

The Polygamist's Daughter

Anna LeBaron *with Leslie Wilson*

a memoir

Since I've met my cousin Anna, she's been a force of inspiration. Reading her memoir, I now fully understand why. Anna's childhood struggles could've been anyone's, and were certainly similar to my own, but her brave and passionate spirit shines as a bright reminder that no matter what happens in our lives, what lies within us is stronger and more powerful than our circumstances.

RUTH WARINER

Bestselling author of *The Sound of Gravel*

Anna's personal story is riveting, captivating, and heart wrenching all at once. You will be startled by this true-life tale and also amazed at the profound ways Anna brings comfort and strength to so many journeying with her. You will be mesmerized by this book and deeply touched by her ability to mount up above her challenging life. Great job, Anna!

SALLY CLARKSON

Author of *Own Your Life* and cofounder of Whole Heart Ministries

The Polygamist's Daughter reads like a taut suspense novel, only Anna's story is terrifyingly real. I rooted for Anna, experiencing her unstable, uprooted, crime-laden childhood alongside her. This memoir reminds us all that no one is beyond the reach of Jesus, and He loves to pursue the broken in broken places.

MARY DEMUTH

Author of *Thin Places: A Memoir*

The Polygamist's Daughter is a heart-wrenching account of my niece Anna's extreme neglect, fear, and abuse inflicted by the very ones meant to protect her. Readers will be astonished by her powerful testimony of surviving danger and terror while growing

up in the cult of her infamous father, Ervil LeBaron. This account of Anna's resilient spirit, strength, and courage brings hope to others—many of whom, through fear, have remained silent for too long!

IRENE SPENCER

Author of *New York Times* bestseller *Shattered Dreams: My Life as a Polygamist's Wife* and *Cult Insanity: A Memoir of Polygamy, Prophets, and Blood Atonement*

The Polygamist's Daughter is a crazy read, full of things almost unimaginable in this day and age. And yet it's real, and Anna LeBaron went through it. *The Polygamist's Daughter* is a riveting narrative, but even more, it's a story of redemption. Read it for the ride, but settle in for the hope.

