10 Books from Holland
Frankfurt Book Fair Issue

Nederlands letterenfonds
dutch foundation for literature
Autumn 2014
The Dutch Foundation for Literature / Nederlands Letterenfonds supports writers, translators and Dutch literature in translation

Information
The Foundation’s advisors on literary fiction, quality non-fiction, poetry and children’s and youth literature are present each year at prominent book fairs, including Frankfurt, London, Beijing and Bologna. *Books from Holland, Quality Non-Fiction from Holland and Children’s Books from Holland* recommend highlights from each category’s selection.

Translation Grants
Foreign publishers wishing to publish a translation of Dutch or Frisian literature may apply for a subsidy towards the translation costs. Having acquired the rights, the publisher’s application must be accompanied by a copy of the contract with the rights owner and a copy of the contract with the translator. Application forms are available from the Foundation’s website. Subsidies are paid after receipt of complimentary copies, with printed acknowledgement of the Foundation’s support. A sample translation may be required and evaluated by our external advisors. Applications for translations that have already been published cannot be taken into consideration. Publishers looking for a qualified translator can request a list of endorsed translators for their language area.

Illustrated Books
In the case of illustrated books and/or graphic novels, foreign publishers can apply for assistance to cover a portion of the production costs. Subsidies are jointly funded by the Mondriaan Fund and the Dutch Foundation for Literature.

Promotional Travel
The Foundation is able to support a publisher wishing to invite an author for interviews or public appearances. Literary festivals are likewise eligible for support. Additionally, the Foundation organizes international literary events in co-operation with local publishers, festivals and book fairs.

Writers-in-Residence
The Foundation coordinates writer-in-residence programmes together with foreign universities and institutions. International authors are invited to spend time working in Amsterdam. They may stay one or two months at the writers’ lodgings above the Athenaeum Bookshop in Amsterdam.

International Visitors Programme
The visitors programme and the annual Amsterdam Fellowship offer publishers and editors the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the publishing business and the literary infrastructure of the Netherlands.

Translators’ House
The Translators’ House offers translators the opportunity to live and work in Amsterdam for a period of time. It is involved with numerous activities assisting and advancing translators’ skills. Each year the Literary Translation Days are held for those translating into and from Dutch.

Schwob
Schwob draws attention to and supports as-yet undiscovered, untranslated classics of world literature. Each month the editors select new titles on www.schwob.nl.

Background
The Dutch Foundation for Literature, created in 2010 as the result of the merger between the Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature (NLPVF) and the Foundation for Literature (FvdL), is an independent organization financed by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. Policies and projects are carried out in co-operation with the Flemish Literature Foundation.

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In her latest novel, Anna Enquist delivers her own unique take on thrillers. While incorporating her recurring themes such as classical music and the loss of loved ones, she chips away at the barrier that separates the well-behaved cultural elite from the harshness of reality until a cruel denouement is the only possible outcome.

The intimate collaboration within a string quartet forms a framework for relationships to develop. Enquist interweaves these emotional entanglements with a gripping plot and scathing social criticism. She is uncompromising in her condemnation of short-sighted local politics, destructive cultural policy and, above all, the power struggles being played out within the healthcare system.

A school trip that ended in a nightmare: general practitioner Caroline and her husband Jochem, a restorer of musical instruments, have lost their sons, aged 10 and 12, in a bus crash. Caroline has yet to come to terms with their deaths. She is unable to talk about the tragedy, determined to somehow keep her boys ‘whole’ in her mind’s eye. At the doctor’s surgery, she works alongside Heleen, a committed idealist who belongs to a writing club that corresponds with prisoners. Together with Hugo, the director of a music centre that has fallen into disuse, the four form a string quartet that plays together every week on Hugo’s houseboat.

This story is interwoven with touching scenes that centre on former cello teacher Reinier van Aalst, too frail to leave his house and afraid of being admitted to a nursing home. Out of necessity he relies on the help offered by a Moroccan boy who lives in the neighbourhood. Reinier gradually overcomes his mistrust and discovers that the boy is motivated by love of music and keen to learn. A musician herself, Enquist writes about musical nuances with astounding clarity, communicating what it is like to make music together and what it means to perform a composition.

Enquist adds a deeper layer to this intricately balanced psychological novel by introducing elements traditionally associated with the thriller. The result is a socially aware, musical composition with a startling finale. She shows that danger can be concealed just a heartbeat away and that the best of intentions can usher in disaster. For ultimately, it is the well-meaning idealist Heleen who inadvertently brings tragedy upon the quartet.

