

AUTUMN FICTION

Trollope in an anarchist squat

A disputed will? An estranged sibling? Only Nell Zink could make this tired plot sing, discovers *Duncan White*

NICOTINE

by Nell Zink



304PP, FOURTH ESTATE, £14.99, EBOOK £9.99

When you break it down, the plot of Nell Zink's third novel is straight out of a 19th-century classic. A wealthy patriarch dies without making a will, leaving his second wife and her daughter to contest the inheritance with the sons from his first marriage. Romantic entanglements ensue; dark family secrets are brought to light. It's the kind of conventional premise you'd expect from Dickens or Trollope – but *Nicotine* is set in an anarchist squat and executed with self-consciously hip dialogue and lashings of sex. Zink is anything but conventional. She's the kind of literary outsider long thought extinct. At the age of 50, in 2014, she published her first novel, *The Wallcreeper*, with a small indie

like cigarettes: the first few are dizzying and not always pleasant, but before you know it, you're hooked. Here's the opening of the new novel: "A 13-year-old girl stands in a landscape made almost entirely of garbage, screaming at a common domestic sow." Weird, right? But it's impossible not to want to read whatever comes next.

The girl in question is rescued from the dump (in Colombia) by "a middle-aged American in a white shirt and khaki pants". This is Norman Baker, who has become wealthy by offering new-age hospice care to the terminally ill. At his Brazilian clinic, "authentic shamans from the interior" treat the patients "using traditional rituals and herbal compounds". There is talk of riding the cosmic snake. Whatever the efficacy of that as a treatment, Norm certainly makes a good living out of cosmic-snake oil.

The girl with the pigs is Amalia, who, years later, becomes Norm's second wife and mother of their daughter, Penny. What happened to Norm's first wife, the mother of feckless Patrick and sinister Matt, is one of those dark family secrets. In the novel's opening scenes, we find Norm dying, but only Penny seems to really care. Amalia announces Norm's death by changing her Facebook status to "single".

With her father's death, Penny is to be evicted from her apartment and needs a place to live. In discussions about dividing up Norm's legacy, it emerges that he still owned the Jersey City house in which he grew up and in which his parents died in a fire. Penny goes to look at it, hoping to take it on, make it habitable.

But she finds that the house is already inhabited. A group of anarchist squatters have been there for years. (You get the impression Zink is playing games with Franzen here, whose latest novel, *Purity*, also contained an anarchist commune.) They are a ragtag group, among them an alluring bisexual Kurdish poet, a middle-aged libertarian and a handsome chap for whom Penny



CHRISTIAN JUNGEBLODT

Outsider: Nell Zink published her first novel at 50

falls – hard – only to discover that he is "asexual". What unifies them is that they smoke: the squat is called *Nicotine*.

The house has a secret: "the bucket monster". This is a wall full of buckets holding the effluvia of a particularly ardent anarchist who was saving up home-made "ammunition" for the inevitable police raid. And as Chekhov very nearly said: if there are buckets of

To order this book from the Telegraph for £12.99 plus £1.99 p&p call 0844 871 1515

fermented human waste on the wall in act one... The requisite peril arrives in the form of Matt, the half-brother, who realises that Penny is not going to evict the squatters – so he decides to do it himself. Various twists, turns and a great deal of shagging in various combinations follow, while Zink's sentences veer and swerve, challenging you to keep up. There's a bit of rope-a-dope

going on – Zink seduces you with all the sex and jokes, only to catch you with a bitterly ironical uppercut. *Nicotine* is a very funny book that has very serious things to say about the hypocrisies of millennial attitudes to love and power and desire. That she uses the most conventional of plots – the contested inheritance – to attack conventional thought itself is a satisfyingly Zinkish twist.

Novels to look out for later in the season



The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead (Fleet, Oct 6)



Hag-Seed by Margaret Atwood (Hogarth, Oct 6)



Autumn by Ali Smith (Hamish Hamilton, Oct 20)



Multiple Choice by Alejandro Somoza (Granta, Oct 13)



Swing Time by Zadie Smith (Hamish Hamilton, Nov 15)

LAST WORD



Anthony Cummins

Why didn't JM Coetzee make the Man Booker shortlist?

After a giant-killing longlist that ignored novels from former winners (Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes, Graham Swift) as well as rising stars (Eimear McBride, Sarah Perry), it felt almost impossible to predict which books this year's Man Booker judges would pick for their shortlist of six. All the same, the omission of JM Coetzee's excellent *The Schooldays of Jesus* is as mysterious as the novel itself.

In longlisting it, the judges evidently disagreed with the reviewers who felt the novel was a con trick (it's not obviously about Jesus); but in leaving it off the shortlist, it's clear they also can't agree with those who hail it as another masterpiece.

There might have been a place, too, for Ian McGuire's *The North Water*, a foul-mouthed story of Victorian whalers who fight to the death over a cabin boy's ghastly murder. I'd guess McGuire

lost out because this year's judges had to choose between four novels on the longlist that could be classed as crime.

One of them did make the shortlist, and the judges have done well to bring more readers to Graeme Macrae Burnet's *His Bloody Project*, a 19th-century Highland whydunnit about a crofter's son who murders his neighbour. Presented as a set of faux-archival documents, it's cleverly done – but I'm not sure it has the staying power of a great Booker winner.

I have similar doubts about Ottessa Moshfegh's blindsiding debut *Eileen*, also on the shortlist. I fell hard for this tale of an old woman's memories of how she came to be caught up in crime during her miserable New England youth. I still think it has a brilliant structure, but the book is a one-read shock.