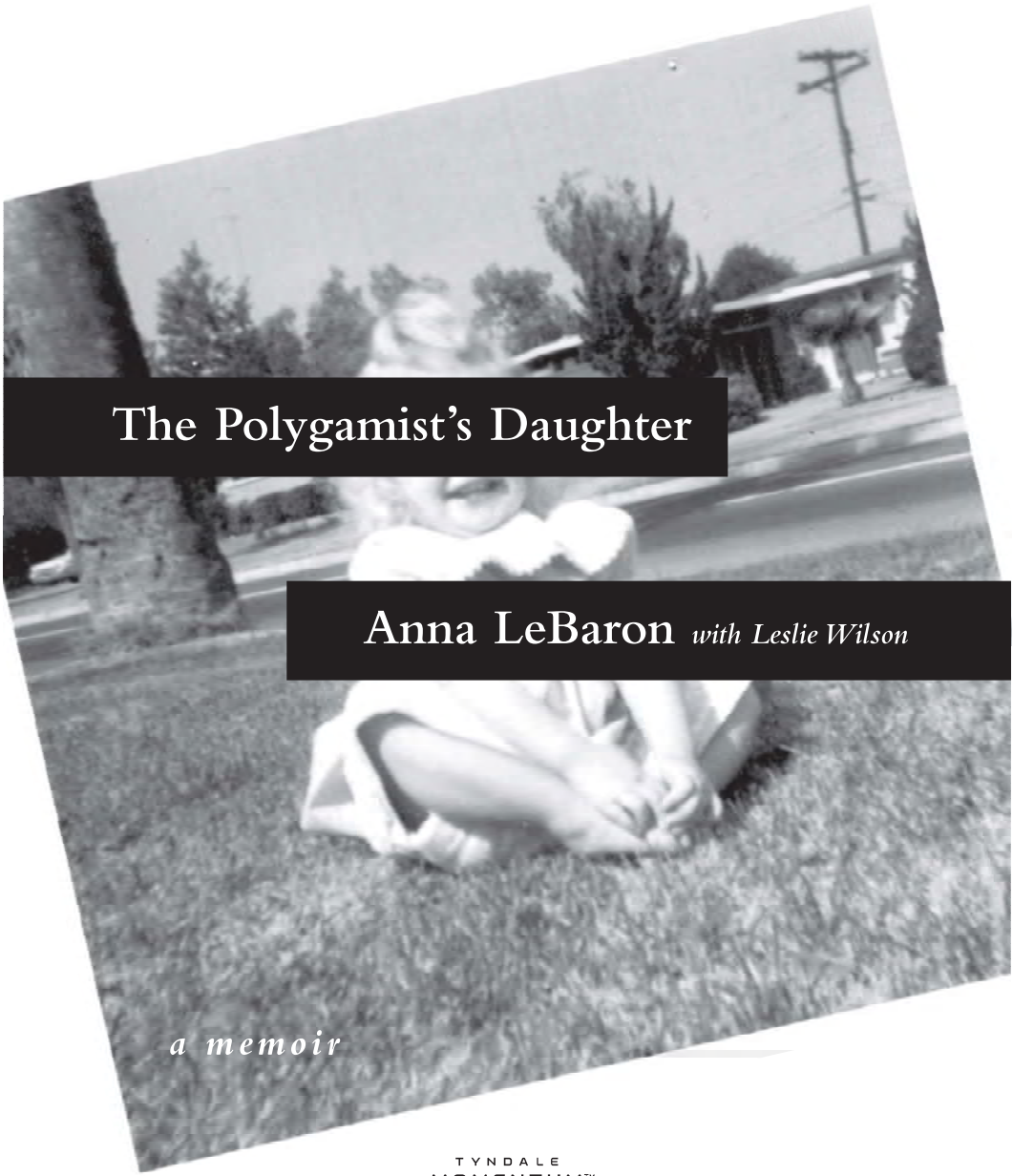
SARAH MAE

Author of *Longing for Paris*

As remembered through the eyes of a child, certain aspects of *The Polygamist's Daughter* seem at times more like adventure than inhumane living situations. You will be captivated as Anna LeBaron's life circumstances weigh heavier and heavier upon her, culminating in the brave decision to escape from the grip of a horrific family situation. Carrying insurmountable grief, she eventually finds peace and wholeness in Jesus. Anna has woven a tragic yet redemptive telling of her childhood that will leave you wrought with holy emotions right up until the last page.

JULIE PRESLEY

Author of *Stones of Remembrance* and *Nor Forsake*



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The Polygamist's Daughter: A Memoir

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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

THIS MEMOIR WAS written from memory, with many details corroborated by close family members. Some names have been changed for the privacy of the individuals; some scenes have been recreated to the best of my ability; and some of the events described have been compressed for brevity. Various details not known to me at the time of the events have been added to the story to give context to the reader.

Except in certain circumstances when the words were seared in my mind, the dialogue is not verbatim. It is, however, in keeping with the spirit of the events surrounding them. The same is true of the people. I describe them to the best of my recollection, based on my age at the time these events occurred, our circumstances and experiences, and my impressions of them at the time.

I also want to make it clear that my father took the basic tenets of Joseph Smith's teachings, including polygamy, that had been practiced for generations in my family and radically twisted them. My father promoted an extremism that shattered so many lives. The modern-day LDS Mormon church officially disavowed polygamy in 1890.

Within these pages, I tell my story. I hope one day the others involved will tell their own.

FOREWORD

WE ALWAYS MEET people somewhere in the middle of their stories. I met Anna LeBaron somewhere around chapter 34 of the book you are holding, and I had no idea of the unfolding story that I would become a part of.

Her narrative begins with “At age nine, I had forty-nine siblings,” and ends with “He knows my name. He knows my story. And He has set me free.” What happens in between is a shocking and powerful account of a young woman becoming herself, while others wanted her to be anything but herself.

Starting as someone who was just one among scores of siblings, Anna has emerged as a one-of-a-kind human being. For someone who was surrounded by demands to obey, comply, serve, and disappear, Anna has done an amazing job of “showing up.” If you were to meet her now you would be taken by her kindness and her generosity, by her smile and her positivity. And you would never guess the specifics that you are about to read.