Anna Enquist (b. 1945), a psychoanalyst and classically trained pianist, is one of the best-loved poets and novelists writing in Dutch. Her novels, which include Het meesterstuk (The Masterpiece, 1995), Het geheim (The Secret, 1997), De thuiskomst (The Homecoming, 2005) and Contrapunt (Counterpoint, 2008), have been translated into many languages, from Chinese to Bulgarian.
Herman Koch

Dear Mr M.

A sardonic cocktail of literary satire and whodunit served by the international bestselling author of *The Dinner*

Following his ruthless dissections of the hypocrisy of the moneyed classes and corruption in the medical profession, Herman Koch turns his dystopian gaze on the literary world. In his new novel, *Dear Mr M.*, he tells the tale of a fading writer held grimly to account by a neighbour with a score to settle. Did *Reckoning*, the novel that cemented Mr M’s literary success all those years ago, culpably distort the facts of a mysterious missing persons case?

‘Actual reality is not concerned with compactness. When faced with reality, a writer has no choice but to stick the knife in.’ These words are spoken by Mr M. in a tête-à-tête with his tormentor Herman, a man he all but accused of murder forty years ago, the same man who has now come to exact retribution. True, Herman was one of the last people to see history teacher Mr Landzaat alive. And yes, as the new flame of a girl who was being stalked by Landzaat, Herman did have a bone to pick with him. But does that mean a writer can suggest with impunity that Herman was involved in Landzaat’s disappearance, even though the suggestion was made in a work of fiction?

An author’s freedom to tailor a story to suit his own ends is one of many literary issues explored in *Dear Mr M*. The novel deals with the crumbling of a writer’s fame, his inability to regain the heights of his literary peak, and the toll exacted by a writerly career, with its readings in rural libraries, interviews with inane journalists and social obligations at gentlemen’s clubs and literary galas. Setting part of the story among school kids in the 1960s also gives Koch the opportunity to lay bare the seedier elements of secondary education, complete with horny teachers, obnoxious teenagers and doomed romances.

But above all, *Dear Mr M.* is a stylish literary thriller, cunningly constructed – the narrative is presented from five different perspectives – and culminating in an unexpected denouement. Fans of *The Dinner* and *Summer House with Swimming Pool* will not only recognise Koch’s twisted cast of characters – from the passive-aggressive downstairs neighbour to the supposedly civilised man of culture – but will also revel in the irony, black humour and comic take on the nastier side of life that have become the trademark of the Netherlands’ best-selling author.

Herman Koch (b. 1953) debuted 25 years ago with *Red ons, Maria Montanelli* (*Save Us, Maria Montanelli*) a novel about a young rebel fighting a perverse school system. His big breakthrough came in 2009 with *Het diner* (*The Dinner*), a social satire about the arrogance of seemingly civilised parents who will stop at nothing to secure the future of their own precious offspring. It is the most widely translated Dutch novel ever. It made *The New York Times* bestseller top ten and paved the way for the success of Koch’s next book *Zomerhuis met zwembad* (*Summer House with Swimming Pool*) in 2011, the tale of a shady doctor with plenty to hide. An added bonus of Koch’s recent rise to bestsellerdom is the new light it has cast on his impressive backlist.

‘Koch is in fine satirical form, but even more important is the literary self-examination that he appears to be conducting.’
— *NRC Handelsblad*

‘*Dear Mr M*. is not only gripping but also makes you laugh out loud on a regular basis.’
— *Het Parool*

Photo: Ulf Andersen

Herman Koch

Geachte heer M.

A sardonic cocktail of literary satire and whodunit served by the international bestselling author of *The Dinner*
Herman Koch
Odessa Star

Tragicomedy about a grouch who becomes ensnared in his own delusions

It’s a standard literary trope: an unremarkable man starts to fantasise about the gangster lifestyle, gets in with the wrong crowd and plunges himself into ruin. But in his fourth novel, Herman Koch presents his own twisted take on this familiar plotline: his protagonist Fred Moorman, stranded in a meaningless job and a joyless marriage is anything but a pitiful victim.

He is an unscrupulous bastard who doesn’t think twice about calling in a hardened criminal to rid him of the bane of his life: an elderly lady tenant who is hogging the garden with her foul-smelling dog. Deep down, he sees himself as an Übermensch and has no qualms about enlisting the services of disorganised crime to sort out his layabout brother-in-law. But crime and amateurism are often a disastrous mix.

Odessa Star, named after the city Fred regards as the pinnacle of underworld chic, features moments of riotous comedy. Koch displays perfect timing and shows himself to be a master at describing absurd trains of thought and scenes of pure slapstick.

