

15 Postwar Classics

from Holland and Flanders

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Literature
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Tragedy of errors

Simon Vestdijk

Ivory Watchmen

IN *IVORY WATCHMEN* Simon Vestdijk chronicles the downfall of a gifted secondary school student called Philip Corvage. The boy – who lives with an uncle who bullies and humiliates him – is popular among his teachers and fellow students, writes poems which show true promise, and delights in delivering fantastic monologues sprinkled with Latin quotations.

But this ill-starred prodigy has a defect: the inside of his mouth is a disaster area, consisting of stumps of teeth and the jagged remains of molars, separated by gaps. In the end, this leads to the boy's downfall, which is recounted almost casually. It starts with a new teacher's reference to a 'mouth full of tombstones' and ends with his drowning when the jealous husband of his uncle's housekeeper pushes him into a canal.

The events in the novel take place over a period of 24 hours and nothing – at least initially – points in the direction of any dramatic denouement. Wry, and incisively, Vestdijk describes the boy's background, his behaviour at the dentist's (he writes the man a poem), and his naive displays of erudition. For all its light-heartedness, it is a telling portrayal of secondary school students and their teachers. Vestdijk is at his best in the description of the new teacher, with his egotistic ambitions and questionable views of his chosen profession.

This tragic novel gradually evolves, as one misunderstanding follows another, Philip's illusions run away with him, and fate ultimately gets the upper hand. In it Vestdijk demonstrates his inimitable style, with sentences that elaborate, suggest and bewitch, and are filled with delightful linguistic invention. Vestdijk also demonstrates the psychological insight that has enabled him to paint this penetrating and touching portrait of the boy Philip, his tragic – even angelic – hero. This novel is among the best work that Vestdijk has given us.



photo Collection Letterkundig Museum

Simon Vestdijk (1898–1971) is regarded as one of the greatest Dutch writers of the twentieth century. He attended medical school but in 1932 he gave up medicine in favour of literature, going on to produce no fewer than 52 novels, as well as poetry, essays on music and literature, and several works on philosophy. He is remembered mainly for his psychological, autobiographical and historical novels, a number of which – *Terug tot Ina Damman* ('Back to Ina Damman', 1934), *De koperen tuin* (*The Garden where the Brass Band Played*, 1950) and *Ivory Watchmen* (1951) – may be counted among the best works of Dutch literature. Vestdijk admitted to having been influenced by such illustrious European writers as Proust, Joyce and Mann. Much of his work reveals a desire both to mythologise the banality of everyday life, and to reduce the mythology of great events to the banal.

A gem of a novel: Vestdijk at his most relaxed.

NRC HANDELSBLAD

Vestdijk combines in his novels (his best work) a lust for life with a psychiatrist's objectivity.

GUIDE TO MODERN WORLD LITERATURE

PUBLISHING DETAILS

Ivoren wachters (1951)
240 pp

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SELECTED TRANSLATED TITLES

The garden where the brass band played (*De koperen tuin*). New York: Heinemann; London House & Maxwell, 1965 / New York: New Amsterdam, 1989 / London: Quartet Books, 1992. Also in Spanish (Aguilar, 1972), in Romanian (Univers, 1972), in German (Arche, in prep) and in French (Phébus, 1993).
Les voyageurs (*De kellner en de levenden*). Paris: Phébus, 1992. Also in Swedish (Tidens Förlag, 1966), in Italian (Edizioni del Borghese, 1968) and Romanian (Univers, 1989).
L'île au rhum (*Rumeiland*). Paris: Gallimard, 1963 / Paris: Phébus, 1991. Also in English (John Calder, 1963), in Finnish (Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö, 1967), in German (Georg Kurt Schauer, 1949), in Hungarian (Európa Könyvkiadó, 1978), in Italian (Einaudi, 1963), in Swedish (Norstedt, 1966) and many other languages.



Historical fiction at its best

Hella S. Haasse

The Scarlet City

IN 1952 HELLA HAASSE surprised her readers with *The Scarlet City*, an ingenious novel based around the figure of Giovanni Borgia, shortly before the plundering of the papal city by Charles V's troops in 1527. It was her second historical novel after *In a Dark Wood Wandering*, a life of Charles d'Orléans, and more complex and inventive, partly because of her development as a writer, but also because of the complex character of Giovanni Borgia who was unsure as to whether he was a bastard or a legitimate member of the Borgias – or neither. The opening lines of *The Scarlet City* are significant: 'I am a Borgia twice over, perhaps thrice over. My origins are a mystery to others, a secret, and more: a source of anguish to myself.'

Haasse alternates her search for the true identity of Giovanni Borgia with tales of such contemporary figures as Michelangelo, Vittoria Colonna and Pietro Aretino. The novel also features a fictitious exchange of letters between Machiavelli and Giucciardini. With this 'fragmented' approach, the author ensures that the mystery of Borgia remains intact, while capturing to perfection the period of the Renaissance, when man was reinventing himself and trying out his wings as *uomo universale*. In *Persoonsbewijs* (Identity card), one of her autobiographical works, Haasse wrote: *The Scarlet City* 'is above all a portrait of an ever-changing reality consisting of many disparate layers, a reality in which man's only chance of survival lies in choosing – in all good conscience – an identity for himself.'



photo Edith Visser

Hella S. Haasse (b. 1918) is the *grande dame* of Dutch letters, and her oeuvre is wide-ranging and impressive. Much of her work consists of historical novels, a genre eminently suited to her erudition and her subtle, penetrating mind. By opting for historical fiction she is not fleeing the present, but rather voicing her deep conviction that history is what determines the present. In the labyrinthine essay *The Gardens of Bomarzo*, she says: 'Nothing is ever entirely past.' Haasse is the author of close to seventy books in various literary genres, and her work has received countless awards.

The Scarlet City is rich historical fiction written with panache.
NEW YORK TIMES

Haasse's challenging novel combines a wealth of historical knowledge with remarkable literary history.
WASHINGTON POST

Haasse once again serves up a historical page-turner.
KIRKUS REVIEWS

PUBLISHING DETAILS

De scharlaken stad (1952)
242 pp

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The scarlet city. London: McGraw Hill Publishing Company Limited, 1954 / Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1990 / London: Allison & Busby, 1997. Also published in German (Büchergilde Gutenberg, 1954 / Fischer, 1955 / Rowohlt, 1994, 1996), French (Éditions du Seuil, 1997), and Spanish (Edhasa, 1993 / Plaza & Janés, 1995).



