

Futile Scribbles in the Margins of History

The Literary Work of F. Springer

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[A D Z U I D E R E N T]

F. Springer, the writer alter ego of the Dutch diplomat Carel Jan Schneider (1932-2011) and the author of eleven novels and novellas and three collections of stories, has been considered a born story-teller since his debut. That debut, a collection of short stories, *Bericht uit Hollandia* (1962), was extremely topical when it was published, in that all three of the stories take place in Netherlands New Guinea, the last remaining part of the Dutch colonial empire in East Asia, which was handed over to Indonesia the same year, under great international pressure. Hollandia was the administrative centre of a colony where, especially in the Baliem Valley, some of the inhabitants still lived in the Stone Age.

Although he regularly refers to work by other writers, the choice between producing literature and telling stories was never difficult for Springer:

'I come from a milieu where people have always told each other tall stories. Besides that, in a period like the one in New Guinea I was on tour sometimes for months, with a few Indonesian, Ambonese and Papuan administrative assistants. After sunset, of course, there was nothing to do in the jungle. We used to sit round the campfire near our bivouac then and just tell stories. To be honest there are a couple of stories in *Bericht uit Hollandia* that I wrote up straight from the mouths of a couple of old friends like that from those days.'

In addition, he borrowed lavishly from such trivial sources as stories from school and ships' libraries: tales of Flash Gordon and Winnetou, of Captain Nemo and Robin Hood, and Edgar Wallace's stories about Sanders of the River. There is therefore an element in Springer's work that can best be described as 'boys' books romanticism'. But if he names admired authors with whom he feels he has most affinity, they are F. Scott Fitzgerald, W. Somerset Maugham, Guy de Maupassant or Heinrich von Kleist, for example, not trivial storytellers, nor essayists nor writers with philosophical leanings, but writers of well-paced stories, with a sharp eye for human weakness and incapacity.

The boys' book romanticism is often reinforced by the exotic setting of Springer's work. Apart from Netherlands New Guinea, his stories are set, amongst other places, in Java, the Angolan national park Kissama, Bangladesh, Teheran during the fall of the Shah, and in Kandy in Ceylon. Even when



Chief Opinay and Chief Administrator C.J. Schneider, Baliem Valley, Dutch New-Guinea. National Geographic Magazine, May, 1962. Photo by John Scofield

the decor is Berlin, New York or the Dutch village Lutten (in the novel *Quadriga*, 2010; the novella *Tabee*, New York, 1974; and the short story 'De verovering van Bandung' in the collection *Zaken overzee*, 1977, respectively) he succeeds in adding an exotic tone. The author lived in most of these places for a long time, either in his youth or, later, as a diplomat.

The Baliem Valley had only been under Dutch authority for a short while when Springer became the chief administrator (which he was from 1960 to 1962). The clash between the Stone Age and the twentieth century that he experienced at first hand there is the theme of some of his work: the novella *Schimmen rond de Parula* (1966), for example, in which the converts made by an American missionary take his message so literally that they crucify him; and his posthumously published novel *Met stille trom* (2012) – which he actually wrote in 1962 – in which an American anthropologist who wants to allow the original inhabitants to keep their own rituals, including regular tribal wars, clashes with the Dutch authorities. The confrontation between such radically different times and cultures forms a core motif in Springer's work: *mutatis mutandis* everyone lives in different worlds simultaneously; the tragedy of life is that one seldom or never succeeds in reconciling these worlds with each other.

Missed opportunities

Two types of characters stand out in his work as far as that is concerned: the escapist and the braggart. Various characters escape from the inclemencies of life in illusions. Sometimes they literally step out of life or disappear without a trace; often they sacrifice hard reality to their imagination. The businessman Charles Enders in *Quissama* (1985) is an example of the latter. He neglects his exploration of the Angolan market because he is completely absorbed by the stories of an impossible love told to him by a fellow countryman who has, in the meantime, tragically died. This is a character who can count one hundred per cent on Springer's sympathy. Those who sell their dreams as their successes, on the other hand, do not come off well in Springer's work. In almost every novel there are braggarts like this, braggarts who end up hitting rock-bottom.