‘Wanting to know what happens to Fred keeps you turning the pages. But his creator builds so expertly towards the climax that you’d keep turning them anyway.’
— NRC Handelsblad

Herman Koch
Thinking of Bruce Kennedy

A woman in the throes of a midlife crisis embarks on a chastening Spanish adventure

When it comes to protagonists, Herman Koch delights in dishing up men who have at least one screw loose. Thinking of Bruce Kennedy is different: the novel that directly preceded The Dinner centres on a female character who, in many respects, is perfectly normal.

Under the pretext of depression, Mirjam Wenger escapes from her husband and children and, in an attempt to find herself, winds up in a hotel on the south coast of Spain. But if anything, Mirjam’s life on the costa proves even more humdrum and predictable than her life in Amsterdam. Until American movie star Bruce Kennedy strolls into her life, that is.

Kennedy’s glamour may be a little worn at the edges but Koch’s desperate housewife nonetheless falls for his charms – if only because he fleetingly reminds her what it’s like to feel like a seductive woman. But exactly what game is the faded film star playing?

Koch proves that he doesn’t need convoluted plots or eccentric characters to tell an original story. His fifth novel is a psychological tragicomedy that has the power to move the reader while steering the plot expertly towards its surprise ending.

‘Koch has slotted all the elements cleverly into place. His humour is restrained, his style subdued. A powerful novel that eschews heavy artillery, yet still delivers a final blow that reverberates in your head.’
— Het Parool
Wessel te Gussinklo

Very Bright Light

Striking comeback by an almost forgotten writer: a tragicomic love story written in a lyrical style

The publication of Wessel te Gussinklo’s De opdracht (The Task), which was laden with literary prizes and nominations, dates from 1995. A virtuoso and rebellious novel, it received excellent reviews, but despite the encouragement, the author did not find it easy to go on writing. This year finally saw the appearance of his third novel, which announces itself as a classic from the very first pages.

The main character is 31-year-old Wander. He makes plans to start a novel, but lets himself be distracted by superficialities. We are in the 1970s; drink, chatter, prostitutes, the occasional joint. When he meets the student Hanna, who is ten years younger, a new period seems to be dawning, but her parents are so opposed to the relationship that Hanna breaks it off. From then on, out of his mind with helplessness, Wander roams the streets. It is in this state of existential pain and rejection that we are drawn into his psyche.

Novels that rely on descriptions of someone’s inner life have fallen somewhat out of fashion, but what riches when the execution is this good. The thoughts flow: incessant and unfiltered. Just as true to life is the seclusion in which the loving couple find themselves and which makes them unreliable observers. For example, Wander praises Hanna’s intelligence and understanding, but there is no evidence of this. Wander projects his dream partner onto Hanna. All those neck-breaking stunts for the sake of love are to no avail.

Where he himself is concerned, there is the same unreliability: does he really have the makings of a great writer? He never tires of explaining it to Hanna: ‘I had to write: books, novels full of images, full of reality, unlike the polished glibness that was always on show, the brilliant results, the poses and attitudes. Or, well, them too, but mainly what was behind them, the hovels and gutters, the engine rooms, secret and hidden, of human existence.’ Here is someone who takes a long run-up to the sheer impossible. But though he may talk to his girlfriend in high-flown terms, he mainly reads cartoons.

And then there are Hanna’s parents. He is allowed just one visit; what awaits is humiliation. He, Wander, a good-for-nothing without a degree or a job, is shown the door after one cup of tea. ‘I expect you have commitments elsewhere,’ says Hanna’s father. It couldn’t be worse, but it becomes even crazier when Hanna’s mother damages Wander’s car. His isolation assumes monumental proportions.

‘A novel that comes charging at you, grabs you by the shoulders and doesn’t let you go until Wander’s whole being has been poured out all over you. This novel is a bully. But a magnificent bully.’
— De Volkskrant

‘A contemporary Inferno. Te Gussinklo seems to be turning his back on all that modern and fashionable prose to present a world beyond redemption. Gruesome and impressive.’
— Trouw

‘Hopefully we won’t have to wait another decade before he publishes another novel. It’s a breath of fresh air, this prose.’
— De Morgen

Wessel te Gussinklo studied psychology in Utrecht. 1986 saw the appearance of his first novel, The Forbidden Garden, which was awarded the Anton Wachter Prize. His second novel, The Task (1995), received the Lucy B. en C.W. van der Hoogt Prize and the F. Bordewijk Prize, and was nominated for the Libris Literature Prize and the Gouden Uil. A new edition is in preparation.
Esther Gerritsen

Roxy

Wry and witty psychological novel about a young widow seeking a suitable enemy

Esther Gerritsen has written a novel about a confused woman who does something gruesome, but her style allows readers to sympathise with this tragicomic anti-hero. Few writers are as good at dialogue and absurd situations as Gerritsen, who delves into themes such as mourning, growing up and parenthood.

