



Laura Esther Wolfson

Age: Fifty-two. **Residence:** New York City. **Book:** *For Single Mothers Working as Train Conductors* (University of Iowa Press, June), winner of the 2017 Iowa Prize for Literary Nonfiction, a memoir in linked essays that explores language, translation, culture, literature, Judaism, marriage, divorce, and illness. **Editors:** James McCoy, Susan Hill Newton. **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, but you must 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 in unison, "Nobody wants a collection"

all across the land. How does any essayist debut before age eighty?

When I was twenty-something, having majored in Russian during college, and fluent in the language, I spent a lot of time in the former Soviet Union as part of a cultural exchange program, and while working as a translator and interpreter. I wrote about my experiences in the collapsing socialist state, sent off the manuscript, then disappeared again behind what remained of the Iron Curtain. I returned to the United States to a typewritten letter from an agent. This was before answering machines took hold. After multiple missed

calls ("Has your number perhaps been disconnected?" she wrote) the agent had moved on, "reluctantly," to another Russia-themed book whose author picked up on the first ring. It would be another quarter century—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 I produced a limbless torso of a novel that no one could tell me how to salvage; and over the years I wrote countless essays that didn't hang together and didn't need to because, heeding the naysayers, I was not planning a collection, thank you very much. Sporadically these pieces trickled forth into the spillways that bordered and ran between nine-to-five jobs, eldercare, illness, an MFA program, and two Siamese cats 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." The idea for 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, and someone left a laconic message: name, number, affiliation. (Vaguely I recalled submitting there months earlier. I had realized the night before the deadline that the guidelines required a hard-copy submission, so I rushed out for a ream of paper plus an ink cartridge before the shops closed. I recalled a mid-December post office so mobbed that, running late for a menorah lighting, I almost bailed before reaching the counter.) Many missed messages followed until finally I picked up the phone to a live person saying, "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, author questionnaires, 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 No. 1: No necklaces; they bang the mic.")

The post-midcentury debut carries zero risk of post-early-success flame-out. Expectations of wealth and glory are modest, keeping disappointment at bay. But if you ever doubted that patience and hard work pay off, doubt no more. ∞

