

In this Swiss novel, pollen is spread across a floor, and things get stranger from there.

THE POLLEN ROOM

By Zoë Jenny.

Translated by

Elizabeth Gaffney.

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By Jenny McPhee

WHEN the mysterious title of the Swiss writer Zoë Jenny's first novel is explained, early in this slender book, it only creates more mystery. In her affectless voice, Jenny's narrator, a young woman named Jo, tells of her mother's reaction to her stepfather's death: everything that had belonged to Alois, who was a painter, is carted off to the dump; in the aftermath, Lucy, Jo's mother, goes into his studio and spreads the pollen from masses of flowers all over the floor. Then she locks herself in and won't come out. Eventually, Jo rescues her by getting a shovel and breaking all the windows.

Why the alienated, isolated, emotionally vacant Jo would bother saving her egomaniacal, emotionally withholding mother is a puzzle that is never solved — mainly because Jenny provides neither her protagonist nor her readers with the means to do so. Throughout "The Pollen Room," she resolutely resists the temptation to explore beneath the surface of the fictional world she has created. It's a risky stylistic choice, one that conveys its narrator's detachment with great immediacy. But then what? When it becomes clear to us that we will be given few insights into her characters' inner lives, we become indifferent to their fates.

In the first chapter, we learn that Lucy ran off with Alois when Jo was barely old enough to go to school, disappearing entirely from the already tenuous life the child had shared with her parents. And so Jo is raised by her father, a publisher who prints his books on a press in the laundry room, drives a delivery truck at night and likes to have wild parties. After not seeing her mother for 12 years, Jo decides to track her down and finds her living in a small town on the outskirts of an unnamed city. (Time and

Jenny McPhee is the translator of Paulo Maurensig's novel "Canone Inverso."

place are as vague as much else in the narrative.)

Soon after Jo moves in with her mother and stepfather, Alois commits suicide by driving his car into a tree. The most we are able to infer from this incident is that he couldn't bear being in the same household with either woman. As far as Lucy is concerned, perhaps he had his reasons: before long, she has moved on to a new lover, Vito, who has been told that Jo is not Lucy's daughter but her younger sister.

At the hairdresser, Jo befriends Rea, an exceedingly wealthy and exceedingly self-centered young woman whose mother is dying of cancer. In a brief burst of decisiveness, they consider running away to Milwaukee. But for too much of the novel, Jo simply lies in her bed staring at the ceiling or tells us about her dreams.

Jenny's prose, translated from the German by Elizabeth Gaffney, is arid and wearisome, full of commonplace metaphors. But every so often, its bleakness strays into an awkward sort of charm, as when Jo describes her father's method of dealing with his girlfriend's temper tantrums: "After one of these attacks, as Father always referred to her bouts of rage, he gave her a pocket video game as a present. It was like a fireman had burst into a burning building with a hose and skillfully extinguished a blaze in the rafters." Frequently, however, the novel's language is forced: "Fractured dreams floated past my sleeping eyes like scraps of paper in the raging torrent of a river."

The most successful metaphor in the novel, for better or for worse, is the title — since at times the experience of reading "The Pollen Room" suggests what it might be like to be trapped in such a cloying and claustrophobic place, wondering how one came to be there.

Jenny was only 23 when the novel was first published in Germany, in 1997. Since then, "The Pollen Room" has sold more than 800,000 copies in Switzerland and Germany and has been the source of much literary attention, particularly in Switzerland. In part this is because of the author's age, in part because of speculation about the extent to which the story is autobiographical. The rest of its appeal, at least to an American reader, may remain a mystery. □