



**Henk Pröpper**

***27 Beats Per Minute***

A personal journey of discovery in the desolate streets of Paris

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Soon after Henk Pröpper moves from Amsterdam to Paris, the world but also his heart nearly come to a stop. He undergoes a major operation, only to awake in an empty city. Paris has transformed into an abandoned stage during its first lockdown. To hasten his recovery Pröpper begins walking. He combs out his immediate surroundings and hunts for the past, discovering countless commemorative plaques and monuments that honour well- and lesser-known Parisians and bring their histories to life. Pröpper also reflects, to the rhythm of his journeys, on his life and the literature that has shaped him. In this way he walks – at times literally – in the footsteps of literary heroes such as Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac and Albert Camus.

*27 Beats Per Minute* is a dazzling ode to life, literature and Paris, the French capital that even in her emptiness and desolation is still magnificent.

Henk Pröpper (1958) is the author of the novel *The Crab's Sword* and numerous essays. For forty years he has written about the literature and culture of France, the country where he was a diplomat and director of the famous Institut Néerlandais. Pröpper also writes for *de Volkskrant*, mainly about French subjects. From 2011 to 2016 he was the director-publisher of De Bezige Bij.



## Press

‘*27 Beats Per Minute* is one of the most moving and most invigorating autobiographies ever written. This is a finely polished gem worthy of admiration.’ – Knack

[*27 Beats Per Minute*] is a concise masterpiece that summarizes a life in the time of corona in the personal, euphoric and precarious shades of one year. Without one’s realising, it covers just about everything: thoughts, emotions, literature, films, loves, feelings, memories, annoyances and doubts. It is a personal essay that touches all highs and lows.’ – Vrij Nederland

‘*27 Beats Per Minute* is the literary precipitate of a turbulent period of stagnation; a philosophical, musing book with the pleasantly slow heartbeat of the writer, who carries the reader through the city, European literature and history.’ – het Parool

‘*27 Beats Per Minute* is a beautifully and eruditely written document by a professional who is used to rushing around, but through Covid realises that sometimes “standing still” can be more enriching.’ \*\*\*\* – de Telegraaf

‘Pröpper describes how, after leaving the hospital, he experiences walking through Paris en confinement and with a pacemaker. Careful yet erudite, he writes about his unexpectedly desolate surroundings.’ – de Standaard



## Prologue

‘What’s your business here?’ That’s the question posed at the hospital entrance, in the gathering dusk. The man eyes me as if I’m an intruder. Not everyone is welcome here, that much is clear. There can’t be the slightest risk of infection. My wife, who’s at my side as my standard-bearer and counsellor, is sent away. I take the bag with overnight things from her. She casts a last look at me, a gaze that penetrates every cell.

There I lie, amid a tangle of tubes and wires. My mind is remarkably clear. I feel resigned. It seems best to submit to what’s happening, to whatever the shapes that keep hastening into my room in ever changing configurations have planned for me. I’m capable of thought, but only in an unfocussed, almost passive way. It’s more observation, really. I take everything in: the room, the faceless people in their white and green tunics, their masks. I’ve got one on too. I see the medical apparatus around me, to which all the tubes and wires lead. I hear sounds, bleeps, the occasional harsh alarm signals. Is that me? I observe my heart rate, study it on the monitor. It’s beating so slowly, that little heart, so erratically, as if readying itself for a very last leap before stopping altogether.

My relationship with my heartbeat has always been a touch ironic. We are odd comrades. There’s something comical about being able to function with such a slow pulse rate, as I have for many years. But now it’s different. Outside, night has fallen. The room looks out onto the roof of one of the building’s wings. There’s little to see there. Gravel, a lone chimney, a gull, spotlighted, as if it were posing. Now it’s all up to me, only without much me. Then I slip away and dream that I’m living slowly, slower than the oldest stone.

For days, now, I’d hardly been able to do anything. Instead I lay on the sofa, reduced to observing my own aimlessness. Life had stuttered to a standstill. My heart beat sluggishly and erratically, threatening to stop entirely. A sad pattern. I would wait for it to accelerate, for a miraculous moment when it would decide to adopt a normal marching rhythm. I waited in vain, though. It no longer did that of its own accord.



