

FICTION IN
REVIEW



D A V I D G A L E F

Not many writers could extract humor from a hospice scene, but Nell Zink manages it. In her latest novel, *Nicotine*, Norm, an aged Jewish shaman and free thinker who's seen many better days, is being offered high-dosage narcotics to ease the pain permanently – only the hospice personnel can't make the offer directly. Norm has to ask. As Zink explains, "The request would have been honored. But general anaesthesia isn't a menu item, because the hospice is run like one of those brothels that are nominally strip clubs. The license affords no protection to the dancers, who must turn tricks as furtively and nervously as hospice staff dispensing painless deaths." Norm happens to be a bit of a comedian, and the slanted exchanges between him and the hospice director are more fun than funereal.

But Norm's daughter, Penny, carries the rest of the narrative, as she goes to explore the dilapidated Jersey City brownstone where Norm's parents once lived. Anarchistic squatters have taken over the place and renamed it *Nicotine* after establishing a non-smoke-

Nicotine, by Nell Zink (Ecco, 304 pp., \$26.99).

free environment. One of the residents, a polymorphously seductive woman named Jazz, even grows her own tobacco on the premises. These are politically informed people who know how to work the system, from milking nonprofits to dumpster diving. The coopted catchphrases and shrewd knowingness make for a heady mix. When Penny explains herself to the squatters, for instance, she starts:

“First off, my mom was Kogi. This people from Colombia.”

“I’ve heard of them,” Rob says. “On the mountaintop, with the gourds. They keep the universe going.”

“Now they’re more into slash-and-burn cattle farming in national parks.”

“What’s their deal?” Sorry asks.

“They used to be the ultimate weirdo tribe,” Penny says. “Their whole lifestyle was chewing coca. That’s all they did. I mean munch it like goats, all day every day. Wandering around chewing coca leaves with builders’ lime until their molars were flat, smearing their spit on these gourds. But that was just the men, obviously. The women cooked and cleaned and got traded between totemic clans or something.”

The whole novel reads that way: loose and whip-smart, casual but extremely informed, since Zink knows about everything from grass-roots activism to the hallucinogenic practices of South American tribes. Or her characters do, which amounts to the same thing. As Penny contemplates how to reclaim her family’s property, she falls in love with Rob, a bicycle reclamation activist who’s too nice to take advantage of a woman, and the sequence of events follows the will-he-won’t-he question. Other amorous entanglements, sexual and semi-innocent, include not just the other squatters but also Penny’s two older half-brothers and her mother. Given the winner-take-all narcissism of our species, with everyone out for something, the results are surprisingly tender.

But what’s most noticeable is Zink’s voice, an oddity in this era of hipster clones. It’s blunt and sharp at the same time, a mix of high-low culture that registers in all octaves. *The Wallcreeper*, Zink’s first published novel, also features a semi-knowing naïf, a first-person narrator named Tiffany, stranded with her errant husband in Bern and also Berlin. The plot involves a lot of extramarital sex and casual career sabotage stoked by a discontent with

things as they are. On the other hand are the consolations of philosophy. Here's Tiffany in a bedroom scene with someone who's not her husband: "I shifted back into neutral and once again accepted the need for negative capability in this world. We had loving, beautiful sex as soon as we could get ourselves to stop talking – loving and beautiful in the expressionist, pathetic-fallacy sense in which you might say a meadow was loving and beautiful even if it was full of hamsters ready to kill each other on sight, but only when they're awake. I mean, you just ignore the hamsters and look at the big picture."

