

There is a moment in Marente de Moor's addictive Gothic novel **THE DUTCH MAIDEN (World Editions, 312 pp., paper, \$17.99)**, translated by David Doherty, when Janna — who has just arrived in Germany from the Netherlands to train with an intriguing fencing master — loses her confidence. She stands before a mirror fencing “against my reflection” and notes that her “formidable opponent” makes her feel “uncertain, and uncertainty is a fatal flaw for a fencer.”

Despite this moment of self-doubt, Janna usually knows what she wants. She dreams of being a fencer as skilled as Helene Mayer, the controversial German who won a gold medal in the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam, who was forced to leave Europe in 1935 because she was Jewish, only to return at Hitler's request to compete in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin (where she won a silver medal and gave a Nazi salute). Janna's teacher, with whom she is obsessed, is the cold, aristocratic Egon von Bötticher, a much older man who has a mysterious connection to her father. And while questions about the exact nature of her father's relationship with von Bötticher propel one through the novel, it is Janna's intense emotional world, the foreboding atmosphere of pre-World War II Germany and the richness of de Moor's imagination that make “The Dutch Maiden” one of the most delicious novels I've read in ages.

Janna's plight is that of Jane Eyre and the narrator of du Maurier's “Rebecca.” She is a young woman who falls in love with an older man so damaged he cannot possibly be good for her. Not that first love is ever about what's good for us. Often, it's the dark, unknown dangers of adulthood that act as an aphrodisiac. In Janna, one feels how terrifying desire can be, especially when it expresses itself through violence.

Fencing and love. Battle and desire. The combination transforms Janna's attempts at love into a match of skill, a game that leaves one bloody and scarred, giving the novel a cruel beauty. While the narrative drags a bit in stretches, I couldn't put it down. Perhaps a good story can, like a love affair, be likened to swordplay: “A good fencing match has moments of stillness. ... Without stillness, a duel descends into a blind scuffle that ends in slaughter.” A sentiment that seems apt for both love and battle.