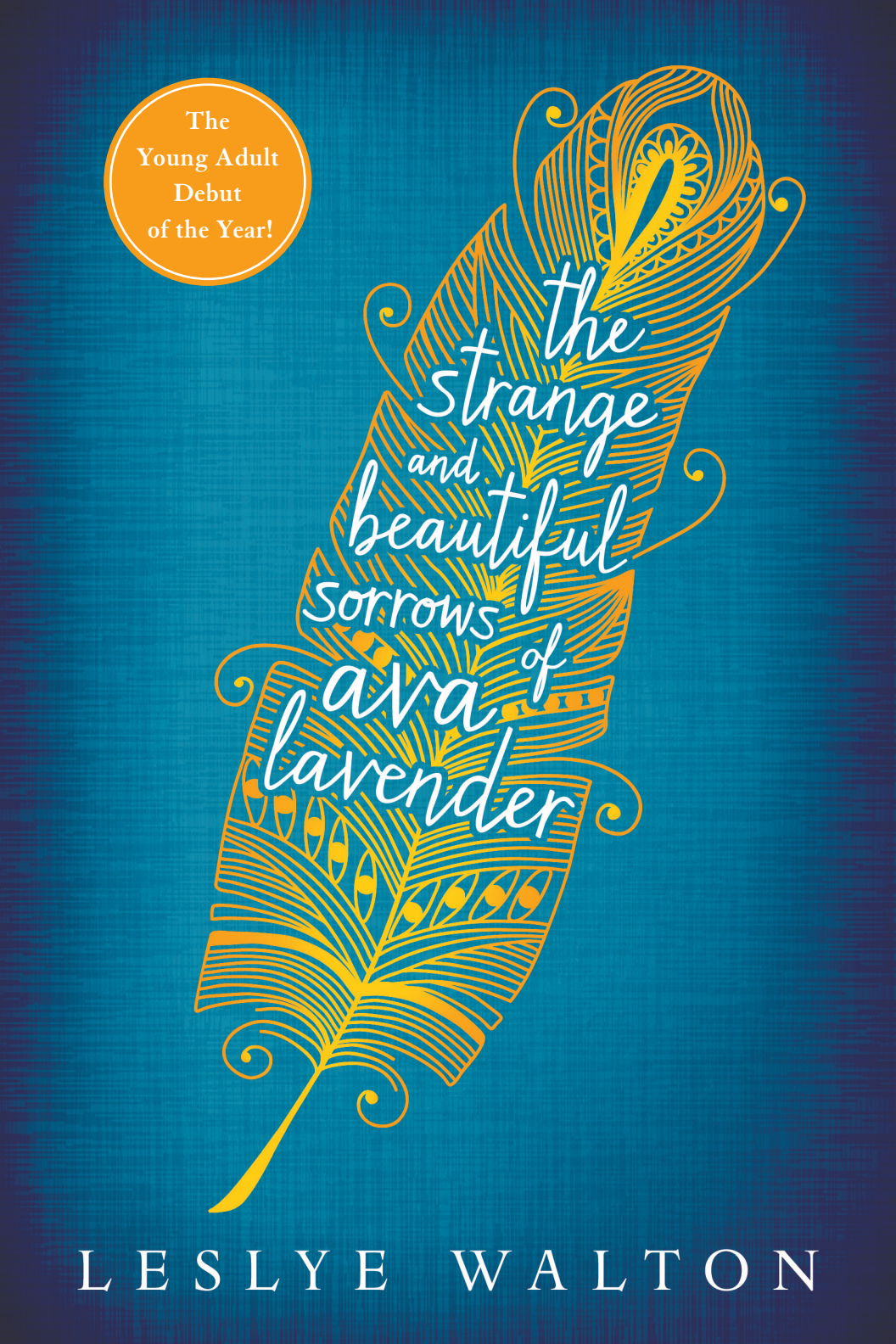
The Young Adult Debut of the Year!
the strange and beautiful sorrows of ava lavender
LESLYE WALTON

I've been told things happen as they should:
My grandmother fell in love three times before her nineteenth birthday. My mother found love with the neighbor boy when she was seven. And I, I was born with wings, a misfit who didn't dare to expect something as grandiose as love. *It's our fate, our destiny, that determines such things, isn't it?*

the strange and beautiful sorrows of ava lavender

LESLYE WALTON

Foolish love appears to be the Roux family birthright, an ominous forecast for its most recent progeny, Ava Lavender. Ava—in all other ways a normal girl—is born with the wings of a bird. In a quest to understand her peculiar disposition and a growing desire to fit in with her peers, sixteen-year-old Ava ventures into the wider world, ill prepared for what she might discover and naive to the twisted motives of others. Others like the pious Nathaniel Sorrows, who mistakes Ava for an angel and whose obsession with her grows until the night of the summer solstice celebration. That night, the skies open up, rain and feathers fill the air, and both Ava's quest and her family's saga build to a devastating crescendo. First-time author Leslye Walton has constructed a layered and unforgettable mythology of what it means to be born with a heart that is tragically, exquisitely human.

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Also available in audio • 320 pages • Age 14 and up

A Note from Author Leslye Walton

Photo by Erin Grace Photography

The novel started out as a short story that came to me while listening to the song "I Just Don't Think I'll Ever Get Over You." I remember listening to the lyrics, "If I lived till I could no longer climb my stairs/ I just don't think I'll ever get over you," and pondering the logic, or lack thereof, in love—the ways we coax ourselves to love, to continue loving, to leave love behind. And through this thinking arose Viviane Lavender, a girl who loved a boy her whole life. I imagined the burden of this love, the many ways she'd try to free herself from it. I imagined the immense weight of loving someone who didn't, or perhaps couldn't, love you back, and how it would define every step you took from that point on.

Over the course of a few months, more characters began showing themselves to me, revealing their intricate place in this now-evolving story. Henry was based on an autistic boy I taught who had a preoccupation with and remarkable aptitude for mapmaking. Trouver was a neighbor's dog I walked to earn money while in grad school. But it was Ava who changed everything. At the time, I was playing with the idea of introducing

characters through detailed descriptions of photographs. I was looking at a picture of my younger sister, taken when she was perhaps eleven. To be honest, I'm not even sure if the actual photograph exists, or if it is merely an image that I recall when thinking of my sister as a young child—all long limbs and big teeth, wearing oversize white T-shirts, and running, always running, her shirt billowing out behind her as if she had wings. And it was in that description that I came to a stop, my fingers poised over the keyboard, and I thought, *No. Not* as if *she had wings. She* has *wings.* And in that, I also realized I had no idea what I was writing. I didn't write again for weeks.

I immersed myself in magical realism. Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, and Louise Erdrich were my guides, as were Alice Hoffman, Joanne Harris, and Neil Gaiman. Then I woke one morning and found Emilienne and the entire Roux family waiting for me to tell their story. I wrote their chapters in one afternoon. I discovered that in this strange and beautiful world I was creating, metaphors were literal, the imaginative conceptual, the impossible possible. Emilienne's "gift" is my favorite—I find it comforting to consider that coincidences could have meaning, that there's truth behind old wives' tales.

The idea that I, the writer, had any control over these bizarre characters, or the story they had to share, is humorous to me. They surprised me all the time. Like reckless teenagers, they rarely listened to what I said, the warnings I called out when I knew the pain they were diligently running toward. When I realized I was writing a story about a girl who would be mistaken for an angel—a symbol of purity—I knew it would also be a story that included a rape. It was never a story I wanted to tell, but it's Ava's story, and she insisted I share it with you.

Q&A with Leslye Walton

Please describe The Strange and Beautiful Sorrows of Ava Lavender *in ten words or less.*

Love can make us such fools.

Describe the writing process for the novel. How long did this book take to fully form? What is your writing process like as an author?

This novel was a learning process. I was in grad school at the time, earning an MA in writing from Portland State University. Though I'd written short stories before, I had no idea how to write a long piece of fiction, and the plot developed as I wrote. I lived and breathed this novel, these characters, for two years. It consumed my life, but again, I was spending as much time learning how to write as I did actually writing.

My stories are always very character-driven. For me, the writing process starts with getting to know the characters. I need to understand them, who they are, and what they care about before I can begin to formulate the plot. And usually it's the characters themselves who tell me where the story is going to go, and not the other way around.

The Strange and Beautiful Sorrows of Ava Lavender is a debut novel. What does it feel like now that the book is being published?

It feels surreal. I was driving to work when I got the call from my agent telling me we'd sold the book. I pulled over and had my first phone conference with my editor in an alleyway behind a car dealership. I kept looking around, thinking, *Is this really happening?* But as surreal as this whole experience has been, I'm also a teacher—I teach middle-school language arts—and my students are very good at keeping me grounded.

What are your hopes for the book, and what do you hope readers take away from it?

I hope it means something. Although that might not sound very original—don't we all hope the things we create will mean something?—it still remains true. I bought my favorite book, *How to Make an American Quilt* by Whitney Otto, at a book fair when I was fourteen. That book sat on my bedside table throughout high school. I brought it with me to college and then later to grad school. The binding of the book is torn, and the pages are yellowed. I can speak some of the lines from that novel as naturally as if the words had derived from my own head. I'd love for Ava Lavender to mean that to a reader. I hope that it speaks some kind of truth for someone—that it makes someone feel less alone, or more alive. I want readers to fall in love with Ava. I want them to love her like I do.

Prologue from

the strange and beautiful sorrows of ava lavender

TO MANY, I WAS MYTH INCARNATE, the embodiment of a most superb legend, a fairy tale. Some considered me a monster, a mutation. To my great misfortune, I was once mistaken for an angel. To my mother, I was everything. To my father, nothing at all. To my grandmother, I was a daily reminder of loves long lost. But I knew the truth—deep down, I always did.

