Clarion Review

General

Finding Zoe
Rosalee Jaeger
CreateSpace
978-1-4538-6657-3
Three Stars (out of Five)

For anyone who ever feels as though they are looking in on themselves from the outside comes Rosalee Jaeger's second novel, *Finding Zoe*. The story charts the life of pianist Zoe Hirsch from childhood to adulthood. In addition to navigating familial relations, love, and her own musical talent, the protagonist also faces a terrifying mental disorder that makes her feel detached from reality. Episodes last anywhere from minutes to months, and plunge the heroine into deep depression. By the time Zoe receives the diagnosis of depersonalization disorder, she is an adult, having coped with the illness and its repercussions for many years.

Zoe's descriptions of her little-known illness make readers go through out-of-body episodes along with her. She says, "I first lost myself when I was six," and then goes on to explain, in excruciating detail, the itchiness and sweating she experiences prior to each episode. The audience both empathizes with Zoe as the brain fog takes over and feels helpless along with her as she wonders how long she will be depersonalized. With depersonalization comes the Destroyer, a little negative voice in Zoe's head. When depersonalization sets in, the Destroyer takes charge, telling Zoe that her current episode will never end and encouraging her to commit suicide. While she battles both depersonalization and the Destroyer, Zoe outwardly appears to be functioning normally. Divulging her disorder often has disastrous consequences for her relationships. *Finding Zoe* poignantly educates readers about depersonalization, while giving them insight into the hardships faced by anyone with a hidden condition.

Jaeger's experience as a pianist allows her to express Zoe's love of piano and the pain she feels when her illness prevents her from playing in public. The fascinating elements of the protagonist's musical talent and mental illness, however, often fade out of the story for long periods, as the author discusses Zoe's love life, schooling, and her teaching. When necessary to the plot, the protagonist's depersonalization will become foreground again. The main character's

relationships, education, and career path often are written about in summary paragraphs, instead of in illustrative scenes with dialog. In relegating these aspects to summary paragraphs, Jaeger downplays the importance of these elements in Zoe's life. After much time is devoted to her relationship with her boyfriend Frankie, Zoe's courtship and marriage to Eric feels rushed by comparison.

Jaeger's characters talk about current events for no discernible reason, other than to make readers aware of the story's time frame (e.g., the characters discuss the Mondale-Ferraro ticket in the 1980s and the outcome of the 2004 election). The book contains descriptions of banal things, such as meals and houses, while physical descriptions of characters and settings come far too late in the story. Jaeger sometimes switches from Zoe's powerful first-person narration to a weaker third-person omniscient narration in order to incorporate more viewpoints. These bizarre narrative switches detract from the novel. Still, anyone who has experienced mental illness, musical ecstasy, or triumph over diversity will find Zoe's story delightful.

Jill Allen