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The Lion in the Room Next Door

By Marilyn Simonds

272 pp. Putnam

Gliding through settings ranging from Brazil to Ontario, Sweden, Greece, Mexico and Hawaii, Marilyn Simonds employs a touch so light in this sensitively observed novel-in-stories that it verges on reticent. Yet, a clear pattern evolves as the narrator grows from a compliant girl to a woman who will take the wheel of her life and steer its direction. Raised in a home where the father "was the centre of attention," she believes that men are in control but easy to please. She finds a sculptor who looks at her with "appreciation and genuine interest," marries him, and fails to please him. A writer confused by words, she was wooed by his enigmatic endearments: "If I gave you raindrops, would you hang them from your ears?" She confesses, "If, at times, I didn't understand him, I decided it must have been because he was profound." However, he prefers work to intimacy and their marriage proves less profound than profoundly disappointing, not face-to-face but side-by-side. She moves from loneliness ("A man can't be committed to both his family and his art") to torpor ("Once I felt everything, so much feeling has left me numb.") But a ripened woman emerges on the other side of this cloud of unknowing, one who learns "the art of seeing shadows" and realizes "every pain must at last be felt." By book's end, she has been carved by the thorns of experience into a Pandora holding fast to hope.