The combination of earthy and cerebral, or rodents and expressionism, is all over *The Wallcreeper*. Zink blends poststructuralism and anal intercourse; she leaps from bird shit and Fragonard to Žižek and adultery. The style contains elements of Gertrude Stein's run-on, recursive syntax, as in Tiffany's observation "I've never met anybody I can be entirely sure I've actually met." At the same time, the narrative progression is often based on emotion, personal associations, and seeming non-sequiturs. Like Virginia Woolf and other high modernists, she wants to cram the whole world into her fiction, with the same kind of rationale: "Everything in the whole world is contagious if you look at it long enough." The comparison with the associative style of modernism isn't to say that Zink's not quite current – she is – or that no contemporary parallels exist; think of Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. From a previous era, comparisons could be made to Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks* or Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, albeit with some bracing updates.

Zink's second novel, *Mislaid*, shows greater control in plot and character, her descriptive riffs toned down and tied to the narrative. The story concerns the unlikely alliance of Lee Fleming, a gay poet at a women's college in the South, and Peggy Vallaincourt, a lesbian student of his who ends up as his wife, the mother of his two children, and then a runaway who leaves with their daughter and sets up a household in a dirt-poor patch of Virginia. She manages to evade detection by changing names and raising her daughter as African American. This alternate life allows Zink to delve into racism, sexism, and class matters: the white father who takes a strap to his daughter for inviting over a black girl, for instance. "Nell Zink grew up in rural Virginia," the author note

supplies helpfully, and it shows. She's had jobs as a secretary, as a waitress, as a translator, and in construction. She was a philosophy major in college and has a Ph.D. in media studies. She was comparatively unknown, so the story runs, until she struck up a correspondence with Jonathan Franzen. She lives in Germany. But as *Mislaid* shows again and again, she really knows her way around the American New South, which in the slow erosion of cultural identity can be seen as the No South, as one speaker puts it. Or, as Zink describes another character, Flea, a product of this region: "A typical country girl, raised between the TV and the car." Zink has a flair for aphorism, and her character sum-ups are worth reading aloud.

Mislaid turns out to be a romance, complete with the reuniting of siblings separated in early childhood. In its pairing off of couples, it also pulls in an African American family with an over-achieving son named Temple, half supported and half let down by the educational system in America, as he finds out when he heads to college. Love and family are revealed as even more complicated than lust and its consequences, and in real life perhaps more nuanced than Zink gives them credit for. But the novel is also a trenchant analysis of everything from an eighties feminist consciousness-raising group in the South to the academy's reaction to working-class writing: "sparse, economical, and lurid in a way that can only remind grad students of Carver and Bukowski." You can open the book to almost any page and find something just as good.

Private Novelist, written years ago but published in 2016, derives from what one might call early Zink: It's a jeu d'esprit, apprentice work only in the sense that Zink apprenticed herself to another novelist. The book is ostensibly a loose translation of her friend the Israeli author Avner Shats's novel *Sailing Toward the Sunset*. (In fact, it's a rewrite and is about as much on track as Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is a critical commentary on a longish poem. Even Zink's occasional references to Zetland seem homage to Nabokov's Zembla.) The work includes a short story by Zink about a bunch of idiosyncratic artists who live and quarrel and love together, the kind of situation Zink returned to in *Nicotine*.

As a mock translation that includes writers as characters, *Private Novelist* is metafictional and, as Zink herself has pointed out,

would probably have been unsaleable without the success of her three other novels. It's a gorgeous mess, a novel-length romp in which no scene exists without a puncturing finale. It contains setups like "the fictional Zohar was too busy to remember that he had left his wife to the tender mercies of an introverted, easily embarrassed professional assassin. Crouched in an ice cave only two hundred yards from their position, he waited for the Bhutane-
nese border police to break camp."

As with Zink's other work, it manages to include everything under the baggy folds of its tent: Trident missiles, Israeli culture, intelligent dolphins – and that's just on page 153. Since this is a book about the creation of art, including a cheese sculptor funded by the Swiss government, Zink turns much of it into a *Künstlerroman* that includes her own education. And in what she terms "my literary digressions," she presents a portrait of her young self and her reading list, which spans Kafka and Gide to Cesare Pavese and Hegel. In this sense, Zink is clearly in the great American lineage of polymathic autodidacts, from Benjamin Franklin to David Foster Wallace. She displays strong likes and dislikes and is well read without being academic. She's a real intellectual, annoyed at pseudo-intellectuals.

