

Poets & Writers 5 Over 50

Age: 52

Residence: New York City

Book: *For Single Mothers Working as Train Conductors*, a memoir in linked essays that explores language, translation, culture, literature, marriage, divorce, illness and Judaism.

Publisher: University of Iowa Press (June 2018)

Awarded the Iowa Prize for Literary Nonfiction (2017)

Agent: None

It is universally acknowledged that writing is tough, ditto getting published. Now add the difficulties of writing *autobiographically*: not only must you mature as a writer (novelists have to do that, too), but also accrue lived material; overcome the shame of writing about self; and negotiate the ethics and fallout of writing about others. For essayists, it's harder still, with gatekeepers shouting 'nobody wants a collection' in unison all across the land. How does any essayist debut before age 80?

Autobiographical writing grabbed me right out of the gate, from *Little House on the Prairie* to *Of Time and the River*. Next: *Red Cavalry*; *The Golden Notebook*; *No Name in the Street*; *Life, Death and the Turning of the Seasons*; and *Remembrance of Things Past*. But *real* writers make stuff up, right? A novelist/teacher once thundered at me: "If you write from your own life only, you'll write only one book!" Falling silent for a time, I might well have written no book at all, which was perhaps his aim.

At twenty-something, I set down my impressions of the collapsing USSR, sent off the manuscript, then disappeared again behind what remained of the Iron Curtain. This was before answering machines took hold. I returned home to a typewritten letter: after repeated, fruitless calls ("Has your number perhaps been disconnected?") the agent had moved on—"reluctantly," oh, dear god—to another Russia-themed book whose author picked up on the first ring. Over a quarter-century would elapse (several world orders, two Cold Wars) before I came that close again.

In my thirties, I penned some skimpy vignettes that didn't cohere; in my forties, a limbless torso of a novel that no one could tell me how to salvage; and throughout, essays that didn't hang together and didn't need to, for, heeding the naysayers, I was not planning a collection, thank you very much. Sporadically, these pieces trickled forth into the spillways that flowed around and between 9-to-5, eldercare, illness, MFA, and two Siamese sprawled across my keyboard, loudly purring.

At a conference for emerging writers (attentive readers will note that I'd now been one of these for decades), somebody put my name down for agent speed-dating. Cross me off, I said; I have no project. "Pitch!" urged the intern staffing the registration table. "Any old thing you've got in the drawer. Don't pass up the opportunity." My essay collection was born.

No one bit that time, nor at that same conference the following year, nor the next.

Contests beckoned. We were well into the era of voice mail now; someone left a laconic message: name, number, affiliation. Vaguely I recalled submitting there months before; recalled realizing the eve of deadline that submission required hard copy, and rushing out for a ream of paper plus ink cartridge before the shops closed; recalled a mid-December post office so mobbed that, running late for a menorah lighting, I almost bailed before reaching the counter.

Many messages followed, until finally a live voice (male) said: “You won the prize; we’re publishing your book.” “Now,” the man added kindly, “ask me anything.”

Authors do readings, right? So that’s what I asked about—not contracts, AQs, revision, blurbs, acknowledgements, cover art, catalogue copy, jacket copy, copyediting, proofreading, galleys, ARCs, marketing, promo, publicity, or tweeting. Much later, a seasoned author friend would provide informal event coaching. (“Rule #1: no necklaces; they bang the mic.”)

The post-midcentury debut carries zero risk of post-early-success flameout. Expectations of wealth and glory are modest, keeping disappointment at bay. Once you doubted that patience and hard work would pay off. Doubt no more.