In the middle of the night two policemen appear at the door of 27-year-old Roxy to inform her that her husband, a successful TV producer, has been killed. He has had an accident together with his mistress; both were found in the car naked. Roxy, who at the age of seventeen fled from the home of her oafish father and alcoholic mother into the arms of her husband, knows that life has now become serious: ‘She always knew that she’d skipped something, that she’d taken a shortcut to adulthood.’

Bringing up her daughter Louise is no longer a game. She suddenly has to deal with people who come into the house: Jane, her husband’s assistant, and Feike, her daughter’s babysitter. Worse still, she has to operate the terribly complicated espresso machine.

Roxy is perceptive, but doesn’t know how to cope, not even with her parents, of whom she is permanently ashamed. Sex with the undertaker only brings temporary relief, so she decides to go on holiday with her daughter, the babysitter and the assistant. What follows is a road novel in which Roxy tries to make friends with Feike and Jane but just as easily swaps their company for anonymous sex with young men.

The holiday makes it clear that Roxy finds it difficult – if not impossible – to relate to other people. One night the isolation and frustration become too much. She wants to avenge herself, not on human beings, who are ‘dead, drunk, absent or innocent’. So she seeks a suitable enemy and finds it in a herd of sheep.

Since her debut in 2000, Esther Gerritsen (b. 1972) has been considered one of the best new authors in the Netherlands. In 2005 she was awarded the Dill/BGN prize for her second novel Normale dagen (Ordinary Days, 2005). Both De kleine miezierige god (The Puny God, 2008) and Superduif (Superpigeon, 2010) were nominated for literary prizes and Gerritsen was included among the ten best young Dutch writers by magazine Hollands Diep. Her 2012 novel Dorst (Craving) was short-listed for four literary prizes. In 2014 she was awarded the Frans Kellendonk prize for her body of work. Gerritsen writes a popular weekly column in the VPRO TV guide.

‘An annoyingly well-written story about the escapades of a young widow [...] Once again Esther Gerritsen displays her gift for striking sentences and dialogue that teeters on the thin line between normality and alienation, between entertaining kookiness and harrowing absurdism.’
— de Volkskrant

‘Not only in her choice of subjects but also in her feeling for style, Gerritsen is one of a kind’
— Jury Frans Kellendonk prize 2014

Avatar: Keke Keukelaar

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Charles den Tex & Anneloes Timmerije
The Forgotten Story of an Unfaltering Love in Wartime

A moving novel based on a true story of love and adventure

Following a tip from a friend and film producer, the authors found themselves on the trail of a love story set in the Dutch East Indies during an all but forgotten episode of World War II. Through the diaries of Guus and Lienke Hagers, the authors have reconstructed the dramatic tale of a couple torn apart by war.

Guus is a passionate aviator, sent to Australia in February 1942 with a group of pilots to collect a new fleet of aircraft. On their flight over, they receive word that the Japanese have landed on Palembang, the first move in a campaign that will lead to the fall of Java.

Powerless to intervene, the pilots soon realise that in Australia all efforts to organize a Dutch squadron fail. Shipped here, there and everywhere, their efforts to enter the fray are blocked at every turn. Distressed about the fate of their loved ones in the Dutch colony, they look on helplessly as senior officials make sure their own families are aboard the very last flights to safety.

Lienke ends up in an internment camp, an ordeal she only survives thanks to bloody-minded perseverance and an indomitable will to live. Before long the camp is seriously overpopulated and the horrific conditions are compounded by the regime of the sadistic camp commandant. Even the slightest violation of the rules results in a collective punishment inflicted on all of the prisoners.

When Guus is finally permitted to take to the air, he soon makes a name for himself by successfully accomplishing the riskiest of missions. His reputation comes to the attention of Captain Spoor, later a controversial general in the Dutch military campaign to crush Indonesia's fight for independence. Spoor is keen to send Guus as his own secret missions pilot, not least because he suspects that Guus knows something about a shipment of diamonds that disappeared after an air crash. What he doesn't know is that Guus has already been recruited as a spy by good-looking, firm operative Marja Landberg to keep a watchful eye on Spoor's shady dealings.

