Notes on Nell Zink, *The Wallcreeper*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described [here](#), theorized [here](#). All comments and criticism are welcome!)

Frantic Cleverness

Zink clamors for the reader's attention in every line, unremittingly, for an exhausting 150 pages. At times this works well. The opening pages are bound to be surprising, because there is not yet enough text to judge what she's up to. It works, as several of the hundreds of reviewers on Goodreads have noted, in the passage on anal sex, because it's unusual to see that subject treated to so many changes of viewpoint (pp. 7-8). But it does not work for the majority of the book.

Like any author, Zink has a limited repertoire of strategies for producing unexpected turns of voice, mood, and image. Her commonest strategy is to write a few sentences with a more or less consistent viewpoint, and then draw a conclusion that is unexpectedly skewed. For example this passage, which follows on the death of the narrator's pet bird Rudi:

"When Rudi died, Stephen stopped raising his eyes above the horizontal. He stopped going out at night or to the marsh [for bird watching]. He read every word of the newspaper, offering lengthy, cogent commentary on the financial news as if he had been asked to join the president's council of economic advisers. He enlightened me on the relations between oil-producing and -consuming states as if he were grooming me for a position on his staff. His personal interests were subrogated to those of the mass media, and he began to seem like a nearly normal person." [p. 45]

Note that the third and fourth sentences are structurally similar to one another. In Zink's prose, whenever two or more sentences reinforce one another, it's a setup. The end of the last sentence I've quoted here is the kind of reversal that would serve as a satisfying end to a chapter in a novel by, say, Henry James (especially given the Jamesian nuance "nearly"). But Zink's sense of surprise demands successive reversals. The next sentences (there is no paragraph break) are:

"He stopped shaking. He never got excited. When he went to bed his face turned into a slack, unhappy mask and he never looked at me before he closed his eyes."

So the narrator's newly politicized and oddly bureaucratically minded husband turns out to be unhappy, listless, and unaffectionate. At this point the reader is being asked to hope the narrator can cure her husband of his strange mourning over the dead bird: perhaps, it's implied, she can revive his interest in her. Then Zink provides another turn:

"Stephen's grief humanized him. I began to fall in love."

This kind of double or triple surprise could function well if it were used once or twice in a novel, but it is one of Zink's principal strategies for keeping the reader's attention. Viewpoints and conclusions shift with a regularity that sometimes makes them into tics, turning a reader's thoughts to the author instead of the narrator.

An even simpler strategy for holding the apparently easily bored reader's attention is changing
subjects, images, and viewpoints as rapidly as possible. In this passage the narrator is looking out at Berne, Switzerland:

"Berne lived turned in on itself. But it wasn't self-sufficient; it was more like a tumor with blood vessels to supply everything it needed: capital, expats, immigrants, stone, cement, paper, ink, clay, paint. No, not a tumor. A flower with roots stretching to the horizon, sucking in nutrients, but not just a single flower: a bed of mixed perennials. A flower meadow where butterflies could lay eggs and die in peace, knowing their caterpillars would not be ground to pulp by the flowers. Continuity of an aesthetic that had become an aesthetic of continuity. That was Berne. I leaned against the city wall and Elvis kissed me..." [pp. 17-18]

First Berne is compared to a tumor, but the simile overspills itself, ending as a list of things that aren't related to the image. But that doesn't matter because the narrator cancels the metaphor, and tries the image of a flower; but in the next sentence that metaphor metastasizes into a meadow. Then comes the lovely but empty abstraction about aesthetics (how is it related to the flower metaphor?), and a blank assertion of the image's veracity ("That was Berne.").

It's always possible to argue that kaleidoscopic writing like this expresses the narrator's state of mind, but that is inevitably the case. The question is whether or not the author is in possession of other kinds of writing she can use to express other feelings, other situations.

I wouldn't argue that every novel needs to have a variety of paces (Bernhard and Beckett would be ready counterexamples), or that it is never a good idea to try to keep the reader's attention at every moment, line by line and image by image. Examples of books that do just that include, for me, the Joyce of Finnegans Wake; most of Mark Leyner; and much of Georges Perec. But Joyce also orchestrates changes in tone, voice, mood, and affect in different sections of the book; Leyner's anxiety about losing his reader's attention is his theme, fully acknowledged and made both ironic and pathetic; and Perec's strangeness is the result of self-imposed constraints, which themselves become objects of interest.

Here there is only the relentless drive to produce entertaining turns of phrase, striking images, clever tropes, and surprising reversals at all times, on every page and in every paragraph, with as little filler as possible, for the entire duration of the novel. The result, for me, is exhausting and, I hope, forgettable.