

# Fifty

## Years of Bob and Bobette

Flanders' most popular comic strip characters, Bob and Bobette (in Dutch: *Suske en Wiske*), are already fifty years old; but in all that time they have not aged a day. Several generations of children have grown up with their adventures. This makes *Bob and Bobette*, among other things, an interesting source for research into Flanders' postwar cultural history.

*Bob and Bobette* is of course first and foremost an entertainment product, to be found between the washing powder and the biscuits on the supermarket shelves. 400,000 copies are printed of each new book, and 3 million newspaper readers in Flanders and the Netherlands can follow the adventures of *Bob and Bobette* every day. More than 180 stories have so far been published. Roughly speaking, the chronological development of this comic strip can be divided into three main periods.

Willy Vandersteen (1913-1990), who in the thirties was a window-dresser, became acquainted with American comic strips through an American fashion magazine. At that time they surpassed European comic strips in both quality and quantity. The disappearance of the American comics during the Second World War left a vacuum in the Flemish press. So it was during the war that Vandersteen published his own first comic strips. Legend has it that the first depictions of Bobette and Aunt Agatha came into being in an air raid shelter in Antwerp with v1 and v2 bombs flying overhead. The story *Rikki and Bobette in Chocoslovakia* (Rikki en Wiske in Chocowakije) appeared in the newspaper *De Nieuwe Standaard* on Friday 30 March 1945, before the end of the war. Rikki, Bobette's older brother, had a quiff (just like Tintin), and they went on an adventurous journey to an East European country that had a secret police force called the 'Gestaco'. The story was very much of its time and reacted bitinglly to the madness of war, a subject Vandersteen was often to touch upon.

In his second story the author made Rikki vanish and had Bobette meet Bob on the island of Amoras; they were to remain inseparable from then on. In his first stories Vandersteen drew them as squat but extremely supple figures who could twist themselves into unusual positions. Anatomical perfection was not for them, but they did have character, and were fun to look at.

Those first albums were full of local colour. In *The Reduction Beam* (De



The 'cast' of *Bob and Bobette*. From the top: Bobette with her doll Molly, Bob, Aunt Agatha, Orville and Wilbur.



sprietatoom, 1946) for example, Vandersteen gives us amusing Flemish scenes, such as the farmer's bedroom in the Kempen: the saint under a glass bell, the stoup, the salted ham, the painting of The Eye of God... All these interesting visual details disappeared in the sterile 1970 version by the Vandersteen studio; moreover, the smooth modern style of drawing is weak and totally without character.

Willy Vandersteen once said, about the first *Bob and Bobette* period: *'Impressions from my youth played a large part in my first creations. There's a part of my life in those first twenty-eight stories: they are the most spontaneous and take no account of technical or commercial concerns. But later on, when the whole business had expanded, other demands were made. The figures evolved over those thirty years. There is also a completely different humour in those first albums which does not appear in the later ones.'*

Differences between the 1946 and the 1971 edition of *The Reduction Beam* (*De sprietatoom*). The 1946 panel (1.) has more local colour and its language is racier. In 1946 the farmer's wife said *'Cornelius! The tax men! Put them taters away!'*, while in 1971 her words read *'Cornelius, I think someone knocked at the door! Could that be the tax collector?'*



Willy Vandersteen (1913-1990) (Photo by Bruno Vettors and Kris Venmans).



Close encounters of the third kind: a slightly more upper-class Orville, Bobette and Bob in *The Messengers from Mars* (De gezanten van Mars).

Breaking the rules of the comic strip in *The African Drummers* (De tamtamkloppers): Orville knocks his opponent off the panel and the poor chap disappears behind one of the next panels.

This humour is a mixture of slapstick, absurdity and everyday popular humour (including a racist streak...). Vandersteen broke the rules of the comic strip on occasion, but always in an amusing way, as in *The African Drummers* (De tamtamkloppers, 1953).

Between 1948 and 1958, while he was writing and drawing new adventures for the newspaper, Vandersteen also produced eight *Bob and Bobette* stories for the weekly *Tintin / Kuifje*: among these were *The Spanish Ghost* (Het Spaanse spook) and *The Messengers from Mars* (De gezanten van Mars). Hergé, who was editor-in-chief of the weekly as well as author of the *Tintin* comic books, made Vandersteen tone down the popular elements: some characters were barred and others were adapted to a more sophisticated taste. These stories also had more structure and Vandersteen's drawing became more 'academic'. Pressure of work and lack of time even drove him to copy certain postures and settings from Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant*. But these stylistic differences between the newspaper comics and the stories for *Tintin / Kuifje* gradually disappeared.

The arrival of a new member of the clan, Wilbur, marked the moment of transition from the first to the second period. This second period began vigorously and full of promise. Vandersteen was writing superb stories, such as *The Circus Baron* (De circusbaron, 1954), and creating marvellous visual images like the horse on roller skates in *The Knight of the Streets* (De straatridder, 1955) and the pack of cards that comes to life in *The Dance of the*

*Cards* (De kaartendans, 1962). Because he was always publishing new stories, Vandersteen was up to his ears in work and came to rely more and more on assistants. *Bob and Bobette* was also exported to the Netherlands: from 1953 the Flemish text was adapted for the Dutch readership and after 1963 just one common version was printed in Standard Dutch. The characteristic Flemish elements were gradually eliminated.