So what has Zink learned over the course of writing four books? To return to *Nicotine*: by now, Zink has somewhat tamed her riffs, tied more to context than sticking out like a throbbing digit. In *The Wallcreeper*, Tiffany thinks about other people's inhibitions and concludes, "But I felt no inhibitions whatsoever. Instead I perceived a powerful longing in my innermost or outermost being (there was no difference, since I generally based appraisals on the momentary condition of my genitalia) to thaw, spread, and embody the essence of fecundity like a river in springtime." By comparison, when Rob, one of the squatters in *Nicotine*, pulls away from Penny after a kiss, we get: "Penny decides it's sexy. It's like he thinks really kissing her would pose a risk, so he's slow to step on the slippery slope, take the bait, enter the trap. She feels spontaneous affection and trust, a sense of knowing him already forever." Granted, the protagonists are rather different, but characterization, too, is partly a matter of style. In any event, the avid interest in everything is still there, along with the vocabulary to register it. In Zink, more is more. As she noted in *Private Novelist*, "I should

point out, in case the reader has not already noticed, that economy and brevity are not what I value most in literature.”

After all, *Nicotine* offers up a lot. The novel is Zink’s ode to the sixties. During that era, write-ups of the protest movement were idealistic; later they became bitter, then satiric – and Zink partakes of them all, with a high snark content. Consider the colorful cast of characters squatting in the house Penny visits: Jazz, Tony, Rob, Anka, and Sorry. Zink has always been savvy about how people scrape by, without much money or amenities. This crew is quite well spoken – aphoristic anarchists all. The most casual observations are phrase-worthy:

“I can’t actually remember what it says, but you should definitely read it.”

“Being a fuckup gives me flexibility.”

“Anarchism is the poor man’s B-school.”

In fact, the dialogue is at times too self-aware and clever, invoking the charge of authorial ventriloquism. And since this is also a novel of ideas, programmatic statements abound, such as the feminist point, put in a casual conversation, that Marxism is as bad as capitalism for downplaying women’s value-added labor. That someone as forthright as Zink can produce such mannered dialogue is a bit odd, though Zink is the opposite of pompous, so spoken exchanges are often undercut. Nonetheless, the crazy quilt of realism is stitched together with a thread of stylization.

For activists these days, this crew does seem believable, engaging in political action and downright charity. They march, protest, and stay informed. Everyone is eco-friendly, to the point where one of them watches another’s TV program so as not to leave his own carbon footprint. As for what else happens: plot has never been the point in Zink’s work. The novel opens with death and ends in love, with lukewarm protests and some hot lovemaking along the way. But then, what *should* happen in a chronicling like this? Mad Matt, Penny’s half-brother, creates some violence in a loose, arrogant, typically male fashion, along with a gun. Oh, and nestling in the house is the Monster, a precarious structure of waste buckets poised to spill on whoever disrupts them on the back wall – a stinking metaphor that gets out of hand. It all builds to a climax of sorts with Matt’s opening a spirituality center where the squatters lived. But mainly, it’s a story in which Penny finds her

way: the usual thoughtful, meandering Zink heroine coming to grips with what the world tosses at her.

The novel grows a little emotional and New Age near the end, as some of the characters embark on a road trip, shifting from the New Jersey–New York region to New Mexico and eventually Hawaii. Once or twice, the feel-good semi-hippie philosophy and musings on sexuality read like passages from an old Reynolds Price novel. Still, these are characters you root for. They mostly mean well.

Reading through any of Zink’s writing is an exhilarating, discombobulating experience. What’s it like, more specifically? In *Private Novelist*, the world may blow up in a flash, but “It’s a special kind of bomb that doesn’t destroy the minds of thoughtful people.” That’s just how Zink’s novels work.