

A love of languages leads translator to write

By Laura Farmer, correspondent

Laura Esther Wolfson, winner of the Iowa Prize for Literary nonfiction, never thought she would be a published author. “I had always believed that success would never come,” Wolfson said in a recent interview. “And that getting published, even in an obscure literary magazine, was something that happened to other people.”

“So when my first piece was accepted by a literary magazine — a magazine that I had never heard of before (someone recommended that I submit to it) — I was extremely excited. I couldn’t sleep and I walked the city for hours until late at night.”

Wolfson would eventually publish 11 of the book’s 13 essays as stand-alone pieces in literary magazines. And while the book is made up of essays, she’s hesitant to classify it as a collection.

“I’ve noticed that the people who have written about (the book) can’t really agree on what it is. To some it’s an essay collection, to some it’s a memoir ...”

“And the more different labels that get attached to it the happier I am because I don’t think it’s only one thing. And I don’t think it’s important to label it.”

The book is autobiographical, detailing Wolfson’s career as an interpreter and translator of Russian and French, her experiences with cultural differences, and her chronic lung condition, as well as her marriages and divorces.

While Wolfson writes about her own life, her purpose “is not to report on what happened, my purpose is to make the stories. There are parts of it where I’ve changed things or embroidered, but I can’t really remember what actually happened after I changed things a little bit.”

Wolfson began “For Single Mothers Working as Train Conductors” in 2002 and finished in 2016, though it didn’t take her 14 years to write the book. She would set the essays aside to focus on work, and on what she describes as a “failed novel” that took three to four years to write. The book was published by University of Iowa Press and released this month.

Despite the unsuccessful first book, “not writing was not an option,” Wolf-



University of Iowa Press

Laura Esther Wolfson will read her new memoir of essays, “For Single Mothers Working as Train Conductors” on Tuesday at Prairie Lights in Iowa City and Wednesday at Barnes & Noble in Cedar Rapids.

son said. “At the time that I wrote most of these pieces I was married to the man I call Tristan (in the book), and he believed very much in writing as an activity of great value, absolutely regardless of success or publication. He encouraged me and created the conditions that enabled me to write.”

“He lived a very quiet, scholarly existence, and we lived in a very small space and he didn’t want me to disturb him so I had to sit down and be quiet,” she said, laughing. “And that meant either reading or writing.”

Wolfson also found inspiration from her language studies. Her high school Latin teacher taught her to read classics such as Virgil and Cicero with an eye for literary devices, and her advanced studies in Russian and French gave her keen insight into the mechanics and style of language.

“Style is very important to me. It’s achieved by a lot of very slow, painstaking polishing. I liken it to when you’re making a clay pot: before you put it in the kiln you rub it and rub it to make it smooth. It’s tremendously time consuming.”

After the overall form of an essay

was complete, Wolfson said she would spend “weeks or months just rereading, changing a little tiny thing here or there. And it felt like I was doing almost nothing — but those tiny changes accumulate and make a significant difference.”

“Sometimes I play games with syntax and I’ll use word orders that sounds strange in English. Word order in Russian is much more flexible. The grammar allows you to move words around and put words in the starting position of a sentence to stress them without changing the meaning or what’s the subject or the object of the sentence. Sometimes I like to do that in English.”

Wolfson started studying Russian as an undergraduate at Cornell University. She learned French as an adult. Learning another language is challenging, but anyone can do it, she said.

“I think a lot of people, especially people from large countries like the United States whose languages are widely spoken, they have a block about learning languages and they think they can’t do it. It’s really because they don’t have to. Because everywhere you go you meet people who speak at least some English.”

“But what you miss out on is you can’t understand what people are saying to each other — and I mean that on a broad cultural level: You can’t read the newspapers, or the books.”

BOOK READING

- **What:** Laura Esther Wolfson will read from her new book, “For Single Mothers Working as Train Conductors”
- **Iowa City:** 7 p.m. Tuesday at Prairie Lights Books, 15 S. Dubuque St., Iowa City
- **Cedar Rapids:** 7 p.m. Wednesday at Barnes & Noble, 333 Collins Rd. NE, Cedar Rapids
- **Cost:** Free

REVIEW | ‘FOR SINGLE MOTHERS WORKING AS TRAIN CONDUCTORS’

Debut collection worthy of accolades

By Laura Farmer, correspondent

‘For Single Mothers Working as Train Conductors,” winner of the 2017 Iowa Prize for Literary nonfiction, is just as quirky and curious as the title suggests.

Made up of 13 essays that range in topic from health and wellness to reflections on family to the power and confusion of loving someone who doesn’t speak your native language, the book functions more like a memoir than a collection. The essays bend and weave together, forming an intricate portrait of a unique literary talent.

During the 1980s, author Laura Esther Wolfson studied Russian and worked in

the USSR, building a successful career as a Russian to English translator and interpreter: “State banquets at the Kremlin, mafia trials, forgotten literary masterpieces, KGB files declassified under (Boris) Yeltsin (later to be reclassified under (Vladimir) Putin). I translated them all.”

Spending so much time in another language, she writes, was an experience “both freeing and confining,” and her essays involving language acquisition — and her marriage and divorce from a Georgian man who, before they married, didn’t speak English and had never been west of Montenegro — are among the books’ strongest.

But Wolfson’s life — and

this collection — are about more than language and love.

She honestly explores her struggles with a degenerative, sometime fatal pulmonary lung condition “whose name I cannot remember, let alone pronounce,” a condition so severe it derails her career as an interpreter and translator. There are essays about the beauty of commuting, about exploring her Jewish identity, about finding her own voice as a writer — beyond translating texts from other authors.

The final essay, “Other

Incidents in the Precinct,” Wolfson uses the story of a trip to the dentist as the foundation for a larger narrative about her second marriage and a family secret, making for a beautiful, multilayered work about resilience and self-preservation.

Because of the range of topics and the depth of exploration, it’s easy to come away from “For Single Mothers as Train Conductors” feeling as if you’ve known Wolfson all your life. It’s a marvelous debut, with a hope of more to come.

