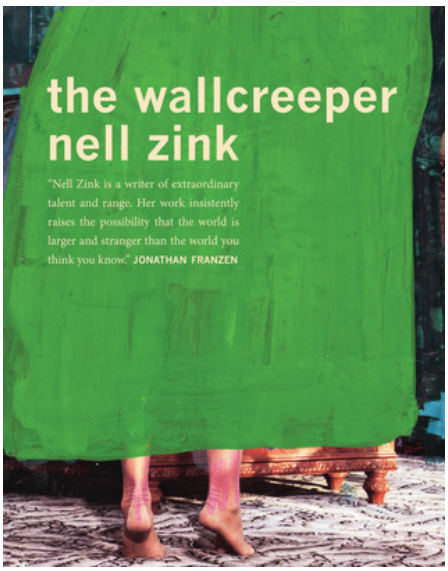

The Wallcreeper

Nell Zink

The Wallcreeper

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The Wallcreeper Nell Zink
Nell Zink’s debut novel follows a downwardly mobile secretary from Philadelphia who marries an ambitious soon-to-be-expat pharmaceutical researcher in hopes that she will never work again. They end up in Germany, where it turns out that her new husband is tougher, sneakier, more sincere, more contradictory, and smarter than she is; she’d naturally thought it was impossible. Life becomes complicated with affairs, birding, and eco-terrorism. Bad things happen, yet they stagger through, clinging to each other from a safe distance.

The Wallcreeper Details

Date	:	Published October 1st 2014 by Dorothy, a publishing project
ISBN	:	9780989760713
Author	:	Nell Zink
Format	:	Paperback 193 pages
Genre	:	Contemporary, Novels, Literary Fiction, Fiction

From Reader Review The Wallcreeper for online ebook

Daniel says

This book could have a great pulp-erotica cover and a tagline like SHE WOULD DO ANYTHING. . . FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, but instead it's tastefully covered up by an intriguing and surrealistic front (it's actually a great design.) I can only imagine the bewilderment of some people who were expecting a much more serious, literary book. Take for example, our current most popular review of this book, a one-star rating by a reviewer who is disappointed that this book wasn't written with "heart," and frankly seems outraged that these characters aren't likable or very realistic, and going so far as to say that the New York Times unfairly "courted feminists" to read this book. Poor soul.

I suppose it's easy to be blinded by its serious environmental concerns, but to take it *too* seriously is to miss out on some great fun. Our main character is Tiffany, a somewhat lazy environmentalist who marries the first man who proposes to her and eventually falls into some destructive habits like not going to work and eco-terrorism. Her defining characteristic, as told to us by many characters, is that she has a "one-track mind." Yes. And prove it she does, many times. Now, I'm not suggesting that this book lacks actual serious concerns or that its literary value is thrown out the window because of sex, but this should act as a major clue about the attitude this book is presenting. This book is somewhat a parody of those erotic novels that lazily attempt some late-game feminism after 200 pages of sexual exploitation, but that's not to say that this books fails at executing character development or that it's not both fun and a serious attempt at understanding one's approach to living, dying, and how to love.

That being said, the most common words I see reading reviews for this book are words like "wild," and "bewildering," and it reads at times like a dream, its behavior almost as surrealistic as its cover, major events coming fast at you with none of the usual sentimental preamble. It's easy to make the mistake of trying to rationalize it--its as messy and volatile as life actually is. Its characters are hard to deal with, aggressively unlikable in an everyday sense yet intensely pleasurable in their humor, and many reviewers make the mistake of trying to legitimize Tiffany's dubious behavior as somehow feminist. Any attempt at transforming Tiffany into a role-model of any kind is an act of absurdity so large that it would not feel out of place gracing the pages of this very book. Best to let these characters be themselves, here.

This book is definitely not going to be for everyone, and that one star reviewer has some concerns I may agree with (though I disagree with most). The NYT reviewer mentions that Zink got her start writing "impromptus" for her friends, and in a way this reads like a continuation of that: amusingly dirty, and filled with what must be satire of German environmental groups that only Zink and her pals would only really get. Maybe that's some of the magic here--it's wild, fun, personal, and doesn't really give a damn if you get it. It's complex enough that I feel this review didn't quite do it justice in capturing its spirit, and it may require rereading for me to understand what it's exactly trying to say, if it's trying to say anything at all.