I first heard about Anna’s journey during a series of conversations between us. I watched her fight, and I watched her learn. I watched her pursue fearlessly (or at least it appeared that way from my chair) the kind of truth that would make her free. I watched

her write her story in her heart, not knowing that one day she would write it for your eyes.

But she almost couldn't help it. It is consistent with the generosity of her life that if she found hope, she would also do whatever it takes to give it to others. If she found life, she would do whatever it takes to offer it to others.

Prepare to encounter situations that few of us could actually imagine. Fleeing in the dark of night, pursued by the FBI, protected by SWAT teams, and traumatized by multiple murders in her family—all of these experiences were part of Anna's life in the cult. But that is not the real story here. While those details may keep your eyes open, the real story will keep your heart open.

The real story is about a child born to an evil tyrant, a child who endured far more than just fatherlessness—she endured wickedness. And yet, this young woman, in the darkest of conditions, found the light of fatherhood to be real and profoundly healing.

Her discovery unveils a fundamental truth for every human soul: Regardless of your circumstances and your family history, you are made for more. You are more than the sum of your experiences and more than the sum of your humanity.

Anna's story meets you in the middle of your story. If you find nothing else in *The Polygamist's Daughter*, you can find the hope that you, too—whether now or later—can breathe the words of Anna's friend in the last chapter, “She has overcome!”

Bob Hamp

Founder of Think Differently: Counseling, Consulting, Connecting
Author of Think Differently Live Differently

PROLOGUE

AT AGE NINE, I had forty-nine siblings.

I didn't play hopscotch with my school friends at recess or watch *The Brady Bunch* on television with my siblings. My mother didn't pack my school lunch and my dad didn't give me a hug at the door, wishing me a good day. Instead, my parents, who were on the run from federal authorities, abandoned me in Mexico for about a year, leaving me with a family I didn't know. A family that included a man named Rafael.

I was fed each day and had a foam pad to sleep on at night. But I found it difficult to sleep in this strange place, so far from my mom. Why couldn't I stay with her and the rest of my family in the United States, instead of in this dingy, dusty apartment south of the border?

Even though I had grown up in polygamy, I had no idea of the truth.

I was auditioning as a potential wife for Rafael.

My father, the notorious Ervil LeBaron, had promised Rafael several of his daughters in marriage. If Rafael, a recent convert to my father's polygamist sect, was still in favor with him when we girls reached marriageable age—typically fifteen—it would

happen. My sisters and I were pawns to be auctioned off to the highest bidder, those followers willing to do whatever my father asked, no matter what it involved.

I understood from watching my mom, along with her twelve sister-wives and my countless siblings, that no one was allowed to question my father's authority. So, like the others, I obeyed.

And even though this life made my stomach ache, I never said a word.

ONE

“WHAT WILL WE DO without you?”

I stood in the driveway of our Dallas home, clinging to my mother as the sun rose higher in the sky, and begged her through my tears not to go. I couldn't imagine life without my mother. So great was my grief that I barely noticed her two sister-wives saying good-bye to their own children.

We had been living there only a short time, having moved yet again on short notice. I'd be sent off to school that day with no explanation as to why my mom had to leave—again. Usually she left without notice and would come back in a few days, or sometimes weeks. This time was different. She didn't know when she would be back.

I'm sure Mom felt like she had no other choice—she was obeying my father's order. Ervil LeBaron led The Church of the Lamb of God, a radical offshoot of the Mormon Church, and Anna Mae was the fourth of his thirteen wives. Like the other wives, she learned early on to do as she was told.

My mom, raised in Arizona, had met and married her second husband, Nephi, when they were both part of the traditional Mormon Church, known as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Nephi attended one of Ervil LeBaron's exhaustive talks and eventually bought into my dad's more radical offshoot of Mormonism. He hurried home to tell my mom that the way they'd been living out Joseph Smith's teaching was all wrong. When she remonstrated, Nephi invited Ervil to their home to convince my mom that they needed to convert and follow this new prophet. Ervil was powerfully persuasive—so much so that Nephi and my mother not only converted, but agreed to relocate to Colonia LeBarón in Chihuahua, Mexico.

