

# Constant tasks

The first few pages of Jenny Erpenbeck's powerful novel, *Visitation*, strike a complicated chord that reverberates throughout the book, in which epic events are contrasted with, and told through, the repetitive, almost rhythmical processes that make up seemingly ordinary lives. A nameless, almost speechless, gardener looks after a plot of land, raking, watering, pruning, and chopping up logs. His precise and knowledgeable work maintaining the garden has a soothing quality, and at first seems to instill a sense of quiet well-being. But this novel is set in the author's homeland, Germany, in the twentieth century, and so the calm does not – cannot – last long. A description of a series of precautions to ward off bad luck when getting married, fear imposing on what should be the most joyful occasion, forms an eerie echo of the lists of the gardener's work:

The bridal procession must avoid, if at all possible, driving past a cemetery. The bride and groom must look straight ahead during the ride. If it rains, this is all right, but it must not snow during the ride.

For every flake of snow

Another tale of woe.

Erpenbeck can create a character in a few words, as in her description of the local mayor: "everyone in the village hears his voice, which has become huge from years of giving orders, it's gotten stretched out of

JAMES COPNALL

Jenny Erpenbeck

VISITATION

Translated by Susan Bernofsky  
176pp. Portobello Books. £10.99.  
978 1 84627 189 2

shape and thus resembles the voice of a drunkard". Her varied career – she has directed opera and written plays as well as fiction – is apparent in the inventiveness and subtlety of the language she uses. *Visitation* cannot have been an easy book to translate, but Susan Bernofsky masters its occasional glints of poetry, and the hints of madness expressed through words shedding their conventional meaning while maintaining a sort of warped sense.

*Around the gentlemen sat three tables.*

*Then I took off my day*

*and wished them all a good hat, sirs.*

*Then the gentlemen laughed to begin*

*until their bursts bellied.*

The land the gardener tends, and the impressive, secretive house built on it, pass through several owners, tenants and occupants, both lawful and illegitimate; local officials, architects, writers, Jews, Russian officers. The house itself, with its terrace overlooking the lake, its creaking staircase and its hidden closet, has its own presence,

not least as a vehicle for people's dreams: "Someone who builds something is affixing his life to the earth". As the narrative progresses, in short chapters told in the third person, the characters' hopes and problems run over and under each other, against the solidity of the gardener's presence, like ivy climbing up a wall. At times, the large number of characters makes the jumps in perspective slightly confusing. The methodical descriptions of work on the garden could perhaps have been pruned slightly too. But the structure of the book, in which the house is touched by much of what struck Germany in the most turbulent periods of its history, allows for a piercing examination of Erpenbeck's characters and the country itself. The story that emerges is bleak; but it is always rooted in the lives, and deaths, of people it is easy to care about, no matter how small a place they have in the novel.

For three years the girl took piano lessons, but now, while her dead body slides down into the pit, the word piano is taken back from human beings, now the backflip on the high bar that the girl could perform better than her schoolmates is taken back, along with all the motions a swimmer makes, the gesture of seizing hold of a crab is taken back, as well as all the basic knots to be learned for sailing, all of these things are taken back to uninvitedness, and finally, last of all, the name of the girl itself is taken back, the name no one will ever again call her by: Doris.

Jenny Erpenbeck's control of different voices, and different periods, is confident and sure-handed. *Visitation* is an important work by a novelist of great talent.