We'd completed our move from Amsterdam to Paris just before lockdown, leaping one bureaucratic hurdle after another in a race against the clock. It had taken a toll on my strength and my heart was labouring. As so often, I'd been laconic at first. I felt up to the task of pulling myself out of the swamp by my hair, like Baron Munchausen. It was just a question of taking action.

So I'd taken up running, as a remedy for being stuck on the spot. I feel that running has a lot in common with reading. They both put life on hold temporarily, they're pastimes that take place outside the confines of time. I regard the time that meanwhile *does* pass – even time measured by a stopwatch – as time gained rather than lost. Reading and running both have a trance-like effect, they make you feel as if you've transcended the quotidian, reached terra incognita, surpassed the limits of your own abilities and knowledge, sidestepped the laws of your own body. As a result you penetrate realms where, even if only for a little while, everything is clear. At such times – just for a moment – I am at one with all things, feel a powerful sense of liberation and joy. Winged insight.

I've always seen reading and running as healing. That's why I took up running: to achieve the impossible. Driven by the same instinct that made me run smack into a tree as a six-year-old: I'd thought that if I ran fast enough I would take off, would sprout wings. I spent the next ten days lying in a dark room, a place where silence reigned. At set times I would hear the rustling of my mother's dress as she approached. I would listen to her whispers. When I was better, our neighbour – I called him 'Grandpa' – brought me an apple from his orchard. I still remember its intense redness. That apple was forever the most beautiful apple on earth, the original Ur-apple that I would afterwards see reflected in every other.

But my attempt to kickstart my heart and speed it up by running failed. It was like pressing the gas pedal too hard when trying to start a car. The engine floods and can only splutter in protest.

Now I'm lying here in the clamour that my body's generating in the machines around me. All through the night, which seems endless, the door keeps opening and masked figures enter. They frown at the monitors, cast glances at me. As the night progresses, I see too how, hour by hour, my heartbeat – which had been 38 on admission – gets even slower. It's a spectacle that I follow with remarkable concentration and



lucidity, amazed that my mind is so clear when my heartbeat is 27 – and that I am still capable of amazement.

Gradually the morning approaches, and my room starts to take shape again in the dawn light. The hospital comes to life. On the roof below my window a man is peering into a chimney as if he expects to find something there. A doctor, forearms bared, comes to tell me cheerily that he is ready. For what, though? They haven't told me that, as far as I know. The decision was straightforward, he says. 'We're going to stabilise your heart and speed it up. You'll be given a pacemaker.' It sounds inevitable. Yet it's something I've been trying to avoid for twenty years now, convinced that I could summon up the necessary speed and stability myself. But it's clear that this doctor has less faith in my powers than I do.

At some point in their lives, most people take a trip to an operating theatre. Your bed becomes your vehicle, as well as carrier of your data, your drip. The journey always involves a descent, and the lower you go, the colder it gets, as if you're nearing the underworld. Downstairs everything is muted: the light, the sounds, the temperature. In that strange climate life is restored and recreated. I will always remember my hand being given an encouraging squeeze – by whom, I don't know – just before the anaesthetic took effect. A gesture like that stays with you, like an intensely red apple. As I fell asleep I felt, in that gesture, the pulse of life still, before the operation took place.

As soon as I wake up, I'm driven back, back to the daylight. We take the COVID-free lift – that's what it says at least – and that's how I return to my room, my perfectly white room a few hours after leaving it. *My room* – striking how after only one night you can get attached to a space that, apart from being full of monitors, is completely bare, that contains nothing to remind me of myself. All my wires are reattached, and for the first time I witness my new heartbeat. Regular, with an upbeat tempo that I haven't experienced since I was eighteen.

Outside in the corridor I hear the voices of nurses, energetic and jolly, like the chatter of birds, whose cheerful background chirping has gone on throughout history, no matter what, luckily for us. In the sunlight my room looks whiter than white. I look at my heart, surprised, as if it's someone else's.