Nephi stayed in Arizona to sell their home, but my mom went ahead with their five children. During this transition, she spent an inordinate amount of time with Ervil, who—while tall, handsome, and charismatic—was also narcissistic, entitled, and manipulative. He proclaimed that he had a revelation that it was God's will and plan for my mom's life that she leave Nephi and marry him instead. She fell madly in love with Ervil, and like the other sister-wives before and after her, she succumbed to his potent influence. They married and she had seven more children with him, including me.

"Please, Mom, don't go."

On the driveway, I wrapped my arms around Mom's waist, my tears dampening the front of her faded denim dress.

"Anna Keturah," she said firmly. Like most mothers, Mom always included my middle name when I stirred up trouble. She named me, her tenth child, after herself, but insisted on a different pronunciation (Ah-nah) that she heard while pregnant with me.

"Stop crying! You're seven years old. Crying doesn't do any good." She bent over and kissed my cheek. I placed my hand over the spot to hold in her warmth as long as possible.

Helpless, I watched her get into the beat-up Chevy with three of Dad's other followers. Along with the other kids and a few

remaining adults, I watched them drive away, hoping Mom would turn around and wave or smile at me one more time. She didn't. My thirteen-year-old sister, Kathleen, took my hand, pulled me into the house, and did her best to comfort me. This wasn't her first time being left in charge of the kids in my mother's absence.

Those of us left behind in Dallas were supported by the adult women in our group who worked at the family's used appliance business, although the majority of the income generated from the family business went to my father. The sister-wives, even nursing mothers, spent long days—often twelve to fourteen hours of back-breaking labor—at the store, just one of many abuses they endured under my father's control. We children witnessed some of the other abuses, but all of us had been conditioned to keep silent.

While the women were gone, Kathleen cared for me, Adine, Hyrum, Celia, Marilyn, Manuel, Virginia, and other children of my mom's sister-wives. To pass the time, Kathleen played games and read to us, activities she preferred over the never-ending housework. Though Kathleen did her best to scrape together meals to feed us, when the sister-wives got home, they would scold her for not cleaning up the messes made by so many toddlers and young children.

When we were all together, I quietly observed the interactions between the sister-wives. Some had petty jealousies, and a few spoke cattily behind each other's backs. Others got along well, especially biological sisters married to the same husband. As teenagers, two of my mother's daughters, Ramona and Faye, were given in marriage to Dan Jordan, my father's right-hand man. Ramona became Dan's sixth wife at age seventeen.

Later, Faye was "sealed" to him following her sixteenth birthday, along with my step-sister Amy. Since the "blessed event" making them wives number seven and eight took place on the same night, Ervil flipped a coin after performing the double ceremony to see

which of the girls would share the marriage bed with her new husband that first night. Faye was relieved when Amy was chosen to spend that first night with the forty-plus-year-old man.

These hurried ceremonies were performed in secret; in many cases, the other wives knew nothing until after the fact. Even if the girls in our group dreamed of being courted, dating, or marrying different young men, they never experienced that kind of happily-ever-after; those types of relationships were seldom allowed. The older men in Dad's sect preferred younger and younger wives, and they managed to get their way with each successive marriage. At first, group members frowned upon underage unions and quietly protested when the older men began to court teenage girls, but the leaders became ever more emboldened, and the disapproving whispers and looks from the older wives did nothing to stop this practice.

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A few months after my mom left us in Dallas, Kathleen roused me from a deep slumber. "Wake up, Anna. It's time to go."

As usual, no one had told me that we were moving again. But I knew the drill. I gathered a couple of items within reach and padded down the long hallway behind my older siblings. None of us had many personal possessions, since we left behind most of our belongings with each move. What we did have, we kept in small cardboard boxes, which, if we were lucky, we could grab before leaving the house. An extra change of clothes and a few special trinkets were treasures that we would keep well-hidden so other siblings wouldn't take them, claiming them as their own. We felt rich when we had a full deck of cards for a card game, a diversion that would keep us entertained for hours. Speed, War, and Slapjack were my favorites.

