

BIZAR

**SJOERD
KUYPER**

Hoogland & van Klaveren

Press on *Bizarre*:

'The language used by Sjoerd Kuyper is extremely literary, but still very accessible to young readers. A sublime combination! (...) Quite early in the story, Sallie says, 'You keep going back to a good book because you want to read a writer's brilliant sentences again. Or ponder an important idea.' And that is exactly what I did with this impressive book.' – *Friesch Dagblad*

'In his wide-ranging teen novel, Kuyper lets the reader get inside the mind and life of a gifted teenager and avid reader. This results in beautiful reflections, but also an exciting vacation adventure. (...) *Bizarre* is beautiful, wide-ranging and unique. No one but Kuyper could have written it.' – ***** *NRC Handelsblad*

'Easily the best teen book of 2019 so far. (...) The characters lie and cheat, but also love and forge friendships. But as Sallie Mo observes, getting close to someone can also be painful. What a wonderful book.' – ***** *Noordhollands Dagblad*

'A gutsy, authentic book by a passionate writer who challenges and dares his (young) readers with sidetracks, sudden leaps in time, unbelievable twists and an unreliable narrator, who often casually mentions that she just made a twist up. (...) Verdict: a clever, passionate, rich novel of ideas.' – *Trouw*

'Soft yet tough. That makes Sjoerd Kuyper one of the most exciting teen authors of the moment' – *de Volkskrant*

'*Bizarre* is cleverly written, and reading it is a breathless experience.'
– jaappleest.nl

Sjoerd Kuyper

BIZARRE

English translation by Nancy Forest-Flier



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Friday, July 10, 1:45 p.m.

If you're as ugly as I am, you can have loads of fun. Nobody pays any attention to you. I mean, nobody sits there staring at you the whole time and drooling all over the floor. You can get up and walk away if you feel like it. Nobody notices, and it'd be at least an hour before somebody asked, "Hey, where's Sally Mo?" You can do a lot in an hour. You can rob a bank or commit murder. Then everyone would say, "No, Sally Mo couldn't have done that. She was just sitting here reading. Wasn't she?"

This is something I've never taken advantage of, because until one thirty-two this afternoon I hadn't been doing anything but reading. I've been reading since I was three years old, and before that I pretended I was reading. I only had to have a book read to me once and I knew the whole thing by heart. If you say the words out loud and turn the page at the right time, they all think you can read. If they're paying any attention to you at all, that is. But to them, ugly babies are even worse than ugly teenagers. Ugly babies shouldn't be allowed to exist. So they act like you're not there. Actually, everybody acts like you're not there, all the time. You can never be sure what people are thinking. Except in books. I'll explain that later. For ten years they just let me read all day long. Nobody bothered me, nobody asked me if I'd like to make out behind the bushes, or go for a swim after the sun went down, "just the two of us." Nobody ever asked me to play in a movie.

Okay, enough of this.

Cut it out. Now.

This is going to be the best book in the world, so the adventures come first, and only then comes a little thinking out loud. You have to make everybody so eager to find out what happens next that they're willing to wade through your thoughts. And don't explain who everybody is right away, and who his father is, and his mother, because then it's like reading the Bible, and even I haven't gotten through all that yet.

My mother and I were there first, as usual. We took the ten o'clock boat, and by eleven-thirty we were on the island, and by twelve o'clock we were at the campground, and by twelve-thirty our tents were up. We each sleep in our own tent, my mother and I. Not because I want to so much, but because she says she wants the freedom to do whatever she feels like doing, especially during vacation. As Grandpa David always said, "Freedom is being on the train with a valid ticket." But what my mother means by freedom is spending the whole vacation looking for a new father for me. That's what she calls it: looking for a new father for Sally Mo. If she finds one, she wants to test him out to see if he's a good new father or not. She does that in her tent, and she doesn't want to have me around. I get it. I hate it. I'm used to it. But that's why we always get to the campground early. So she gets first pick.

She had already put the white wine in the cooler and I was reading the last few pages of *Hamlet* when Dylan and his mother popped up from between the trees.

“Here they are,” cooed my mother. “Isn’t this fun, Sally Mo?”

“Stupendous,” I said.