*The ultimate confrontation of
an old man with himself*

Herman Teirlinck

The Man in the Mirror

THE THEME OF HERMAN TEIRLINCK'S FINAL NOVEL, *The Man in the Mirror*, remains extraordinarily topical. The main character, Henri, a banker and dandy fast approaching seventy, is a kind of postmodernist *avant la lettre*. He sees life as a game that should be played with virtuosity and imagination. Ironically, he refuses to commit himself to any attitude towards life. For him, 'everything is true' is almost the same as 'nothing is true'. Morality is replaced by aesthetics. Henri is the perfect egotist for whom the art of life is the art of camouflage. 'Whatever you think you are, that is what you ultimately are.'

The novel starts with a meticulous description of Henri in the barber's chair. Gazing into the eyes of his mirror image, he notes the deterioration of a body that is no longer his. Just like Gustav von Aschenbach, the famous character from Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, Henri undergoes a beauty treatment before entering into the ultimate confrontation with himself. His ageing face is spruced up with creams and scents, his lacklustre hair smeared with old-fashioned miracle remedies, his nails polished by a charming manicurist who treats him to a momentary 'sensual fringe benefit' – 'The touch of a woman's hands has a subtle unreliability about it.' Henri rises from the ashes a handsome young man, fit for fresh feminine conquests.

But what may seem like purification is, in reality, a vain attempt at keeping up the camouflage of a life built on lies and deceit. Henri's Don Juanesque masquerade is no longer tenable and he subjects himself to a merciless bout of soul-searching. In the face of death, Henri is anxious to unmask himself, in search of the true identity behind his immaculate caricature. He resolves to resort to drastic measures, casting off all pretence and revealing his past and that of others, as described through flashbacks. His crippled wife with whom he has a marriage of convenience; his son Manuel, killed in an accident; the one big love of his extramarital life, Elsje; his only friend Sebastiaan, also dead; all bear witness to his loveless, lying existence. Before his moral execution can be carried out, however, one more experience awaits him. The ultimate attempt at self-portrayal can only succeed after, and by means of, a last supper, served by the stunningly beautiful Babette, the 'typist' at his office, with whom he has a rendez-vous in the hotel where he will perform his swan song.



photo Collection AMVC-Letterenhuis Antwerpen

During his life, Herman Teirlinck (1879 –1967) was an undisputed king of literature in Flanders. He was not only art consultant to the Belgian monarch, Leopold III, but at the age of 70, also co-founder of and the driving force behind the magazine, *Nieuw Vlaams Tijdschrift*, an innovative literary publication. As a dramaturgist he was a major innovator of realistic theatre. As a novelist he wrote, amongst others, the metropolitan novel, *Het Ivoren Aapje* (*The Ivory Monkey*, 1909), the baroque epic, *Het gevecht met de Engel* (*Battle With the Angel*, 1952) and his swan song, *Zelfportret of het galgemaal* (*The Man in the Mirror*, 1955).

In this novel, Teirlinck confirms the main line of thought in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and André Gide 'Become who you are' – the cult of originality, of sincere loyalty to one's own self.

JEAN WEISGERBER

One of the purest realisations of the therapeutic novel.

BERNARD KEMP

PUBLISHING DETAILS

Zelfportret of het galgemaal (1955)
198 pp.
Sample translation available

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The man in the Mirror. London: Heinemann, 1963, French (Éditions Universitaires, 1971) Romanian (Editura Univers, 1970), Polish (Czytelnik, 1968) and Greek (Magkaniyas, 1972).



An overpowering erotic desire for a young girl

Louis Paul Boon

Minuet

IN *MINUET*, a man works eight hours a day in the refrigerated basement of a factory. There he adjusts the temperature and has little more to do than open or close a valve occasionally. In this polar world he is accompanied only by his own fears and thoughts, and for hours on end he converses with himself. Once he returns home to his wife, he prefers to withdraw with his collection of newspaper clippings about brutal rapes, gruesome murders and other inhumanities.

His wife is his complete opposite. She is optimistic about human nature and wants to climb the social ladder. She turns out to be very receptive to the smooth talk of a travelling salesman who ultimately gets her pregnant. Her now precarious marriage is completely thrown off balance when a twelve year-old girl comes to help with the house-keeping. This is not an innocent child but a pubescent femme fatale, a nymph like Nabokov's *Lolita* (also from 1955).

The novel is divided into three parts and in each an unnamed narrator tells his or her part of the story. Boon succeeds at bringing to life these completely different mental worlds in great detail and at a dizzying pace; we see the complete isolation of the man, the shameless assertiveness of the girl, and the bourgeois ambitions of the woman.

On the surface, no greater contrast can be imagined between this intimate, subjective novel and the politically-charged polyphony of *Chapel Road* (1953). Nevertheless, within this masterful psychological novel about a triangular relationship we find a strange allegory of the world in which we live. Because of his maladjustment, the protagonist poses critical questions about religion, monarchy and the State. In addition, a generational conflict is examined, that between the idealism of the hard-working middle-class woman and the nihilistic, rebelliousness of post-war youth in the person of the child temptress.

The rock-hard undertone of the story and its claim to realism are accented by authentic newspaper reports of murders and rapes, printed at the top of the pages, which expose the perversity of modern man.



photo Jo Boon

Louis Paul Boon (1912-1979) was one of the most important innovators in post-war Dutch literature. His masterful novel, *De Kapellekensbaan* (*Chapel Road*, 1953), was translated into eight languages and had a great influence on the literature of the Low Lands, but also on the German writer Günter Grass. In 1971, Boon received the Triannual National Award for his novel *Pieter Daens* which was later made into a film in 1993 and received an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. It was anticipated that Boon would become the first Dutch-language Nobel Prize winner but his early death prevented this.

The Flemish working class could not find a better historian than Boon. He sprang from its ranks and feels himself at one with it.

VRIJ NEDERLAND

PUBLISHING DETAILS

Menuet (1955)

144 pp.

Sample translation available

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Minuet. New York: Persea Books, 1979. Also in German (Aufbau, 1975; Carl Hanser Verlag, 1979), in French (Complexe, 1973, 2nd edition 2003), in Hungarian (Európa, 1979), in Polish (PIW, 1980), in Swedish (Forum, 1976), in Czech (Olomouc: Votobia, prep) and in Danish (Husets, 1994).



Moving and memorable

Marga Minco

Bitter Herbs

MARGA MINCO is the only member of her immediate family to have survived the Second World War. Her father, mother, brother Dave and his fiancée, her sister Bettie and husband – all were deported to concentration camps. None returned. Minco's entire oeuvre is informed by these dreadful, incredible facts. She once said in an interview, 'Whether I want to or not, I always return to 1940-45. Those were the years that made the most impression on me.' The inability to let go of the past is undeniably the overarching theme in Marga Minco's work.

