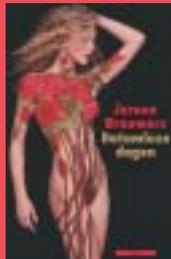


NO. 17-1

SPRING 2008

# 10 Books

from Holland and Flanders



Annelies Verbeke

Jeroen Brouwers



Rachida Lamrabet

Louise O. Fresco



Natalie Koch

Kees van Beijnum



Joke J. Hermsen

Rascha Peper

Chika Unigwe



Marente de Moor

 Foundation for the  
Production and  
Translation of  
Dutch Literature

Flemish  
Literature  
Fund



*A wonderful collection of tragicomic stories*



## Annelies Verbeke

### Greener Grass

**A**nnelies Verbeke's work has been praised for its bizarre take on people who are slightly out of the ordinary, who for all their unease have great reserves of emotion. In their existential discomfort they display varying degrees of loneliness, isolation and impotence, feelings of insignificance and

rejection, but always counterbalanced by subtle irony and dry humour.

In *Groener gras* (Greener Grass), her third book, Annelies Verbeke brings together stories in which a succession of people step into the limelight, all of whose lives contain substantial hidden realms: a woman who becomes fond of a bull; a tough self-defence teacher whose heart melts when she looks after a small refugee girl. With their emotional isolation and longing for affection, the characters arouse sympathy and compassion, even if their self-control ends in a violent outburst. A postal worker, misunderstood by the people he lives with, his diligence unnoticed, puts on his best suit one day and goes out into the street with a gun. His hopelessness and wounded self-esteem lead us to see him as a tragic figure rather than simply a criminal.

Those who seem most recognisable are damaged characters, forced to deal with their own minor tragedies in the shadows of their public lives. A man visits a chat room and carefully builds up a promising friendship, but at his first real meeting with his online girlfriend he escapes. A retired couple, emigrating to sunnier climes, lose their dog, their most important bond, to an unnecessary dose of tranquillisers on the flight out. With the dead dog wrapped in a blanket in a taxi on the way to 'their own beach', the wife in particular realises 'how much gradual loss had been abruptly revealed. How little there was left to say.'

In this book Annelies Verbeke's prose excels at evoking gradual loss, in strange harmony with undertones in a kind of atonal ambiguity. Things that remain implicit weigh heavily upon the characters' lives, but absurd touches, quirkily humorous traits and unexpected twists and turns add a bizarre light-heartedness to the shifting narratives, such as the story of a Don Johnson lookalike who makes a big mistake in assuming the woman he is addressing is the author of a love note. In *Groener gras*, Annelies Verbeke peoples her peculiar world with ardent, irresistible, intriguing characters.



photo Liesbeth Kuipers

Annelies Verbeke (b. 1976) writes novels, stories, screenplays and columns. She made a celebrated entry onto the literary scene with her first book *Slaap!* (Sleep!, 2003), the story of two insomniacs, a young woman and an older man, who discover each other during their nocturnal escapades at the margins of everyday life. The book won the 2004 Debut Prize, the 2004 Woman and Culture Debut Prize and the Golden Dog-Ear 2005. *Sleep!* has since been translated into fifteen languages.

*A wonderful collection of tragicomic fairytales for adults, beautifully articulated and full of unexpected twists and turns. DE TELEGRAAF*

*The clever thing about Greener Grass is that there seems to be very little going on around the everyday, slightly odd characters, yet their lives suddenly take a bizarre, felicitous or disastrous turn. Annelies Verbeke's assured and evocative style lends the stories enormous eloquence.*

*DE VOLKSKRANT*

*Powerfully written scenes. NRC HANDELSBLAD*

#### PUBLISHING DETAILS

*Groener gras* (2007)  
224 pp

#### RIGHTS

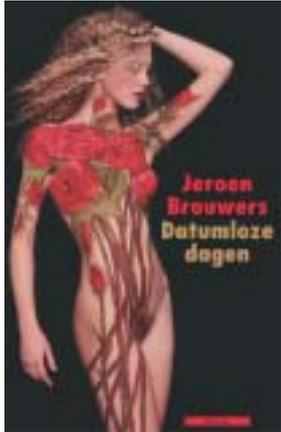
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#### OTHER TITLES IN TRANSLATION

*Schlaf!* (Slaap!). Leipzig: Reclam, 2005. Also in French (Mercure de France, 2005), in Italian (Instar Libri, 2005), in Finnish (Avain, 2006) and in many other languages.



## Father and son



# Jeroen Brouwers

## Numberless Days

**D**atumloze dagen (Numberless Days), Jeroen Brouwers' latest novel, incorporates a thunderous symphony of death. In his rich oeuvre this virtuoso author has consistently given voice to melancholy. Death plays a central role in all his novels, as well as in many of his essays.

Datumloze dagen is a short, dark novel about a father and a son, told retrospectively by the father in one long, strangling monologue: 'A hateful memory suddenly slips into your brain, like a burglar throwing a piano wire over your head and tightening it round your throat.' The nameless father got married young, and almost immediately realized that marriage was not for him. 'I had the feeling that my life had become void of dates and that it would remain this way, the feeling that time was rushing blankly past me and I was leading a non-existence.'

His wife Mirjam wanted to save the 'festering' marriage by having a baby. Her husband resisted, lying next to her in bed like 'a rigid mummy in a sarcophagus', but she managed to seduce him during a stay in Venice – 'sun, stand still!' – a city that traditionally symbolises death. Brouwers' narrative, heavy with foreboding like all his books, is jam-packed with symbolism and references to classical myths and literature. Every word and letter has a double meaning. Nathan (meaning 'gift of God') is born against his father's explicit wishes.

His parents' marriage runs aground soon after due to his father's urge to cheat on his wife. For years the father doesn't see his son, and almost forgets that he exists. Years later two seemingly coincidental, awkward meetings take place. 'What is worse than not having a father? Having one.' Shamefully the father doesn't recognize his son, and consequently the son no longer wants to know the father. This changes when Nathan comes down with a mysterious, lethal blood disease, haemophagocytosis.

The father returns to the hospital, to Nathan's sickbed, where the approach of death unites father and son in a horrifying climax. Exactly because the father has been a bastard, a selfish lecher, because of the bitter shame that finally overwhelms him, and because of the author's honest, uncompromising, almost crushing description of his acts and thoughts, the poignancy and sadness of the final pages crash over the reader like a wave. A deeply melancholic, honest, and masterful novel.

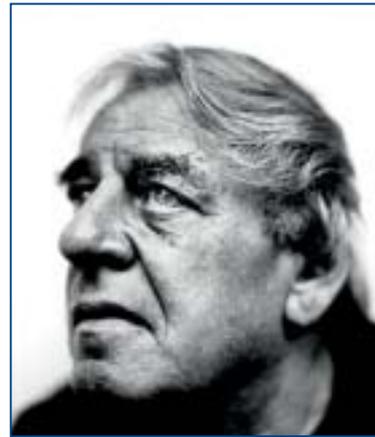


photo Stephan Vanfleteren

Jeroen Brouwers (b. 1940) broke through to a wide audience with the novella *Zonder trommels en trompetten* (Without Fanfare, 1973) in which he weaves a web on death, love, loss and the past that then informs his later work, such as the novel *Zonsopgangen boven zee* (Sunrises at Sea, 1977), which was a great critical success. Brouwers' work has strong autobiographical elements, such as in the polemical novel *Het verzonkene* (The Submerged, 1979, awarded the Multatuli Prize) and in *Bezonken rood* (Sunken Red, 1981). His novel *Geheime kamers* (Secret Rooms, 2000) won critical acclaim and won several prizes. In 2007 Brouwers was awarded the prestigious three-yearly Dutch Literature Prize (Prijs der Nederlandse Letteren) for his entire oeuvre. *Numberless Days* was short-listed for De Gouden Uil (the Golden Owl Award) in 2007.

This novel is a poignant book about guilt and mourning and the impotent triumph of art.

HET PAROOL

Jeroen Brouwers pulls no punches in *Numberless Days*, about a man who gets a son whom he doesn't want only to lose him again. KNACK

A real Brouwers: stylistically pure, beautifully composed, poignant, filled with melancholy and regret. [...] Jeroen Brouwers creates a perfect fictional universe. ELSEVIER

### PUBLISHING DETAILS

*Datumloze dagen* (2007)  
190 pp

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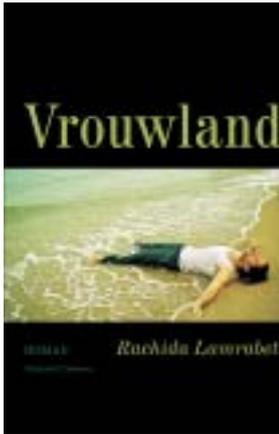
### OTHER TITLES IN TRANSLATION

*Sunken Red* (Bezonken rood). New York: New Amsterdam, 1988 / London: Peter Owen, 1990. Also in German (Nagel & Kimche, 1984 / Piper, 1988), in French (Gallimard, 1995), in Japanese (Rose des vents / Suisseisha, 2001) and in many other languages.  
*Geheime Zimmer* (Geheime kamers). Stuttgart; München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2002.

*L'édén englouti* (Het verzonkene). Paris: Gallimard, 1998. Also in Serbian (Prometej, 1997).  
*Adolf és Eva, meg a Halál* (Adolf en Eva en de Dood). Budapest: Noran, 2003.



## Subtle and convincing portrait



# Rachida Lamrabet

## Woman Country

**R**esistance or resignation are the only options, or so Mariam, the central character in Rachida Lamrabet's *Vrouwland* (*Woman Country*), believes. A Moroccan woman in Antwerp who has chosen a Western lifestyle, she embraces her personal freedom, but not without encountering opposition and doubt.

The cultural conflicts in Mariam's life emerge in her tragic story. At the end of a holiday in Morocco she agrees, without thinking, to marry Younes. For five years he waits for her to return. Meanwhile Faïza hopes that Younes will notice her instead. Finally, deciding to deliver one last desperate letter to Mariam in Europe in person, Younes dies on the illegal crossing to Spain. A survivor carries the letter on to Mariam.

To pay her final respects, Mariam goes with her brother to visit the place where Younes' body was washed ashore. In southern Spain she decides to make the crossing to Morocco. There she faces not only confrontation with Faïza but incomprehension and criticism of her rejection of traditional values and customs. 'Are you happy?' a sympathetic aunt asks her. There can be no simple answer.

It is Lamrabet's convincing interpretation of the characters' points of view which makes *Vrouwland* so captivating. The novel presents a Moroccan outlook on the differences between Moroccans in Morocco and those who have emigrated; between their own values, which often marginalise Moroccans in Europe, and Western values, including the rampant consumerism that causes such envy in Morocco; between tradition, which so tragically impedes Faïza's life, and the modern ways of thinking that men find so hard to deal with. 'Woman Country' is how they refer to the West, where they believe emancipated women have taken charge.

Rachida Lamrabet creates above all a subtle and convincing portrait of a fascinating woman, who, standing firmly by her decisions must pay the social and intellectual price. Whether in Morocco, where as a woman on her own she cannot find a hotel room, or in Belgium, where a political party exploits her activism for its own ends, she constantly has to struggle against prejudice. In the cemetery in her native village, filled with melancholy and doubt, she is finally able to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of her choices in life. In *Vrouwland* we are in the hands of a promising writer with a distinctive voice of her own.



photo Koen Broos

Rachida Lamrabet (b. 1970) is a Belgian author of Moroccan origin. She works as a lawyer for the Centre for Equality of Opportunity and Opposition to Racism in Brussels. In 2006 her story 'Mercedes 207' about a Moroccan who regularly travels between his relatives in Morocco and his family in Antwerp won the literary prize 'Colour the Arts!' awarded by Kif Kif. The story was included in *Kif Kif. New Voices from Flanders* (2006). *Woman Country* (2007), Rachida Lamrabet's first novel, has attracted a great deal of interest and was extremely well received.

*A remarkably powerful debut novel. [...] Woman Country is above all a wonderful story, impossible to put down. It's exciting, fast-paced and written in a style both incisive and highly readable. DE MORGEN*

*A unique perspective on our woman-friendly society. TROUW*

### PUBLISHING DETAILS

*Vrouwland* (2007)  
180 pp

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## Intriguing novel of ideas



# Louise O. Fresco

## The Utopians

**H**ow can you be principled when in power? This novel of ideas is about corruption. Michiel van Straten, an environmental activist, has been appointed Secretary of State for Technology and the Environment. He enjoys his new role, but the novel gradually reveals how he is struggling.

How does the State Secretary, living now in a luxury canal house in the centre of Amsterdam, relate to the person he once was, one who lived in a squat, organising activities which bordered on terrorism? Or has Michiel always been the politician he is today? These provocative questions apply to quite a few modern-day European politicians (Joschka Fischer, for one).

The novel opens with Michiel's inaugural celebrations. His former fellow activists, his new friends from the Progressive Party, his fashionable new girlfriend, his daughter, and his oldest friend are all at the party. Then his ex-wife arrives – and all the main characters are assembled. At the same time, the first cracks between Michiel's past and future begin to show.

The new State Secretary starts with fresh energy, but soon realises how dependent he is on his officials. His diary is filled up for him, making it impossible for him to put his mark on policies. His mother dies before Michiel finally finds the time to visit her. He doesn't pay enough attention to his glamorous girlfriend and when events from the past put him in a tight spot it looks as if he will go under.

Eventually, he announces his resignation in a fiery speech at a party conference. This resembles author Fresco's career with the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Her letter of resignation, leaked to *The Observer*, contained strong criticism of the FAO's lack of decisiveness.

Fresco, like the protagonists of *De utopisten* (The Utopians), is driven by idealism, and this shows in her new novel as well as in her scientific and managerial work. In *Het Financieel Dagblad* she says, 'For many years I've been writing both fictional and factual pieces about distance and engagement. When you are involved, you lose your perspective. If you keep too much of a distance, you become indifferent.'

For a long time, politics and social engagement were rare in Dutch literature. But that changed recently with *Vladiwostok!* (Vladivostok!) by P.F. Thomése, *De literaire kring* (The Literary Circle) by Marjolijn Februari and now *De utopisten* by Louise O. Fresco.



photo Willem Diepraam

Louise O. Fresco (b. 1952) worked for years for the FAO in Rome, where she was Assistant Director General. Since June 2006 she has been a professor with the University of Amsterdam focusing on sustainable development from an international perspective. She is a senior member of the Social Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER), and a member of the board of directors of the Rabobank.

Despite her busy schedule, she regularly publishes collections of essays and novels. Her novels, *De kosmopolieten* (The Cosmopolitans, 2003) and *De tuin van de sultan in Rome* (The Garden of the Sultan in Rome, 2006), were well received.

*Fresco's message is that naïve idealism leads to nothing, but purely selfish pragmatism offers even less chance of social progress. Which way do we need to go in order to leave the world a better place than the one we found? That is the question.*

NRC HANDELSBLAD

*The human mixture of Michiel's activism, opportunism and eagerness to please is especially apt. He embodies the main trajectory, as it were, of his generation, from leftist activist to social success.*

TROUW

### PUBLISHING DETAILS

*De utopisten* (2007)  
350 pp

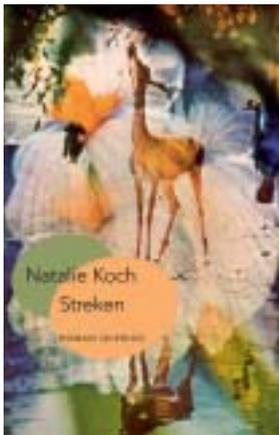
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## Driving ambition and unconditional love

# Natalie Koch

## Plays



To reach the pinnacle in classical music demands passion and sacrifice – and driving ambition. This is the theme of Natalie Koch's first novel, *Streken* (Plays). Its protagonist is world-famous cellist Arthur Bronckhorst. Now nearly fifty and suffering from arthritis, his career is at an end; his final concerts in London at the end of the year were disastrous. After a master class, Arthur manages to seduce seventeen-year-old Chrissie Pagett, who has an even greater potential than he had at that age.

In Chrissie, Arthur recognises unconditional devotion to her instrument and the drive to achieve the purest musical rendition. For that reason he offers to be her teacher, preparing her for the heights of international success. At the same time, his affair with Chrissie forces him to reflect on a painful part of his past, particularly the way he competed with his brother Alexander, who disappeared mysteriously twenty years previously. In Chrissie's performance he sees a reflection of Alexander – also a great talent at the time, but lacking the social graces and the theatrical skills to become a star.

The mystery of Alexander's disappearance and Arthur's role in it unfolds slowly. Why has Arthur never composed anything since his sublime piece *Dead Days* – even when Chrissie asks him to? Koch is accomplished at subtly developing the plot, painting a world driven by fierce ambition, rivalry and the desire for fame as by an unconditional love for music – a contradiction which, in itself, creates great suspense. Koch's style is musical; even when describing the elevated emotions generated by music, so often difficult to express in words, she manages to hit the right chord. This, in particular, is what makes *Streken* such an accomplished debut. It has already been reprinted three times.



photo Leo van der Noort

Natalie Koch (b. 1966) is a musicologist. As a journalist and musicologist, she has published articles about music and written concert and CD notes. Today, Koch works at the Amsterdam Conservatory and is working on her second novel.

*Plays, a well-made play in which everything falls into place. DE VOLKSKRANT*

*Koch writes about something that is hard to catch in words – music – and does so convincingly. Her style is fluent. OPZIJ*

*A strong and moving debut. NOORDHOLLANDS DAGBLAD*

*Natalie Koch wrote an excellent first novel. BLVD*

### PUBLISHING DETAILS

*Streken* (2007)  
271 pp

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## The meaning of happiness

# Kees van Beijnum

## Paradiso



**F**rom the very first pages of his new novel, Kees van Beijnum puts the reader on edge. After six months, scientific researcher and happiness expert Mart Hitz, married father of a fourteen-year-old girl, decides to leave home for his mistress Karin. However, nature is stronger than he is: when he comes home, to announce his decision, it is to find out that a dyke has broken and that the villagers – Dana, Mart’s wife among them – have been evacuated to the

bowling alley. But when Mart goes there and doesn’t find her, a dark, winding hunt commences. Along with the police, his in-laws, and his daughter, he follows the leads of the few witnesses and slowly becomes mired in quicksand as he discovers that she, too, had a secret life.

The essence of this compelling novel lies in its title and literally so, since the eponymously named Amsterdam rock-music temple is where Mart first met Karin, a young single woman who surprised him by being open to a boring, married man as he saw himself. *Paradiso* is really about the meaning of happiness, too. Ironically, Mart Hitz, by profession a happiness expert, gropes about in the dark when it comes to his own happiness, and heads for doom.

*Paradiso*’s power is its tension, which contrasts so strongly with the shrouded lyricism of the style. Thus the realistic relational drama gains an almost existential depth. Van Beijnum doesn’t hesitate to give his story a moral, which flows naturally from the drama’s seriousness. People have everything but they forget to appreciate it. Cliché this may be, but under Van Beijnum’s skilled pen, it is revealed as a fresh and penetrating insight.

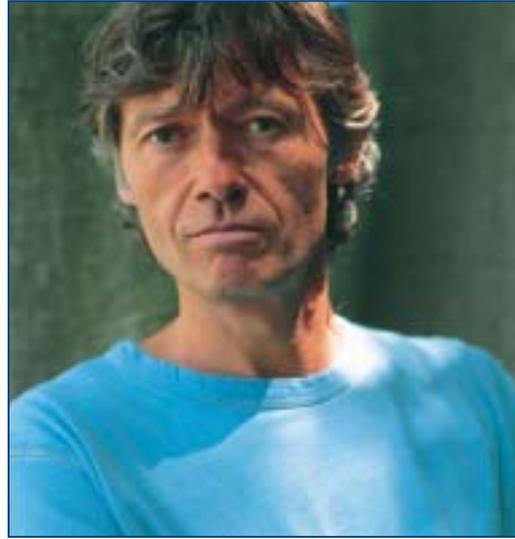


photo Wim van de Hulst

Kees van Beijnum (b. 1954) made his debut in 1991 with the true-crime novel *Over het IJ* (*Across the IJ*). His steady novel production that followed, with as peaks the autobiographical *Dichter op de Zeedijk* (*Poet on the Zeedijk*, 1996) and the amorous *De oesters van Nam Kee* (*Nam Kee’s Oysters*, 2000), made Van Beijnum one of the best Dutch literary storytellers. Van Beijnum, who also writes movie scripts, has a sharp eye for the rules of a good story. Rather than playing an intellectual game with his characters, he supplies them with a warm heart and heightened senses. Despite the sobering truths of his novels, as in *De vrouw die alles had* (*The Woman Who Had Everything*, 2002), a mother-son drama, and *Het verboden pad* (*The Forbidden Path*, 2004), about the underbelly of social work, his work reads as if you are watching a cathartic movie. ‘You have to love your characters, but you also have to send them to the brink,’ Van Beijnum said in an interview. ‘That’s where the real drama is – the truth and the pain.’

An admirable novel. Van Beijnum continues to write heart-wrenchingly beautiful plots and it works: as a reader you are very moved by this novel. Impressive. *HET PAROOL*

A wise narrative about loss and acceptance, an incredibly exciting parable about human imperfections... With *Paradiso* Van Beijnum is shown at his best.

VRIJ NEDERLAND

### PUBLISHING DETAILS

*Paradiso* (2008)  
293 pp

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### OTHER TITLES IN TRANSLATION

*Die Archivarin* (*De ordening*). Stuttgart; München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2000.

## Tasteful and ingenious story

# Joke J. Hermsen

## So It's Love



**I**n this ingenious epistolary-cum-historical novel, Hermsen shines a fascinating light on the life and work of Isabella Tuyll de Charrière, better known by her pseudonym: Belle van Zuylen. She begins a personal investigation in the spirit of the eighteenth-century Dutch libertine author and composer into the moral aspects of marriage and love, then and now. From the very first page she draws the reader intimately into Van Zuylen's mind, fluently alternating letters, journal

entries, and fragments of narrative, all relating to the events of a single summer in 1785.

'So it's love,' the Parisian representative of the King lets slip, in an attempt to get his taciturn fellow traveller, a Swiss banker, to open up about the reason for his unhappy state of mind. It is September 1785, both gentlemen are on board a French three-master headed for America and both are running away from love. From passionate, impossible loves, to be precise. The banker's love interest is none other than Belle van Zuylen. She and he had met two years earlier and the attraction had been immediate, but Isabelle was married and the banker was engaged. Nevertheless, an ill-fated love affair ensued and it was to have long-lasting effects on van Zuylen's life, in Joke J. Hermsen's mind, that is.

In summer 1785, Isabella flees Colombier, her dull hometown in Switzerland, and her equally dull marriage, for Paris. There she consults famous doctor and alchemist Count Balsamo Cagliostro, hoping he can cure her stomach ailments and 'vapours'. She enters into intense discussions with the doctor on such matters as morality and happiness, circling the question that torments her: should one pursue personal happiness at the expense of the happiness of others? Only a passionate, deep love makes one really feel alive, but it carries within it a destructive power.



photo Vivian Keulards

Joke J. Hermsen (b. 1961) studied Dutch and philosophy. In 1993, she wrote a doctoral thesis on Belle van Zuylen, Lou-Andreas Salome and Ingeborg Bachmann entitled *Nomadisch narcisme* (Nomadic Narcissism, 1993). Five years later, she wrote her debut novel *Het dameoffer* (The Lady Sacrifice) about a suffocating mother-daughter relationship. In her novel *Tweeduister* (Double Darkness, 2001) – a portrait of the Bloomsbury Group – she evokes the political and literary climate between the two world wars. Her experience as researcher and professor at several philosophy faculties is reflected in the satirical university novel *De profielschets* (The Profile, 2004).

*The structure – letters, novel form and journals – is a real find; it is how Hermsen makes the novel intriguingly multi-faceted. It results in beautiful connections between present and past, winks and mirrorings, without any overlap.*

HET FINANCIEELE DAGBLAD

*Joke J. Hermsen has written a tasteful, ingenious story about the big mystery in Belle van Zuylen's life, based on her writings.*

DE VOLKSKRANT

*So It's Love is a lively and varied novel with a real, classic denouement, based on a disastrous misunderstanding.*

NRC HANDELSBLAD

### PUBLISHING DETAILS

De liefde dus (2008)  
256 pp

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### TITLES IN TRANSLATION

*Die Gärten von Bloomsbury* (Tweeduister). Bergisch Gladbach: Lübbe, 2003, 2006

*Queen of subdued passion*

Rascha Peper

Marzipan Fingers



**P**assion is the central theme in Rascha Peper's work. Whether it is the love of German Romantic painting in *Verfhuud* (Dyed in the Skin, 2005) or the fascination for the Romanovs in *Russisch blauw* (Russian Blue, 1995), her protagonists are ready to put their life on the line for passion. The same goes for *Vingers van marsepein* (Marzipan Fingers), about the lifelike specimens by the eighteenth-century Frederik Ruysch, who specialised in preserving people and animals in alcohol.

The protagonists are Bregtje and Benjamin, both ten years old and separated from each other by three centuries, and yet neighbours, because they live on the same Amsterdam canal. Bregtje is an orphan who is placed with the Ruysch family and Benjamin becomes fascinated by the specimens during a vacation in St Petersburg, where the Ruysch collection – bought by Tsar Peter the Great – ended up in a museum. Both their fascinations stem from the loss of a brother and sister. For Bregtje the promise – false, as it turns out – of being able to meet her brother again is the reason for giving away Ruysch's secrets. Three centuries later Ben commits a rash deed in the St Petersburg zoo, featuring a rhinoceros – similar to the one that made a deep impression on Bregtje.

Peper seamlessly weaves the two stories into an intriguing whole, cleverly evoking two radically different periods of time through colourful details of daily life, language, and social relations. Both periods come over authentically. Equally convincing is the way Peper voices the experience of two ten-year-old children. All this makes *Vingers van marsepein* arresting reading.



photo Keke Keukelaar

Rascha Peper (b. 1949) made her debut in 1990 with the collection of short stories *De waterdame* (The Water Lady), followed a year later by her first novel *Oesters* (Oysters). She received the Multatuli Prize for *Russisch blauw* (Russian Blue, 1995). Literary appreciation for Peper goes hand in hand with a wide public following. *Rico's vleugels* (Rico's Wings, 1993) has been reprinted twelve times. And *Wie scheep gaat* (Embarkation), published in 2003, had no less than eight editions in two years.

Rascha Peper's great strength is the matter-of-course manner in which she presents bizarre subject matter and symbolic motifs. A great story-telling talent.

DE VOLKSKRANT

A compelling book full of delicious details about seventeenth-century Amsterdam. [...] Rascha Peper proves again that she is a talented writer, a full-blooded storyteller with the gift of being able to take her readers into the colourful worlds she creates. DE TELEGRAAF

Again Peper has delivered a feat of beautiful and entertaining writing. NRC HANDELSBLAD

**PUBLISHING DETAILS**

*Vingers van marsepein* (2008)  
316 pp

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**OTHER TITLES IN TRANSLATION**

*Visions of Hanna* (*Wie scheep gaat*). Hamburg: MareBuch, 2006 / Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2008.  
*Russisch Blau* (*Russisch blauw*). München: Luchterhand, 1998 / Knauer, 2002. Also in Serbian (Prometej, 2006).  
*Das Mädchen, das vom Himmel fiel* (*Dooi*). Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2001.

## Disconcerting account of personal tragedy



# Chika Unigwe

## Fata Morgana

**T**he four African women in *Fata Morgana*, who work as prostitutes in Antwerp, are not entirely dissatisfied with their lot. But when Sisi is murdered in one of the suburbs, the other three come together seeking protection, bringing with

them their horror and their questions.

Sisi had earned a diploma in Lagos, but she could not find a job and in desperation took up an offer from Dele to be smuggled to Europe. She, and the others, had had to pay substantial sums to sex trafficker Dele. Efe was sexually abused by a rich man when she was a child, then rejected by him when she became pregnant. Ama comes from a wealthy, strictly religious family; her father revealed he was really her stepfather, thinking this gave him the right to use her for sex. Joyce from Sudan was raped by soldiers. A man from an asylum centre, who has become Joyce's friend and lover, pays off her debt to Dele. The women's lives are shaped largely by poverty, lack of opportunity, sexual abuse and incest, corruption and injustice.

Dreaming of a future in which they will be free to lead normal lives, whether in the West or back in Nigeria, they are prepared to put up with discomfort for the time being. They have known worse. But they never find out that Sisi was murdered for trying to leave prostitution and therefore have no idea of the extent to which they are all Dele's prisoners. The reader learns things that the characters themselves cannot know, even glimpses of the women's future lives, thus further magnifying the tragedy of their illusions.

In her acknowledgements Chika Unigwe refers to 'the anonymous Nigerian sex workers who allowed me into their lives, answered my questions and laughed at my ignorance.' Thoroughly documented and starkly realistic, *Fata Morgana* is a disconcerting account of personal tragedy in a world still largely hidden from Western eyes, reinforced by Chika Unigwe's intense personal commitment to their story.

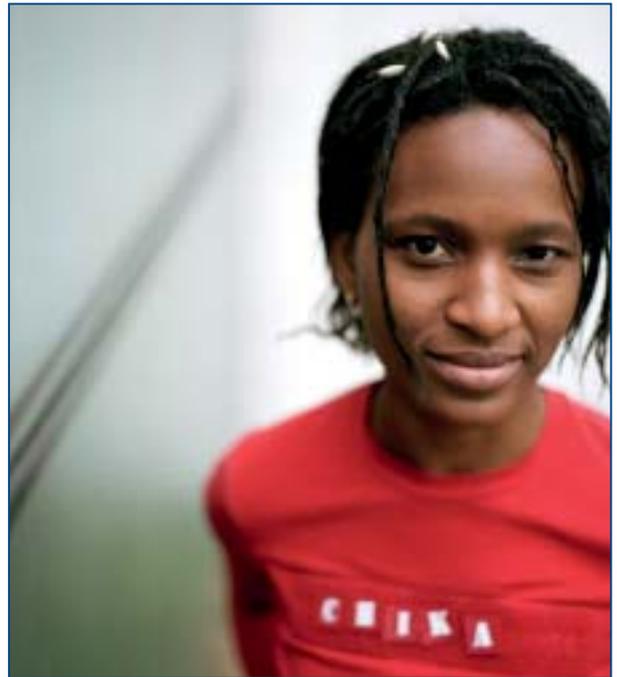


photo Koen Broos

Chika Unigwe was born in Nigeria in 1974 and emigrated to Belgium in 1995 with her Belgian husband. She studied English literature in Nigeria and was awarded a doctorate in postcolonial studies in Leiden. She first published poetry in Nigeria, then children's books and short stories in Britain. Unigwe has won a number of prizes, including the BBC Short Story Competition and the Commonwealth Short Story Award 2003. In 2004 she was a finalist for the Caine Prize (sometimes called the African Booker Prize). In her first novel, *The Phoenix* (2005), a Nigerian woman loses her son in a tragic accident at school and never fully recovers. In her grief she becomes more profoundly affected than ever by cultural differences in chilly Belgium and misconceptions about her background. *Fata Morgana*, Unigwe's second novel, was nominated for the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) Award for Unpublished Fiction.

*An eventful yet soberly chronicled account of four African women desperately trying to escape their wretched circumstances. TROUW*

*Vivid, gripping prose. NRC HANDELSBLAD*

### PUBLISHING DETAILS

*Fata Morgana* (2007)  
320 pp

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Jonathan Cape (UK)



## An unruly bunch of Russians



# Marente de Moor

## The Transgressor

**I**n *De overtreder* (The Transgressor), Marente de Moor paints a compassionate picture of the world of East Europeans who ended up in Amsterdam in the 1990s, fumbling drunks and street vendors who spend the day in fine tales and vodka. A discussion about national identity and the meaning of borders under-



photo Leo van der Noort

lies this layer of anecdotes about bohemian lives. A Russian in Amsterdam is still a Russian. Borders don't really exist.

Vitali Kirilov was a corporal on the Finnish-Russian border, until one of his soldiers deserted. Vitali didn't shoot him as he skied rapidly away – except at his tracks – and that led to his demotion. He endured the rest of his military service in a barren place near the border with Norway.

After leaving the army, he was haunted by a dream about the soldier and his large padded bottom, but he forgot the name of the soldier. About ten years later, in 1993, he left for the West in search of the soldier. His destination was Amsterdam, home of his cousin Ilja. His culture shock began with misreading road signs, leading him to Hoek van Holland instead. Eventually he reached Amsterdam and joined the *Amsterdamski*, a colourful bunch of Russians living in town, all intending to start a new life, but homesick and longing for the smell of 'whitebait and sausage', unable to get away from Russia. We meet an amazing collection of East Europeans: a drinking brass band which plays in the arches under the Rijksmuseum; Leopold and his curious diet of raw onions, olive oil and lemon juice, and woolly Tjoma, who believes in hippy hero Carlos Castaneda.

This world, lively rendered by De Moor, is dominated by drink. A Russian needs alcohol because, as one of the Russians explains, without it he would suffer vertigo because of the depth of his own soul.

Vitali earns a living by selling painted copies of cityscapes drawn by his friend, the sombre Roman. He sleeps in an old squat destined for demolition, where two of his pill-popping fellow countrymen fight.

De Moor successfully paints the differences in attitude between the Russians and the Dutch, particularly when Vitali gets a Dutch girlfriend. His original search for the soldier fades into the background, until he finally boards a ship for St Petersburg. Once aboard, he suddenly remembers the name of the soldier and discovers what probably happened to him.

Marente de Moor (b. 1972) studied Slavonic Languages and lived in St Petersburg for several years, from where she wrote columns about her life for the Dutch weekly *De Groene Amsterdammer*, which were later collected and published as *Petersburgse vertellingen* (Petersburg Stories). She returned to the Netherlands with her Russian husband and worked for some time for the weekly *HP/De Tijd*. *The Transgressor* is her first novel.

Enjoyable first novel about Russian fortune-hunters. *NRC HANDELSBLAD*

The *Transgressor* reads like a dream which shifts into a state of intoxication [...] De Moor can write, she has a rich vocabulary and she dares to fantasise, as is evident from this unusually mature debut. *VRIJ NEDERLAND*

De Moor is capable of describing a person or place in one or two sentences, never using a word too many. She draws a lifelike picture – sometimes hilarious, sometimes full of nostalgia – of an unruly bunch of Russians, washed up in Amsterdam like castaways.

*HAARLEMS DAGBLAD*

#### PUBLISHING DETAILS

*De overtreder* (2007)  
244 pp

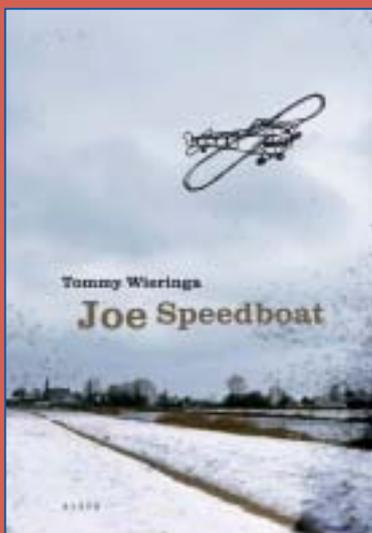
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# Recent publications

Tommy Wieringa

Joe Speedboat



Publishing house Avain recently published Titia Schuurman's Finnish translation of *Joe Speedboat* by Tommy Wieringa, chosen by Finnish magazine *Image* as Book of the month (April 2008). The first translation, by Bettina Bach, of this 2005 novel was published in Germany by Carl Hanser in 2006. This year there are plans for editions in Italian (translated by Elisabetta Svaluto Moreolo, published by Iperborea), French (translated by Bertrand Abraham, published by Actes Sud), Spanish (translated by Goedele de Sterck, published by Destino) and Czech (translated by Magda de Bruin-Hüblová, published by Argo). The English translation (by Sam Garrett) will be published by Portobello Books, the Hebrew translation by Or Yehuda, the Hindi translation by Rajkamal Prakashan, the Korean translation by Sol Publishing, the Icelandic translation by Bjartur (translator: Jóna Dóra Oskarsdóttir), the Polish translation by W.A.B. and the Portuguese translation by Asa – all in 2009 or later.

Louis Paul Boon

Menuet

(Minuet)

*Translated into Bulgarian by Aneta Danceva-Manolova for Pet Plus*

Stefan Brijs

O angeloplastis

(Angelmaker)

*Translated into Greek by Ino van Dijck-Balta for Kastaniotis*

Esther J. Ending

Po Valentýnu

(After Valentine)

*Translated into Czech by Veronika Havlíková for Odeon*

Robert Haasnoot

Der Erinnerer

(The Scribe)

*Translated into German by Christiane Kuby for Berlin Verlag*

Heere Heeresma

Ein Junge aus Amsterdam

(A Boy from the Southern Plan, '38-'43)

*Translated into German by Marianne Holberg for Ammann*

Frans Kellendonk

Corpo mistico

(Mystical Body)

*Translated into Italian by Claudia Di Palermo for Scritturapura*

Tomas Lieske

Moje výsostná láska

(My Sovereign Love)

*Translated into Czech by Olga Krijtová for Lidové Noviny*

Vonne van der Meer

Omzumdaki melek

(I'll Put You Through)

*Translated into Turkish by Tuna Alemdar for Altin Bilek*

Connie Palmen

Luzifer

(Lucifer)

*Translated into German by Hanni Ehlers for Diogenes*

Maya Rasker

Xenia

(Xenia)

*Translated into Spanish by Marta Arguilé Bernal for El Cobre*

Philibert Schogt

La moglie del filosofo

(The Philosopher's Wife)

*Translated into Italian by Elisabetta Svaluto Moreolo for Garzanti*

P.F. Thomése

Dijete sjene

(Shadow Child)

*Translated into Croatian by Anita Bračun and Johannes Hendrik Verschoor for Fraktura*

Dimitri Verhulst

Madame Verona steigt den Hügel hinab

(Mrs Verona Comes Down from the Hill)

*Translated into German by Rainer Kersten for Luchterhand*

Simone van der Vlucht

The Reunion

*Translated into English by Michele Hutchison for Text*

Henk van Woerden

Ultramarin

(Ultramarine)

*Translated into Danish by Birthe Lundsgaard for Tiderne Skifter*

Most of these books were covered previously in our 10 Books brochures.

For a complete list of translations of Dutch fiction, please consult our website: [www.nlpvf.nl/translations](http://www.nlpvf.nl/translations)

## 10 BOOKS 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 10 Books from Holland and Flanders please contact the editorial office.

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