Springer is not the type of writer that expressly engages with social or political standpoints; his engagement is in the first instance with the individual that stands his ground in the world by following his dreams. At the same time the realisation that many people cannot hang on to those dreams permeates his work; it is teeming with missed opportunities. Nonetheless, in *Met stille trom*, for example, he makes it clear between the lines that he does believe that the Western ideal of civilisation is right for those still living in the Stone Age. From the fact that his administrators and diplomats generally go about their work without complaining, we can infer that he also believes that they make a useful contribution to the relations between different peoples. But Springer would never use that type of language ('make a useful contribution'). He prefers 'playing embassy' and 'futile scribbles in the margins of history'

In addition to being civil servants, diplomats or businessmen, many of Springer's main characters are, or are forced to become, writers. While writing seems to come easily to them in everyday life (they 'bang out' their reports because they know pretty much what their superiors want to read), it is quite the opposite with their personal writing. It might look as if it has been put together casually, but in fact it is all about sharp phrasing and vivid characterisation, as is the case with his much admired examples. A familiar technique in Springer's work is the comparison of events with scenes from films and characters with film stars; or one hears a song in a scene that adds to the atmosphere - casual manipulations whereby the imagination strengthens the illusion of reality.

A good example of how Springer reflects on his writing can be seen in *Bougainville, Een gedenkschrift* (1981), considered by many to be his most successful novel. In it, the main character Bo, the Dutch Chargé d'affaires in Dhaka (then Dacca), Bangladesh, gets hold of the story of his recently drowned boyhood friend Tommie Vaultant's adulterous love affair with a former school friend. From his own comments on the opening sentence of his story - 'She was so extremely blonde it left me speechless' - it is clear that Tommie realises he is definitely not a writer:

'Ah no, that's not how Kleist opened, *Gatsby* didn't start like that. Everything I'd like to say is blocked by her. My friend Bo, who writes (slick) stories and loves pertinent opening sentences, would laugh himself silly if he read "she was so exceptionally blonde". (And anyway, she wasn't blonde). Get some

distance, some perspective, take yourself pretty much out of the equation - that is the only way to make something of it, on paper and elsewhere too. That's what Bo would say. We only spent an hour together this time. He came from the ministry and we had coffee on the Square, in The Hague. They had his collection of short stories in the window of the bookshop there. He bought one for me and, despite the chitchat, the slap on the shoulder, I knew it was important to him to give me that book. I could see him thinking: whatever you do, don't be too serious, don't get theatrical or dramatic.'

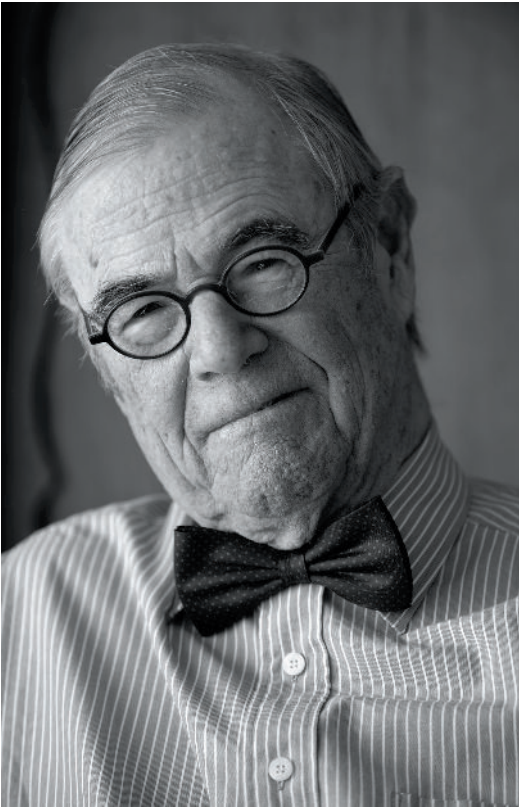
The Shah as braggart

Apart from being a literary commentary (in which Springer indirectly trivializes his own writing - 'writes (slick) stories') this is also a life commentary: there is no place for theatricality in stories any more than there is amongst friends. What is really important becomes clear from a person's actions, not from what he says about them. The need to put things into perspective applies not only 'on paper' but 'elsewhere too', in everyday life.