Bitter Herbs, which dates from 1957, was Minco's debut novel. The title refers to a ritual which is part of the Jewish Seder, when unleavened bread and bitter herbs are eaten, partly to commemorate the exodus from Egypt, and partly to symbolize the hospitality offered to strangers. She calls her ninety-page novel 'a little chronicle', and in it she evokes her memories from the war years: the evening the whole family gathered to sew Jewish stars onto their coats, the day the call-up came for the 'work camp', a forbidden train trip, and the razzias which emptied whole streets.

As in the work of Primo Levi and Imre Kertész, it is not only simple facts that make Minco's work so impressive, but the manner in which those facts are presented. *Bitter Herbs* is written in a limpid, immediate, almost casual style. The scenes in the book are deceptively ordinary, except that their context is vicious. Minco is never explicit; she says more by saying less. Her reminiscences leave a lasting impression upon the reader, because of the open sincerity of the writing and her refusal to resort to any form of literary dramatisation to tell a story that is in itself poignant and dramatic.



photo Serge Ligtenberg

Marga Minco was born into an orthodox Jewish family on March 31, 1920. This her debut has to date sold more than 400,000 copies worldwide. New work followed at irregular intervals: *De andere kant* (*The other side*, 1959), *Een leeg huis* (*An empty house*, 1966), *De val* (*The Fall*, 1983), *De glazen brug* (*The Glass Bridge*, 1986), and *Storing* (*Static*, 2004).

The family's incorrigible optimism enhances the nightmarish effect of this impressive little book. Moving and memorable.

THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

The simplicity and complete naiveté of Marga Minco's account sharpen the impression it makes. THE JEWISH CHRONICLE

The book deserves a wide audience. DIE ZEIT

Europe's catastrophe is here in microcosm. THE TIMES

No book has succeeded more brilliantly in capturing the atmosphere of those brutish times. THE SUNDAY TIMES

PUBLISHING DETAILS

Het bittere kruid (1957)
90 pp

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Bitter herbs: a little chronicle. London; New York; Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1960 / Oxford; London; Edinburgh; New York; Toronto; Sydney: Pergamon Press, 1969 / Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990. Also in French (Jean Claude Lattès, 1977), in German (Rowohlt, 1959 / Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995 / Konkret, 1985), in Hebrew (Salomon, 1986), in Hungarian (Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1979), in Italian (La Giuntina, 2000), in Norwegian (Gyldendal, 1961), in Portuguese (Teorema, 1997), in Russian (Raduga, 1989) and in Swedish (Natur och Kultur, 1962).



Wandering in a Sadistic Universe

Willem Frederik Hermans

The Dark Room of Damocles

WILLEM FREDERIK HERMANS was an adolescent in Amsterdam during the Second World War, a period that made an indelible impression on him, compounded by his older sister and cousin committing suicide in the maydays of 1940. Hermans often chooses the war as backdrop for his novels, since it is an environment in which malice and misunderstanding, and the pointlessness of our existence can best be brought to the surface. *The Dark Room of Damocles* is no exception.

During the German occupation, cigar salesman Henri Osewoudt is visited by Dorbeck. Dorbeck is Osewoudt's opposite. Henri is blond, clean-shaven, with a high, squeaky voice. Dorbeck is dark-haired and his voice deep and masculine. 'I felt as if I was his extension, a part of him. When I first saw him I thought: I should have been like this man.'

Dorbeck gives Osewoudt a series of dangerous assignments; helping British agents and taking out traitors. But the assassinations get out of hand and when Osewoudt almost gets killed by his wife, he kills her too.

Having survived all the dangers, at the end of the war Osewoudt is himself taken for a traitor and captured. Osewoudt cannot prove that he received his assignments from Dorbeck. Worse, he can't prove that Dorbeck ever existed. When he develops a roll of film that should show a photograph of the two of them together, it turns out that the picture is a dud. He escapes from prison in panic and is dishonourably shot as he flees.

Osewoudt's fatal wandering through the 'sadistic universe' – the title of one of Hermans' essay collections – is unusually thrilling. Is Osewoudt hero or villain? Or is he a psychopath, driven by delusions? *The Dark Room of Damocles* is constructed of sharp, suggestive and merciless sentences, and its ambiguous ending is debated by critics to this day. It is this impossibility of determining whether Osewoudt was on the 'right' or the 'wrong' side – the moral issue of the Second World War in a nutshell – that still makes Hermans' novel breathtaking.



photo Philip Mechanicus

After studying physical geography at the University of Amsterdam, Hermans became a lecturer in Groningen. In 1973 he left the Netherlands in exasperation and established himself as a writer in Paris. Willem Frederik Hermans is considered one of the greatest post-war Dutch authors and he received several literary prizes. His oeuvre is made up of novels, stories, novellas, essays, polemical pieces, plays, poetry, translations, and a biography of Multatuli. Everything in this rich oeuvre is subordinate to the author's pessimistic philosophy.

Not only would Dutch literature be considerably less without Hermans; so would the European literature.

SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG

Hermans is a prominent European author who has continued the tradition of E.T.A. Hoffman, Kleist, Kafka, Céline and Sartre in a unique way.

NEUE ZÜRCHER ZEITUNG

There is his accurate delineation of place, the inscrutability of his characters and a fascination with language's capacity to order reality.

TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

PUBLISHING DETAILS

De donkere kamer van Damocles
(1958), 336 p.

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The dark room of Damocles. London; Melbourne; Toronto: Heinemann, 1962 / New York; Woodstock: the Overlook Press, in prep. / London: Harvill, in prep. Also in Danish (Spektrum, 1961), in French (Éditions du seuil, 1962 / Gallimard, in prep.), also in German (Gustav Kiepenheuer, 2001 / Büchergilde Gutenberg, 2002 / Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003), in Greek (Kastaniotis, in prep.), in Norwegian (Gyldendal, 1962), in Polish (Wydawnictwa Alfa, 1994) and Swedish (P.A. Norstedt & Söners, 1962).



A classic tragedy

Harry Mulisch

The Stone Bridal Bed

HARRY MULISCH IS A PHILOSOPHICAL AUTHOR who does not shun the great issues of life. This is evident in his magnum opus *De ontdekking van de hemel* (The Discovery of Heaven, 1992), which centres on the ungodliness of the world due to progressive technology, and the disastrous consequences for humanity. Although his basic premise is pessimistic, Mulisch offers a way out: for those who perceive the world as essentially in harmony, and who prefer the freedom of art to the yoke of technology, there is still hope.