J.A. Carter-Winward says

Reviews: the reason people read reviews is to decide for themselves whether or not they should invest the time, money and energy into reading a novel. This is only my opinion, and reflects not on the author personally, but on this particular work of fiction.

I read the New York Times book review of *The Wallcreeper* AFTER finishing the book. What came to my mind was, *The Emperor's New Clothes*. But the author, the Times, the famous "blurber," all want us to see gilded gold and refined cloth. But I'm not among the NYC literati, so all I saw was a saggy, naked ass.

Nell Zink's writing attempt to hoodwink us into thinking she has created something fresh and new with with patchwork prose, dry-but-flat humor, and pretentious, bleak levity, and the tenor of a challenging, post-modern voice that defies definition is nothing but shiny keys posing as highbrow literature. And frankly, I know how to define this type of novel easily enough, and it starts with "hype," and "who you know."

When I say, "fresh and new," (a cliché within its own right), I'm doing what the writing fails to do: using clichés as devices to point out irony. But Zink's rampant use of clichés throughout the book are not used ironically.

Examples: "You can't judge a book by its cover," and "I refuse to go on fiddling while Rome burns!" Along with, "Garbage in, garbage out"--although she redeems this one a little, with a tiny, new spin. If you're going to use clichés, the whole point of their employment is to poke fun at them, or double-back and rework them. Not the case here.

On page one, we get an over-the-top explanation that, given the lack of clarity throughout the whole book, now seems rather quaint: "I opened the door and put my feet outside, threw up, and lay down, not in the vomit but near it." I'm not sure why we need that spelled out for us. This kind of clunky prose riddles the entire book.

Before the protagonist, Tiffany, throws up, her husband hits a rock in the road. It jostles her enough that she has a miscarriage. What he actually hit was a bird, a wallcreeper. He leaves his wife there, bleeding, to go rescue the bird, like any husband would, naturally. Irony? A grim sense of tongue-in-cheek, "yes, this is who her husband is," and foreshadowing of events to come?" If the latter is true, then it's so on-the-nose it's shudder-worthy. If it wasn't meant as foreshadowing, it's just plain poor storytelling and character development.

The couple keeps the wallcreeper in their kitchen until the thing starts to molt and basically needs to be set free into the wild--make a note--"set free" is a theme! Yet the bird, the main motif and title of the book, gets dropped less than 20% into the story, and what happens next is nowhere near a foreshadowing of things to come.

After they release the bird into the wild, the wallcreeper is eaten by a hawk--miraculously on the very day the couple goes to watch him in his habitat. So, that very day. Not the day they let him out of the kitchen. But later. Because they could find that particular wallcreeper and...ugh. Disbelief suspension? Way too much to ask, here. To say it was supremely *deus ex machina* is an understatement. I can't remember how they were able to keep track of it, but somehow, they do, and it gets eaten. Foreshadowing again? I wish I could say "yes." But no, it was, and is, as meaningless as it sounds, which reflects the rest of the book's trajectory, I'm afraid.

Going back to the beginning, here's what Tiffany, the protag, says after the rock-bird-vomit-bleeding-car incident: "I wasn't pregnant, I noticed." This seemed totally absurd to me. As I said, the first lines of the book chronicle this event and her husband, acting like no husband or human being would act, EVER, cared more about rescuing the wallcreeper than his bleeding wife. I realize the author might have been attempting to use this blasé, ironic device to set some sort of post-modern, bleak tone, but to me, it felt completely off-key and contrived.

Within the first few pages, metaphors abound which, not for a lack of trying, I couldn't fathom. I think Zink was hoping readers would skim over them and not think too much on them. Kind of like certain poetry that is so obscure, the poet hopes the reader believes it's simply too deep or intellectual for them to grasp, so the reader assumes it's good and just over their heads, when in fact, it's simply verbal onanism on a page.

Here's the first one that caught my eye: "I clenched my hands into claws and cried like a drift log in heavy surf." I've never personally heard a drift log in heavy surf. I've seen it. Was she thrashing about? Then her husband does something to her that once again, no human being would do, ever: "Stephen put his hands on my ears. Much later he told me he thought if I couldn't hear myself I might stop. He said it reminded him of feedback mounting in an amplifier." From the clashing metaphors to her husband acting in completely unrealistic, ridiculous ways, I found it difficult to suspend my disbelief.

There are many places where it felt like Zink was trying much too hard: "I wanted to hear my own whispers in the next room and know that I was thinking of me." Then this noggin' scratcher: "I was raised on art and literature, the opiates of the intellectually underprivileged."