At the novel's end, Den Tex and Timmerije bring us back to the present in fine style. In a coda that is as startling as it is moving, all is revealed and the truth that emerges gives the novel an added dimension.

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For translated titles of Charles den Tex please see www.vertalingendatabase.nl

‘Everything in this book is vibrant and alive! [..] The descriptions are appealing and evocative. [..] The Forgotten Story is a novel about embracing and suppressing dreams, about losing one’s grip on existence and then regaining it through extreme effort.’
– De Scriptor

‘This book’s great strength is its characters. Guus and Lienke really come to life. Readers empathise with them and experience an unfamiliar side of the war through their eyes. [..] Universal and recognizable. Heartrending and beautifully written.’
– Hebban

Charles den Tex (b. 1952) is the Netherlands’ leading thriller writer. His work has won all the major prizes in crime fiction and has been translated into several languages. Anneloes Timmerije (b. 1955) is a journalist and author of literary and historical non-fiction. Her fiction debut De plaats der dingen (The Place of Things) was awarded the 2006 Vrouw & Kultuur Prize for best debut and was nominated for three other debut awards that same year.

Photo: Keke Keukelaar
Ida Simons

A Foolish Virgin

A rediscovered classic about the growing pains of a Jewish girl between the world wars

A Foolish Virgin, which first appeared in 1959, was republished this year to a rapturous reception. Reviewers compared Ida Simons’ sparkling prose to that of writers as disparate as Jane Austen, John Cheever and Anne Frank. Her novel tells the story of Gittel, a twelve-year-old girl with a passion for the piano, who is dragged between The Hague, Antwerp and Berlin by her parents.

At the start of the novel, Gittel is living in The Hague, the daughter of a hapless businessman who goes on to lose all his money trying to get rich quick in Berlin. On the very first page, Simons treats us to a delightfully matter-of-fact account of how young Gittel regards the blazing rows that erupt between her parents on Sundays and public holidays: ‘Although relations between them were reasonably amicable otherwise, tensions mounted on the double helping of public holidays that is the lot of Jewish families. It therefore became a matter of the greatest urgency for me to ascertain at the earliest possible opportunity the days on which our holidays would fall in the coming year.’

The tone is set: in light-hearted yet determined fashion, Gittel relates the trying circumstances in which she attempts to make a life for herself. After every matrimonial slanging match, mother runs off to her parents’ home in Antwerp with Gittel in tow. There Gittel’s loyalty is taxed by a surfeit of relatives. Much to her delight, she makes the acquaintance of the well-to-do Mardell family, who allow her to practise on their Steinway. Gittel feels that she is taken seriously by Mr Mardell, the head of the household, and by thirty-year-old Lucie Mardell, whom she adores. When these friendships turn out to be nothing but an illusion, Gittel learns her first lessons about trust and betrayal.

This intimate portrayal of a familial rite of passage is set in the inter-war period and in the shadow of the Shoah. The writer says little about the turmoil and tragedy that awaits her characters, yet succeeds in giving the reader a sense that the novel is about more than a young girl’s loss of innocence.

In a fluid, almost casual style, Ida Simons has written a masterly and timeless ode to a relatively carefree interlude in a dark and dramatic period.

Ida Simons (Antwerp 1911-The Hague 1960) came to the Netherlands with her parents during World War I. After completing her studies in London and Paris, she performed with many leading orchestras in the Netherlands and abroad, until her career was brought to a dramatic halt by the Nazi invasion. Her health was permanently affected by two years of wartime internment in Westerbork and Theresienstadt, forcing her to abandon her ambitions as an international concert pianist altogether in the 1950s. By this time she had begun writing and debuted as a poet in 1946 with Wrange oogst (Bitter Harvest). It was followed by a collection of novellas entitled Slijk en sterren (Muck and Stars), published in 1956 under the pseudonym C.S. van Berchem.
Niña Weijers
The Consequences

An enchanting rollercoaster of stories and plots down to the last page

In her first novel Niña Weijers shows what she is capable of: a portrayal of the fashionable world of modern art, a coming-of-age story about a talented girl capable of many things but unsure of everything, and a tense story about disappearing. One of the most striking débuts of recent years.

Minnie Panis is a young artist with the world at her feet since showing a strange mix of all her possessions – her sofa, her curtains, a toothbrush, rubbish – in the exhibition Nothing Personal. The critics judged this as ‘an extremely intimate and raw self-portrait of a woman in search of the consequences of her disappointed love’.

