

For Single Mothers Working as Train Conductors

Laura Esther Wolfson

University of Iowa Press (Jun 1, 2018)

Softcover \$19.95 (144pp)

978-1-60938-581-1

Laura Wolfson worked, traveled, and eventually married in the Soviet Union toward the end of the Cold War. Despite being fluent in Russian, she struggled to understand her Russian spouse's insistence that having children would require twenty-four-hour childcare. Eventually, this statement is revealed as a reference to the childcare provided by the Soviet state for single mothers working as train conductors. But her spouse's mother wasn't one. After their childless marriage and divorce, his statement lingers, a translation without a context and the first of many instances in Wolfson's *For Single Mothers Working as Train Conductors* where her desire for language to be at the root of everything and the limitations of that same vehicle are revealed.

Wielding a diarist's tone of complete, poignant honesty, there's an undeniable gravitas in Wolfson's story. She makes a formidable offering of her life, traversing two marriages, sickness and health, multiple countries, several languages, and a career in translation. Her foreign language skills give her access to experiences that are and aren't her own, and the results of this arrangement play out in interesting ways across the memoir.

The memoir's chronology is organically rough and balances time's forward march with retrospective meaning-making, but Wolfson's greatest skill is as a stylist. Throughout, her prose is a constant delight; melancholic, it dances between Proustian perambulations and stark, terse phrases with ease. The transit between these polarities is circuitous and unhurried, with remarkable turns of phrase scattered high and low.

At one point, Wolfson surmises, "Writing arises from loss; it aims to fashion something to fill the charred void that is one of the late phases of suffering, to erect on a parched plot of pain an edifice of meaning, or of beauty." A disconnect among connections, *For Single Mothers Working as Train Conductors* fashions beauty from all the singular losses of Wolfson's many parts.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (July/August 2018)

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