The Second World War has strongly informed Mulisch's thinking, and his writing. We need only think of the Eichmann trial in *De zaak 40/61* (The case 40/61, 1962), the German occupation in *The Assault* (1985) and, more recently, the figure of Hitler's son in *Siegfried* (2003). The War is ever-present.

The Stone Bridal Bed is no exception. In this impressive novel, the war takes the form of a classic tragedy, complete with Homeric songs chronicling the epic struggle. Thirteen years after the war Norman Corinth, a dentist from Baltimore, revisits the German city of Dresden, destroyed by a firestorm triggered by Allied bombing. Corinth had taken part in that bombing as an aerial gunner and didn't come through unscathed; his face bears traces of the burns he suffered when his plane was shot down, injuries which Russian doctors lacked the resources to treat properly.

Mulisch ingeniously links the taking of the city with the taking of a woman – Hella – with whom Corinth has a brief affair. She is the embodiment of the Helen whose abduction led to the Trojan War and who, like Troy, is destroyed and abandoned. Lust and the desire for conquest lead Corinth to the bridal bed, which – once the fire of passion has cooled – turns into a stone-cold tomb.



photo Edith Visser

Harry Mulisch was born in 1927 in Haarlem to a Jewish mother and a half-German, half-Austrian father. After his parents divorced in 1937, he was raised by his father's German housekeeper. The father was joint director of a banking firm which was a repository for stolen Jewish funds. 'I didn't so much "experience" the war: I am the Second World War,' Mulisch wrote in the autobiographical *Mijn getijdenboek* (My book of hours, 1975). *The Stone Bridal Bed* is regarded as the best work from his early period. In addition to novels, Mulisch has written plays, poetry, political pieces and philosophical studies. His work is held in high regard, as witness the numerous awards he has received, including the Prijs der Nederlandse Letteren (Dutch Literature Prize, 1995), the P.C. Hooft Prize (1979), and the Constantijn Huygens Prize (1977). Harry Mulisch is one of the most illustrious authors in the Netherlands today.

A curious, wry and thoughtful novel. (...) Mulisch is a fine writer. A beautifully done book, evidence that the future for the novel of ideas is both considerable and unlike its past. HUDSON REVIEW

THE PRESS ON SIEGFRIED:

Few if any other living novelists could make such potentially intractable material so thrillingly dynamic and provocative. One of the world's great writers continues his steady march toward a Nobel Prize.

KIRKUS REVIEW

PUBLISHING DETAILS

Het stenen bruidsbed (1959)
174 pp

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The Stone Bridal Bed. London; New York; Toronto: Abelard Schuman, 1962. Also in French (Calmann-Lévy, 1985), in Hebrew (Keter, 1983), in German (Nannen Verlag, 1960, Suhrkamp, 1995) and in Slovakian (Tatran, 1968).



A gripping story of temptation

Hugo Claus

Amazement

VICTOR-DENIJS DE RIJCKEL, a self-conscious and sexually troubled language teacher, is asked by the headmaster to prepare a flattering introduction for the speech the latter is going to give in Oostende. De Rijckel, who has had to put up with the headmaster's arrogance for years, chooses to attend a bewildering masquerade ball in the city's casino instead. Overwhelmed by a boisterous feeling of liberty, he watches an austere woman refusing the advances of a hapless admirer. When the woman leaves for the beach, De Rijckel and the unfortunate admirer cannot keep up with her. The following morning, a thirteen year-old pupil invites De Rijckel on a trip to the village of Hekegem, a trip that promises to offer the teacher additional glimpses of his object of desire.

In Hekegem's Almout Castle, the two continue their quest for the woman, but the teacher soon finds himself in the midst of a secret society of Flemish-nationalist fanatics honouring the memory of the mysterious lieutenant Crabbe, a former SS officer. De Rijckel gradually loses control of the situation. When he realizes that his role is changing from witness to accomplice, he tries to disentangle himself from the oppressively hagiographic mythology surrounding Crabbe, clinging on to entirely impotent notions of duty and morality. When he finally manages to escape from the castle and finds refuge in a pub, other customers accuse him of paedophilia. Sandra will save him from the villagers, but he will have to rescue himself from the imminent darkness of lunacy.

In *Amazement*, the graphic events are recounted in many mutually enriching, if often contradictory, ways: not only does Korneel, De Rijckel's psychiatrist in the mental institution, force the deranged teacher to write down what happened at Almout in a more or less linear manner, but De Rijckel manages to keep a secret diary as well as yet another notebook, containing crucial details concerning the people who drove him insane.

In Claus' magisterial novel, the baroque plot is intertwined with strong psychological portraits, scenes from Flemish military history and lurid images of desire. Eminently readable as an adventure story, this scintillating *tour de force* also harbours an array of emotions and densely textured meanings. *Amazement* is without any doubt one of the landmarks of twentieth-century Dutch literature.



Hugo Claus (b. 1929) is the most famous and probably the most important Belgian writer of the twentieth century. This internationally acclaimed author of dozens of plays, novels and collections of poetry has also been successful as a painter and cinematographer. In his Faulknerian novels, Claus mixes expertly crafted stories of post-war Flanders with poignant character portraits and allusions to Greek and Christian mythology. His panoramic depiction of *la Flandre profonde* in *Het verdriet van België* (The Sorrow of Belgium, 1983) testifies to the literary grandeur of this country's most protean scribe. *De verwondering* (Amazement, 1962) is Claus' most trail-blazing work. Claus' work was awarded important international prizes as The Prix International Pier Paolo Pasolini (1997), the Aristeion Literature Prize (1998), the Premio Nonino (2000) and the Preis für Europäische Poesie (2001).

While fully aware that such an honourable title can only be used in great exceptions in Flemish literature, I would call *Amazement* a masterpiece.

PAUL DE WISPELAERE, *DE VLAAMSE GIDS*

PUBLISHING DETAILS

De verwondering (1962), 242 pp.

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SELECTED TRANSLATED TITLES

L'Etonnement. French (Complexe, 1977; 2nd edition Stock, 1999), German (Limes Verlag, 1979), Swedish (Albert Bonniers Förlag, 1985), Slovakian (Slovensky Spisovatel, 1983), Spanish (Anagrama, 1995), Russian (Raduga, 1991) and Korean (Moonhak Syegye, in prep.).