That was the second time I lied today.

“Seen any tight buns yet?” called out Dylan’s mother.

They collapsed into each other’s arms and pressed their bodies so tightly against each other that I thought their tits would pop out of their backs. That might come in handy, actually – if your baby’s so ugly that you’d rather not look at her when she’s nursing. She didn’t bother to give me a second glance, Dylan’s mother, but Dylan winked at me. He’s the only one who knows I exist. But he keeps it secret.

“Everything okay, Sally Mo?”

“Perfect, Dylan.”

That was my third lie. Which means I can’t read any books for three months. Bizarre.

Later on I’ll write about the death of Grandpa David and his cat, but after they died I had to go to a psychiatrist because they thought I had gone all weird and they were afraid I’d “lose touch with reality.” I went to see him every week. His name is Bloom. That’s his last name. Doctor Bloom. I’ve been to see him twelve times.

Yesterday he said, “You’re going on vacation, right, Sally Mo? I think it would be a good idea if you didn’t read for a while. Three months – okay? Live outside your books. Look at everything, think about everything you see. Reading is thinking with somebody else’s head. It’s time you started thinking with your own head. And start searching for the sublime. Look, I’ll make a deal with

you: if you experience the sublime three times, you can start reading again, even if the three months aren't up yet."

We talk a lot about the sublime, Doctor Bloom and I. Ancient philosophers found it in the untamable forces of nature: thunder storms, earthquakes, double rainbows, waterfalls, volcanic eruptions – things that make you live more intensely than you ever did before. Snow helps.

"But it can also happen when you walk along a dike," said Doctor Bloom. "Land on the left, water on the right, and the sun rising out of the mist above the water, and for just a minute everything is completely perfect."

"As if the whole universe were in your head," I said. "In your heart. Or the other way around. As if you a filling the whole universe, merging with everything."

"You get it, Sally Mo. I'm so pleased. I think the sublime is one of those very rare moments when you're glad you were born." Doctor Bloom isn't a laugh a minute, which is fine with me.

"Did you ever experience the sublime, Sally Mo?"

"In the real world?" I asked. He nodded. So I thought about that time a couple of years ago, when I was here at the campground and it was raining gently and everyone was in their tent or in the snack bar or had gone to the beachcombers' museum and I was sitting alone at the edge of the swimming pool and a leaf fluttered down from a tree and landed on the water.

"Landed is a stupid word in this case," I said.

"It doesn't matter," said Doctor Bloom.

“Well,” I said. “The leaf fell just the right way. It’s hard for me to explain what I mean by ‘just the right way,’ but when that leaf fell that way, just the right way, then everything in the world was just right. I was really, really happy.”

And I started to cry. About a little leaf on the water in a swimming pool. At a campground. Bizarre. And what Doctor Bloom did then was just right too. He got up, walked over to the window, and stood there staring outside. He just waited until I felt like continuing the conversation.

“I’m done,” I said after a little while.

He turned around and said, “Those are the kinds of moments you have to search for, Sally Mo. You can find them everywhere, even with people. Believe me.”

“Maybe when they happen it means you’ve gone back in time to before you were born,” I said. “That’s what it seems like to me.”

“Jesus, Sally Mo. I’m supposed to be getting you straightened out, but you’re making me even crazier than I already am.” And we both had to laugh, Doctor Bloom and I. Not real loud. Absolutely not loud. More like two little leaves that had fallen in the water of a swimming pool side by side in just the right way. In the rain.

But yesterday we had an argument, just before I left. About truth. We started in his office, continued on the stairs and in the hallway, and ended up on the street. It took at least fifteen minutes, and I’ll write the whole thing down sometime, but what it boiled down to was that Doctor Bloom thinks truth is a crock, while I think

you always have to search for the truth, that truth is the highest thing there is in life.

“The highest thing in life,” said Doctor Bloom, “is that your poems are translated into Chinese, and what’s even higher is that you turn into a frog.”

That was a good one, but I was too mad to laugh. And I hate animals. Really. All of them.

“If you love truth so much,” said Doctor Bloom, “you should try not to lie for one whole day.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just try it.”

“I’m trying all the time.”

“Are you in love?”

“No.”

