



Angel Pavement

J.B. Priestley

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"What do they call this street? Angel Pavement, isn't it? That's a dam' queer name for a street, though I've known queerer names in my time." (Golspie).

Tucked away in the City of London, lies a dingy, almost forgotten side street known as Angel Pavement. Here can be found the headquarters of Twigg & Dersingham, suppliers of veneers and inlays to the furniture trade. Business is slow and the staff struggle against a tide of growing competition, rising prices and recession. Into their midst descends the mysterious and charming Mr Golspie and the promise of a brighter future. Be sure, life will never be the same again for all those concerned with the firm...the likes of Herbert Norman Smeeth, the cashier; Harold Turgis, the clerk; Lilian Matfield, the secretary-typist; and the boss, Howard Bromport Dersingham!

Angel Pavement is one of the great London novels: a vivid evocation of the sprawling and crowded metropolis during the era of the painful Depression of the inter-war years. It is also a splendidly perceptive examination of what happens to a small group of office staff when the destructive force of a rapacious financial predator is unleashed among them.

This is J.B. Priestley at his best...indeed most critics agree that Angel Pavement was his finest novel, with only Bright Day a near contender! It arrived just after the huge success of The Good Companions, and, though it is darker than the delightful earlier novel, it proved just as popular...and probably more significant.

Great Northern Books of Ilkley have been bringing out new editions of a number of Priestley's works, and that Angel Pavement was the choice in 2012 proved a source of pleasure to all Priestley fans...and, hopefully, the availability of the novel once again will help new readers discover the unique style and magic of J.B. Priestley.

Angel Pavement Details

Date : Published 2012 by Great Northern Books (first published January 1st 1930)

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Author : J.B. Priestley

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From Reader Review Angel Pavement for online ebook

Rachel Stevenson says

Dickensian in scope, Hardy-esque in plot.

Estott says

A good book, rather sad overall. A study of the employees in a small London office, all leading lives of "quiet desperation". In comes a rather charismatic and piratical figure, and his daughter and everyone's life is affected. It's pretty obvious from the beginning that things will not end well, but the characters are all well drawn.

Veronika says

Let me quote a fellow reviewer: a long book about nothing. We met a couple of people in London in 1930s, we spend a couple of weeks with them, some story lines has started, and most of them dropped in mid-air. However, I cannot say that I did not enjoy the book. What I liked the most about the author - how he could show accents with spelling. Very amusing!

Kerri Thomas says

A tale of common life experience, of fantasies and fears coming true.

I appreciated this book far more the second time I read it because I saw more in it. At first, I felt that Priestley was giving way too much information about his characters, but by the end of the book it had dawned on me that he was writing about fundamental lessons in life that we can all relate to and, in order to do that, he needed to give the reader a thorough look into the hearts and minds of his characters.

The focus of the story is the firm of Dersingham & Twigg, struggling to survive in 1930 London, a time of great economic hardship. It's address is a street called Angel Pavement, hence the name of the book. The catalyst of the tale is the arrival at the firm of a man of no scruples, Mr Golspie, who intends to use the firm to make a lot of money very quickly and then get out. Both he and his beautiful daughter are incarnations of the fantasies that two staff members, Turgis and Miss Matfield, have on a daily basis. Turgis hungers for love and sex; Miss Matfield longs for adventure and excitement. Well, both get their fantasies made real through the Golspies, but with devastating consequences. Smeeth, the office manager, yearns for safety and security but has always feared that he will not have it. Again, through the actions of Golspie, his fears come true. Then there's the principal of the firm, Mr Dersingham, who is going through the motions of being a businessman; his heart is not in it and he just muddles through his life. When Golspie departs, he has turned Mr Dersingham's world upside down but we are left with the idea that he will actually begin to live the life he has always wanted to.

Priestley is saying through the lives of his characters 'be careful what you wish for, because you just might get it', but he is also saying that out of great pain and upheaval, life can improve because we become wiser and more mature. This is a timeless story of human experience, and Priestley does a masterful job of describing the scenes in which it is set, London in the grip of a bleak, depressing winter. He also captures

perfectly the mangled English of the working class British. This is indeed a book about life that we can all relate to.