Shamelessly candid

Gerard Reve

On My Way to the End

IN THE 1960S GERARD REVE'S CAREER entered a new phase when he discovered that the letter was his ideal literary form. It allowed him to adopt a direct, confrontational tone, combined with formal, almost solemn, syntax and vocabulary. Reve wrote openly and in great detail about his alcoholism, his homosexuality, his preoccupation with death and his adoration of God and the Virgin Mary. As the main character of his letters, he described his life with remarkable candour, contributing to his own legend in the process. In a 1998 interview he said, 'I'm a Great Writer, but it's not as if I'm not stuck up about it.'

The letters in *On My Way to the End* shocked Dutch readers of 1963 with their complete lack of taboo and shameless frankness. In the opening 'Letter from Edinburgh', Reve talks about attending a writers' congress in the Scottish capital and describes his anger on discovering that certain topics there, particularly homosexuality and sodomy, were considered beyond the pale. 'As a homosexual,' Reve wrote, 'I will never let anyone forbid me from making homosexuality the subject of my work.' He spent the rest of his creative life making this clear.

Yet it is not groundbreaking honesty that has made *On My Way to the End* one of the undisputed masterpieces of Dutch literature. The book's power lies in the author's firm grasp of what he calls 'pointless facts'. At first glance, it may seem as if Reve is simply writing down whatever pops into his head ('mindless bullshit, blessed by the Almighty', as he later called it), but upon closer examination, all the personal anecdotes, travel stories and cynical jokes are part of an intricate literary pattern. Gradually the problem of writing itself emerges as one of the book's themes. The only way to comprehend the world is by attempting to bring order to it, and one can only bring order to life by writing about it.

In the final analysis, it is Reve's brilliant style that won these 'letters from faraway places' a place in the canon. His sentences are more exuberant and baroque than in his earlier work, and he possesses that rare gift of being able to make his reader cry and laugh at the same time.



photo Philip Mechanicus

Gerard Reve's (b. 1923) most widely read book is his literary debut, *De avonden* (*The evenings*, 1947). The much reprinted and controversial epistolary books *Op weg naar het einde* (*On my way to the end*, 1963) and *Nader tot U* (*Nearer to Thee*, 1966) were instrumental in establishing the author as a public figure in the Netherlands. Over the years he has published a large series of autobiographical epistolary books and several novels: *Moeder en Zoon* (*Mother and son*, 1980) and *Bezorgde Ouders* (*Parents Worry*, 1989). Reve was awarded the P.C. Hooft Prize in 1968 and the Prijs der Nederlandse Letteren (*Dutch Literature Prize*) in 2001.

THE PRESS ON *PARENTS WORRY*

This is a tragicomic masterpiece that explores with imaginative integrity the obscene and blasphemous frontiers of our nature.

HARRIET GILBERT in *THE LISTENER*

PUBLISHING DETAILS

Op weg naar het einde
(1963)
188 pp

RIGHTS

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Parents worry. London: Fourth Estate, 1990. / Minerva, 1991. Also in French (Le Promeneur, 1995) and in Slovenian (Drustvo Skuc, 2003).
Die Abende: eine Wintergeschichte (*De avonden*). Gifkendorf: Merlin, 1988. Also in French (Gallimard, 1970), in English (Overlook Press, in prep.), in Hungarian (Jelenkor Kiadó, 1998) and in Norwegian (Gyldendal, 1993).
Il linguaggio dell'amore (*De taal der liefde*). Torino Il Quadrante Edizioni, 1986. Also in Spanish (Ultramar, 1988), in Russian (Inapress, 1999), and in Czech (Mlada Fronta, in prep.)
Der vierte Mann (*De vierde man*). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1993. Also in French (Gallimard, 1995).
Näher zu dir (*Nader tot U*). Hamburg: Merlin Verlag, 1970 / 1986.



The moral conflict of a soldier

Ivo Michiels

The Book Alpha

WHEN, IN THE LATE 1960s, a German translation of one volume of the Alpha cycle was published, Samuel Beckett remarked that, stylistically, this was the best book he had read that year. The Alpha cycle is, indeed, one of the most overwhelming reading experiences in postwar literature. It owes its legendary status to Michiels' unsurpassed use of language.

The author's crystal clear, almost primitive language has been a source of inspiration for many a young writer. The first two parts in particular, *The Book Alpha* (1963) and *Orchis Militaris* (1968), have still lost nothing of their punch more than thirty years after publication. This was evident in 2003, when, at a literature and music festival in Antwerp, Michiels gave an emotional rendering of his texts to an audience of several thousand young people. What, for years, had been dismissed as a 'difficult experiment', was now seducing a new generation of readers. This comeback had already been heralded ten years ago in former Yugoslavia, where four of Michiels' books were published in the space of two years. 'It seems that those in a state of extreme moral destitution pick up the signals from my books with extraordinary clarity,' was how Michiels explained the phenomenon in an interview.

This 'moral destitution' applies first and foremost to *The Book Alpha*, in which existential uncertainty, feelings of guilt and the search for an individual identity are central themes. The book recounts the story of a soldier on guard, under threat of imminent war. The war is used primarily as a concept reflecting the protagonist's own precarious situation. In a style and composition based on repetition, recapitulation and litanies, Michiels gives shape to uncertainty. The soldier is torn between conflicting feelings and desires: civilian life or the barracks, discipline or freedom, intuition or duty? During this chaos of opposites he reflects on his past life. A stampede of associations unearths a jumble of childhood memories and loves lost and longed for. From these snippets and snapshots in time emerge a mental portrait of someone who, thrown backwards and forwards between indecision and resistance, must continue to live on in uncertainty.



photo Collection AMVC-Letterenhuis Antwerpen

The writing career of Ivo Michiels (b. 1923) stretches back half a century. He became famous and internationally acclaimed with *The Book Alpha*, the first part of the legendary five-volume Alpha cycle (1963-1979). Inspired by the French *nouveau roman*, this work in effect introduced the modernistic novel into Flemish literature. In 1979 Michiels retired to a village in France to devote himself to an ambitious new endeavour, a ten-volume series, *Journal brut* (1983-2001). Today, Michiels is still one of the most important defenders and representatives of the avant-garde in Flanders.

Michiels' style is exceptionally rhythmic and melodic. The author has a fine sense of alliteration, assonance and rhyme.

ELSEVIER

Michiels is a superb storyteller, witty and wacky!

TROUW

PUBLISHING DETAILS

Het Boek Alfa (1963)

143 pp.

Sample translation available

RIGHTS

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The Book Alpha. Boston: Twayne, 1979, French (Gallimard, 1967), German (Suhrkamp, 1965), Polish (PIW, 1973), Serbo-Croat (Prometej, 1994).

