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Notes from a Feminist Killjoy by Erin Wunker

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The Feminist Killjoy Toolbox

***Notes from a Feminist Killjoy* by ERIN WUNKER**

BookThug, 2016 \$23.00

Reviewed by **HANNAH BRAIS**

Following Sarah Ahmed's theoretical pathway, Erin Wunker sets out to make a guidebook for the feminist killjoy: the individual who refuses to perpetuate the embodied realities of patriarchal society. As she quickly explains, any sort of definitive guide for the feminist killjoy is impossible. The subjectivities involved in the feminist killjoy's life are crucial to their strategy. As such, *Notes from a Feminist Killjoy* becomes a collection of Wunker's thoughts and experiences organized through different thematics. Her thoughts offer a starting point for both challenging and using the reader's experiences as vehicles for contending with the patriarchy.

Living the academic-blogger life of a feminist killjoy, Wunker draws on personal anecdotes as starting points for all of her musings. Never shying away from the feminist mantra of personal as political, we travel through time and location while she relates her experiences as a feminist killjoy to her upbringing in Ottawa and North Carolina, to her life on various campuses as both student and professor, up until the quietude of her recent life as an academic mother. Prefacing her actual notes, the author takes extensive pains to explain not only the concept of positionality, but also talks at length about her position, particularly as it relates to great privilege. This affirmation of position and relative privilege becomes a constant throughout the book.

Following this thorough positionality statement, the book is divided into three sets of notes: rape culture, friendship, and mothering. While based principally on her experiences and a critical review of core feminist theory, a crucial part of Wunker's description of the killjoy experience is based on pop culture and its manifestations of said thematics. Considering this formula, her notes on rape culture (as she admits) are the most articulate and developed of the book. While the chapter takes more time to discuss the question of rape culture in relation to moments passed, like the trials of Jian Ghomeshi, the *#BeenRapedNeverReported* hashtag, or Emma Sulkowicz's *Carry That Weight*, there is a particular timeliness to her ruminations. Core to her argument is that understanding rape culture is not about a set of ethnographies of monsters but about situating this violence in the history of misogyny. This analysis hits close to home: as 2017 came to an end Time magazine listed the *#MeToo* hashtag as person of the year. Increasingly, in the past year, we have seen voices surface articulating the expansive, recurring, and profoundly systemic sexual violence that consumes our communities. While Wunker's thoughts reflect on the precursors to recent public conversation surrounding rape culture, they offer important indicators as to how to understand this violence, and more importantly, how to address it:

Shifting our questions shifts our action, energies, and affects from within (I hope, I hope, I worry, I fret) to *with each other*. We move from the internalization of rape and rape culture as inevitable towards dialogue with others that positions rape, rape culture, gendered

violence, and the associated traumas, big and small, as sites of struggle. (100)

In these instances, Wunker shows her wisdom with premonitions of a feminist killjoy future. While often these insights related to rape culture are pessimistic, particularly while she frets over the well-being of her infant daughter, they are unpacked concretely in her ruminations on friendship and motherhood.

Drawing from the isolation that Wunker describes within her notes on rape culture, the friendship notes I found were the most valuable for engaging with other authors. Erin Wunker often treats authors who discuss feminist friendship as remote friends themselves. This model for engaging with other thinkers was particularly valuable as Wunker navigates the personal alongside the more formal analysis.

The final chapter, discussing motherhood, focuses on the author's struggle to theoretically converge feminism and motherhood. While admittedly Wunker's analysis is stronger elsewhere, her unabashed recognition of the challenge of situating motherhood within feminism highlights the limitations of existing thinking on the subject. Drawing on her lived experience within academia, she further expands on the isolation that she experiences as a feminist killjoy mother.

What clouds Wunker's musings as a feminist killjoy is her over-emphasis on her position as an academic. While she articulately gives credit to the act of positionality as part of her preface, that the 'I' abides, it was my reading that the ongoing discussion of her secured placement in academia often isolates the reader. Although the feminist killjoy here is loosely grouped through the thematics of rape culture, friendship, and motherhood, it would at times seem that the common thread, according to Wunker, would be being paid to think about them.

Conversely, one of the greatest merits of *Notes from a Feminist Killjoy* is its style of personal musings: by employing brief and often unfinished thoughts, Wunker lends us the opportunity to complete the feminist killjoy sentiment, filling in blanks and empathizing with our own set of experiences. Where these thoughts often leave wanting for more complete arguments, it would appear that it is Wunker's intent to have them satisfied by the reader's subjectivities. In this sense, she successfully accomplishes what she claims to be an abandoned project for this book: a handbook for living as a feminist killjoy. Similarly, the book offers a valuable starting point for us as killjoys, not only with a set of ruminations to toil over and complete, but also an accompanying reading list. Wunker's relationship not only to her experiences and thoughts, but also to others, makes for a great feminist killjoy toolbox.

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