“So what about Dylan?”

Shit! I had told him about Dylan during our first talk. I told him a lot. I’m sure Dylan must have rolled over in his grave when I said “no.” Or almost blew the lid off his urn. If he had been dead. Which he wasn’t. Or so I thought. I mean, anybody who isn’t right in front of you, so you can’t see them moving or hear them talking, could be dead. Suddenly I was really afraid that Dylan was dead.

“I’ll make it easier for you,” said Doctor Bloom. “If you can lie fewer than three times a day, then you can read again. Deal?”

“So I can lie twice?”

“It’s impossible not to lie at all. It’s inhuman.”

Deal.

First thing this morning I started not lying. I got up,

looked in the mirror, and said, “What an ugly puss you have.” Good start. Then my mother called to ask if I was out of bed yet.

“Yes.” Good again.

“Will you come here for a minute?”

“No.” Good again.

“Please ...”

“Okay.” I really didn’t feel like it, but it wasn’t lying. I went to her room and there she was, trying to stuff herself into a pair of shorts that were much too small.

“How does this look, Sally Mo?”

“Nice.” First lie. Within five minutes. Then Dylan and his mother arrived at the campground. Stupendous. Second lie. Should I have said that I hate Dylan’s mother even more than my own? Actually, Donnie and Axel’s mother is the worst bitch of them all.

“Everything okay, Sally Mo?”

“Perfect, Dylan.” Third lie. Three strikes and you’re out. Should I have said he’s a jerk, because I hadn’t heard a thing from him in a whole year? I was glad he was still alive!

Everything I’m writing here is true, but everything I said today was a lie. On to the sublime.

“Dead,” Dylan said.

“Not born,” I said.

“If you’re dead, at least you’ve lived,” Dylan said.

“If you haven’t been born, you can still be born,” I said.

“Not if you’re dead. One more time?” Dylan asked.

That’s our what’s-worse game. We’ve been playing it for about five years. It gives us something to think about

in the fifty weeks without each other. Last year the question was: what's worse, being dead or not being born? You can go anywhere with it. The year before that it was: being not really dead, and waking up in the fire of a crematorium or in a coffin six feet under? I voted for fire, because before you realized you were still alive you'd be really dead, and in a coffin you'd be dying of hunger and thirst for days.

Dylan voted for the coffin. "Because I'd have my phone with me," he said.

"No signal," I said.

"You think they haven't figured that out?"

"Or your phone is dead or you've used up all your pre-paid minutes."

"You think I'm that stupid?"

"Then they'll find you centuries later like a skeleton with your hands and feet pushing against the lid of the coffin."

"You can ask them to stab you in the heart with a knife before they bury you, then you know for sure that you're dead."

"Then they have to pull it out again, otherwise the blood can't flow, and it's like a Band-Aid on a cut, or a cork in a bottle. Then you'd lie there for the rest of your life in that coffin with a knife in your heart." We never laugh out loud, Dylan and I. We grin.

I've been in love with him for fourteen years. I'm thirteen, but our fathers were good friends, and when Dylan was born my father said to Dylan's father, "I'm going to make a little girl for that boy of yours." Nine months

later I was born, and even by then I had been in love with Dylan for a long time. Made-up stuff is usually the best, and it would be a shame not to write it down. But in this book I'm always going to say whether something is true or not, because I think truth is the highest thing there is, no matter what Doctor Bloom says. That bit about being in love with Dylan when I was an embryo is made up.

But this is true: today Dylan said, "When you're born, everyone laughs. And you cry. When you die, everyone cries. And you laugh." I think he got that from a book. But I've never seen him read.

Because Dylan is the only one who knows I exist, he's the only one who can be in love with me. He isn't in love with me yet, but he's always nice to me. One time I was sitting next to him on a pier, reading, and I put my arm around his shoulders, and he just let it stay there. But he didn't do anything back. So after a while I pulled my arm away. He dived into the water and I kept on reading.

This year everything is going to be different. I'm going to make sure he falls in love with me. That's what this book is about. About my conquest of Dylan. I'm gradually learning how books work.

YOU WANT A BULLET THROUGH YOUR HEAD OR A KNIFE IN
YOUR THROAT?

