

The Email Master

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BY NICHOLAS DAMES

By all accounts, Nell Zink writes fantastic emails. The story of how she brazenly initiated a correspondence with Jonathan Franzen, convincing him over time to act as her agent and promoter, is now a kind of fable. Journalists have described the deluge of digital provocations, corrections, and ludic embellishments that accompany her formal interviews. Her third novel, *Nicotine*, arrives alongside *Private Novelist*, a collection of two long early stories that were written as epistolary installments, in 1998 and 2005, to her friend the Israeli writer Avner Shats; her first novel, *The Wallcreeper*, started as a look-what-I-can-do rebuke to Franzen's suggestion that she write something publishable. We should all be so lucky to have, or better yet be, such a mischievous and inventive (and let's face it, effective) correspondent; most of us, even if we claim some kind of wit, freeze into cliché before the depressingly familiar interface of an email client.

It's worth thinking about email, and what it means to email well, when trying to assess what Zink's fiction is so good at and why so many people have taken to her so quickly. What seems to liberate Zink is the occasion, or the fantasy, of one-on-one communication. No audience—not even the hothouse drama of the MFA workshop or

the cozy reassurance of a coterie—beyond one: the situation leaves Zink free to swerve as unpredictably as she likes through her stories, to dilate and summarize and skip, to presume everything she wants to presume and nothing she doesn't. Reading Zink feels more like listening in than being solicited.

What Zink excels at—what makes for the best emails—is a tone of brilliant offhandedness. Moods and rhetorical gambits shift rapidly; the beckoning index finger turns into an up-yours. Serious things get immediately undercut, robbing them of any pathos, yet without losing their seriousness. From *Nicotine*, on a smoker's second day after going cold turkey:

She walks the hills on the hottest days alone. One day she climbs a small but steep and jagged peak, and standing on the top, she takes off her shirt and says to the sun, "Sunlight. Fill my heart." Thereupon sunlight fills her heart (inexplicable process defying prose description).

Also from *Nicotine*, when the protagonist's dying father misunderstands a hospice director's coded, illegal question about whether he'd want anesthesia:

The request would have been honored. But general anesthesia 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 staffs dispensing painless deaths.

Everything seems as blunt and eccentric and knowing as an email written at white heat: a mode of address that assumes it'll all be understood—and if not, then fuck you.



Exterieur Voorgevel, Amsterdam (1992).

Photograph by Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed / Wikimedia Commons

Even bloggers and social-media addicts (meaning: everyone) find it hard to keep up such a tone; they too want an audience. Worse odds still for contemporary novelists. American “literary fiction,” both the marketing category and the state of mind, however many extrinsic problems it has, tends to suffer above all from an intrinsic one: a tone of wheedling embarrassed earnestness that can best be called passive-aggressive. Benjamin’s famous line that if commodities had souls, as Marx had suggested, those souls would be empathetic and needy (because desperate to find a buyer), might be given one extra twist: the contemporary “literary novel” very often exudes a neediness ashamed of itself. There’s a formula to the shame: the lurking knowledge that its territory (marital strife; the splendors and miseries of ennui in the late capitalist metropole; oh parenthood!) might not matter much; the insistence that it matters a great deal nonetheless. Global catastrophes are often recruited as background (or worse, metaphor) to add a patina of significance. Zink’s offhandedness reverses the formula: nothing matters more than what I’m writing you, but I know it doesn’t matter much at all.

Few contemporary fictional styles agonize as little as Zink’s. Her characters are prone to exercising their will urgently and frictionlessly. Whether deciding to become an ecoterrorist (*The Wallcreeper*); to flee a husband, taking one child and leaving another behind, and adopting a new race (*Mislaid*); or, as in *Nicotine*, to join an anarchist squat populated by committed smokers, the young women at the center of Zink’s novels have the kind of wild but deliberate agency that comes from clearly seeing their general helplessness and taking the first way out that offers. The milieu in which her characters have roots is thin soil. It’s a rebuke to the anxious stasis of so much contemporary realism, its handwringing portrayal of thickly rendered environments and its devotion to an idiom of identity; it’s also more fun, if disconcertingly arbitrary.

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This freedom is everywhere in *Private Novelist*, which is Zink’s style unfiltered. The book’s major offering is the antic “Sailing Toward the Sunset by Avner Shats,” a complete reinvention in the guise of a translation of Shats’s postmodern Hebrew novel. In it a Mossad agent searches for the heir to the Israeli throne in Bern, Konstanz, and Rye Playland, before returning to Tel Aviv to apologize to a stuffed bear he had raped as a child, as well as to welcome the child of his pregnant paramour, who happens to be a half-seal/half-woman Shetland “silkie.” Meanwhile an inflatable submarine named “Mr. Pickwick” lurks threateningly off the coast of Tel Aviv, lobbing Trident missiles softly onto nearby rooftops in what might be an attempt at seduction by dolphins infatuated with the narrator. All this comes interspersed with the translation of a Walser story; a remarkably skilled pastiche of Kafka; and opinionated ruminations on, among others,

Daniel Deronda (good), *Moby-Dick* (very good), *Pamela* (bad), and *Possession* (very bad indeed).