When we got outside, I blinked several times, then wiped the

sleep from my eyes as I tried to see my surroundings under the heavy cloud cover.

“Keep moving,” a husky voice barked.

I felt someone thump me on the back of my head. I turned slightly and stuck out my tongue at my brother Arthur, only because I knew he couldn’t see me in the inky darkness. I was wearing flip-flops, and with the next step, I stubbed my toe on a piece of the crumbling driveway and nearly fell. My rubber sandal fell off, and I had to scurry back a couple of steps to retrieve it. Another man, Alex, helped herd us kids as well. Clearly, they were in a hurry to get on the road.

“Anna?” cried the thin, fearful voice of Celia, my sister closest in age.

“I’m right here.”

She took my hand, and I asked her to help me find my sandal. We felt around in the dark until she found it just off the driveway in the weed-ridden yard. I quickly slipped it back on, and we fell back in line with the others.

“Do you know where we’re going?” Celia whispered again.

“I heard Arthur say something about Colorado.”

“Oh, I hope so. That’s where Mom is.” We clung tightly to one another, and to the hope of seeing our mother again.

“I can’t see anything. Where are the cars?”

We both knew we would need at least two vehicles to transport all of us kids on the eight-hundred-mile trek from Dallas to Denver. Just as I opened my mouth to say I didn’t know, the clouds parted slightly, and a full moon revealed a large box truck sitting at the end of our cracked driveway.

“We’re not going in that, are we?” My surprise and disgust carried my words slightly too far, reaching Arthur’s ears at the front of the line.

As he directed everyone to the open back of the box truck, he hissed at each one, "Get in. Find a place to sit, and be quiet. Absolutely no talking!" Then he spun around and headed toward me. He yanked my arm hard, and held me in place while the line of siblings marched on toward the truck. Celia could only watch, her countenance filled with compassion mixed with confusion. Arthur leaned down, his face only inches away from my own. I could smell the peanut butter on his breath.

"Shut your mouth and get in. You know we're doing this to build God's kingdom. Do you think I need to hear you complaining?"

"N-no," I stammered, trying to wrench free from his firm grasp.

He tightened his strong fingers around my upper arm until I felt certain they would leave a mark—or worse, a bruise. "Then I'd better not hear another peep out of you." He quickly released my arm and shoved me in the middle of my back, propelling me forward once more. I stutter-stepped but managed not to fall or lose my flimsy flip-flop again and climbed in the back of the truck.

The space inside was dimly lit by a couple of flashlights held by older siblings. Someone had spread a few moving blankets across the floor of the truck, but these did little to soften the hard wood floor. I wrinkled my nose at the pungent odor of mothballs mixed with the greasy residue on the blankets. Scanning the truck for Celia, I quickly spotted her midway back. She patted the floor next to her, indicating she had room for me beside her. Even the slight movement of her hand echoed throughout the empty space and garnered startled looks from the older siblings.

I scurried next to Celia, sat down cross-legged, and leaned up against the metal wall behind me. We sat quietly for what seemed like an eternity. Even a sigh or heavy breath brought worried glances from other siblings because Arthur had told

us not to make any noise. I didn't even want to imagine what the adults might say or do if one of us younger ones actually spoke up about our confusion or fear. Celia and I clutched one another, and that small reassurance helped me keep my rising whimpers at bay.

Finally, Arthur appeared at the back of the truck. He grabbed the door handle and pulled it down, and the door rattled shut, leaving us in darkness, except for the faint light of the flashlights. Moments later, the tired truck sputtered to life. The way it squeaked and groaned around every turn, I worried that we wouldn't make it out of our neighborhood, much less anywhere else. It bounced in and out of potholes as we made our way onto a Dallas freeway en route to Colorado.

After a while, the noise provided enough covering for me to safely whisper to Celia, "What do we do if we have to go to the bathroom?"

Celia only shrugged her shoulders, but I could see dread in her eyes.

Thankfully, Arthur and Alex, who took turns driving, made scheduled, reasonable potty breaks. They even gave us a loaf of bread and jar of peanut butter along with a butter knife after one stop at a gas station and convenience store. It was all we had to eat, but still it was something. I gobbled up my sandwich in mere moments. We played guessing games about where we were headed and told stories to pass the time.