## The story of the water-spewers

*No fun waking up, today's no exception. Heartrate 55, always 55, but feels like 27. In the mornings I live in a haze. My brain lies sluggishly in its cranium, reluctant to stir. The only thing that helps clear the mental fog is walking. That's the only time my heart springs into action. And then I think, when I feel my pulse, this is my heart – this is me. (Diary)*

I've come home to a house I've scarcely lived in. I still have to get acquainted with its smell, its sounds. The only familiar presence is my books, lined up on their shelves, trusty as always. After a few days I'm well enough to go out for little strolls. Yet at first I feel caged in the cramped space allotted to Parisians. Under the terms of the *confinement* – the lockdown that was imposed on 17 March – we're only allowed an hour a day outdoors, and must stay within 1.5 kilometres of our homes. All bars, restaurants, theatres and museums are shut, as are most shops. The city is deserted and hushed: there's something unreal about it. The houses, the monuments and the sky seen like an empty stage. Even the homeless have disappeared from the street scene; no one knows where they are.

You can only travel around the city for work purposes, armed with a certificate stating that your journey's necessary. So my wife Myriam does the rounds of her patients, tootling through the abandoned streets in her little car, to the soundtrack of her favourite jazz musicians. I, on the other hand, spend months confined to a 1.5 kilometre circle around our home. But I'm cheered by the thought that the permitted circles are different for everyone. To each his own world. I feel like a tourist in my own life, and quickly discover how full this small space is. Also that I can cover a lot of mileage in my own little circle. What's more, the distance is in tune with my new tempo. It's a bit like promenading, but in a concentrated, studious way, like Darwin or Von Humboldt on their voyages of discovery – the difference being that plants and animals are in scarce supply here. But I don't mind. It's the human species that fascinates me most, its history and development. The world in a radius of 1.5 half kilometres. It puts me in mind of the Belgian painter James Ensor, who chose to spend his whole life in the place of his birth, Ostend, leaving it on only a couple of occasions. The rich world of his imagination was formed by his immediate surroundings.



I walk to Place de la Concorde via the Louvre, and back along the river bank. Place de la Concorde, usually a pandemonium of vehicles and pedestrians, now resembles an empty theatre. Earth after the departure of humankind. Never before have I been so aware of all the stone towering up around me on all sides, and stretching out to the horizon. Every vehicle seems like a curiosity from another age. I can even smell exhaust fumes, normally undetectable, now easily traced to a specific passing car – just like in the mountains. The streets are virtually deserted, except for the occasional passer-by hastening to some unknown goal, sharply outlined against the sky like a sculpture by Giacometti.

This is the alien setting in which I walk down streets and alleyways, aimlessly and at random. The city is under the spell of COVID-19, I of reveries that are at times apocalyptic, at times euphoric. It's a scene of 'magnificent desolation', as one of the first astronauts said of the moon. A sole daffodil blooms here and there, but the spring has largely passed me by unawares. The sun shines brightly, as it has done pretty much throughout spring and early summer, but the world seems frozen, like a seventeenth-century painting. There's something riveting about that frozen state: I come to realise that no single spot is a blank canvas. Every location prompts memories, conjures up stories and associations. Walking through my *quartier* and along the banks of the Seine, I come across memorials and historic plaques everywhere. In the normal bustle of the city I'd pass them by without noticing, but now, in the uncanny silence, history comes to life. The city, which seems so empty, is in fact filled with the thousands of lives. The lives of those who went before: people who once breathed, thought and created, and who handed down their knowledge and experience. Our *comedie humaine* has fallen briefly silent during the pandemic, but not this chorus of voices. The walls literally radiate history. The city, motionless and impassive, seems to me like a library of stories and memories that manifest themselves both inexorably and at random.

This must be very like the Paris that Adolf Hitler saw, almost eighty years ago: grand and steeped in history. It's a curious thought that just suddenly pops into my head, during these desolate, sun-drenched days of May. On 23 June 1940 Hitler, accompanied by Arno Breker and Albert Speer, drove around Paris at dawn in his six-wheeled Mercedes. At that early hour, the city was almost entirely deserted, washed clean in his



honour, virginal. A symphony of stone for the painter, the sculptor and the architect who shaped the aesthetics of the *Reich* that was to last for a thousand years.