Orchis Militaris. Boston: Twayne, 1979, French (Comp'Act, 2002), German (Suhrkamp, 1969), Polish (PIW, 1973).



The Great African novel from Flanders

Jef Geeraerts

Gangrene – Black Venus

THE FIRST PART OF THE GANGRENE CYCLE, *Gangrene – Black Venus* (1968), is set in the Belgian Congo at the end of the 1950s. These are the years before independence, when the colony experienced its finest hour. Against this backdrop, Geeraerts portrays a colonial civil servant who frees himself from the oppressive constraints of the Western bourgeois mentality. In his own words, the protagonist says, ‘I am at once a heathen and God. God does not exist. I am God.’

In a fluent, evocative style, Geeraerts describes the obsessive love of this white colonial for a black woman. The protagonist leaves western civilisation further and further behind him and descends into an orgiastic, quasi-mystic way of life, combining ritual and instinct, violence and eroticism. His life consists of hunting, sleeping, eating, drinking and copulating: man in his most primitive state. He writes, ‘I shed my culture gradually, piece by piece, and felt myself nearing the blissful state of innocence.’ *Gangrene – Black Venus* is not just a colonial novel, it is primarily the story of a romantic ideal. It is about man’s longing to find paradise in nature, a paradise where he can experience his freedom to the full. Geeraerts then demonstrates the consequences of this freedom in a most ruthless manner.

Gangrene – Black Venus is one of the most talked-about novels from post-war Flanders. The controversy surrounding the publication was astounding. First the Belgian government awarded the novel the national prose prize, then that self-same government seized the book in order to investigate its lascivious character. Applauded as brilliant, then decried for ‘extolling of racism and pornography’; however shocked conformist Belgium might have been, no-one could really deny that seldom had a writer approached such a sensitive subject with such monumental daring.

Thirty-five years after the publication of *Gangrene – Black Venus*, Geeraerts revised all four parts of the legendary cycle. Although the cultural climate has changed entirely, none of the books has lost anything in impact. They retain an all-pervading authenticity that still shocks to this day.



photo Collection AMVC-Letterenhuis Antwerpen

Jef Geeraerts (b. 1930) was for the 1960s what the French author Michel Houellebecq is for our time. More than thirty years ago, Geeraerts gained international acclaim with his *Gangrene Cycle*, a controversial series of four autobiographical novels in which the author recounts his experiences in the former Belgian colony of the Congo. The books have been reprinted dozens of times and translated into numerous languages. Today, he is primarily a crime writer. One of his best-known crime novels is *De zaak Alzheimer* (*The Alzheimer Case*, 1985) which was successfully adapted for the cinema in 2003.

Geeraerts has written a breathtakingly demonic masterpiece. It is hard to decide whether to congratulate or condole him.

MARNIX GIJSEN

Geeraerts’ sentences twist and twine across the pages like lightning-speed lianas, interweaving cruelty with mysticism, the gripping with the ecstatic.

NRC-HANDELSBLAD

With his tornado prose, Geeraerts has broken the mould of the classical novel.

DE STANDAARD

PUBLISHING DETAILS

Gangreen – Black Venus (1968)
210 pp.

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SELECTED TRANSLATED TITLES

Gangrene. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975. Also in German (Wilhelm Heyne, 1971; 12th ed. 1984), in French (Actes Sud, 1995), in Italian (Feltrinelli, 1977), in Norwegian (Gyldendal, 1972), in Finnish (Karisto, 1974), in Hungarian (Tevan, 1991) and in Serbo-Croat (LutErazmo & ReVision, 1996).



Areal page-turner

Jan Wolkers

Turkish Delight

TURKISH DELIGHT (1969) opens in a sculptor's squalid studio. The nameless artist has been distraught and angry since Olga, the great love of his life, left him a few years before. He cannot accept that she is gone and lies in bed for weeks at a time, fantasising about what he has lost. When not doing that, he takes his frustration out on other women. 'I fucked one girl after another. I dragged them to my lair, ripped their clothes off and banged the shit out of them.'

After the bitter opening chapter, Wolkers alternates nimbly between past and present as he tells the story of the fateful relationship, from the moment Olga gives the sculptor a lift and they make love in her car (and his penis gets caught between the 'copper railway' of his zip) to their inevitable break-up under pressure from her shrewish mother. Some time after their break-up, the narrator loses Olga for a second time, when doctors find a tumour 'the size of a bar of toilet soap' in her brain. They succeed in removing part of it, but she slowly loses her sight after the operation and eventually dies.

The novel makes compelling reading. Wolkers rarely pauses to reflect and he never theorises, but simply piles one sensational scene on top of another. All the scenes are evocative, raw and exciting, full of elaborate metaphors. This made it perfect for filming (the eponymous film was directed by Paul Verhoeven).

The story of the sculptor's and Olga's unbridled and 'monstrously happy' love stands in sharp contrast to the sculptor's impotent rage at the outset of the book and the moving and poignant final chapters, which describe his visits to Olga in the hospital and her inexorable decline. There, at her bedside, he carefully feeds Olga soft, sweet Turkish delight. It is a fragile symbol of their ill-fated love.



photo Steye Raviez

In the books of Jan Wolkers (b. 1925), love and death – the two great themes of world literature – have made a pact. In *Kort Amerikaans* (Crew cut), Wolkers' first novel, the main character, like the mythical figure of Pygmalion, can only feel love for dead material: a plaster statue of a woman. And in *Terug naar Oegstgeest* (Back to Oegstgeest), a touching story of childhood with strongly autobiographical elements, his favourite brother Peter dies, isolated from the world in a clinic. Love and death are most closely linked in *Turkish Delight*, Wolkers' eighth and best-known novel. One of Dutch literature's most flamboyant and powerful personalities, Wolkers is an artist as well as a writer.

Like Henry Miller, Wolkers writes with a tremendous appetite for life and a painterly approach to the sensuous. He is a refreshing stylist.

NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

Storytelling skills combined with a vigorous plasticity of style, worthy of a painter and sculptor-turned-writer, to produce indelible images, full of Bosch-like distortions and Biblical echoes.

