

The Bad Wife Handbook

Rachel Zucker, *The Bad Wife Handbook*
Publisher: Wesleyan University Press
2007, 114 pages, hardback, \$22.95

Rachel Zucker's confessional third book of poems, *The Bad Wife Handbook*, ruthlessly confronts marriage, motherhood, science, God, and writing. In calculated though playfully experimental form, Zucker wrestles with defining the woman as body, the woman as mother, the woman as the bad wife, and the woman as writer. These definitions describe woman not only as what she is, but also as what she is not; woman is re-imagined as a result of her roles. In "Squirrel in a Palm Tree," she writes, "a woman with young children is not a woman but a mammal, salve, croon, water carrier."

The final section of her book, "Autographies," presents twenty autobiographical snapshots, including some in which she examines her own poems. In "Autography 17," she writes:

A reader, anonymous, suggested my poems would be better
if the marriage/motherhood stuff wasn't so literal.

Life too, I'd say.

Not one to shy from daringly precise scientific jargon, Zucker experiments with biology in "The Rise and Fall of the Central Dogma," naming its first four parts "Replication," "Transcription," "Processing," and "Translation," respectively. These are then followed with "*a mother, all function, has no morphology,*" "*somewhere a heavy isotope named N-15 reveals my whereabouts,*" and "Problems with the Central Dogma." The final section of her poem, "Feral *more at Fierce,*" details the wife's role:

The first wife was a hard-working molecule.
A ribosome without membranes making
and making unsheathed to every loving master.
By the millions she colonized the endoplasmic
reticulum, the enfolding and crenellated mitochondria.

Mixed in the twists and turns of Zucker's helix of a handbook is a dryly humorous, blunt, and tender examination of a woman claiming the contrasts of her many roles. Consider the following passage from "Autography 8": "This is not just // about being a woman. No one / believes mothers are, anyway." Zucker's intimate collection of poems becomes most distinctly her own in her final sections, though she consistently probes her readers to consider human success and failure, human attachment and estrangement.

—Molly Tustison