So…people who aren't blessed with intellect…use art and literature to numb the pain of…being stupid? It almost feels like she's slighting us, her readers, implying that if we enjoy art and literature (and since this book has been hyped up as a work of literary fiction), why then…hm. You connect the dots. IF you're not "intellectually underprivileged," that is. According to this line, I suppose reading Ms. Zink's novel is proof-positive that we're all idiots, reading her novel to escape our dearth of intellect. I really can't see any other way to interpret this.

From page one I went from incredulity, to irritation, to boredom, to incredulity again, to laughter because I was still incredulous, to relief that I was finished with the book. From what I had read, I wasn't surprised that the ending left me indifferent.

The boredom came with the didactic, eternally long passages where Stephen, the protag's husband, starts preaching (Zink's authorial intrusion) to Tiffany (us, the reader), about his thoughts (obviously Zink's obsession) on the environment and the European government's policies w/r/t the environment. It was very clear that the author has an information fetish about environmentalism and wild birds. I find it ironic that I've heard Jonathan Franzen rail against over-didacticism and info-fetishes, yet he was the person not only instrumental in getting Zink to write this book, get it published, but he blurbed it as well. I loved The Corrections and Freedom, so his blurb carried weight for me, which is why I bought the book.

The NYT book reviewer stated that the protag, like the wallcreeper, wanted to be wild and free. This isn't the impression I had. Tiffany is an apathetic, flat character, with no discernible arc throughout the book until the last 5% of the story, where she suddenly, out of the blue, does a complete 180 that I personally didn't see coming in any of the preceding events or internal processes (of which there were little) of her character.

It was as sudden a shift as a right angle, and utterly unbelievable. Tiffany begins, and remains throughout the book, a leech, entirely dependent financially on men because she doesn't want to work. She literally has no motivation to do anything. Not even sex. Nothing.

Finally, in one paragraph, less than 5% away from the end of the book, she exclaims, "I refuse to go on fiddling while Rome burns!" Oh, okay, Tiff. Glad you joined the party.

Yet, even with this "sudden change," in the form of her *telling* us she's changing, she doesn't. She tells a male character in the book, "I just need you to save me." Now, I realize the author was probably trying to be

ironic and humorous, but it can't be ironic if it's the actual truth. The man to whom Tiffany is speaking says to her, “…you can live in Dessau rent-free if you redecorate. I’ll pay for the materials. Isn't that what women want?” Oh yeah, that’s what all women want: free rent, and carte blanche to redecorate. So ultimately, her earth-shattering epiphany that she suddenly wants to do something with her life does not preclude her continued financial dependence on men.

This isn't a woman craving freedom, I'm sorry. Even with the male character's feeble attempt to make it "okay" by telling her she'd be doing him a favor by living rent-free in his house is presented, it feels like the author is "protesting too much." (She knows the speech about Tiffany “doing him the favor” is bogus, but needs it to seem like Tiffany is contributing…something, ANYTHING, to the world, even though it demands ZERO effort, action, or motivation on her part, and the requirement includes her apathetic agreement to squat for free in some guy’s house, while continuing to breathe in and out, every day. Wow, makes me tired just thinking about it!) Bottom line? At the end, Tiffany is still as helpless and dependent as ever.

Meanwhile the NYT reviewer courted the feminists by writing, "…we not only plunder our resources in an effort to 'breed and feed' but allow ourselves (especially if we are female) to be similarly plundered: physically, emotionally, spiritually, creatively."

Oh, do “we”? Speak for yourself. The key words here are "allow ourselves." What woman with any self-respect allows this? I certainly don’t. But too many women, according to the NYT writer. How is this book anything but a reflection of the victim-mentality that many people, not just women, live by to avoid taking responsibility for themselves? If someone allows themselves to be “plundered,” the onus rests on the shoulders of the individual, and no one else. And Nell Zink writes a character all-too willing to be plundered, who continues to be plundered, and then expects us to root for her when she takes an initiative that most people in today's world take when they reach the age of eighteen.

The final nail in this book's coffin for me was when, after over 85% (give or take) of the book goes without mentioning the wallcreeper, Tiffany is called (by the man who is rescuing her for the third time) a "butterfly among the birds…" (although I am grateful we finally got a metaphor that's coherent--butterfly=change--I am never sold on the fact that her entire personality, hopes, goals and dreams etc. change on a dime), Tiffany retorts: "Do you mean I remind you of the wallcreeper?" Oh, oh. PLEASE. No. This felt so forced it was almost embarrassing to read it.