This vision of the city would be reflected in the models of Berlin that Hitler had Albert Speer construct in the years that followed, and over which he bent dreamily only a few hours before his death. Paris, but bigger. The Opéra Garnier, but grander. The Place de la Concorde – Hitler stood up in his limousine the better to see the size of the square – undeniably majestic, but no, it had to be yet more expansive. Millions had to be able to gather there to hear him speak. ‘When we are finished in Berlin, Paris will only be a shadow,’ he apparently confided to Speer. To see Paris had been Hitler’s lifelong dream – a dream that had now been realised. But the Berlin he saw in his mind’s eye would remain a dream. And had not the military governor of Paris, Dietrich von Choltitz, refused to obey Hitler’s order to destroy the city in August 1944, Paris would indeed have been reduced to a shadow. That’s how close annihilation can come. That’s how thin the line is between adoration and the urge to destroy.

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Not a week has passed since my operation, and yet I feel called to visit Notre-Dame. The call is strong, like the pealing of bells when I was young, summoning people to church. The whole family would hurry off to the service, dressed in their Sunday best, with neatly combed hair. For me, the cathedral connects somehow with the city’s primeval state, forms a kind of starting point in its history. Notre-Dame lies just inside – or outside – the 1.5 kilometre radius of my permitted daily hour’s outing. I decide to risk a fine, armed with a strikingly ugly shopping bag, knowing that my route will take me past Paris’s main police station on Quai des Orfevres. Thanks to the novels of Georges Simenon, I’m familiar with this imposing building on Île de la Cité. It was there, in one of its fairy-tale turrets, that Maigret would puff on his pipe, blowing out clouds of smoke and solving crimes that almost always had human tragedies at their root. During my secondary school years I spent several summers in his company, fascinated by his cantankerousness and the way nothing seemed to faze him. His ability to be silent and listen intently mystified and annoyed my younger self: why don’t you just say what you think! The books – there were



piles of them, Simenon wrote considerably faster than God could create – were stored in the attic, in a massive old army chest of my father's. I recall reading them on a scratchy blanket that I'd spread out under the skylight, on a wooden floor warmed by the summer sunshine. It was there, in that attic, that I got to know Paris and France: I can still see those cafés in my mind's eye, the clouds of cigarette and cigar smoke, the smell of pastis. I stare enthralled at elegant women striding along self-confidently. I hear the playful banter of acquaintances meeting in the street. I see concierges putting the waste bins outside.

And now I'm standing more or less under his window and think: 'I've nothing to fear from the police. I'm sure Inspector Maigret will protect me, will grant me free passage, after all the hours I've spent with him and his gruff silences.'

On the way to Notre-Dame, going via Quai Francois-Mitterrand, I arrive at the Pont-Neuf bridge. Simenon once moored a boat here: a cutter called *L'Ostrogoth*. He'd had the twenty-ton vessel baptised by the abbot of Notre-Dame, and in 1929-1930 would travel in it to Wilhelmshaven via the Meuse, Maastricht, Delfzijl and the Wadden Sea, ultimately voyaging to Lapland on a larger ship. As a boy, I remember being charmed to learn that the Dutch town of Delfzijl had played a pivotal role in the oeuvre of this famous international author – back then France seemed a distant place to me, a faraway country beyond the Ardennes. Simenon spent five days in Delfzijl while his boat was being repaired. In that short space of time he wrote a novel – *The Strange Case of Peter the Lett* – which he typed sitting on a crate, his typewriter propped up on another crate in front of him. It is in that novel that the character Maigret first sees the light. He had appeared to Simenon on a sunny morning in a local café, after one or two – or possibly three – gin and bitters, when the author was growing drowsy. He came complete with his trademark attributes: a pipe, a bowler hat, an overcoat with a velvet collar and an old cast-iron stove in his office. It was cold that day in in Delfzijl. That's Simenon's version of accounts, anyway. Literary historians have their doubts, it seems a bit of a tall story, and but that's how Simenon wanted it to be remembered. And why wouldn't we believe him? He's a master storyteller, after all.

What most stays with me, all these years later, is the ease of Simenon's style. It flows like the Seine, calmly and smoothly, without interruption. A style in keeping with a world that – with a few exceptions – is largely intact. Evil is individual, not the product of



a disrupted society. Simenon does perceive class differences, but rarely as unbridgeable divides in need of social analysis. His writing has a walking rhythm: the easy, effortless pace of a practised walker. His books are delightfully slow. They're quiet, too – noise doesn't often intrude on their pages. Everything that Simenon describes is visible and concrete, the world is made of things, not of ideas. The world as seen by a walker: streets, cars, cafés, people, brick walls, paving stones. Maigret does not reflect, does not ponder; he's a man of set habits and flashes of insight. Instead of books, he reads people. Filling his pipe is how he concentrates: it's an act of meditation. He's almost never in a hurry, nor does he let himself be influenced by the expectations, opinions or judgements of others. I don't know if the word 'disinformation' existed back then, but I'm quite sure he wouldn't have been affected by it. He listens and reads the meaning behind the words, knowing that speech, rather than silence, is often a method of concealment. His calm attention is enviable; it's a skill I'd like to acquire. I think a lot of people would find it beneficial. The ability to trust in the insights that come to you, unclouded by external noise.