That becomes all the clearer from the passage in this novel describing the talk Bo attended in Dhaka given by the then deathly tired French writer André Malraux. Bo, who has great admiration for Malraux, realises that he is standing 'eye to eye with Grandeur', with an adversary of fascism, the confidant of various great people in the world, but also with the friend of the writer E. du Perron, to whom Malraux had dedicated the novel *La Condition Humaine* and in whose novel *Het land van herkomst* he himself figured as Heverlé. As preparation Bo had read some of *Het land van herkomst*. When he is finally able to shake Malraux's hand, Bo calls himself not an admirer but a compatriot of his friend:

"'Je suis..." I said, "je suis compatriote d'Eddy du Perron". He took my hand and said something, so softly that I didn't understand, and he had no chance to repeat it as two women suddenly embraced him enthusiastically and shouted loudly that they had admired his work so very much for years.'

Not all of Springer's writers are as conscientious as this Bo. One of them is actually a pure imposter as a writer, in the tradition of Willem Elsschot's characters. This applies to Toby Harrison in *Teheran, een zwanezang* (1991), who gets a commission, just before the fall of the Shah, to write a biography of the Pahlevis in the tradition of James Morier's famous picaresque novel *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, which was regarded by many in the nineteenth century as giving a true picture of Persia. Harrison knows very well what sort of writer he himself is: 'I sprinkle well-known historical facts with a sauce of highly imaginative noises. [My] books are not meant for clever Swiss clockmakers. I write for nitwits.' In the character of this nonentity, for whom the Shah seems to have more time than for Western diplomats who could help him save his skin, Springer gives a wonderful and often hilarious picture of the unworldliness of a man who fails to see how thin his power and status have worn: the Shah as braggart.



F. Springer (1932 - 2011)
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Indonesian background

One element present in all of Springer's novels and stories is the Indonesian background of one or more of its characters, often the main character. Much of this is directly linked to the writer's first thirteen years of life, in Java, and his childhood friendships and loves, and certainly the three years in Japanese camps. Later meetings with former friends play a major role in several of the novels. The sadness at no longer being able to relive the past as it really was and the impossibility of undoing mistakes from the past colours some of these stories. What he reveals of the camps is partly hidden behind a shield of relativity ('some hunger, some homesickness'), but the most harrowing events, such as being separated from his mother at ten years of age, seeing and experiencing misery and death, are clearly mentioned.

In two novels that he wrote after he retired from diplomacy, this period is central. *Bandoeng Bandung* (1993) is the story of an older Dutch politician who goes along on a commercial mission to Java, the land of his birth, as an expert in the field. There he comes into contact with a former classmate of Indonesian origin, to whom he had promised at the end of the war to do what he could to get him out of Indonesia too. But he never fulfilled his promise and feels like a fraud now. The meeting affects him so much that he decides to give up his political and administrative ambitions. He does not want his career in society to hinder his ability to fulfil his real obligations any more.

The other novel is *Kandy, Een terugtocht* (1998), the story of the laborious repatriation of incomplete families after the war. After mothers and children had first been reunited with each other following their years in Japanese camps, it took months, due to chaotic bureaucracy, before they could be reunited with the fathers, who had ended up in Bangkok after their forced labour on the Burma railway. Meanwhile, the mothers and children were stranded in Kandy, in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Mountbatten's former headquarters. The subtitle, 'a journey back', applies not only to the events described, it also refers to the way in which the story is told. One of the children of the time recounts his memories, looking back at the secret club in which he and other children had created their own world, remembering the love he never expressed for the girl who was the natural leader of the club and the fact that he might, accidentally, have wounded or even killed their favourite camp waiter with a bow and arrow. Both the question of whether he really was so in love as he remembers now and his doubts about the consequences of his shot take such a hold on him that he goes in search of his companions from back then. Although the meeting results in a brief moment of acknowledgement of what had previously had to remain unsaid, this acknowledgement comes too late. Meanwhile he comments on his nostalgic questions as 'an old fool's sentimental nonsense'. He is a typical Springer character: someone whose nostalgia and disillusionment get in his way. That is also the case, for example, in *Tabee, New York* (1974), the first novel for which Springer delved into his Indonesian youth. In it, a young Dutch diplomat rediscovers his childhood love from Indonesia in the United States. In the meantime she is unhappily married with his erstwhile rival. But when he finally gets his chance with her, he feels it is too late and deliberately lets it go.