After reading over 90% (again, give or take) of the book, the wallcreeper forgotten after 15% of it, and then the man to whom she speaks, (not even knowing about the event with the wallcreeper or in fact about wild birds at all, mind you,) drops this bomb? It felt like a desperate, wild attempt to bring the motif back to the forefront in the most contrived way.

In conclusion, to me, a novel is not a platform to proclaim your beliefs and causes to the world. It isn't about pretension and self-indulgence. It's about the reader, your audience. As an author, you have a sacred duty to them. They give you time, money, and their energy. Authors are supposed to give the reader, us, food for thought, the soul, heart, let the clichés roll in. But this book felt like birdseed, tossed down to a starving crowd by a handful of misanthropic, literati aristocrats.

But because people like Franzen and the NYT book reviewer endorse the book, readers who don't know will buy it and read it, and because of the mindset of people like Zink, believing we are too “intellectually underprivileged” to get it, many will, and have, proclaimed it a “literary marvel.” They will pretend they see the Emperor's fine, new clothes. What the reviewer and Franzen have done with endorsing this book is lose all credibility for me as arbiters of taste.

I am a hungry reader, always searching for an author who writes with heart and an earnest desire to weave a compelling tale. But it doesn't feel like Nell Zink wrote this story for me or for anyone else. She wrote it utterly for herself, and it left me, and others who are hungry for a rich, fulfilling story, unfed.

Warwick says

Strangely enough, this is the second female-authored 2015 bestselling US novel about an adulterous expatriate American housewife living in Switzerland that I've read this year. However, putting down Jill Alexander Essbaum's Hausfrau and turning to Nell Zink's *The Wallcreeper*, as I did while preparing this review, feels like leaping out of a coma singing the opening bars of Sha-La-La by Al Green. Rarely do you get such a chance to see how themes that were trite and plodding with one writer can become fresh and funny when described by someone else with wit and verve and vim and brio and zest and all the other things that Zink's writing has in spades.

It's clear from other reviews that there's already some backlash against the Zink hype, which is understandable. For me, though, this was just 170 pages of pure enjoyment. And not in a fluffy way: her prose style is so smart and witty and allusive that some of the laughs came from sheer admiration. Her writing flits in and out of different tones and registers in a way that is technically much harder than it looks, and almost every double-page will throw at you literary call-backs, strange sex, binomial names, vertiginous changes of subject – random exclamations! – wading birds and excellent jokes.

When I think back now to the opening line of *Hausfrau* – 'Anna was a good wife, mostly' – it seems to sum up everything that annoyed me about that novel's satisfaction in the character's coy self-deceptions; by comparison, a similar line in *The Wallcreeper* – 'I was pretty bad as wives go' – seems refreshingly, breezily direct. *The Wallcreeper*'s own opening line, incidentally, is already quite famous for its near-parodic, creative-writing-course compression of incident:

> I was looking at the map when Stephen swerved, hit the rock, and occasioned the miscarriage.

Yep, sign me up – I was on board for this voice right away. And other comparisons are instructive too. In *Hausfrau* Essbaum uses German language lessons to try and reflect her character's emotional state, which involves many laboured metaphors on grammatical terms like 'passive' or 'perfect'. It's a grind. Zink tries something similar but gets away with it, partly because she avoids the obvious and partly just because her ironic tone means you already grant her an assumption of self-awareness.

> At Elvis's suggestion I took a course in Berndeutsch. I learned ten verbs for work: work hard (*drylige*, *bugle*, *chrampfe*, *schaffe*, *wärche*), get stuck with jobs no one else wants to do (*chrüpple*), work slowly (*chnorze*), work carelessly (*fuuschte*), work absent-mindedly (*lauere*). Stay at home and putter around doing little harmless chores (*chlütterle*). I learned fast and the teacher said maybe it was an advantage my not knowing any German. Then the ten weeks of the course were over and I didn't know anything anymore, except that I would never look for a job.