That already indicates the extent to which the view of the outside world – full of well-meaning clichés – can differ from that of the artist. Is life art or coincidence? And how can people talk about their lives as if they are stories? Minnie cannot; she was only trying to show that she existed.

Somewhere something has gone wrong, somewhere in her early childhood. A premature baby who did not make any sounds, her mother took her to an American therapist with New Age ideas. Her relationship with her mother is not warm, more awkward. Her father disappeared before she was even born. It gives Minnie’s figure a rather lonely feeling. Then comes the point at which history seems to repeat itself: Minnie herself becomes pregnant by a man who probably will not be involved in the child’s upbringing.

The second part of this intelligent, tense novel things accelerate rapidly. A Taoist statement (‘All the fish has to do is lose itself in the water’) keeps recurring; it is also the motto on the headed note-paper of the therapist who contacts her again to see whether his treatment of decades earlier was successful. The portrayal of the art world turns into a strange, psychological, paranormal case study.

Niña Weijers (b. 1987) studied literary theory. In 2010 she won the writing competition Write Now!, and published short stories in literary magazines De Gids, Passionate and elsewhere. In 2013 she was singled out by Opzij magazine as one of the ‘35 women writers under 35’.

‘In this novel, tingling with ambition and fascinating ideas, the life and art of the main character revolve around loss, existence and disappearance. A determined tone characterises this crazy book.’

—— NRC Handelsblad

‘The novel grates and creaks, and is loaded with questions, leaps and side paths, but that is one of its charms. Up to the last disturbing sentence the writer holds the reader in her manipulative grip.’

—— De Groene Amsterdammer

‘An impressive novel on the art of creative living or the creative and destructive vital force of being an artist.’

—— Maarten Asscher

Photo: Merlijn Doomernik
Jaap Robben
Birk

A dark, restrained drama about a mother who keeps her son an emotional prisoner

Jaap Robben is well-known as a poet, children’s author and theatre director. This, his first novel, is set on a remote island between Norway and Scotland. Only one family lives there – the nine-year-old Mikael and his father and mother, plus a solitary neighbour. The mail arrives every week by boat. One day fate strikes: Mikael’s father drowns after saving his son from the sea.

It happened by the rock that his mother had often warned him about. The rock I must ‘never-never-never, look at me, never jump off.’ By keeping quiet about what happened, Mikael – who at the time of the fatal event is nine – hopes to change reality. It is some time before the reader learns the truth about what happened. In a penetrating way Robben gets under the skin of a boy who is consumed by guilt, uncertainty about the future and confusion about how to deal with his grieving mother.

The book sparkles with short sections of dialogue. The conversations are marked by periods of silence, and it is precisely this silence – which can descend at any moment – that is very telling. The conversations between mother and son in particular reveal the gradual souring of their relationship. ‘We came no closer than opposite sides of the table.’ Such gems – sentences, similes or images – can be found on almost every page.

‘Mother and son drink ’awkward coffee’, a ball smells of ‘new raincoats’. Or take a sentence like this: ‘With the naked eye, the sail was as small as a folded piece of paper, but with my binoculars I could see that there was someone standing under the boom with a red coat on. There was someone else in a blue coat fore. I focused and saw that it was the plastic case for the jib.’

The reader can’t help but feel stifled by the mother’s psychological warfare, the way she boxes her son in with passive aggression, but elsewhere seems to be trying to seduce him – Mikael reaches puberty in the course of the story – by walking about the house naked and creeping into his bed. Is she looking for a new husband in her son, or does she want to punish him for the loss of her husband? That is the key question, which eventually leads to a dramatic finale.

Jaap Robben (b. 1984) is a writer, poet and theatre director. Since 2000 he has written poems and short stories for both children and grown-ups and has published four collections of stories: Twee vliegen (Two Flies, 2004), De nacht kreelt (The Night is Full of Crickets, 2007), Zullen we een bos beginnen? (Shall we Start a Wood?, 2008, shortlisted for the Gouden Uil for Children’s Literature), De Zuurtjes (The Sourballs) and Als iemand ooit mijn botjes vindt (If Anyone Finds My Bones, 2012). Birk is his first novel for adults.

‘Robben’s description of the inner world of a child is faultless. As an oppressive story of the premature loss of innocence, Birk is on a par with Niccolo Ammaniti’s I’m Not Scared and Ian McEwan’s The Cement Garden.’

(****)
— Het Parool

‘At first sight there’s nothing spectacular about the plot and the narrative is traditionally structured. Yet with this basis, Robben has written a novel that slowly grabs you by the throat.’