I managed a fitful sleep, but when I woke I was stiff and sore from lying on my side. It took me a moment or two to get my bearings. My ears were buzzing from the constant noise of the motor and the grinding gears that were mere inches from where I'd rested my head.

But ringing ears and stiff muscles seemed a small price to pay

to see my mom again. I hoped the truck would hold together long enough to get us to our destination.

Finally, the loud, constant hum of tires on pavement traveling at highway speeds lessened. The truck careened one direction, then the next. We held on to one another for stability when we weren't lying down. One of the older kids turned a flashlight back on. "I think we're almost there. Gather up your stuff." All I had with me was a worn stuffed rabbit and a ponytail holder—we called them *bolitos*—around my wrist. Celia held her prized possession, a worn Raggedy Andy doll, to her chest.

When we finally came to a stop, the rolling door was opened with a deafening rumble that reverberated off the metal walls. Celia and I squinted in the bright sunlight, thankful to hear nothing but relative quiet. I saw a figure just outside the back of the truck—something familiar about it made me sit up.

"Mom!" I yelled, as the tears started welling up in my eyes and the ache in my heart began to ease. I clambered over my siblings to get to the edge of the truck bed, lean over, and hug my mother's neck. "I never thought I would see you again!"

"Anna Keturah, stop being so dramatic." She held me tightly for a few seconds, then peeled me off and searched for her other children who needed hugs as well.

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Celia, my other siblings, and I experienced a few blissful days—blissful only in the sense that we were reunited with our mother, not in less work or more comfortable living conditions. This new "home" in Denver was completely run down, like all the other barely affordable houses we rented. The cramped three-bedroom, one-bathroom house sheltered about twenty of us, which meant constantly crowded conditions. Mom, her children, and the other

children in her care shared this home with Teresa and Yolanda, two of my mother's sister-wives, and their six children.

I didn't realize it at the time, but Mom shouldered enormous responsibility. She cared for her own seven children, the ones who were still minors, as well as four other children who belonged to Beverly, Mom's sister-wife who was in prison. But that wasn't all. Mom was given charge of her sister-wife Mary Lou's children when Mary Lou lost her short battle with cancer.

I don't remember ever meeting Mary Lou, but I do recall the day that two of her six kids showed up at our house when Mom was gone for a couple of weeks and Kathleen was in charge of us children. The newcomers, technically my half-brother and half-sister, spoke little English, and I could see the fear and worry etched on their faces. I remember my mom taking us aside after returning home and instructing us to be kind to them because they no longer had a mother and they were separated from their older siblings. They lived with and were cared for by my mom from then on.

Even though we all had our own mothers, we were expected to obey all of the sister-wives. Teresa and Yolanda meant well, but if you got on their nerves—as children tend to do—they'd pick up any nearby object to administer a spanking. Their go-to items included a long-handled spoon, the back of a hairbrush, or even their shoe, which they'd remove in a pinch if we misbehaved or didn't do what we were asked to do.

As always, my sisters and I spent hours washing dishes—plastic margarine tubs that served as our only bowls—and doing laundry, while Mom, Teresa, and Yolanda were working at the used appliance store. We took our time with the household chores we were assigned in the absence of the adults.

My life in Denver brought many challenges, but being

separated from my mother was not one of them, so it seemed nearly perfect to me. I recall a few happy moments in the Xavier Street house, playing Monopoly and card games inside. In the backyard, we played tag or caught grasshoppers to see who could hold on to one the longest, squealing in horror as they wiggled around in our hands.

At night, we each spread our threadbare blanket on the living room floor and lapped half of it over ourselves to create a thin makeshift sleeping bag. As usual, I snuggled near Celia, thankful to be away from the large cockroaches we'd come to fear in Texas. We giggled and whispered about playing house and dreamt of having new dresses, all our own.

While in Denver, I first heard a phrase that I didn't understand but didn't dare ask about: "hot lead, cold steel, and a one-way ticket to hell."

What I didn't know then was that nearly two years later, hell would be unleashed right on our doorstep.