Written a chapter a day for Shats alone, it is an extraordinary record of the epistolary flirtations of friendship—made up of confession, mockery, self-mockery, inside jokes, jokes not meant to be understood by anyone. “When we read a work written for publication,” Zink writes of Kafka’s letters, “we allow a stranger to direct our behavior and narrow our focus. When we read that same stranger’s diaries and letters, our reality is widened and enriched.” To try to write fiction with the same spontaneous, aggressive affection with which you might write—if you were good enough—a memorable email: if you succeeded at this goal, you’d have cracked open a window in the house of fiction to let in some air.

What gives Zink’s novels their friction is the contrast between her offhanded intensity—a style much more common in the fissiparous world of radical subculture writing (such as her self-produced mid-’90s zine *Animal Review*) than in novelistic realism—with deliberately old-fashioned plots. If *The Wallcreeper* was a *Bildungsroman*, and *Mislaid* a multi-generation family novel, *Nicotine* is a Victorian inheritance plot wedged into the ragged world of post-Occupy radicalism.

These venerable plots move in Zink’s work with such celerity, however, that they seem to merge with their paraphrase, like a shrunken territory taking on the size of its map. *Nicotine* covers nine months in 2016, starting with the cruelly Western death in hospice care of Penny Baker’s father Norman, a Jewish academic-psychologist-turned-shaman famous for running a Brazilian clinic devoted to indigenous therapies. Aside from Penny, Norman leaves behind two sons from a prior marriage, to a mysteriously vanished woman; Penny’s mother, Amalia, who met Norman in Cartagena as a 13-year-old taking flight from her Kogi village and who in 2016 runs the HR department of a large Manhattan bank; and three houses, including his childhood home, currently a Jersey City anarchist squat. Directionless at 23, Penny takes on the job of reclaiming the squat for her family, only to be seduced by its inhabitants, pariahs even within their anarchist community thanks to their nicotine addictions. She is most profoundly seduced by Rob, a self-described asexual and bike repairman, and Jazz, a Kurdish American poet with an incandescent sexual charisma.

When Penny’s predatory half-brother Matt discovers her living among squatters and espousing their right to the house, a contest ensues for its possession, complicated not only by Matt’s violent infatuation with Jazz but also, it turns out, by Penny’s mother’s hidden love for her stepson. After a dramatic confrontation, involving a gunshot and the springing of a booby trap involving gallons of human shit, Matt takes possession, cynically turning *Nicotine House* into the “Norman Baker Center,” a cleaned-up community space, complete with free-trade coffeehouse and radical bookshop, ready for its next monetization. Its previous inhabitants flee westward, while Penny grudgingly accepts a job as a commodities analyst working in the tech sector.

A satire of cooptation and gentrification, it would seem. Zink, however, packs several reversals into the novel’s final pages: Matt abandons his scheme to profit from Jersey City’s innocent radicals in favor of chasing Jazz to the Pacific, while *Nicotine House* is returned, repaired and refurnished, to remnants of the original gang—

including Rob, whose asexuality has been revealed to be merely impotence thanks to Penny and Jazz's assiduous attentions. The unexpectedly traditional happy ending is a Zink specialty; like Victorian fictional orphans but with much greater speed, her protagonists are finally rewarded with family concord, employment, and sexually compatible partners, even if they did little to achieve them. The manic plots undo themselves in ironies even to the point of straightening what had been tangled. Normativity lands like a punch line. "Every time I think I know what's happening," Penny says, "the cards get reshuffled."

The insouciant middle finger of Zink's style is aimed just as much at fashionable fatalists as at market-friendly Big Issue realists. The happy ending can seem not so much conservative as stochastic, proof that in her world you can always act, but you have to be prepared not to recognize the effects of your action, even sometimes getting what you wanted but were trying not to have. Immersion in radical thought turns Zink's characters into specialists in historical irony: "Norm's feminism—his not wanting her to be a girly-girl—that dovetails so neatly with Amalia's traditional culture, where women labor day and night," Penny thinks. "The workaholic-Disney-princess model of femininity that makes all the tomboys stay home with Sherlock. Is emergent filmmaking so very unlike chewing coca leaves and smearing it on a gourd?"

Such thoughts make Zink's radicals wised-up realists rather than ideologues. The toughest thing about them is their Zinkian patois, as if a Preston Sturges character had been raised on Althusser. Otherwise, unlike their Dostoyevskian or Conradian forebears, they have an essential sweetness. They are afraid of touching the world too roughly, because they know they could wound it if they do so. The structure of feeling derives from environmental activism, the subject of *The Wallcreeper* and the source of so much of Zink's habitual imagery: the partly disabling suspicion that the most effective actions one can take are erasures of the will. Bring your father to a hospice, and thereby prolong his torture. Try to preserve an anarchist squat, watch it be dismantled accordingly. Reality is the set of things you harm when you interact with it.

What the novel seems to ask, as Penny worries at the boundary between care and exploitation, is: how can you tell cruelty from care? There's no easy answer in *Nicotine*, where the distinction between the lupine Matt, whose every action is a barely displaced rape fantasy, and Penny's adopted anarchist family, whose considerate interactions seem like slow mutually assisted suicide, is much more tenuous than at first glance. Thanks to the contingencies of unintended results, either kind of action might have beneficial results. This is politically unsatisfying and morally unconsoling. But Zink is clearly interested in neither. Above all she seems unembarrassed to be neither, like the most genuine and confiding of one's correspondents. In that quality she doesn't have many peers. ■

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