Colm Mccrory says

Another great London novel, sits up there with Norman Collins, Patrick Hamilton, Monica Dickens, Somerset Maugham, etc.

Auriel Roe says

This is an unusual book with sections in it that were like long passages in the Pinter/Beckett/Ionesco school of thought. Ponderous descriptions but I loved the detail, many wouldn't, unused to the absurd. Good story, a con man totally messes up an odd little veneer business staffed by hopeless subordinates.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Natsnock says

The whole time I was reading the book, I was thinking how suitable it is for mini series. As it turns out, there are 2 of them - one from the 50s and one from the 60s (unfortunately nowhere to be found for downloading). So, if you're hooked on British period dramas, looking not so much for good dramatic plot, but for a fine depiction of everyday life and the subtle irony of presenting the characters the British are so good at, this one might be for you - London in the 30s, but in the form of a book.

Jenn says

Pity the generation that lived through the great depression. I thought this was one of the most moving books I have read for a long time. It is not dramatic, the action such as it is is very low key, the characters are mundane and the subject it deals with (office work) is hardly going to be thrilling, but Priestley had a knack of really getting under the skin of his characters so you cared about the outcome. I ended up wondering what happened to Turgis, Mr Smeeth, Miss Matfield et all after the book finished.

Basically the plot centres round the small firm of Twigg and Dursingham located in a London backstreet. The firm is struggling: the book implies Dursingham inherited it and makes for an incompetent manager. He employs Mr Smeeth, a cautious accounts manager, perpetually worrying about the future; Turgis the lonely teenage clerk, living in lodgings and dreaming of romance and Miss Matfield the frustrated, intelligent secretary, who lives in a women's shared residential house. Into their lives strides the larger than life Mr Golspie, with promises of cheap imports from abroad and easy profits to be made and his glamorous daughter.

It's a close observation of life in London in 1930. Apparently very popular in its time, but Priestley has gone out of fashion as the years have gone by (unfairly I think). If you are interested in social history this is a fantastic book, I loved the detail, for instance the tobacconists shop round the corner from the office, Turgis setting out for the bright lights of London's West End on a Saturday night or the dreadful dinner party with the couple recently back from Singapore. Some of it I remembered as dim reflections from my Grandparents, such as the Front Room which was kept respectable and never used except for high days and holidays. I remember seven of us squeezed into a back room just so it could be left empty. And the cramped sitting room of the Smeeths, full of cheap ornaments proudly displayed, also just like my Gran.

Having a teenage son myself who is surly and spotty and girl mad I felt particularly for the lonely Turgis. I was nearly in tears when he tried to gas himself and realised he didn't have the money to pay for it, and when he finally hooks up with Poppy and realises the girl of his dreams was under his nose all along, so touching.... *Saturday night: the children of the pavements and chimney-pots came pouring out, seeking adventure, entertainment, profit or forgetfulness in the vast impersonal thunder and glare of the city; and soon these two were lost in the crowd.* Forget Dickens.

Interestingly Priestley doesn't indulge in back stories. The story is firmly focused on the present only. A modern writer would flash back to Dursingham's and Smeeth's war experiences, or Turgis's difficult upbringing, but there is none of this. Presumably not fashionable in his own time, they were probably keen to forget the War had ever been.

My copy was so battered and yellowed it was probably bought not long after it was printed! I didn't like taking it places for I was worried it would fall apart. I don't normally keep books after reading but I'll keep this one.

Alan Mackay says

Reminded me of Norman Collins' London Belongs To Me. Both could be described as soap operas but none the worse for that. A must read for anyone interested in London and London working life that has mostly disappeared for ever.

Malcolm Noble says

Truly one of the great "London" books of 20th Century. Not very cheerful, I'm afraid, but well written. Take your time with this one

J. says

This has no real tricks up its sleeve, but draws the reader nonetheless. We have what amounts to a large-cast Dickens or Trollope outing, complete with competing narrative threads and class discordance. This begins much as all London novels do-- in the swirl of life being lived, the just-manageable chaos driven by commerce and urbanism unbound-- and somehow manages to narrow down to separate characters by the early chapters. And great characters, in large part because of their un-remarkableness.

