

# Ferymont

Lorena Simmel

Novel

German



*Solidarity at work. In her debut novel Ferymont, Lorena Simmel tells the story of a young woman who spends a summer helping with the harvest. She learns how solidarity and consideration can ease the hardships of labour.*

*"The strange thing about that summer was that time flew by, but the individual hours in the field, in the tunnels or in the reprocessing centre just didn't want to pass."*

Title

Ferymont

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Lorena Simmel was born in Fribourg in 1988 and grew up in Switzerland. She studied Literary Writing at the Swiss Literary Institute in Biel and European Literatures at the Humboldt University in Berlin and in Warsaw. She has published poetry, prose and essays in EDIT, Neue Rundschau and STILL, among others, and was a scholarship holder at the 16th Klagenfurt Literature Course. For her debut novel *Ferymont*, she received the Berlin Senate's work stipend for literature. In 2022 she was a literary fellow of the Jürgen Ponto Foundation. Lorena Simmel lives in Berlin.

Photo: Nane Diehl

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Excerpt translated by Jamie Lee Searle

Prologue

It was raining in Terespol. The train station was a large new-build, made of concrete and glass. At this hour the arrivals hall was practically empty; through an automatic sliding door, an old locomotive could be seen on a platform right at the back. It suited the rain, which seemed to be a weather that had fallen out of fashion.

Towards 7 o'clock, the hall filled with arriving passengers. Their voices and footsteps reverberated off the high ceiling, and from time to time a flood of travelers surged towards the exits. An elderly woman carried a floral funeral wreath in front of her; others had luggage, umbrellas, shopping bags or laptop bags. A few were looking at their phones or listening to music.

People began to enter the hall from the station forecourt too. Most paused for a moment in front of the large destination board above the sliding door, then moved onwards, out to the platforms or to the bar at the back of the hall.

I was sitting on one of the benches by the entrance. My train was announced for 7:15 a.m., with twenty minutes delay.

In this moment created by the waiting, I had the pleasant sensation of submerging in the sounds; the murmurs, the hustle and bustle of arriving and departing passengers.

Each and every one of them, I thought, could have been somebody I'd worked with in the fields the previous year. I searched for Daria's face, or Konrad's, and for a few seconds at a time individual faces really did stand out from the crowd, only to disappear again. In the throng that both surrounded and ignored me, I felt safe and protected, but also fully alert. No one was watching me, but I could watch everything undisturbed.

In this moment, I felt convinced I could hear the heartbeat of the city and surrounding settlements and villages on the Belarusian border, and I hesitated a little more before standing up, wanting to linger on among the travelers, to experience this winter's morning with them.

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I was working on a tobacco plantation in Switzerland back then. Due to the wet ground, the planting of the seedlings had been delayed by several weeks. April and early May had been cold; after

that, it was unseasonably warm. In June it rained almost without pause. Every morning as we drove out to the fields, thick rain clouds hung low over the Jura mountains. Seeds flew from the poplars across the canals like cotton wool, settling on the water and paths. At Bellechasse prison, the ochre-colored cattle stood motionless on the peat-blackened earth. The wheat and canola fields glistened in the haze that lay over the plateau after the rain. Plants drooped their heads beneath the weight of the water. The "weather hole" – the entrance of the valley behind Neuenburger Lake – was veiled with mist.

It was March when I arrived. My aunt picked me up in the late afternoon from Ferymont train station. She was waiting at the top of the steps, and laughing, though she seemed to be freezing cold. Her arms were wrapped around her knitted coat. I was warm from the journey and the feeling of unease that overcame me every time I arrived in Ferymont.

Behind my aunt, the "drug copse" rose up into the sky – a cluster of leafless poplars beneath which characters considered shady by the villagers used to sit with beer and cigarettes.

Today, the copse looked neatly pruned. The benches beneath the poplars were empty, the wind rustled in the crowns of the trees.

My aunt pulled me into an embrace. She smelt of coffee and perfume, her hair was dyed brown this time. Since my last visit a few months before, she seemed to have gotten smaller, as though she had withered.

"Finally," she said, smiling.