A month earlier I'd walked this same route towards Notre-Dame. At the time I was already in bad shape, but I hadn't yet been to hospital. The date was 15 April 2020, exactly a year since the fire that had devastated the cathedral, and it was the first time I'd gone out since the beginning of lockdown. I'd decided, in the early evening – the moment the fire had first appeared – to make a small pilgrimage to the cathedral. To enhance this lone ceremony I carried a book by Ken Follett with me: a kind of love song to Notre-Dame. The style is pacey, like his thrillers, yet you feel his affection for its stonework and noble timbers, his reverence for the way thousands laboured to construct it over the centuries. It's an ode to inspiration and an era. To the way history manifested itself almost tangibly on this spot before the conflagration. Like so many others around the world, Follett had watched the breaking news about the fire with horror and dismay. I'm too young to remember the day that John F. Kennedy was shot in 1963, but can vividly recall the moment when his brother Robert met the same fate in 1968. Everyone who was *there* remembers. The whole world fell still; eyes turned to the black and white of TV screens, ears were pinned to crackly radio stations. Sirens sounded, seeming to signal to the world that an entire way of life had been stricken. The same was true of the evening of the fire:



it was as if more than a building was being lost, something that had seemed immortal and almost indefinable. Together with millions of others, Follett had seen the nineteenth-century lantern towers designed by Eugene Viollet-le-Duc topple and collapse, along with part of the cathedral roof. A moment when a cry rang through the world.

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On the north side of the cathedral there's a stained-glass rose window. Made in the thirteenth century, it's a glorious creation of pink and purple. Now the beautiful glass has been removed and a sad sheet of plastic covers the gaping hole. In the novel that gets closest to the secrets of the cathedral, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831) by Victor Hugo, this rose window inspires a visionary insight in the author – one that's perhaps even more enlightening than the window itself. Hugo, who must have stood where I'm standing now in the evening light, chooses a spring day for his setting – a day like today. He describes how the evening slowly falls and the sun sinks toward the horizon. As the sun's rays dip lower, the cathedral's huge rose window catches the light and he sees it flare up 'like the eye of a cyclops in which the fiery glow of the forge is reflected'. On a spring day in the nineteenth century, the sun's light was reflected in the rose-coloured eye of the window, a glowing image that connected heaven and earth. On a spring day in 2019, the fiery glow in the window came from the belly of the cathedral itself; flames from a hellish forge raged within the cathedral, stifling all lyricism.

At the time, Hugo's novel had the effect of a pamphlet. His books weren't page turners – unlike most modern authors, the notion of pace meant little to Hugo. Instead, tension was created by inserting slow passages, to make the reader eager for the real story to emerge. Writers used novels as vehicles for ideas: a good story could help you find an audience. In *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Hugo inserted several lengthy digressions about the terrible state of the cathedral. Those passages weren't important to the narrative, but they inspired countless readers all over the world to write to the French authorities, clamouring for the cathedral to be restored. Back then in the nineteenth century, this house of worship had already become a symbol: a focal point of Catholicism and the sacred centre of the Western world. The concern voiced by so many of the faithful



ultimately led to the building's thorough restoration, as well as to the construction of Viollet-le-Duc's towers, that had now collapsed in front of the eyes of millions.

There are many ways in which a novel can impact the world.