(****)
— de Volkskrant

‘The way he tells the story of Mikael Hammerman in 58 short chapters is original and inimitable. Finally another book that has got under my skin.’
— Bart Moeyaert
Ale S. van Zandbergen
The Littens Fair

Scenes from a marriage and from an upbringing in rural Friesland

The novel cleverly combines two narratives. The story of the unhappy marriage of a nineteenth-century clergyman and his wife in the farming village of Littens is interspersed with the tale of a solitary butcher’s son growing up in the same village almost a century and a half later. The storylines are interwoven to such an extent that it sometimes seems as if the time between them has evaporated.

Littens, 1830. The village’s young, studious preacher, Martinus Laurman, takes a stand against the religious bigotry that is coming into fashion. But his trust in reason and the power of words leads to a personal crisis of faith. Martinus’ fixation on theological issues is combined with an aversion to physicality, and he is unable to fulfil his wife Eeuwkje’s deeply felt longing for a child. Farmer’s daughter Eeuwkje is Martinus’ polar opposite. She likes to lose herself in an imagined reality. The arrival of artist Henrik Giesing marks a turning point in their marriage.

Littens, 1960. Butcher’s son Liuwe Bosgra is eager to learn, but he remains an adolescent loner living in a world of his own, where he shuts out everyone except his older, liberated girlfriend Sabetheli Duparc. He shares with her his fascination for numbers, language and time. Mildly autistic, Liuwe enjoys contemplating the discrepancy between literal and figurative uses of language. Sabetheli manages to draw him out of his inner world and through her he discovers the freedom that typifies the 1960s and 1970s. She introduces him to love. Once again it is a man called Henrik Giesing, a photographer, who brings about an unexpected turn of events, against the background of the village’s annual fair.

The Littens Fair is both a historical novel and a coming-of-age tale. The taut, well-composed narrative switches back and forth between the two storylines, each of which has its own characteristic register. They mirror each other, with objects, characters and events of the first story reappearing in a more modern form in the second. Both Martinus Laurman and Liuwe Bosgra regularly contemplate the function of language and the workings of time, giving this captivating novel, which is written with great empathy, an extra philosophical layer.

Ale S. van Zandbergen was born in 1956, the son of the local butcher in Easterlittens, a village in the Dutch province of Friesland. He works as a mathematics lecturer and since 1979 he has contributed to various magazines in the Frisian language, especially De Strikel, for which he was also an editor. The Littens Fair (2013) is his debut novel. It won him the Douwe Tamminga Debut Prize and the Rink van der Velde Prize for the best Frisian prose work.

‘It would be great if this novel could gain a wide readership, because it’s a remarkably good book.’
— Friese-literatuursite

‘A metalinguistic work, with a low but fascinating tempo set by perfectly judged sentences and ingenious storylines.’
— Friesch Dagblad

‘With The Littens Fair, Ale S. van Zandbergen has made the best prose debut of recent years.’
— De Moanne

Photo: Wim de Vries
Two lovers are separated at the beginning of World War II. When the conflict is over and they share their stories with each other, only one conclusion is possible: the life they had together has been decimated. Only fragments remain.

On Saturday, 4 May 1946, Victor stands in front of a gravestone that reads: ‘Our dear boy Christiaan C. Bender’. The war had only just begun when Chris was shot as Victor looked on. Could he have done something to save his friend? Although his name means ‘he who conquers’, he is racked with guilt about his failure to act until it was too late. He runs into Esther, a Jewish girl who was once his sweetheart, and tells her about his experiences.

Victor’s story mirrors that of the Dutch army, forced to capitulate to the Germans after a few days of battle, and that of the Dutch government, as symbolised by Queen Wilhelmina’s escape to London before the capitulation. Seemingly, the only character in Fragments who wanted to stand and fight – ‘I wish I could have done something… with my bare hands’ – was Chris Bender.

This graphic novel ends with an appendix, presenting documents and photographs from De Graaf’s own family history, in a village not far from Rotterdam. He describes how a couple of young soldiers crept into a farm on 10 May 1940 – the day of the German invasion – to take cover, ‘without having overpowered an enemy’. Powerlessness here too, in the historical reality.

De Graaf works painstakingly to create exactly the right aesthetic for his images. He uses atmospheric colouring and achieves a rough-edged texture by scanning lines drawn with Conté crayons. The visual rhythm of his pages radiates calm, a subtle representation of Victor’s introverted character.