Elvis is the guy she's having extramarital sex with; he tells her he's a Montenegrin, although her husband doesn't believe it (‘He's Syrian if he's a day! “Elvis”! It's like a Filipino telemarketer calling himself Aragorn!’). All the frantic sleeping around makes the book read a little like a farce at times, except that the tone is used more as a way of dealing with difficult experiences than of avoiding them altogether. A painful and barely-consensual bout of anal sex with her husband, for instance, gets described like this:

> Now, all my life I had fantasized about being used sexually in every way I could think of on the spur of the respective moment. How naïve I was, I said to myself. In actuality this was like using a bedpan on the kitchen counter. I knew with certainty that “pain” is a euphemism even more namby-pamby than “defilement.” Look at Stephen! He thinks he’s having sex! Smell his hand! It’s touching my hair! I thought, Tiff my friend, we shall modify a curling iron and burn this out of your brain. But I didn’t say anything. I acted like in those teen feminist poems where it’s date rape if he doesn’t read you the Antioch College rules chapter and verse while you’re glumly failing to see rainbows. I was still struggling to dissociate myself into an out-of-body experience when Stephen came, crying out like a dinosaur.
>
> I gasped for air, dreading the moment when he would pull out, and thought, Girls are lame.

This is so much more complex and interesting than all the moralistically-loaded bad sex that happens in *Hausfrau* – just look at how often Zink shifts gears through that paragraph. Stephen is no villain and the protagonist is certainly no victim; rather her irony shatters all good/bad experiences into a kaleidoscope of annoyance, amusement, self-reflection and philosophising. The way irony interacts with sex is actually one of the most interesting parts of the book, and also one of its subjects – Zink writes revealingly at one point that it's a character's ‘incapacity for irony’ that stops her ‘from coming across […] as anything but horny’.

Certainly the plot – which concerns birdwatching and ecoterrorism – is a bit of a mishmash, and I can understand why some readers find the prose style too flyaway to settle into. I thought it was a delight, and after a few pages of submitting to its spell you realise that every single sentence is about to make you burst out laughing – although examining them in isolation, it's not always clear why. Apparently she wrote this in three weeks. I hate her, but I want more, more, more.

Jenna Evans says

Wow, this is one weird, fucked-up, compelling, funny, angry, sexy, twisted, intellectual little book. I don't know how she managed to get it published in today's world -- it's so offbeat and unclassifiable -- but I'm excited that she did. I couldn't really put it down. Really interested to see what Zink does next, too.

Jim Elkins says

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.

Rebecca says

I'd been desperately eager to try Zink's work but – now that I finally found a copy of one of her books at my new library – can't think why. I liked the madcap birdwatching and ecoterrorism material, and there are some genuinely hilarious lines, but most of the characters seem to be here just to say some goofy stuff and then disappear once they've served their purpose. I could relate to Tiff's sense of dislocation and purposelessness, but not at all to most of her decisions. Plus the sexual amorality really bothered me ("The world is not a better or worse place because you do or don't screw around"). The plot is uneven throughout, but the wheels completely come off in the last 15 pages. Flouting the rules for how to conclude a novel is all well and good, but sometimes the rules are there for a good reason – to make something readable and believable.

Some great use of nature imagery:

> "He then proceeded to dance as if he had never seen me, or any other human being, before in his life. Cranes came to mind."
>
> "The ospreys would have to take a back seat, because he and I were that most common of endangered species: adulterers."
>
> "At the funeral, I finally met [name redacted]'s mother. She looked at me with a hatred I'd only ever seen before on a caracal in the zoo."

Another example of the wacky humor:

> "Your mom told you to smoke weed?"

> “No! She told me drummers smoke weed to keep from getting carpal tunnel syndrome.”
> “I thought they did it because drumming is boring and monotonous.”
> “It’s not monotonous if you smoke weed.”

Ben Loory says

a lot of sparkling writing draped over yet another miserable story about a married couple having affairs

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Natalie says

I don't know if I'm too prudish for this book, or not artistic enough, or if this really is just a terrible book. The characters are all unlikable (I think intentionally), there's a whole theme of birds and bird watching that does nothing for the main narrative, and, most importantly, the narrative is a build up to nothing. It ended and I was just happy it was over, I didn't care what happened to any of the characters. At least it was short.

Paul Bryant says

They are all gaga for this novel. All of them. For all these reviewers *The Wallcreeper* is like a heart transplant, they’re bounding around, they’re happy again.

I don’t know, it was okay but -

It wasn’t like the day of the Rapture for American fiction. I’ve read stuff that isn’t a million miles away from Nell Zink.