CONTEMPORARY FOREIGN LANGUAGE WRITERS

PUBLISHING DETAILS

Turks fruit (1969)
214 pp

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SELECTED TRANSLATED TITLES

Turkish Delight. London: Futura Publications Limited, 1975 / New York: Dell Publishing, 1974 / Boston: Delacorte Press / Seymour Lawrence, 1974 / London: Calder & Boyars, 1974. Also in French (Pierre Belfond, 1976), in Swedish (MånPocket, 1983), in Finnish (Kustannusosakeyhtiö Otava, 1974), in German (Deutscher Bücherbund, 1976 / Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1975 / Rowohlt, 1977 / Bertelsmann-Club, 1987 / Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1986 / Aufbau-Verlag, Berlin und Weimar, 1989 / Goldmann Verlag, 1992), in Swedish (Forum, 1973; 1978), in Portuguese (Casa Portuguesa, 1976), in Japanese (Kadokawa Shoten, 1983), in Polish (Iskry, 1990), in Slovenian (Zalozba Obzorja, 1978) and in Bulgarian (Literaturen Forum, 1995).



A powerful picture of colonial life

Frank Martinus Arion

Double Play

IN HIS BOOKS Frank Martinus Arion tries to provide readers with ‘critical knowledge about reality’, while at the same time getting them ‘so immersed in the book that they forget about the food they have cooking on the stove’. By these standards, *Double Play* (1973) is a resounding success.

It is a hot Sunday afternoon in the village of Wakota on Curaçao, the largest island in the Netherlands Antilles. Four men are seated under the tamarind tree, playing dominoes: Booboo Fiel, taxi driver and layabout; Manchi Sanantonio, bailiff and owner of the biggest house in Wakota; Chamon Nicolas, convicted murderer with a secret fortune (no one may know that he owns several houses) and Janchi Pau, independent idealist. They play dominoes every Sunday, but this particular Sunday is different.

There is trouble brewing. Booboo and Manchi lose one game after another. Booboo’s thoughts wander back to the night he spent at the al-fresco brothel of Campo Alegre and Manchi can’t get his partner to keep his mind on the game. Unlike other Sundays nobody’s telling juicy stories, instead all the talk is of politics. ‘Things are getting too heavy for a game of dominoes among friends,’ Booboo complains. But are they still friends? Janchi and Chamon are playing as if their lives depend on the outcome of the game. Driven by his love for Solema – Manchi’s wife – Janchi has set his sights on winning. As always, the men play until dusk. The stage is set for an unprecedented defeat, a double defeat.

In addition to the four men with their four different views of Curaçaoan society, Solema and her friend Nora also play an important role in the story. Of them all, Solema is the progressive thinker: the people of Curaçao have to produce more themselves; they need to take control of their own lives. It’s no coincidence that she winds up as one of the book’s winners.

Meanwhile tension and intrigue affect them all in this taut and ambitious tragicomedy of a novel.

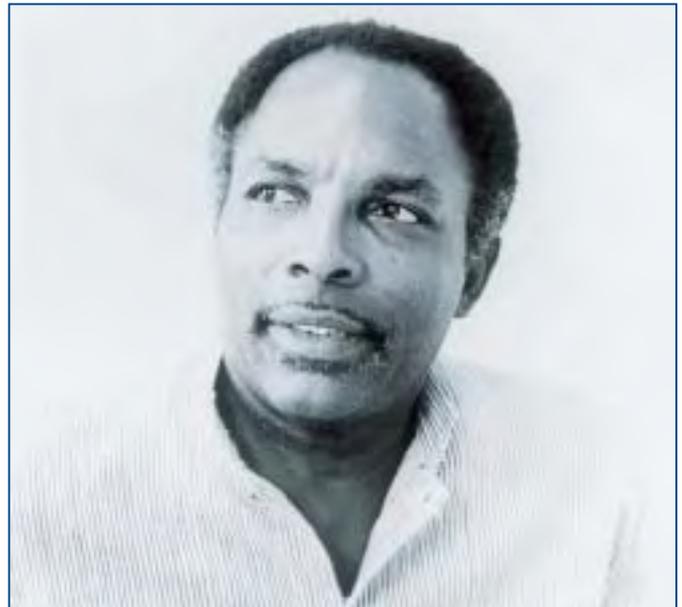


photo De Bezige Bij

The Antillean writer Frank Martinus Arion (born Frank Efraim Martinus in 1936) studied Dutch in Leiden in the 1950s and published a volume of poetry *Stemmen uit Africa* (African voices, 1957). He has lived and worked on Curaçao since 1981. Together with his wife, he founded the only Papiamentto-language school in the world, the Kolegia Erasmo. His interest in the language resulted in *The Kiss of the Slave*, a study of the origins of Papiamentto tongue. This work also served as his doctoral dissertation; in 1996 Arion was awarded a PhD from the University of Amsterdam. He has always made it clear that his roots are in Caribbean and South American literature, and his work indeed bears the traces of magical realism. *Double Play* is unanimously regarded as his best book.

Although Dubbelspel is a first novel, it is the work of a mature writer – one who prepared himself for this sort of audience through life experience. (...) Beneath the ostensible goal of victory in dominoes, the four men are competing for individual power and for the loyalty of their lovers and wives.

WORLD LITERATURE TODAY

A cleverly constructed novel, full of sharp social observation and convincing characterisation, it tells us a good deal about Curaçao, about men, and about the darkness that lurks behind the seemingly innocent pastime of dominoes.

CARIBBEAN BEAT

PUBLISHING DETAILS

Dubbelspel (1973)
365 pp

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SELECTED TRANSLATED TITLES

Double Play: the Story of an Amazing World Record. London: Faber and Faber, 1998. Also in German (Peter Hammer, 1982) and Danish (Hekla, 1983).



A search for harmony

Oek de Jong

Billowing Summer Frocks

IN THE FIRST PART OF *BILLOWING SUMMER FROCKS* we are introduced to eight-year-old Edo Mesch during a languid summer in rural Zeeland. He clings to his mother, but he also torments her. His squint keeps him indoors and away from his friends. Angry and proud, he spends his days sailing the imaginary seas with the aid of a rake. As Part Two opens, we watch as 17-year-old Edo gets into a black Citroën DS belonging to an attractive aunt. This is the beginning of a three-week involvement in a depressing triangle. The sensitive boy is now a difficult young man who is doing his best to believe in a philosophical system that can reduce all phenomena to a principle, while yet struggling with his feelings for his aunt.

At the beginning of the third part, Edo – now 24 years old – is on a ferry in the Mediterranean with his girlfriend Nina. By the time they disembark, the relationship is over. Edo escapes to Rome, but still cannot find peace, instead becoming entangled in erotic relationships, apparently determined to destroy everything around him, and himself in the process. Ultimately this places him in a situation where all his burdens fall from him, leaving only the will to survive.

This book took the literary world by storm in 1979: it made compulsive reading. The scenes he describes remain indelibly etched on the retina, and, thanks to subtle shifts in perspective, the novel retains its momentum and dynamic to the very end.

