

## Why I Never Finished My Dissertation

**Laura Foley**

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*The autobiographical poetry collection Why I Never Finished My Dissertation rejoices in the joys and grittiness of reality.*

Laura Foley's poetry collection *Why I Never Finished My Dissertation* uses precise language to celebrate life and capture the inherent beauty of the everyday.

These autobiographical, narrative poems move from a childhood spent memorizing French by a mother's piano, to a green card marriage, to the death of a second husband, to a final, queer marriage. These expansive poems move toward the conclusion that some practices must be deserted in order to live life fully.

The entries are free verse in form, but their sparing, deliberate use of techniques, including repetition, rhyme, and enjambment, make their language feel musical, resulting in deep emotional insights and rewarding attentive readers. Their tones are psalmic and idyllic, though they also incorporate modern beats. Some are confessional. The book's shifts in vocal register and sound work because each poem is grounded by Foley's consistent use of powerful images, unexpected similes, and clever epigrams.

Moving in four sections from childhood vulnerability to being a queer grandmother, the poems take on a pointed political tone as the collection progresses, and come to evaluate life during the Trump presidency, too. The sections also partition Foley's different ways of being: as a grandmother, a daughter, and a person in her own right. Each category is fraught with pain, sadness, and frustration, but each is also addressed with optimism. A visit with an older sister in a psychiatric ward is recalled in terms of the oppressive atmosphere, but also its moment of hope:

*she pats me on the back  
obsessively, and gently,  
as if I needed comforting;  
my oldest sister, looking out for me.*

Careful diction bolsters the beauty of Foley's scenes, as with

*Seventeen pigeons perch  
like interrogatives  
or musical notation,  
along three wires over the river,  
begging unknown questions,  
as I lean over the railing.*

Visual and aural notes, from the cooing of the birds to their craned necks, demonstrate Foley's devotion to musicality. Each poem begs to be read aloud because of its sights, sounds, and sensations.

“Corked” sets the mood for the book’s last section, where Foley wonders, on election night, when the states will turn blue “while the champagne stays under pressure.” This symbol of celebration never opened builds in pressure during Trump’s presidency, threatening to become dangerous.

In “After,” Foley and her wife march in a protest; “One Day” reframes “current events” as time spent holding her granddaughter or raking autumn leaves, instead of what’s going on in the news. The concluding section is microcosm of the strategies used throughout; it elevates the entire collection with its insights into the complex symbology of everyday objects or people. Its entries map religious language onto inner monologues, and they subvert expectations to mirror how life does the same.

Also compelling for its queer scenes—one poem concerns the terror of kissing another girl; another shows a mother trying to overcome her homophobia—the book muses on love and the power of people to change. Its lines meditate on how even the most trying issues can be understood in new ways. Foley’s resilience and willingness to understand herself completely serve as a guide to her readers to do the same.

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GEORGE HAJJAR (March 31, 2021)

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