Friday, July 10, 6:17 p.m.

Then Donnie and Axel arrived and we were complete. Six little tents on a campground on an island. Three tents for four kids, three tents for three divorced mothers. To be clear: I don't hate my mother. I hate everything she does and says, but that's different. My mother has no talent for mothering. She thinks you're only a good mother if you make sure there's a father nearby. So that's what she's always doing: looking for a father for me. In every way possible. It hurts your eyes and ears just to watch. There's something sweet about it, I guess, if you think about it hard enough. But I'd just as soon she didn't bother. I have my hands full with one parent.

"And the rest is silence," said Hamlet, and then he died. I was allowed to finish *Hamlet*, but then I had to stop. I had to start writing, Doctor Bloom said. About everything I see and hear and think. And that's what I'm doing now. But because I was writing I didn't realize until it was too late that Dylan had left. Fuck. He likes to be alone. At least he doesn't like to be with us. With other people. He always goes to the beach, and that's where I found him today. I saw him in the distance and started sneaking up on him. Through the dunes. You learn a lot about sneaking when you're in love.

[...]

Most of the time Dylan doesn't really do anything on his expeditions. He walks and he looks around and he hums the whole time. Sometimes he goes swimming. As long as nobody else is there. The swimming doesn't amount to much. He falls full length onto a wave when it breaks and lets the surf drag him back to the beach. Then he walks back into the sea and does it again. Twenty times, I mean. Or thirty. Then he sits down on his towel till he's dry, and then he keeps on walking. Looking around and humming. That's all. One time I heard him scream at the sea. No words, just sounds. He stood with his fist raised up to the sky. Bizarre. Maybe he was sad.

Today everything was different. First there was the dog, then the painter, and finally the bitch in the bunker. With her little brothers. As if the world knew I was writing a book and thought it was time for some action. Dylan had taken off his shoes and rolled up his pants' legs and was walking along the shoreline. A big dog came out of the dunes and ran up to him. From behind. Dylan didn't see him. Just as he heard the sound of thudding paws and turned around, the dog snatched the shoes from his hand. I should have warned him, but you don't shout when you're sneaking. The dog raced back into the dunes. You couldn't even see his legs, he was running so fast. With the shoes in his mouth. Dylan dropped to his knees in the sand, totally dumbstruck. It couldn't be true. For a minute he didn't know how to react. So what did he do?

He called out, "Hey! Hey, dog!" Really. "Hey, dog!"

And then he started walking into the dunes. His head bent down, his nose almost in the sand. He was following the footprints! So cute. I sat there watching him, smitten. I felt my heart leaking honey, until from the corner of my eye I saw the dog coming down the land side of the dune. He slid through the loose sand into a little valley and ran up a low bank. Perfectly white sand without any overgrowth. Except for a bush at the top. Burnet rose. I know that name. I know the names of all the plants and animals, but I have no idea what they look like.

The dog dropped the shoes in front of the bush and barked, a short high bark. Three times. *Eeuw, eeuw, eeuw*. Like a bird. Then the bush swung open. There's no other way to describe it, because the bush turned out to be some kind of little door. And it swung open. I dropped onto the sand, flat on my stomach. Out popped the head of a girl. She whispered, but I could understand every word. Sometimes whispering doesn't help. The thinner the knife, the better it cuts – something like that. I bet they could even hear her on the mainland.

“Good job, Brother Monk,” she whispered. “Nice catch.” She stuck her arm out the little door and scratched the dog behind his ears. “But you were supposed to get something to eat. Now go over to the beach cafe, okay? Beach cafe.”

“Eeuw,” said the dog, and ran away. The girl tossed Dylan's shoes inside and pulled the door closed. I hadn't seen what she looked like. Wasn't paying attention.

Even though that's what Doctor Bloom told me to do:

pay close attention. Watch, think, write. Observe, contemplate, record, he says. Be alert, he means. So I blew that one. Yeah, well, if you happen to see a bush at the top of a dune, and the bush swings open and a girl's head pops out, you don't notice right away whether it's a big round head or whether it has sunken cheeks or thin lips or teeth like a row of crooked tombstones. All you can think is: Shit, what's that girl doing there? In that hole? Exciting.