He looked what he ought to have been, in the opinion of a few thousand hasty and foolish observers of this life, and what he was not--a grey drudge. Angel Pavement and its kind, too hot and airless in summer, too raw in winter, too wet in spring, and too smoky and foggy in autumn, assisted by long hours of artificial light, by hasty breakfasts and illusory lunches, by walks in boots made of sodden cardboard and rides in germ-haunted buses, by fuss all day and worry at night, had blanched the whole man, had thinned his hair and turned it grey, wrinkled his forehead and the space at each side of his short grey moustache, put eyeglasses at one end of his nose and slightly sharpened and reddened the other end...

At the opening of *Angel Pavement* we've left the Great War behind, but the marks remain, a great shadow has passed over civilization. Like a lot of between-the-wars novels, there is the sense of trying a little over-hard at inducing amnesia, getting the old peacetime gears and levers to work again, with a hopeful but semi-blinded populace. The story takes us from Englishman's-home-is-his-castle pomp to the familiar threadbare boarding house existence, a matter of streets or tube stops away. The milieu will be familiar to readers of Norman Collins or Patrick Hamilton. Priestley's basic premise is picaresque, giving the reader a few pointed glimpses at the follies and foibles of the faces on the street, via the particular faces he's chosen.

... a tall, cadaverous virgin of forty-five or so, who displayed, especially in evening clothes, an uncomfortable amount of sharp gleaming bone, just as if the upper part of her was a relief map done in ivory. In order that she might not be overlooked in company and also to protect herself, she had developed and brought very near to perfection a curiously disturbing manner, which conveyed a boundless suggestion of the malicious, the mocking, the sarcastic, the sardonic, the ironical. What she actually said was harmless enough but her tone of voice, her expression, her smile, her glance, all these suggested that her words had some devilish inner meaning...

Not long after the structure is laid out, as the characters become more familiar, we're treated to comedic turns in the story, where perhaps the reader is led to know more about what will happen than the people involved. In fact, at points the Dickens set pieces and face-offs begin more and more to resemble the more latter-day style of absurdity meeting staunch postwar reserve. Not altogether distant from the Ealing Studio films of the later decades-- but all is not well. We begin by midbook to get the feeling that things may not work out for the best, as they do in the movies.

No need here to summarize the proceedings; best to say that things will not go according to plan, nor will there be bluebirds over the white cliffs of Dover by the end. Priestley is taking stock, somewhere before mid-century, and finding things are amiss in his remarkable world. He's worried. There will be no eureka moment, or neat conclusion, but safe to say he's on to something with that.

Keith says

I have just re-read 'Angel Pavement' for the first time in more than 40 years, and I am delighted that I was encouraged to do so following the re-issue of this classic by Great Northern Books (at £9.99 the new paperback edition is excellent value). I know I was impressed when I first read it as a young man sometime in the 1960s, but I couldn't honestly recall exactly why, or say that I remembered too much about the story; and so it was an enjoyable experience to rediscover this excellent novel and to be reminded of just how good J. B. Priestley was at his best.

The novel was published in 1930, and the setting is Depression-era London and a firm called Twigg & Dersingham, whose premises ("in what was once a four-storey dwelling house where some merchant-alderman lived off his East India dividends") are sandwiched between the Kwick-Work Razor Blade Company and the London and Counties Supply Stores at Number 8 Angel Pavement.

Angel Pavement may sound colourful and romantic as an address, but, in truth, it is a typical City side street, except that it is shorter, narrower and dingier than most. The irony is that it was the novelty of the address

that caught their eye of James Golspie, the rogue who proves to be the ruin of Twigg & Dersingham, when he was looking for a 'victim'. "Do you know how I came to your place?" he says to Lilian Matfield. "I looked up the names of firms in this line of business, and Twigg & Dersingham took my fancy, not because of their name but because of the address. Angel Pavement did it. I was so tickled by that name. I said to myself 'I must look at that lot first of all.'"

What an unfortunate twist of fate that proves to be. The firm, which imports veneers and inlays to sell to cabinet makers and furniture manufacturers, is struggling to cope with the consequences of poor management, declining demand and an economy hardly geared to a sudden improvement in trade. Into their world descends Golspie, the con-man with a smooth tongue and all the push and panache of the natural predator. He has just arrived in London on a Baltic cargo ship with a display case full of veneer samples and the sole UK agency for a new product, and he is looking to persuade some gullible fool that together they are set to make a fortune.

