



Christine Arnothy

Sinister bloom

THE BLACK GARDEN. By Christine Arnothy. Translated by Robert Baldick. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. 202 pp. \$4.95.

"Well," she said vindictively. "So we don't keep our word any more? We lose our nerve. We get edgy." "You're confusing me with somebody else," said Yves.

With this intriguing exchange, Christine Arnothy, Hungarian-born author of the impressive war story, *I Am Fifteen and I Don't Want to Die*, begins a fascinating new novel of the brief encounter between a kind, cautious Frenchman and a tormented German girl. Yves is paying a forlorn final visit to his childhood home before its demolition; Sigrid is on her way to a clandestine rendezvous with her long-absent father, once a sadistic doctor in Dachau. They meet on the deserted wintry beach at Beauville; at first she mistakes Yves for one of the Israeli agents with whom she is ambivalently collaborating, but then, exhausted and anguished by her mission, she lets him take her to his house. Yves's invitation is prompted by loneliness, pity and a boyish yearning for an "affair," but he quickly falls under her spell, the banality of good mesmerized by the glamour of evil and suffering. By the time they part three days later he is so obsessed by her fierce vitality and tragic history that he eventually abandons everything to go in futile search of her across the ocean.

Miss Arnothy writes with immense skill; the setting could hardly be better. The luxurious yet half-dismantled summer

house in which they camp and picnic works both as a symbol of their similar, unhealthy preoccupation with their so different pasts, and also as a visually interesting background for what might have been a tempestuous but disembodied dialogue. The characters and their confrontation are admirably evolved: Yves, bourgeois, humane, naive, touchy; Sigrid, operatic in intensity, sullen and confessional, tender and vindictive, often grotesque but never absurd. She vacillates wildly between gratitude for and distrust of his gentleness, envy and contempt for his prosaic life, self-loathing and perverse, arrogant pride.

The book is not without flaws, notably the stereotyped rendering of Yves's domestic life, and the incident which provides the title: Sigrid's mother, she tells Yves, was a quiet German housewife fond of flowers but on discovering the nature of her husband's "research" she set up a small laboratory of her own in which she concocted poisons which turned their garden sere and black. Whether horticulturally plausible or not, this symbol seems artificial and contrived. But no matter, these are minor defects. Miss Arnothy has attempted and achieved an ambitious novel. Like Hawthorne's famous herbalist Rappaccini, rather than like Sigrid's mother, she has blended her toxins to bring her story into sinister but splendid bloom.