Suddenly I heard Dylan: "Did you see a dog go by here?"

"He almost knocked my easel over," said a man, or at least somebody with a man's voice.

I couldn't see him, so I snuck a little closer. That was tricky, because I could be seen from two sides. By Dylan and by the girl. If she happened to be peeking out. But I slithered through the sand like a snake and saw Dylan standing between two dunes and talking to a man in front of a painter's easel. He was short and bald. I couldn't see any more of him because he was turned with his back toward me.

I lay nearby and peered through the dune grass. I saw the painting on the easel and it was pretty. It looked abstract, three horizontal bands, but if you looked more closely you could see the beach, the sea, and the sky. Floating in the sky was a red cloud that was reflected in the water. The paint was laid on nice and thick. I know something about paint, because Grandpa David was an artist. Professional. Dylan was looking at the painting too.

“Wow,” he said. “If you hung that on a wall, everybody would think it was a window.”

Can you blame me for being in love with him?

“Thank you,” said the painter. “That was my intention. The dog went that way.”

“I see his tracks,” said Dylan.

He trudged down the dune with his head bent over. He was following the footprints again.

Maybe a diary isn't such a good idea for a first book. In a diary the world is in charge, “real life,” and not the writer. I wouldn't have invented that painter. He's not important to me. Dylan could have just followed the dog's footprints, which he was doing anyway. The painter is a useless fact. I'll explain later. When I write my second book, I'm going to invent the whole thing. Like God on the first day. I did read the beginning of the Bible. I'm really into Moses.

Dylan got to the foot of the little dune with the bush and stopped. There the dog's footprints went north and east and south and west, all mixed up together. I crept up the other side of the dune, to just below the top. Then I peered over the edge. Dylan hesitated. He looked around, took a step in the wrong direction, and I ... I did the stupidest, most idiotic thing that I've ever done in my life and ever will do. Really bizarre. How did I know what was going to happen? I wanted Dylan to get his shoes back. That's why I did it.

I whined like that dog. Three times. High-pitched and short. *Eeuw eeuw eeuw*. It sounded pretty good. Dylan turned around and looked up. I ducked down and

heard this rustling on the other side of the dune. The girl opened her bush-door.

“God damn it!” Her voice sounded really sharp but with a posh accent, like somebody from the government a hundred years ago. “God damn it. Are you standing there trying to imitate my dog?”

“I’m looking for my shoes,” said Dylan.

What a pathetic opening line.

I couldn’t see anything without being seen, so I slid down the dune and crept to a place with a better view. In the meantime I could hear what they were saying.

“Not a very smart move,” said the girl. “Because now you die. You want a bullet through your head and a knife in your throat? I mean it.”

Dylan didn’t say a word. He couldn’t make up his mind.

I got another good look at them. The situation was more serious than I thought. The girl was aiming a gun at Dylan, and Dylan was standing there with a red face, looking right down the barrel. I had never seen him blush before.

The girl had mid-length hair, black as ebony, all messed up, the hair, and what was under it in her head was probably messed up too, and skin as white as snow, lips as red as blood. Fucking Snow White, I thought. But she looked more like a homeless girl that I had seen in an old black-and-white movie once. So beautiful it made you sick.

[...]

The girl had smudges on her face. Bright eyes. Perfectly cast for a girl in a hole in the dunes. So it's not true that people with dogs are always ugly. Not always, I mean. I could have screamed or run up to them, I could have warned the painter, but for some reason I knew she wouldn't shoot. And I was right. Dylan stood there with his hands in the air, kind of amateurish, and the girl fell forward, flat on her face in the sand, gun and all.

Two boys about eight years old, as old as Axel, came out of the hole and climbed over her. Each carrying one of Dylan's shoes. Twins. Nasty-looking brats. With freckles that weren't cute. They talked with the same posh accent as the girl.

"How much will you pay for these?" one of them asked.

They held up the shoes.

"For fifty euros you get them back," said the other.

Dylan let his hands drop. "Forget it," he said. "Those shoes are mine."

"We got them fair and square," said the one.

"From the dog," said the other.

"Come on," said Dylan. "The dog stole them from me."

The girl had sat down, the gun lying on her knees.