The fool in question is Howard Bromport Dersingham, the ineffective, conceited owner of Twigg & Dersingham, a man not really suited to the cut-and-thrust of business (he got into it almost by accident) and soon out of his depth in his dealings with an experienced swindler like Golspie.

I worked in a number of offices in my teenage years, and while that was in the 1950s rather than the time of this novel, and it was Sheffield rather than London, those places I knew, and the people in them, were not really much different from those depicted by Priestley in 'Angel Pavement'. I am sure that I knew people not too far removed from Herbert Norman Smeeth, the cashier; Harold Turgis, the railway shipping clerk; and Lilian Matfield, the secretary-typist.

Priestley is the master of the art of describing his characters with affection and a faint touch of humour, and his flair for dialogue came to the fore long before he became a successful dramatist. He is such fun to read –even when the subject is deadly serious.

Smeeth, the colourless cashier, is typical of a breed of senior clerk/office manager that was commonplace in those days. He loves his repetitive job. "He obviously thought of himself as a real factor of the entity known as Twigg & Dersingham. When he entered the office he did not dwindle, he grew; (in the office) he was more himself than he was in the street outside...he had a gratitude, a zest, and eagerness that couldn't be found in the others (his colleagues)...His days at the office were filled with important and exciting events. He had spent years making neat little columns of figures, entering ledgers and then balancing them, but this was not drudgery to him." He is delighted when his salary is increased from £315 a year to £375, though he worries that his wife will want to spend the extra income immediately rather than, as he wants, save something for the rainy day that is always threatening.

Angel Pavement is told through each of the firm's employees, and, apart from Smeeth, the other key employees are Turgis, the clerk who constantly dreams of romance, "a thinnish, awkward young man with a rather long neck, poor shoulders and large, clumsy hands and feet"; and Lilian Matfield, who considers the job rather beneath her ("there are those like Miss Matfield, the daughters of professional gentlemen, who condescend to the office and the typewriter"). Poor, sad Turgis makes the mistake of believing that Golspie's spoiled daughter, Lena, cares for him when she is merely using him to idle away a few boring hours; while Miss Matfield, stuck in spinsterhood and a miserable existence, dreams of escape...and when, latterly, a relationship with Golspie himself seems in the offing, she is left stranded and embarrassed...and slumps back to her old world suitably chastened and resigned to her fate.

Priestley began this novel in October 1929, around the time when his previous novel, *The Good Companions*, was taking off in a big way. He was keen to ensure that this was not another light and romantic slice of fiction, and it is much more serious and darker than its predecessor. He powerfully evokes the social background of the period, especially the constant fear of unemployment among people who lived from week to week and could barely afford to save. It was a time when the loss of one's job was not merely a blow, but a disaster from which it might take years for a person to recover. Even Smeeth, who in one sense feels so content, even secure, in his work, knows how precarious his world really is.

The firm's owner, Howard Dersingham, unfortunately, is oblivious to looming disaster. When he agrees to Golspie's request for his commission to be paid before the customers have settled their bills, it is a recipe for the final disaster...yet he then wonders why the firm's woes are suddenly compounded. "Golspie's cleared out, he's done us in," he cries. "Oh, the rotten swine! God, I was a fool to trust that chap a yard. It's

damnably unfair, Smeeth. We've simply been swindled."

If you have never read this novel, I would urge you to seek it out and give it a try. It is vintage Priestley.

Ginni says

My first J.B.Priestley, an author I've been meaning to try for years; this reading was partly inspired by going to see a production of 'When we are married' at the West Yorkshire Playhouse a month or so past. I really felt that as an honorary Yorkshire woman, now living close to Bradford, I must read Priestley. I wanted to read 'The Good Companions', but 'Angel Pavement' was on the library shelves in this Great Northern Books paperback edition.

I suppose Priestley has gone out of fashion; this new edition seems timely, then. I thoroughly enjoyed this, very much a book of its time in many ways, and with some phrases and attitudes that may jar with modern readers. All reviewers agree that the portrait of London is tremendous; albeit a London of the 1930s with no tower blocks and less sophistication, it is recognisably the City and the Docks, the bustle, crowds, dirt and noise, the lights and the traffic, many people yet much loneliness and disillusion.