Absolutely – all these people saying how weird and far out she is have never come across Alissa Nutting or Matt Bell -

Miranda July -

Or even the venerable and ancient firm of George Saunders and Saint Donald Barthelme -

(Sings) *Oh oh oh wallcreeper*
How come you taste so good?
Oh oh oh wallcreeper
Just like a young bird should

Anyway, I suppose we should give this damned review a try.

Well, I guess. That’s what we’re here for.

So….

It was…..

Okay!

(Sighs.)

It was like a deadpan reads-pretty-autobiographical-but-who-knows account of an expat American woman married to this American guy and living in Europe and getting interested in ecology and birds and all of that and kind of wibbling around aimlessly, quite a bit of shagging going on but some idiot said the sex was on a gross Nicholson Baker level of detail which is proof they didn't read all of this very short novel because *The Wallcreeper* is not *The Fermata.*

The Fermata stands alone.

On a plinth of awe.

Which is in the form of an erect…

Anyway.

(Sings) *Wallcreepers couldn't drag me away*
Wall, wallcreepers we'll eat them some day

Actually, there were bits which I couldn't quite understand. Does anyone know what this means?

Easterners hear "coffee culture" and think of Vienna, not longshoremen idling their pickups at a drive-through. They don't know the uniform polo shirts at Starbucks are the alternative business model for when you want women customers to let their guard down.

No… I mean it sounds smart, it has a smart shape, but I have no idea what it's supposed to mean. Here's another one :

She may have been twelve. Coming from a subculture in which a pose of stubby-pawed, forthright naïveté is held to embody youthfulness right up to death from old age, I couldn't tell.

Yeah – that sounds smart *and* funny but I have no idea whether it's either.

(Sings) *Wallcreeper, wallcreeper, won't you dance with me?*

But you know, it was pretty readable. It ambled along. It did give me the idea that being an ecological activist would drive you crazy because there are a thousand contradictory ideas about exactly how we should leave nature alone.

Hmmm… and I do like the *idea* of this writer, that she was disovered and almost *instructed* to write this novel by the famous Jonathan Franzen, and now she's like famous at the age of 51.

Yay, go Zink.

She's the poster girl for late starters.

(Sings) *Easy come, easy go, will you let me go?*
Wallcreeper! No, we will not let you go. (Let him go!)
Wallcreeper! We will not let you go. (Let him go!)
Wallcreeper! We will not let you go. (Let me go!)

How many stars then?

Two!

Three!

Two!

2.5 it is.

Okay, good - can we go now?

(Sings) *We will not let you go!*

Lee says

I liked its flighty sexy fun for the most part but also found myself against its caprice as idea/art. But then once I finished -- thanks to the end -- I started thinking about it as a contemporary feminist companion piece to Kenzaburo Oe's A Personal Matter (oh, it's a moral tale about taking responsibility for yourself!) and knocked the rating up a bit. Franzen blurbed it for the birding and Berlin, and those bits -- the insider info on Germany/thereabouts and similes involving angry robins, trash birds etc -- make it singular but the tone is familiar, sort of like Grace Paley at her rangiest but shot through with way more sexy stuff. Insight, wisdom, and unpredictable turns of phrase and modulations throughout made it easy and enjoyable reading, but like a bird in flight it too often felt weightless, thanks mostly to incessantly ironic over-reliance on exaggerated analogy and the like. The eco-terrorist action seemed like a little engine to ease the burden of gliding along on language alone. A recommended beach read for readers who'd never read a conventional beach-read book.

Michael says

This book is about a twenty-something woman growing up late. Tiffany draws us in to her odd life on the power of her fresh and quirky way of looking at the world. It’s a fun, but confusing ride. In the end it’s only her writing of it that is admirable.

At the start we have she and her husband living in Berne, Switzerland, where he has transferred from the States to work in marketing for a pharmaceutical company. A collision of their car with a bird called a wallcreeper helps facilitate a growing interest of the couple in birding and nature. Aside from this common interest, there seems to be little holding their marriage together. They openly have affairs with other people. Still, she appreciates that he doesn’t demand that she work, and he continues to hope that she will bear them a couple of children. He cajoles her:

“I feed, you breed. Come on!”

She deflects him by speaking of the earth’s overpopulation and obfuscates the conversation by asking:
Admit it would help him get promoted
“What about global warming?”
“If it weren’t for global warming, we’d be under an ice sheet right now”. He gestured toward the mountains.
“But look at us. Earth as far as the eye can see. I love global warming! And I love you!”
Something about the implied comparison made me nervous. I was pretty bad as wives go. Where Stephen was concerned possible epoch-rending, world-destroying bad. But without me he’d be under an ice sheet, so maybe I was doing him a favor.