It is true that most of Springer's characters, like Bo in *Bougainville*, give themselves up at some point to 'all sorts of sentimental thoughts, distant loves, missed opportunities, deeply buried but never forgotten blunders and a bit of self-pity too.' But then they usually straighten up and tell themselves and the readers: 'What do you bring home from your travels? A handful of wild stories that are embellished with more and more invented true-to-life details at every family get-together – that's all there is to it.' A cast-iron lie that his readers believe again and again with each story and each novel. Thanks to his style, thanks to his humour, thanks to the mixture of perspective and sentiment, and thanks to his refreshing insight into character.

When, in late 1985 – he had just become Dutch Ambassador in East Berlin – he was asked what the most important event of the year had been for him, Springer did not mention his posting to the strange parallel world behind the Iron Curtain, nor the umpteenth summit in Geneva, but a couple of literary facts: the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Kurt Tucholsky and the discovery of a lost poem by Shakespeare. Tucholsky because he had known exactly how to ridicule pomposity; Shakespeare because he had already put down on paper what makes us tick three centuries earlier: power, love, jealousy and desire. In that kind of literature, which is focused on the fortunes and motivations of the individual, history is merely a footnote. ■

An Extract from *Bougainville, A Memoir*

By F. Springer

No one will remember, but in 1973, just two years after the state of Bangladesh was born, amid much bloodshed, the Secretary-General of the United Nations made a short visit to the capital, Dacca. And absolutely no one will remember the few short reports announcing that one of the officials that had come from New York with the Secretary-General had had an accident and died during an inspection of the UN food transports in the port of Chittagong. A tragic but unimportant footnote to the visit by the UN top man, who had come, on behalf of all of us members of his organisation, to accept thanks from Sheik Mujibur Rahman for the aid we had provided - and would hopefully continue to provide - him and the millions of his countrymen who had been teetering on the brink of starvation since the state of Bangladesh was founded. Besides, that footnote did not say what exactly had happened to Tommie Vaulant. Obviously he had had a look at those ships full of rice and milk powder in the chaotic port complex in Chittagong, but halfway through the morning he had had enough of it and had driven his UN jeep to Cox's Bazaar, the longest, emptiest, most untouched beach in the world. It's now or never, he must have thought. I knew that, because the night before his death I myself had heard him name a few places in the world that he absolutely wanted to visit if he ever had the chance, because of their exotic names. As a travelling official of the UN he had got through a lot of them already, but there were still some excellent ones on his list.

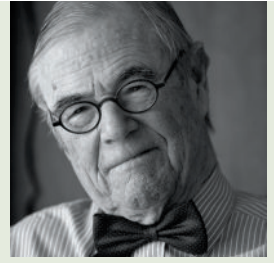
'When I want to escape from the trials and tribulations of everyday life,' said Tommie, 'I say those names quietly to myself. I'm a first-class, experienced escapist. Cape Farewell in New Zealand, Alice Springs in Australia, Mandalay in Burma, Bougainville in the Pacific Ocean, ah, Bougainville, Cox's Bazaar on the Bay of Bengal. And if ever I have the chance to choose another life in another time, as in the well-known game, I would become a working member of the Royal Geographical Society round 1860 or so. Burton, Speke and all the rest of them.'

I laughed.

'Will you come too?' he asked earnestly.

'Can't get away,' I said. It sounded a bit too self-important.

Swimming in the sea, Tommie was swept away by a sudden undercurrent not far from the neglected Government Rest House in Cox's Bazaar. He was gone, washed up only in the afternoon,



close to the Rest House again, which made the search easier, of course. Well, search is a big word. There was only one witness. She had run backwards and forwards in the hot sand helplessly, wringing her hands. When Tommie ceased to surface she had run to the Rest House, but the telephone there did not work and there were no caretakers (because there were never any guests now). She had run back onto the beach again but there was no Tommie waving in the surf. At breakneck speed she took the jeep to the village further up and finally phoned Chittagong from a police post, but it was already two hours since she had last seen him. In the afternoon, at almost the same time as Tommie, a Red Cross helicopter landed on the beach, and even before the always breathtaking sunset in the Bay of Bengal he had been readied for transport to Dacca.

Obviously I still did not know exactly what had happened when we all – Bangladeshi government dignitaries, diplomats, UN officials – saw the Secretary-General and his entourage off at Dacca airport the following day. I had missed Tommie when we said our goodbyes, but someone said that he was still in Chittagong and would follow later, and I had no idea I was seeing him off too, my old friend, in his coffin in the belly of the UN plane.