The arrival of Wilbur, a rough Flemish version of an American superhero, had unexpected consequences. He made his first appearances dressed only in an animal skin, but, under pressure from a number of incensed readers, Vandersteen soon wrapped him up in normal civvies. At first, Wilbur and Orville lived with Aunt Agatha, but in 1954 they went to live on their own, which was not exactly a common occurrence in 1950s Flanders (this was, of course, avidly exploited by various sex parodies in the early eighties). Wilbur also presented Vandersteen with another problem: how do you bring a situation to an exciting and unexpected end in the presence of a superhuman muscle-man like this, who can get the better of anyone? That the heroes always win in the end goes without saying, but it is the way they achieve their triumph that can be interesting. That's why Vandersteen often tried to neutralise Wilbur by, for example, letting him sleep through a whole story...

Orville and Aunt Agatha emulating 007 in *The Carnival of the Apes* (De apekermis).





In addition to this, times had changed, and Vandersteen was well aware of it. The sixties may have been ‘golden’, but they also saw the bloodbaths in the Congo, Vietnam and the Middle East. A sizeable amount of Vandersteen’s bitterness seeped through into his work. By the mid-sixties he was spicing his comics with cutting comments, more extreme than his former ironical swipes. In *The Carnival of the Apes* (De apekermis, 1965) the apes take over the running of the world, while the people, affected by meteor radiation, fail to see any difference; the politicians and generals are all replaced by apes and no one notices a thing! Vandersteen once again hits hard, two stories later, in *Mad Meg* (De dulle Griet). This well-known character from Brueghel is brought to life to find out why people wage wars. The story ends on a sarcastic note with a crying Vietnamese girl under a barrage of bombs, followed by Bobette, who normally winks cheerfully at the reader, hiding her face in her hands. This is not a happy ending, and we are no longer able to laugh. The state of the world has become too serious and there seem to be no simple solutions, such as a comic strip would normally provide. Subsequent stories demonstrate a hard cynicism: Orville becomes successively a cold-hearted money-grabber and a hardbitten mercenary... These changes are also reflected in the clothing: Bob swaps his shorts (symbol of the child) for long trousers and Bobette often leaves her red-striped white dress hanging in the wardrobe. By the end of the sixties the original vividness had vanished completely and the stories weakened and became extremely middle-of-the-road.

The last panels from *Mad Meg* (De dulle Griet): Our heroes have just shown Mad Meg, Pieter Brueghel’s embodiment of war, the error of her ways. They are about to return home in the pouring rain. Meanwhile, it is raining bombs in Vietnam, right to the bitter end.

In 1972, Willy Vandersteen, looking for new stimuli in other projects, handed over his most important brainchildren to Paul Geerts, who had been a member of the Vandersteen studio since 1968. While the name of Willy Vandersteen has always remained on the cover, the name of the actual author has only appeared on the title page for the last five years. Geerts’ approach has been a great success both commercially and in terms of public appreciation, but some critics are less enthusiastic. It may be that older readers will no longer recognise ‘their’ *Bob and Bobette* in this contemporary approach, but it is today’s young readers (7 to 13 years) that set the pace, and they prefer the recent books to the old Vandersteen comics.

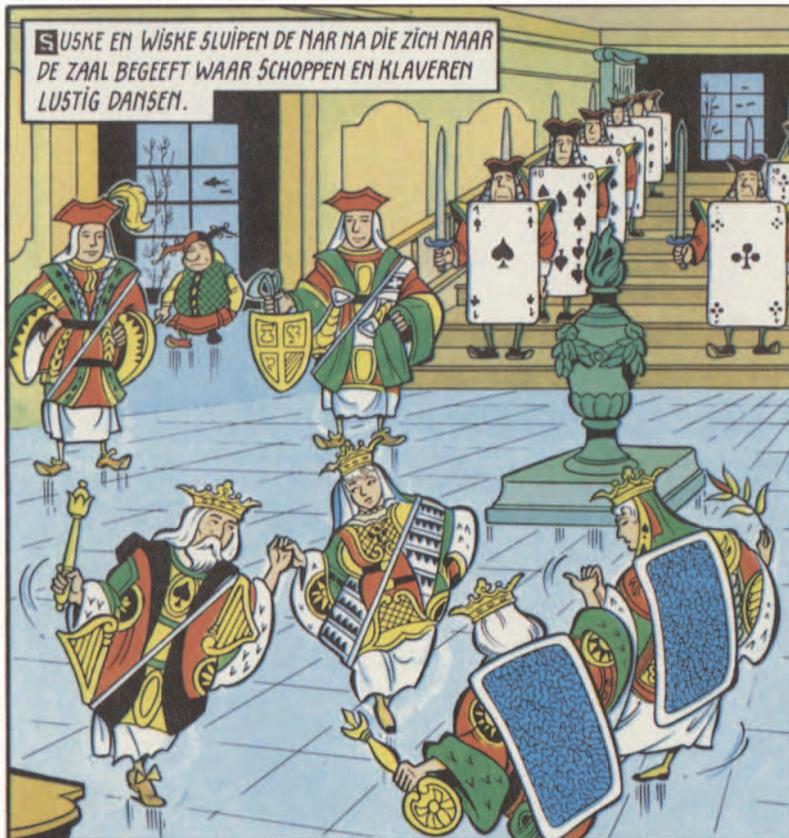
There is a fair amount of veiled advertising in today’s *Bob and Bobette* stories: Orville drives a clearly identifiable Suzuki jeep. The (Dutch) mar-

ket-orientation is also apparent in the Dutch characterisation of what were once thoroughly Flemish figures: the heroes no longer fly Sabena but KLM and Bob plays football not with the Red Devils (the Belgian national team) but with Orange, their Dutch equivalent.

Vandersteen's spiritual testament dictates that dangerous, meaning commercially risky, subjects like religion, racism, sex and drugs may not be mentioned. Even so, Geerts has been able to sidestep some of these prohibitions: in *The Sharp Scorpion* (*De scherpe schorpioen*, 1992), Bobette is cared for affectionately after an accident by a family of Moroccan immigrants. Geerts' personality is most conspicuous in a book he produced in his spare time and which was never published in a newspaper beforehand. *The Jewel in the Lotus* (*De parel in de lotusbloem*, 1987) begins with the basic feelings of Western man, who is then overwhelmed by reports of war, famine, terror and more. In this New Age, Paul Geerts seeks the remedy in Oriental wisdom and has Bobette call a Buddhist monk 'vicar'.

The characters in *Bob and Bobette* are not tied to time and space: while everything is changing around them (cars, furniture, etc.), they remain the same age, but this age is hard to estimate. Nor are they real children: they never have to go to school and they drive a wide variety of vehicles without a driving licence; on the other hand they sometimes behave in a genuinely childish way (e.g. Bobette's legendary close bond with her doll Molly).

A deck of cards shuffling on the dancefloor in *The Dance of the Cards* (*De kaartendans*).



Aunt Agatha and Orville occasionally behave like, but are most certainly not, parents. The reason for a false family like this is, of course, that real parents would never allow their children to become involved in such adventures and would prefer to put the emphasis on their performance at school. *Bob and Bobette* are like mini-adults with childlike aspects. Nor do the characters have real human emotions: Aunt Agatha will remain forever in love with that bully Orville, but they will never marry. That much is laid down in Vandersteen's spiritual testament.

Classic comics like this do not pretend to portray reality, rather they create a world entirely their own, which does not necessarily work according to normal logic. Even so, a cultural product like a comic is never totally divorced from its context. To take one example, in earlier days Vandersteen would take a swipe at taxation, as regularly as clockwork. The precise message is not always unequivocal. There are plenty of ambiguities and contradictions in these stories. In 1975, when the green political movement in Flanders was in its infancy, Geerts denounced the degeneration of the environment in *The Chubby Shad* (*De mollige meivis*) while only ten years later he produced a book with the dreadfully ambiguous Orwellian title of *The Jolly Millirem* (*De mooie millirem*), in which it is stated that radioactivity itself is not dangerous, only those who use it !

One of the keys to the success of these stories, apart from the popular humour, is the familiarity of the ingredients used. In *Bob and Bobette* one would have no trouble in tracing elements from fairy tales, folklore, myths, legends, bible stories, paintings, novels, plays, films and other comics. History and current affairs are also an almost inexhaustible source of inspiration. In this respect the time machine was a useful invention, allowing the characters to travel through time. But they are never historical stories, since the past is only used as a sort of fairy-tale backdrop. *Bob and Bobette* experience their own adventures in a 'past time'. They do not venture to change history, even fictitiously. The historical setting is there to provide the stories with variation or to shed a historical light on contemporary issues.

Its timeless, achronological structure and its internal contradictions and evolutions make the world of *Bob and Bobette* fairly complex and by no means unambiguous, however simplistic a single story may seem. This complexity is probably not consciously intended by the creators, since both Vandersteen and Geerts claim to think up their stories quite spontaneously. In any case, they have no time to reflect too long on individual questions: two rows have to appear in the paper every day. They tell stories in their own way, with their personal view of life playing its part, and their outlook is not so different from what the average Belgian or Dutchman thinks and feels.

PASCAL LEFEVRE

*Translated by Gregory Ball.*

LIST OF TRANSLATIONS

*The Diamond Boomerang*  
*The Flying Bed*  
*The Texas Rangers*  
*The Plunderers*  
*The Poisoned Rain*  
*Kingdom of the Sea-Snails*  
*The Amazing Coconut*  
*Rhino Rescue*

(All titles published by  
Ravette Books, Horsham)