

Paradise Rot

Jenny Hval

Verso (Oct 2, 2018)

Softcover \$16.95 (160pp)

978-1-78663-383-5

Musician Jenny Hval's *Paradise Rot* follows a Norwegian biology student and her hypertuned sensitivities. Electric, idiosyncratic, and disturbing observations elucidate Jo's sexual awakening.

Newly arrived in an English university town, Jo takes up residence in a converted brewery. On this imaginative stage—built of plasterboard and mezzanines—there's little privacy and plentiful fungal growth. From the outset, the sense that there's something amiss infuses each scene. The apartment skillfully hints at the impermanence of Jo's situation, all while signaling the undefined emptiness that marks her departure from home.

Jo immediately experiences a barrage of sensory feedback. She can hear inanimate objects. Her roommate Carral's actions amplify through the walls. Nothing passes Jo's notice. An unfiltered, relentless array of fecund details threaten and beguile her, creating a moody portrait of a young woman settling into herself, all while leaving her state of mind in mysterious flux.

Less a straightforward novel based on characterization than a near allegorical exploration of lives bound by their own choices, the work builds a series of crescendos. Thematic sections take everyday encounters—from a haul of apples that eventually spoil to a neighbor's awkward visit—and paint them through Jo's intense perspective.

As boundaries between the roommates blur, the story gathers intrigue. Carral, in particular, takes on an eerie role that fills the decaying apartment. Her unexplained gestures, which include cutting her own hair and appearing at Jo's bedside, begin to shift the story from one of Jo's adaptation to the town of Aybourne to a more sinister one of roommates caught in an interdependent web. The less the young women speak about their situation, the more their silences gain significance.

Psychologically dark and at times claustrophobic, this unusual debut portrays raw want as a gradual encroachment. *Paradise Rot* dances between dream and nightmare, probing the jagged line between exploration and suffocation with unnerving clarity.

KAREN RIGBY (July/August 2018)

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