Later I saw Bettina sitting in the lobby of the Intercontinental Hotel, in her neat Swiss Red Cross uniform, smoking nervously, looking anxiously at me with her red-rimmed eyes, not answering my greeting. Silently she went with me to my room, I poured her a drink, but she put the glass down on the table, clasped her head in her hands and sobbed and sobbed. 'Gott, Gott!' I heard now and then, and 'warum hab' ich... warum bin ich...'

There had been the official dinner at the Intercontinental two evenings before. On the podium the Secretary-General and his wife sat in a long, formal line with Sheik Mujib and his ministers. The other Bengali dignitaries, important-looking UN people and we local diplomats sat at round tables at their feet. We had started with a glass of pineapple juice, because nothing stronger was served at official functions, but it did not matter, because most of us had, as usual, surreptitiously fortified ourselves with a strong whisky before the start of the party. Beside me was Bettina, the Swiss doctor: good-looking but always stern and professional in

public, she had experience in Biafra and other disaster-struck places. Like me, she had been staying at the Intercontinental for months and sometimes, after a long day, she thoroughly enjoyed bending the old elbow with me or others to forget for a while the hopelessness of her work in the Bihari camps. From our seats we could see that the wife of the Secretary-General had long since run out of things to say to Sheik Mujib. We could not help laughing at the determined faces with which the guests of honour on the podium tried to make conversation. It reminded Bettina of the awkward sketches they had had to perform in the hall at her school on the last day before the summer holidays.

Tommie Vault slipped into a seat on the other side of me. I had been looking out for him. 'I've written to Sonnie that I've met you,' he said. I introduced him to Bettina: 'An old friend, very important in the SG's cabinet these days.' They shook hands. 'He looks exactly like Montgomery Clift,' said Bettina.

'Well, well, that's a nice compliment,' I said, although I couldn't immediately call to mind what Montgomery Clift looked like. Oh yes, that nervous trumpet player in *From Here to Eternity* - she was right, damn it, Tommie was the image of Montgomery Clift.

Didn't he die young?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Bettina, 'tragic. I was a big fan of his. It's those eyebrows in particular that...'

I did not want to be left behind and said roguishly: 'I've been compared to a film star too, do you know who...?' But the sheik rose to make a speech.

He knew that I was in Bangladesh as Chargé d'affaires; I knew that I could expect him, the UN man, in Dacca. Since '55 we had written each other perhaps ten letters and had exchanged Christmas cards and announcements of our children's births. I had met him once in '65 in New York and we had last seen each other just before I left for Bangladesh, when he phoned me at the ministry. Both pressed for time, we had a coffee somewhere. A lot was left unsaid, which is not unusual between old friends.

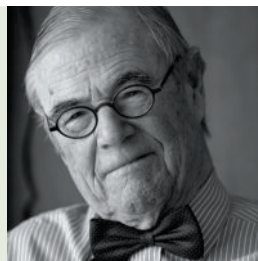
Soon after his arrival he knocked on the door of the hotel room where I lived and played embassy, as I had not yet found an office in the chaotic city that Dacca was so soon after independence. On the dressing table stood a typewriter on which I banged out my brilliant reports for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with two fingers. I used to put them in a postbag with an impressive red seal on the label. I often burned my thumb and index finger sealing the bag. It was and continued to be a dangerous task. Then,

on a three-wheeled bicycle taxi, I brought the bag to the airport, where a young Bengali with the insignia of Thai International Airline on his shirt took the weighty dispatch from me, always with the same words: 'Your Excellency, thank you for entrusting your state secrets to Thai International.'

So there stood Tommie, in my room, and we spent the whole evening talking – well no, that is an exaggeration: actually it was him who talked, non-stop, till about eleven o'clock. About Great Things, such as a Better World, which we would never see; about the poet Robert Lowell, whom he had known personally; about Power and Powerlessness. It was a disappointing meeting, in my opinion. No confidential, intimate conversation between old friends. He seemed to want to avoid any subject of a personal nature.

'I'm tired, Bo, dead tired,' he said suddenly and disappeared, yawning, to his room on the same floor, three doors down from Bettina's – but, of course, he did not know her at that point. ■

Translated by Lindsay Edwards



From *Bougainville. Een gedenkschrift*, Querido, Amsterdam, 1981