There are signs of our society to come, in the attitude of the young people, seeking something they cannot quite put into words, something different. The grip of 'the talkies' in a pre TV and computer age is interesting, and the social venues of tea rooms and pubs are still recognisable. There is a marvellous description of London in the grip of the run-up to Christmas, which applies absolutely to us now.

It is the characters who are marvellous, though. None are glamourised, except perhaps the 'villains', yet even they are not completely dark and wicked. The cast is small, yet we feel sympathy for all the inhabitants of the office of Twigg and Dersingham, Angel Pavement. Their faults are there, yet also their humanity, their hopes, fears and ambitions. I was quite gripped and read quickly, although the outcome is not a surprise. Definitely recommended.

Evi Routoula says

Ο αγαπημένος Τζον Μπίντον Πρστλει που μας είναι γνωστός απ' τα καταπληκτικά θεατρικά του έργα (Εμείς και ο χρῆνος, ο Επιθεωρητής ῥχεται κλπ) μας δίνει εδῶ ῆνα πολῶ δυνατῶ μυθιστῶρημα.

Βρισκῶμαστε στο Λονδῶνο του μεσοπολῶμου, επικρατεῶ ανεργῶα και φτῶχεια, ῆ Ευρῶπη δεν ῶχει συνῶλεθει ακῶμα απῶ τον Πρῶτο Παγκῶσμιο Πῶλεμο (που τῶτε τον ονῶμαζαν ακῶμα Μεγῶλο Πῶλεμο, ποῶ να φανταζῶντουσαν τι ῶλλο τους περῶμενε!). Μια μικρῶ επιχεῶρηση στο Σῶτι προσπαθεῶ να ορθοποδῶσει με δυσκολῶα: το αφεντικῶ εῶναι ῆνας μεγαλοαστῶς που δεν τα καταφῶρνει καλῶ με τις επιχειρῶσεις, ο τῶπος του ῶγγλου τῶντλεμαν που προτιμῶει τη λῶσχη του και τις ῆνδοξες ιστορῶες του στρατοῶ της παλιῶς αυτοκρατορῶας. Ο αρχιλογιστῶς εῶναι ο αφοσιωμῶνος υπῶλληλος που μοχθεῶ για το καλῶ της εταιρεῶας, που μια ζωῶ αποταμιεῶει για ασφῶλεια. Ο νεαρῶς υπῶλληλος προσπαθεῶ να βρει την ευτυχῶα και την ολοκλῶρωση μῶσα απῶ μια γνωριμῶα με μια ῶμορφη γυνῶκα, εργῶζεται μηχανικῶ μῶνο και μονῶ για να επιβῶνει. Ῥ δακτυλογρῶφος ζει μῶσα στην βαρεμῶρα ενῶς ιδρῶματος για κυρῶες, διαβῶζει μυθιστορῶματα και κῶνει ῆνειρα για περιπῶτειες στην εξωτικῶ Ριβῶρα. Και τῶτε ῶρχεται απῶ το πουθενῶ ο μαγικῶς τυχοδιῶκτης, ο κομπιναδῶρος που επιπλῶει πῶντα, για να τους προτεῶνει συνεργῶσα.

Πρόκειται για ένα αριστογράφημα της λογοτεχνίας, μια κραυγή κατά του πολιτικο-οικονομικού συστήματος: οι φτωχοί παραμένουν φτωχοί, η μύνη τους διξοδος είναι το τσαγώδικο και η παμπ, η φτηνή μπύρα και το νερούλι τσί. Οι παλιό αριστοκρατία είναι αδύναμη πλέον να διεκδικήσει και να παλήσει, βαυακαλίζεται στα παλιά μεγαλέα. Ο νέος ήρωας είναι ο απατεώνας, ο νεόπλουτος που δεν σβεται τίποτα. Πώς δεν σβεται τίποτα και η ίδια η κοινωνία. Καταπληκτικός συγγραφέας ο Πρστίλει και δυστυχώς χι ίσο θα ήπρεπε αναγνωρισμένος στην Ελλάδα. Μαζί με τον Ήργουελ και τον Γκρζιαμ Γρην αποτελούν τους μεγάλους ήγγλους του 20ού αιώνα.