The themes which the author touches upon have earned the book its enduring reputation. Edo is a walking bundle of contradictions. He yearns for love, but walks away as soon as it appears. He wants to be in touch with his feelings, but is forever rationalising. He searches for naturalness, but is the epitome of artificiality. In the end, it is all about achieving harmony. Here the title scene is revealing when Edo, as a boy, is on the back of his mother's bike. They're on a cycle trip, together with a neighbour and her son. He feels the rush of the wind and sees the women's skirts billowing around their legs. An 'incredible sensation of light and space' comes over him. At last, things are all right. 'Everything was simply the way it was. But he was a part of everything and he was floating.'

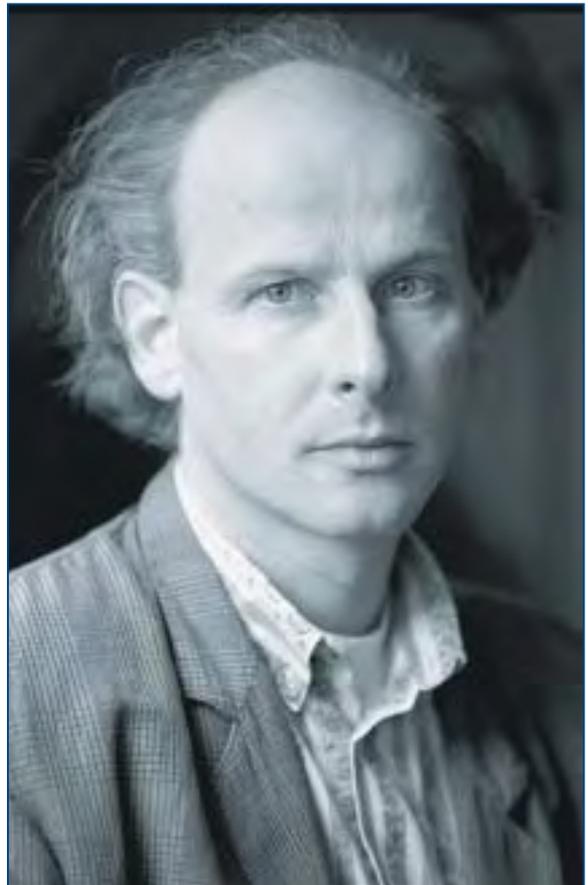


photo Roeland Fossen

Oek de Jong (b. 1952) studied art history, but left university after five years in order to write full time. His debut, a collection of stories entitled *De hemelvaart van Massimo* (The Ascension of Massimo, 1977) was awarded the Reina Prinsen Geerligs Prize. And for *Opwaaiende zomerjurken*, he received the F. Bordewijk Prize. For a time he published very little, but with *Cirkel in het gras* (Circle in the grass, 1985) en *Hokwerda's kind* (Hokwerda's child, 2002) he again captured the hearts of both readers and critics.

A novel I want to keep close at hand for some time to come. It's not every day that a writer is born.

VRIJ NEDERLAND

The style and the mastery of language make this debut a high point in the tradition of individualist and autobiographical literature.

NRC HANDELSBLAD

PUBLISHING DETAILS

Opwaaiende zomerjurken (1979)
271 pp

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Fladdrande sommarklänningar. Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt & Söners Förlag, 1983.



Controversial caricatures and masterful prose

Frans Kellendonk

Mystical Body

THE PUBLICATION OF *MYSTICAL BODY* caused a sensation in the Dutch literary establishment; a number of leading critics accused Kellendonk of anti-Semitism. This was a serious accusation which led other critics to reach for their pens to defend the writer and refute the charge. So who was right? While Kellendonk employs a number of clichéd images that have traditionally been projected onto Jews, he does so in such a way that the clichés are always recognisable as such. At no point does he actually endorse these views himself. A possible problem for the critics is the ironic way that Kellendonk plays with stereotypes in general, not just those associated with Jews. Kellendonk couples these images with ideas about life and death, art and religion. The bizarre contrasts that this produces can scarcely be interpreted any other way than ironically.

Certainly, he presents an anti-Semitic character – Catholic businessman Gijsselhart (who, paradoxically enough, most resembles the cliché of the Jewish miser). He vents his anti-Semitic ideas when he learns that his daughter Magda has gotten pregnant by the Jewish Bruno Pechman. She has come home to have her baby in peace. The arrival of the child will give Gijsselhart his humanity back, as he renounces his materialism and tones down his objectionable ideas.

Gijsselhart's homosexual son, the art historian Leendert ('Broer'), just back from New York and suffering from a deadly virus, turns up unexpectedly at his estate. The lover from whom he caught the virus has just died, and to Leendert's disappointment, the art world is turning out to be run by men who worship money, not beauty. Homosexuals, he says bitterly, live outside history: to him the pregnant Magda represents human and divine creativity, the church sanctifies heterosexuality, while the homosexual's bride is Death.

Leendert's hatred of Bruno should not be seen as a manifestation of anti-Semitism but as an expression of the contrast between life and death, hope and despair, between the vitality of life and the art's futile attempts to equal it. Nevertheless, art – like the union of man and woman – is able to produce a mystical body, as Kellendonk proves with this novel.



photo Gerrit Semé

Frans Kellendonk (1951-1990) belonged to a generation of writers who elevated the dichotomy between fiction and reality to a major theme of their work, with a strong emphasis on form. During his short life, Kellendonk created an impressive oeuvre of novels, short stories, essays and translations. From his debut *Bouwval* ('Ruin', 1977), the ghost story *Letter en geest* ('Letter and Spirit', 1992) to his final novel *Mystiek lichaam* ('Mystical body', 1986) Kellendonk won the admiration of readers and critics alike with his masterly expressive capabilities and sublime command of the language.

Mystiek lichaam is brilliantly written and composed.

VRIJ NEDERLAND

Kellendonk is a sensitive stylist and an astute observer. There is also a spark in his lithe, restrained sentences. He is a pleasure to read.

DE VOLKSKRANT



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15 POSTWAR CLASSICS from Holland and Flanders

is published jointly by the Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature and the Flemish Literature Fund.

The bulletin is distributed free of charge to foreign publishers and editors. If you would like to receive *15 Postwar Classics* from Holland and Flanders please contact the editorial office.

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PUBLISHING DETAILS

Mystiek lichaam (1986), 195 pp.

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Corps mystique: une histoire. Paris: Gallimard, 1993.

Le bon à rien - un récit (De nietsnut).

Nantes: Le Passeur/Cecofop, 2002.