Now, in May 2020, a few days after my operation and in the middle of lockdown, the cathedral is the loneliest place on earth. Even the homeless man I'd so often seen lying on the pavement here has vanished. I'd been struck by his calm, stoical demeanour, and by the book about Pope John XXIII that he was invariably holding. He always studied it intently, but I couldn't make out whether he was really reading it. I have a special connection with that Pope, having been born a week after his coronation, on 4 November 1958, to parents who saw in him a beacon of hope. Someone to whom, even though far away, you could turn for advice. John would renew and modernise the church: that was the glad expectation in those years. The first of the television popes, the word he liked to use was '*aggiornamento*'; he wanted to bring the church up to date – to remodel it in keeping with the times. That led many priests in Western countries to pre-empt innovations that struggled to get off the ground in Rome itself, like the use of the vernacular during the Mass. (After all, Latin had been the vernacular once, was the reasoning.) I remember the huge impact of John's last encyclical, *Peace on Earth*, published in 1963, the year of his death. Young Catholics like my parents felt vindicated by the text. John's words prepared a way for them, formulated a task with Biblical resonance: to use their God-given talents to do good. He taught them to see the world as a big place, to look outwards, transcending the notion of individualism – a trend that was already gaining ground back then. His words accorded with the Good News as they perceived it, led them away from scholarly hair-splitting and a conservatism that was blind to people's suffering. John offered them scope to intervene where there was need or conflict. He sparked an optimism that's sorely lacking here, on this construction site, where everything lies derelict. Here and there, though, I detect traces of a new beginning, smell the fragrance of new timber. There are cranes, but no one's working. Apart from the resident pigeons, I can't see a living soul. The only trace of the homeless man is the sheet of cardboard that was his bed, in Rue du Cloitre-Notre-Dame.



An exhibition has been set up on panels that encircle the cathedral. Enthralling though it is, I'm the sole visitor. The sense of desolation gradually becomes overpowering: it hangs everywhere, like an atmospheric phenomenon. Too many catastrophes have befallen this spot, crushing all the life out of the cathedral. How different from Victor Hugo's descriptions of a place bursting with vitality and colour. In his day, the cathedral was a city in itself, a meeting place, a market. All sorts mingled there: burghers and beggars, saints and sinners. A building that seats nine thousand now lies empty and hushed. After the fire, the melted lead of the roof was deemed a danger to public health. Neighbouring schools were closed, silencing the cheerful din of the playground. And now the rampant virus has repelled the last visitors: the last of the faithful. What I'm seeing is a ruin, the ruin of an age.

Why am I here? The only thing that occurs to me is that a detour is sometimes necessary in order to find the right path.

I decide to focus on the exhibition panels, but in the distance I spot six soldiers with submachine guns approaching, and am once again distracted. The presence of this strolling patrol heightens the deathly atmosphere. What does the Republic's watchful presence here mean? What are they guarding? What way of life? I find some kind of answer in the exhibition: the attractively designed panels give a clear picture of the cathedral's history and construction, and the scientific curiosity and expertise involved in its restoration. Every single component of the ruined building has been carefully numbered. Thanks to 3D imaging it's been possible to trace their original location in the nave and the transept. The research done on the 13th-century beams is particularly fascinating, providing significant insight into the climate of that period. I read that it may even contribute to the debate on climate change in our time, and humankind's role in that process. But who among the climate change deniers will want to learn from timber? What sign will ever be enough? How close do catastrophes have to come for a trend or pattern to be seen in them, and for people to take responsibility for them?

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The gargoyles and chimerae high up on the façade stare down at me mockingly. They've hung there since the Middle Ages, these grotesques, with their cartoon-like features. Over the passage of time they began to crumble, and in the eighteenth century they were removed because they posed a danger to passers-by. In the nineteenth century, Viollet-le-Duc had them reinstalled.

I return their gaze. It's strange to think that for centuries now, they've looked down at the teeming multitudes, observing their curious habits. They possess the vantage point we often lack, and the time we often don't take. Their knowledge of this city is unique; they've seen everything go by. Fat years and lean. The genius of humans, and their faults and vanities. The good, the bad and the never-ending grey. When it's dry, the gargoyles just sit there; when it rains they spew water steadily and serenely. It's only temporary, the desolation of this place, right now, at this particular time in history. It will pass, I realise. And my sense of abandonment is strange, really, when you think of all the people who have walked past the cathedral over the ages. Of all the great minds that have lived just in my own little 1.5 kilometre circle. Who mightn't I have bumped into on my first walks, in the street and in my head? Here, beneath the grinning gargoyles, I decide to look for them more systematically, to go in search of my historical neighbours.

Translated by Jane Hedley-Prole