The same is true of *The Sellout*, Paul Beatty's live-wire satire on American race relations, already a prize-winner in the States. About a black man who faces trial for bringing back slavery and segregation, it's provocative, timely and often hugely funny, but the premise isn't developed – it feels little more than a vehicle for its un-PC quips. It doesn't deepen with rereading; but unlike the novels of Macrae and Burnet, it doesn't offer much by way

of a story first time, either.

I'd be less surprised if the prize went to Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk*, a strange story of a half-Greek barista who joins her hypochondriac mother on a trip to Spain. Levy's *Swimming Home* was shortlisted in 2012, and *Hot Milk* is even better, if a bit overblown in insisting that mother-daughter enmity is inevitable.

Madeleine Thien's *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, a layered and delicate slow-burn saga of recent Chinese history, hasn't had the attention of the other books on this list, but it would be a worthy winner – and a safer bet than my favourite book on the shortlist, *All That Man Is* by David Szalay.

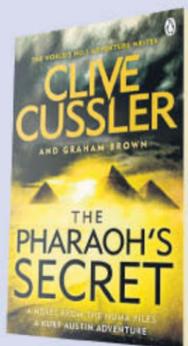
Comprising nine stories about stumbling European males, it begins with an interailing A-level student and ends with an aged Whitehall mandarin who helped create the EU. It's true that we've heard the woes of skirt-chasing males before, but the quality of Szalay's observations gives him every right to bag the prize. However, it would be a controversial winner.

Is it even a novel? Does the stories' arc – from young to old – amount to a unity? But if Szalay did win, it should pave the way for the prize to relax its rules still further.

After all, if Americans can now compete, why not story collections?

Pick of the week

THE PHARAOH'S SECRET – CLIVE CUSSLER



This week's choice is *The Pharaoh's Secret*, in which Kurt Austin and his team must delve into ancient Egyptian history in order to defeat a sinister organisation hellbent on destruction. *Clive Cussler spoke to The Telegraph*:

Tell us about the plot of *The Pharaoh's Secret*. Off a remote island, a mysterious ship releases a deadly poison. Minutes later, everyone on the island is dead. Responding to a distress call, Kurt Austin and the NUMA (National Underwater and Marine Agency) team race to pick up the few survivors, but struggle to understand the

cause of the disaster. As they investigate the incident further they uncover a far greater threat – a hidden organisation that is using the knowledge and power of the Ancient Egyptians to destabilise Northern Africa. Austin must learn and understand the secrets of the past if he is to expose a conspiracy and save millions from a horrifying death. But it is a race against time. And he faces an enemy who will stop at nothing.

How does the present interact with the ancient past in this novel? The secrets of the past are at the heart of the story. A ruthless, secretive organisation is trying to use their

knowledge of the power once held by the pharaohs to dominate modern North Africa. There's so much that is still unknown about the complex and sophisticated world of the Ancient Egyptians. But it's only through uncovering the mysteries of this incredible period that Kurt Austin and NUMA will be able to stop them. It's fertile territory for any storyteller.

Get our Pick of the Week every week for only £3.49, better than half price at WHSmith.

NEXT WEEK: *The House on Bellevue Gardens* by Rachel Hore.

EXCLUSIVE TELEGRAPH OFFER

THE PHARAOH'S SECRET – CLIVE CUSSLER

We have partnered with WHSmith to offer readers *The Pharaoh's Secret* by Clive Cussler for only £3.49. Present this voucher at the till to claim your book.

If you are a Telegraph subscriber, simply show your Telegraph Rewards card at the till to get your book for £3.49.

ONLY £3.49
BETTER THAN HALF PRICE
RRP £7.99



WHSmith

Terms and conditions: Subject to availability, while stocks last. Only one £3.49 book per voucher. Voucher is valid until Wednesday, September 21, 2016 at WHSmith High Street stores and selected Travel stores, including selected airport and hospital stores. Excludes all workplaces, motorway service stores, outlet stores, online. Books by WHSmith at Selfridges, Harrods, Arnotts and Fenwick's stores, garden centres, and WHSmith Local. Voucher offers cannot be used in conjunction with any other offer or promotional voucher and vouchers must be surrendered upon use. Photocopies will not be accepted. No cash alternative. WHSmith reserves the right to reject any voucher it deems, in its sole discretion, to have been forged, defaced or otherwise tampered with.

Telegraph bookshop

The Tunnel Through Time

A New Route for an Old London Journey

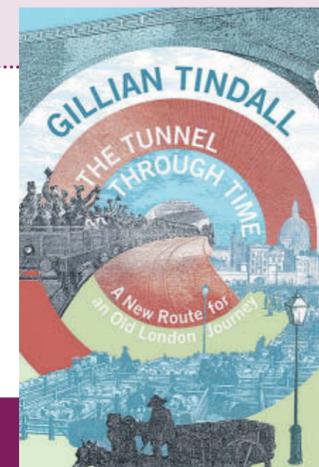
Crossrail, the 'Elizabeth' line, with its spacious, light-filled stations, is simply the latest way of traversing a very old east-west route through what was once countryside to the old City core and out again. Visiting Stepney, Liverpool Street, Farringdon, Tottenham Court Road (alias St Giles-in-the-Fields) and the route along Oxford Street (alias the Way to Oxford and also Tyburn) this richly descriptive book traces the course of many of these historical journeys across time as well as space.

Archaeology disinters layers of actual matter; one may also disinter the lives that walked where many of our streets, however altered in appearance, still run today. These people spoke the names of ancient farms,

manors and slums that now belong to our squares and tube stations. They endured the cycle of the seasons as we do; they ate, drank, laughed, worked, prayed, despaired and hoped in what are essentially the same spaces we occupy today. As *The Tunnel Through Time* expertly shows, destruction and renewal are a constant rhythm in the city's story.

SAVE £3

Available for £16.99 (rrp £20)



To order, call 0844 871 1514 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk