. The killer, Jacob Hansen, was a student at the local high school, where Lucas was his high school counselor.

The complex interconnection between the entire cast of characters comprises the exquisite tapestry of the story within which Quick weaves depth psychological insights from Lucas’s analytical experiences with Karl. But there are two different angles from which these insights are threaded. In his letters, Lucas is often recapitulating what he has learned from Karl, not only about Jung’s work, but also about the process of undergoing analysis—particularly about the sanctity of the psychological container established between analyst and analysand. From these descriptions, we are introduced to the experience of transference and countertransference, and the often indecipherable, inexplicable threads of unconscious and conscious intertwining that create a therapeutic bond.

But as mentioned, the bond has been broken. All we know is that Karl sent Lucas a letter, after the massacre, communicating that he was ending their work together. The assumed explanation, though not explicitly articulated, is that Karl is grieving the death of his own wife. However, through hints and asides, it feels as if there is more behind the abrupt ending. Lucas’s conveyance of his relationship with Karl and what he has learned

can feel didactic, memorized even, and almost used as a defense against something far more troubling that Lucas is both unable and unwilling to articulate—something he is strenuously attempting to keep at bay. His unconscious psychological struggle cannot be told, so it has to be shown in other ways. And the depth psychological brilliance of the novel is most deeply expressed by this distinction, because Quick as an author knows the difference between show and tell—knows how to do both, and when.

What is shown, in a nuanced and nerve-wracking unveiling, is a mind coming undone by trauma. There is something incongruous at work in the background of the letters to Karl. On the surface they read as rather straightforward attempts by Lucas to reach out to Karl, to express how much he has gained from their relationship, and to find out if there might be a way for them to resume their therapeutic engagement. But far more comes out in Lucas's letters than what he can see. In many ways, we discover that they are his last tether to sanity, however much they are also a symptomatic expression of its fraying.

What no one knows, though Lucas believes that he is secretly disclosing it to Karl, is that his deceased wife Darcy visits him nightly as a feathered angel who envelops him and gives him guidance. As Lucas was killing Jacob Hansen in the theater, he had a vision of the dead ascending as angels into the light. His wife Darcy was the only angel to stay behind, though as time goes by Lucas feels her slipping away. Each morning she is gone by the time he awakes, but he gathers the feathers she has left behind on the sheets—to prove to himself that he is not going crazy.

The only person who seems to have a good sense of what Lucas is going through is his wife's best friend, Jill, who has moved into a spare room in his house in order to look after him. Like the other relationships in the novel, Jill and Lucas's is multilayered and complex. Despite his own misgivings and inner conflicts about how the relationship appears, Jill provides Lucas with a center of gravity without which he would have almost certainly spiraled into a much deeper darkness.

The other person who becomes central, and climactic, to the story is discovered one day living in a tent in Lucas's backyard. Eli Hansen, the younger brother of the perpetrator of the theater killings, has been ostracized by the community because of his brother's acts. He has fled his abusive home and taken up refuge with Lucas, who takes Eli under his wing. Lucas is instructed by Darcy in her angelic form that Eli is the way through the trauma that he and the community have suffered. Eli is seeking the aid of Lucas—who was also his high school counselor—to help him create a film to address his experience of being viewed as a monster by the community, because of his familial association.

This film takes the form of an independent project that will help him complete high school, which he felt compelled to leave because of the bullying he was experiencing. With the backing of Lucas, viewed as the hero of the day, the film gains the support and participation of survivors of the Majestic Theater tragedy, as well as other community members. But Eli wants to show the film in Majestic Theater in the hopes of redeeming the space for the community and showing that he is not the monster he is perceived to be.

What Lucas is not prepared for, but unconsciously drawn toward, is a confrontation with the true depths of his trauma at its source. On the day of the event, as Lucas enters the literal place of his suffering's origin, he finds himself psychologically facing what he has been unable to see. The vision is his final undoing . . . and the true beginning of his psychological repair. This climactic dismembering and re-membering, how those closest to Lucas share in it, and what we finally learn about Karl, is something that I prefer the reader

to get firsthand rather than in a book review. Ultimately, *We Are the Light* is an experience that touches the heart of trauma. In doing so, the book reveals the meaningfulness of our severest symptoms and how they can keep us alive. Most profoundly, Quick is able to convey the paradoxical capacity of psychopathology to symbolize the psyche's teleological movements towards healing and wholeness in the very things that are tearing us apart.

Contributor

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