

ARNOTHY Christine

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THE BLACK GARDEN

By Christine Arnothy

Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 202 pp., \$4.95.

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IT WOULD BE HARD to imagine more dissimilar characters than Yves Barry and Sigrid Dusz, on whom this new novel by the author of *I Am Fifteen* and *I Don't Want to Die* centers. Both are middle-aged when they meet in midwinter on a deserted beach at Deauville, but otherwise they are almost entire opposites.

Yves is a habit-ridden, bourgeois Frenchman, a husband faithful to his shrewish, frigid wife, the father of two children whom he bores, and a model civil servant. World War II, in which he took no part, affected him minimally.

Sigrid's whole existence, on the other hand, has been shaped by the war. She feels she never had a normal childhood in wartime Germany, and because her father was a sadistic doctor who "operated" at Dachau she has never allowed herself to have a normal life since.

That she was only fourteen when the war ended and knew nothing of her father's work does not, in her opinion, exonerate her.

The Israelis, who believe Sigrid has a list of ex-Nazis from whom she obtains funds, hope she may lead them to, among others, her vanished father; agents trail her everywhere. One of them—the only man she has ever really loved—has tortured her in vain for three days to learn her secrets.

But chiefly Sigrid tortures herself. She tells Yves, "I'm like some of the ghosts of Hiroshima: without being directly involved I'm marked with stigmata. History has made me radioactive. My very presence contaminates a place, disintegrates an atmosphere."

The Black Garden is the story of the few days Sigrid and Yves spend together and the effects of their affair on their lives. It is largely a study of clashing characters, and the reader is left wondering what Christine Arnothy means by it. Is the novel symbolic: timid, habit-ridden France attracted to a Germany that is oppressed with guilt for the past and torn between love and cruelty? The title refers to a garden of Sigrid's mother. Before she died (of disgust, Sigrid says) Frau Dusz poisoned the soil in it so that although the flowers grew vigorously, all of them were black. (Neat trick, incidentally.) Does Miss Arnothy mean that the generation of Germans which fought World War II has made life evil for its children? Many readers won't find it worth struggling through this awkward though occasionally striking prose to try to find out.

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