



★ **Otherwise**

Julie Marie Wade

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In the superb autobiographical essays of *Otherwise*, Julie Marie Wade illuminates sexual orientation and body image issues.

Nine intricate pieces reflect on risk, bodily autonomy, gender roles, and poetry versus prose. A series of meditations composed across Wade's thirties arranges snapshots of her growing frustration with stereotypes about behavior and appearance. In particular, Wade interrogates her rosy childhood notions of marriage, which she saw as a chief goal in life. As she explored feminism and accepted her lesbian identity—though not before leaving a man at the altar—she found ways to be “a secular humanist by day and a hopeless romantic by night.”

“Tremolo,” a critical rereading of a Galway Kinnell poem Wade loved in college, ponders the intersection of sex and power. Wade, who dated men before meeting her wife at graduate school, felt like a “failing heterosexual” and “failed queer” then. “Nine Innings” recounts times that others denied her sexual orientation, as when her mother insisted that she was a manic depressive instead, and when a doctor labeled her file “BISEXUAL.” Such erasure made her feel under siege; this, as much as her own discomfort with gendered expectations, is a central theme.

Often, an essay's structure fits its contents. “Still Life with Guns “ takes the apt form of a bullet-point list. “Old,” “new,” “borrowed,” and “blue” are recurring headings in a piece about marriage conventions. The braided essay “Meditation 38” is split into 38 short sections that dwell on the body and imagery of butterflies. “Prose and Cons” includes exchanges with Wade's students as they grappled with the distinction between poetry and prose. The metaphors are energetic: Wade describes turning over a quotation in her mind as a “rotisserie of wonder and surprise.”

Otherwise is a stunning and nuanced memoir-in-essays that insists on queer visibility.

REBECCA FOSTER (November / December 2023)

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