"Stealing is the same as getting," said the one boy.

"Our father stole money from people, and they gave it to him themselves," said the other.

"So he got it from them," said the one.

I wish I knew what their names were. That would make it much easier to write about them.

"I don't want to hear any more of that," hissed the girl. She aimed the gun at the boys.

I thought the painter could hear and understand everything in that windless world. But maybe he had already left. His painting looked finished.

“No more euros and no more money. Never,” said the girl. “No more profits and no more interest and no more anything that has anything to do with it. Never again. And no iPhone and no chips, either. They don’t exist here.”

“Fifty thingamajigs,” the second boy said to Dylan.

“Fifty you-know-whats,” said the first. “Or we’ll sell your shoes on eBay.”

The dog came up the dune in a cloud of dust. He laid a piece of raw meat in front of the girl and whined three times.

“Je-sus,” she said. She had this thing about swearing. She had probably learned it somewhere, but it sounded stupid with that accent of hers. “Je-sus, raw! That won’t do us any good. Not from the kitchen, I said. From the plates.”

The dog whined and laid down next to her in the sand. She scratched him behind the ears. It was a really sweet gesture. As long as she doesn’t scratch Dylan behind the ears I don’t care what she does.

Dylan walked up to the boys and tried to grab his shoes. What he ended up with was a knee in the groin, and he bent over double. I felt it, too. I heard my pubic bone crack. Exaggerating is different than lying.

“A deal’s a deal. They’re ours now,” said one. Or the other.

And then something fantastic happened. Dylan straight-

ened up, grabbed the two boys by the scruff of the neck, and rammed their two heads together. It was a miracle their skulls didn't burst open, with clouds of little black devils pouring out.

Shit. Time to eat. Don't forget: read everything through again later on and put the best sentence at the head of the chapter. As the title. And then on we go with the adventures of Dylan. He's the main character for the time being, the villain. That's the word Hamlet always uses when he means motherfucker: villain.

English translation © Nancy Forest-Flier

BIZARRE is the diary of a girl called Sallie Mo. She is thirteen years old, and since she learned to read at the age of three she has done little else. She lives in her books, and has read everything from Shakespeare to contemporary authors and all the way back to the most ancient stories. On the rare occasions she stops reading, she visits Grandpa David to listen to his stories. And when she goes to the island with her mother in the summer – which they do every year, together with Dylan and his mother, and Beitel and Donnie and their mother – she slinks after Dylan for three whole weeks. She has been in love with him for thirteen years, but has never dared to tell him.

Fiction | 15 x 22 cm | 320 pages | Age: 13+

Press on previous work:

‘With his superb style, his dark humour and unparalleled sense of the absurd, Sjoerd Kuyper turns *The Big L Hotel* into that one book in a thousand.’ – Jury Silver Slate Pencil 2015

‘This prose is irresistible. You can only conclude that Kuyper is a true writer for teenage boys.’ ***** – *de Volkskrant*

‘Reading Kuyper makes your heart pump faster, tingling with happiness.’ ***** – *NRC Handelsblad*

‘A riotous rollercoaster about adversity, love and happiness.’
– *Het Parool*

‘A wonderfully wacky, high-spirited adolescent novel about Kos, who tries to run a hotel without his parents and falls in love.’ – *Trouw*



© Ineke Oostveen

SJOERD KUYPER made his writing debut in 1974 with a collection of poems for adults. He wrote various film scenarios, among them *Het zakmes* (The Pocket Knife) and *Mijn opa de bankrover* (My Grandpa the Bank Robber). He was awarded the Theo Thijssen Prize for his oeuvre, a Golden Slate Pencil for *Robin en God* (Robin and God) and six Silver Slate Pencils, the latest for *Hotel De grote L* (The Big L Hotel) which was nominated for the Premio Strega and awarded the Premio Orbil in Italy. *De duik* (The Dive) was awarded the Jenny Smelik IBBY Prize and nominated for the Woutertje Pieterse Prize.

He is, he thinks, a writer who writes mostly about what he thinks, fears, feels, more than about what he himself has experienced. Kuypers writes in a style that is poetic, clear and vivid and enters with ease into the emotional world of young children.

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