I was just a girl.

I was born Ava Wilhelmina Lavender on a remarkably clear Seattle night on the first of March in 1944. My birth was later remembered for the effect it had on the birds on the street where I lived, the auspiciously named Pinnacle Lane. During the day, as my young mother began experiencing labor pains, the crows collected mounds of tiny cherry pits in their beaks and tossed them at the house windows. Sparrows perched on women's heads and stole loose strands of hair to weave into their nests. At night nocturnal birds gathered on the lawns to eat noisily, the screams of their prey sounding much like my own mother in hard labor. Just before slipping into a deep twilight sleep—relief granted by a nurse and a cold syringe—my mother opened her eyes and saw giant feathers fall from the ceiling. Their silky edges brushed her face.

As soon as I was born, the nurses whisked me away from the delivery room to explore a matter that was later described on an

anonymous medical report only as *a slight physical abnormality.* It wasn't long before the devout gathered in the light from the hospital windows, carrying candles and singing hymns in praise and fear. All because when I was born, I opened my eyes, then unfolded the pair of speckled wings that wrapped around me like a feathery cocoon.

Or so the story goes.

Where the wings came from, no doctor could ever determine. My twin (for there was a twin, Henry) had surely been born without them. Until then, no human being on record had ever been born with animal parts—avian or otherwise. For many in the medical field, the case of Ava Lavender produced the first time science had failed them. When the religious masses gathered below my mother's hospital room window with their fevered prayers and flickering candles, for once the doctors considered the devout with jealousy, rather than with pity or disdain.

"Imagine," said one young intern to another, "believing the child is divine." It was a musing he uttered only once. Then he wiped his tired eyes and went back to his medical books before returning to my mother and claiming what every other specialist had already concluded—there was nothing they could do. Not medically, at least.

"I've never seen anything like it," he said, shaking his head to show my family that he sympathized. It was a practice he would master in time.

My entire muscular, skeletal, and circulatory systems were irrevocably dependent on my wings. The option of removing them was quickly deemed out of the question. I would lose too much blood. I could end up paralyzed. Or dead. It seemed there was no separating the girl from the wings. One could not survive without the other.

Later the young intern wished himself audacious enough to interview the family. But what does one ask? *Is there a history of winged beings populating the family tree?* In the end, the intern instead made his rounds to other patients with ailments that did not evoke such complex questions. But let's pause and imagine if he had. What might have happened if he had turned to the sullen young mother with the unnaturally red lips, or to the stern but beautiful grandmother with the strange accent, and asked them the two questions that haunt my every winged step:

Where did I come from?

And even more important: *What would the world do with a girl such as I am?*

Perhaps my mother or my grandmother would have had an answer.

And perhaps then my life would have turned out much differently. For the sake of the intern, it was probably best that he convinced himself that there was nothing he could do and left it at that. For what could he have done? Foreseeing the future, I would later learn, means nothing if there is nothing to be done to prevent it. Which just proves that my story is much more complicated than just the story of my birth. Or even the story of my life. In fact, my story, like everyone's, begins with the past and a family tree.

The following is the story of my young life as I lived it. What started out as a simple personal research project as a young woman—a weekend in 1974 spent at the Seattle Central Library compiling information about my birth—led me down a road that took me from one coast to the other. I have traveled through continents, languages, and time trying to understand all that I am and all that has made me such.

I will be the first to admit that certain facts may have been omitted, long forgotten over time by myself or by other involved

parties. My research has been scattered, dropped, neglected, then picked up, shuffled, and reorganized time and again. It cannot be considered a holistic document. Nor is it unbiased.

The following is the story of my young life as I remember it. It is the truth as I know it. Of the stories and the myths that surrounded my family and my life—some of them thoughtfully scattered by you perhaps—let it be said that, in the end, I found all of them to be strangely, even beautifully, true.

A. Lavender

March 2014

LESLYE WALTON was born in the Pacific Northwest. Perhaps because of this, the author has developed a strange kinship with the daffodil—she too can only achieve beauty after a long, cold sulk in the rain. Her debut novel, *The Strange and Beautiful Sorrows of Ava Lavender,* was inspired by a particularly long sulk in a particularly cold rainstorm spent pondering the logic, or rather, lack thereof, in love—the ways we coax ourselves to love, to continue loving, to leave love behind.

Leslye Walton has an MA in writing and lives in Seattle. When she's not writing, she teaches middle-school students how to read and write and, most important, how to be kind to one another, even on days when they don't really feel like it. She is currently working on her next novel.

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Magical realism, lyrical prose, and the pain and passion of human love haunt this hypnotic generational saga.

MARKETING CAMPAIGN

100,000 First Printing
Global Publication March 25, 2014

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