Thus, we slip slide along with outwardly despicable people who charm us somehow with their honesty and verve. Tiffany’s boldness in seeking out vigorous sex partners has a bohemian flare. The way she looks at the world is jaundiced and wise in a zany way. For example, here is her deft summary of the city she is growing attached to:

Berne lived turned inward on itself. But it wasn’t self-sufficient; it was more like a tumor with blood vessels to supply everything it needed: capital, expats, immigrant, stone, cement, paper, ink, clay, paint.

Despite their open marriage, Tiffany periodically loves Stephen and isn’t about to give him up for another woman. She has such a comic way of turning a cold shoulder to the wife of one of his coworkers who wants her to help her get him:
“I can’t feel this trapped and survive. You don’t love Stephen, and I do.” Her hands were pressed against her heart and she was taking the feeling of emptiness there very, very seriously—a hole in her heart only Stephen’s dick could fill.

Soon their birding adventures lead them into the world of environmental activism. And more interesting sex partners for both of them. Stephen is led by his lust for a charismatic, ambitious woman to focus on large scale environmental efforts to rehabilitate the Rhine River, with a far-fetched goal of removal of all its hydroelectic dams . He takes up media work for with an outfit called the Global Rivers Alliance, attends endless conferences, and moves them to Berlin. Tiffany goes along for the ride, but at one more rural conference setting between Berlin and Leipzig she gets tuned into the fate of the Elbe River. An older Lutheran minister gets her interested in a more achievable goal of removal of the stone levees of the river, thereby allowing periodic flooding that will raise the water table and save an old forest.

Just when her interest in activism begins to grow, Stephen is beginning to feel ineffectual among the big league environmental players at his conferences and disillusioned with the whole scene:
They hate me. The only thing they think laymen are good for is to supply emotional arguments that might make somebody put up with nature. But they know it won’t work. Because if you have a plant you don’t like the looks of, or a bug that looks weird, you’re going to kill it, unless you’re a total sap. …Because nobody knows how the ecosphere works. It just wants to be left alone. Life is what happens when you leave it alone. It’s circular! But nobody wants to leave it alone. They want to love it. Love of nature is a contradiction in terms. It’s the thing everybody says nobody has enough of, and it’s this totally nonexistent personality trait. The myth of biophilia.

At this point I began to get disillusioned over the trajectory of the story. But by holding out a little longer, the plot careens into a significant resolution, and we get into a better position to forgive the two main characters for being such aimless idiots. I got a kick out of this fast kaleidoscopic read and its truly funny satire on the downside of sexual adventurism and on the environmental movement.

After writing the above, I went looking for information about the author and discovered an entertaining account of how this book came to be written in three weeks by the 50 year old author and sold for three hundred dollar. The article, Outside-In (*New Yorker, 5/18/15*, by Kathryn Schulz), also captures well her style of humor:
We think of being deadpan as playing it straight during comic episodes, but Zink stays deadpan through everything—through outlandishness, anger, injustice, grief.

Natalie Draper says

Narcissistic Tiffany's total apathy and the improbable Stephen delivered a bunch of snappy zingers at each other, screwed around on each other, did things that made no sense in any dimension, and then I didn't really care anymore, plus bird watching. There were some damn good sentences in this book though. Nell Zink could be a master of twitter. I went back and forth between liking it and total alienation from the story and characters.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

This is going to be one book from the Dorothy Project that I will not be finishing. It's described all over as a funny book and I'm sorry but it starts with a woman having a miscarriage and almost dying because her husband is a trying to find a bird? I just don't see the humor. This is not the book for me. I even kept going after that, but that was a mistake.

Fiona says

Far be it from me to read what Jonathan Franzen tells me to read, but this was given to me by an in-law with notably good taste in books. He has not let me down.

This book is a much better book than I give it credit for. But I feel things deeply, and I like feeling things deeply, and this book does neither. It skips and hovers over things and never really pokes them too hard. It's worth reading, for sure but it and I were never meant to love each other.

Phil says

Too "clever" for its own good (could use a healthy dose of "kill your darlings").

Almost became a case study on self delusion and futility. This was ruined by a too tidy and moralistic ending.

Hype is the enemy. I should know by now to not be seduced.