We drove in her firtree-green VW Golf along the road up into the village. As always, the fitness center was illuminated with neon light; a few people were training on pieces of equipment that resembled angular birds. In front of the flower shop, pansies and thuja cuttings stood rank and file on irrigable stands. In Café Münz, a few elderly people sat in front of ice-cream cups or beer.

Since my parents' move, my aunt had been living alone in a large house on the outskirts of Ferymont. The house was surrounded by a small wood, and in front of it, a driveway stretched across the property. An external stone staircase, with a beautiful, albeit slightly rusted railing, led up to the front door. Gravel paths on both sides of the building steered into the big garden. The house was old, and my aunt had previously shared it with her brother, my father. The siblings, just like my mother, had come to Switzerland from Germany in the 1980s to study.

I stayed in the room on the top floor that functioned as a kind of office for my aunt. There was a bed by the window, a writing desk with an old flat screen monitor, and a wardrobe with glass doors and curtains. My aunt had fixed the room up especially for me. She'd put on the windowsill my old, silver CD player, which my parents had stored in her cellar along with a few of my other things. It gleamed in a matte, futuristic way. My old desk lamp, on which as a teenager I'd written *Did your shadow ever speak to you?* in black marker, was fastened to the writing desk. The view from the window looked out on trees, onto part of the driveway, and to the sky above the wood.

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Because I was initially put to work with the men on the asparagus harvest, probably because it was the less strenuous, less complicated work, I travelled by car the morning after my arrival with an elderly married couple, Zef and Drita, to the "Nusshof": the lodgings for agricultural workers, located in Grossen Moss near an exit of the T10 bypass, where I boarded a minibus that took us to the fields.

Before boarding the field buses, the men shook one another's hands; the women nodded to one another and the men; some smoked; others stood around and scuffed their work boots against the ground.

I was familiar with the "Nusshof" from driving past it. An old, sand-colored house, with red shutters, that looked like an administrative building. It was actually an old guesthouse which hadn't been in use for a long time.

Even though the day was only just dawning, most of the workers seemed wide-awake, as though they'd slept badly or not at all. I'd barely managed any sleep that first night either. I'd awoken repeatedly with a strange feeling, unable to orientate myself, until my aunt's office window began to take shape in the darkness beside the bed, and I became aware I was lying in bed in her house in Ferymont, not in my apartment in Berlin.

After the standing around and smoking, everything went really quickly. A group leader directed the seasonal workers into different vehicles, people jumped in, doors slammed shut. I squeezed onto the back seat between two other harvest workers. It smelt of rubber and car seats and of the earth that had fallen from the soles of boots and dried in the footwells.

The driver of the minibus turned around to us.

"Here's to an enjoyable time working together," he said with a

grin, looking at me. He had a friendly face and calm eyes.

"Where're you from?"

"Berlin," I said.

"Gotcha," he said. "Welcome."

Feeling a little nervous, I concentrated on the rustling sounds of our waterproof clothing, and the music coming from the minibus radio up front.

I knew and was very familiar with the landscape rolling past outside the window, but on this morning it seemed to be from a world I'd never properly seen before: the fields of vegetables, the canals, the villages with the old farmhouses built in typical regional style, new settlements of white, cube-shaped buildings with company cars from small sanitation or heating installation firms parked in front, and behind it all, the hills of the Ferymont hinterland, the Jura mountains with the radio tower on the Chasseral, the slopes with their greenish-dark blue shimmering forest, the "weather hole".

Around the houses in the villages, everything seemed to have been tidied away, the gardens were wintry and bare. Beige fleece was wrapped around some of the shrubs.

Near a gas station, we drove past a parking lot for cars, trailers and motorhomes. Dishcloths hung from a washing line that had been strung between two rearview mirrors, a couple of people were loading tools into the trunk of a car. These people had stopped in the region for as long as I could remember, and used to go door to door in the villages, selling baskets or offering services like knife sharpening or window cleaning, which my parents had sometimes taken them up on.

Now I stared at the cars, chairs and a ball left on the asphalt like I was a tourist at a sightseeing spot.