Erik de Graaf (b. 1961) studied graphic design and advertising at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rotterdam and is now creative director at Millford design studio. His love of the ‘more serious side of comics’ blossomed during his student years, influenced by artists such as Joost Swarte and Yves Chaland. In addition to Scherven (Fragments), a sequel to which is due in 2016, he has published the books Verbleekte Herinneringen (Faded Recollections), Gekleurd Geheugen (Coloured Memory) and Gevonden Verleden (Found Past). He also collaborated on the second part of the Drawn and Quarterly Showcase, an anthology from one of the world’s leading comics publishers.

www.nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erik_de_Graaf
www.erikdegraafcomics.blogspot.nl/
Successful Titles

A portrait of an era, a kaleidoscopic work about a clash between generations

Peter Buwalda
Bonita Avenue (Bonita Avenue)

Rights: Marijke Nagtegaal, m.nagtegaal@debezigebij.nl
Rights sold: Bulgaria (Colibri), Czech Republic (Odeon), France (Actes Sud), Germany (Rowohlt), Greece (Alexandria), Hungary (Scolar), Iceland (Forlagid), Italy (Mondadori), Spain (Salamandra), UK (Pushkin Press), US (Hogarth Crown), Denmark (Art People)

'A new writer as toe-curling as early Roth, as roomy as Franzen and as caustic as Houellebecq.'
— The Telegraph

Graphic novel about the painter’s last years in the South of France

Barbara Stok
Vincent (Vincent)

Rights: Luciënne van der Leije lvan.der.leije@singel262.nl
Rights sold: Brazil (L&PM Editoras), Greece (Aiora), Italy (BAO Publishing), South Korea (Open Books), Turkey (Yapi Kredi), United Kingdom (SelfMadeHero), France (Emmanuel Proust), Spain (Salamandra Graphic)

'Stok does a brilliant, sympathetic job of picturing the artist.'
— The Guardian

A subtle meditation on fathers and daughters, sailing and economic crisis

Toine Heijmans
At Sea (Op zee)

Rights: Shared Stories: Hayo Deinum, hayo@sharedstories.nl
Rights sold: Brazil (Cosac Naify), Denmark (Turbine), France (Christian Bourgois), Germany (Arche), Hungary (Gondolat), Turkey (Kuraldıs¸)

Winner of the Prix Médicis étranger for best translated novel

Classic 1966 novel about a young man’s solitary search for a meteorite

Willem Frederik Hermans
Beyond Sleep (Nooit meer slapen)

Rights: De Bezige Bij Marijke Nagtegaal, m.nagtegaal@debezigebij.nl
Rights sold: China (Yilin), Czech Republic (Host), Estonia (Huma), France (Gallimard), Germany (Aufbau), Hungary (Jelenkor), Israel (Kinneret Zmora-Bitan Dvir), Italy (Adelphi), Norway (Gyldendal), Slovenia (Didakta), Spain (Tusqueta), Sweden (Norstedts), UK (Harvill Secker), US (The Overlook Press)

'The language is dry; the socks are wet; the compass is lost. A masterpiece.'
— Roddy Doyle
Recent Translations

This is a selection of recently published translations from the Dutch.

Kader Abdolah
The King
Translated into English by Nancy Forest-Flier for Canongate, 2014.

Gerbrand Bakker
The Twin
Na górze cisza

Britta Böhler
The Decision
Der Brief des Zauberers
Translated by the author for Aufbau Verlag, 2014.

Remco Campert
A Love in Paris
Un amore a Parigi
Translated into Italian by David Santoro for Lit Edizioni, 2014.

Adriaan van Dis
Betrayal
Tête à crack

Arnon Grunberg
The Man without Illness
L’Homme sans maladie
Translated into French by Olivier Vanwersch-Cot for Héloïse d’Ormesson, 2014.

Oek de Jong
Billowing Summer Dresses
Robes d’été flottant au vent

Herman Koch
Thinking of Bruce Kennedy
[Razmyshlaja o Brjuce Kennedi]
Translated into Russian by Vladimir Belousov for Azbooka-Atticus, 2014.

Erik Kriek
H.P. Lovecraft – From Beyond, and Other Tales
H.F. Lvakraft - S one strane i druge prêe
Translated into Serbian by Bojana Budimir for Besna Kobila, 2014.

Marcel Möring
In a Dark Wood
Im Wald
Translated into German by Helga van Beuningen for Luchterhand, 2014.

Willem Jan Otten
A Man from Hearsay
Un homme par ouï-dire

Tommy Wieringa
These Are the Names
Questi sono i nomi
Translated into Italian by Claudia Di Palermo and Claudia Cozzi for Iperborea, 2014.
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