

So Universal, yet so Dutch

Gerbrand Bakker's *The Twin*

In Gerbrand Bakker's *The Twin* (transl. David Colmer, 2008, original: *Boven is het stil*, 2006) Helmer van Wonderen has 'put Father upstairs'. That means the 55-year-old farmer is making a literal and figurative move. A power shift takes place on the West Frisian farm in the North of Holland (the province Holland that is). The old man who took control over Helmer's life and autocratically reigned over the farmhouse's ground floor, has now been moved upstairs. Father is tired and worn out; he will soon die. In the meantime, his son Helmer starts redecorating, and buys a new double bed.

Behind the move hides a tragedy, subtly expressed in *The Twin*. Slowly, taking his time, Bakker reveals a tale of loneliness and repressed passion. 35 years before, Helmer lost his twin brother, Henk, in a car accident; his father lost his favourite son. At that point Father decided that Helmer was 'done there in Amsterdam'. He orders Helmer to quit his Literature studies in the big city, and to start working on the farm now that Henk – the natural farm heir – is gone. A 'life milking cows', full of unspoken frustrations between father and son, follows. Yet the move of the aging family tyrant initiates change. So does the sudden reappearance of Riet, brother Henk's former fiancée, who was driving the car in which Henk lost his life.

This Summer *The Twin* received the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award 2010, a cash prize of 100,000 euros. This is the most valuable literary award for a single work of literature published in English. *The Twin* clearly appeals to an international audience – 163 international libraries in 43 countries nominated 156 novels for the IMPAC long list, which was cut down to a shortlist of eight. Bakker's novel had to compete with the likes of Zoë Heller and Joseph O'Neill, who are both widely known; whereas Gerbrand Bakker from Wieringerwaard in the Netherlands seemed to many so obscure that the international press kept stubbornly referring to *The Twin* as 'his literary debut'. The book was Bakker's second literary brainchild.

Besides receiving the IMPAC award, *The Twin* also won the French Prix Initiales 2010 and has been nomi-

nated for the Prix Cevennes. The novel gained international press coverage and has been translated into seven languages. What is it about *The Twin* that is so attractive to the international reader?

Is the story not too Dutch, taking place in a culturally limited setting? In an interview with the *Irish Times* Bakker says boldly: 'A Dutch writer should write about Dutch characters. I ask why would a Dutch writer write about a Russian?' What then accounts for the novel's international appeal?

I wonder if the appeal is in the confirmation of an image of the Netherlands that reigns abroad, an image of country landscapes, cows and ice skating. It extends even to the object that Father uses to hit the twin brothers with – a wooden clog, no less. It is a recognizable Dutch picture, repeated on the book covers at home and abroad. On his website, Bakker confesses that when his publisher asked him about ideas for cover images, he answered: 'something with sheep'. Yet four cows are shown on the Dutch edition, staring at the reader from beneath a blue sky with greyish white clouds.

The choice for this visual seems to be inspired by the works of Dutch landscape painters such as Ruysdael. Ruysdael used cattle as a signifier of Dutch prosperity. It is no surprise that several international reviewers of *The Twin* choose the word 'landscape' when referring to the vivid descriptions of nature in the book. Bakker's work certainly evokes thoughts of landscape painting. His writing is observant, with a great attention to surroundings; the setting is rural and the animals – subtly 'painted' – can easily be seen as literary characters in their own right.

The Twin's strength is also in the intimacy created between reader and narrator. The reader is invited to peek into a normally closed farmhouse. The scope of the cold Dutch landscape becomes manageable as the (foreign) reader gets to know the secrets hidden behind the closed doors. It is a joyous voyeurism, comparable to the feeling of looking at a Vermeer painting, such as his *Milk Maid*. The motif of voyeurism is unforgettably symbolised in the novel when Helmer and neighbour Ada stare at each other from behind their living room windows, both slowly lowering their binoculars.



Vermeer, as well as other Dutch painters such as Pieter de Hooch, often includes a window or door that looks out from the intimate interior onto the street. There is the city where other things happen. In Bakker's work there is a similar 'vista': the outlook on Helmer's broken dream of studying literature in Amsterdam, serving as a reminder of a life not lived.

Though Bakker says he wants to write about Dutch characters, his themes are universal: loneliness, loss, taking control of one's own life and ageing. These themes may be more appealing to international readers because of *The Twin's* overlap with visual representations of Dutch culture: landscape paintings, intimate interiors and vistas.

There is the icescape, too - lively Dutch winter scenes depicting young and old enjoying winter, skating, playing ice hockey etc. This genre is probably best represented by Hendrick Avercamp who painted *Ice-skating in a Village* (early 17th century). Several scenes in *The Twin* are reminiscent of Avercamp's painting. For example, Helmer learned to skate without his brother. While his mother skated pirouettes on the ice, the farmhand safely pushed young Helmer forward. Another 'icescape picture' is the twins' dad daringly driving his car at high speed over a frozen lake, with Helmer and Henk in the back seat.

Hendrick Avercamp, *Ice-skating in a Village*, c. 1610, Oil on panel, 36 x 71 cm, © Mauritshuis, The Hague.

In Avercamp's *Ice-skating in a Village* most people are enjoying winter together. They are all part of a group of some sort - couples, a sports team, a family. Or they skate by themselves, focused, eyes forward like marathon runners. However, in the middle of the painting there is a little girl. She seems both lost and in place in the busy surroundings, standing steadily on her skates, a small pale creature that stands out and fits in at the same time. Bakker's novel, *The Twin*, is similar to this strange little girl; it is a coming-of-age novel about a 55-year-old; it is both typically Dutch and reaches out to the wider world; and it takes place on a small farm but is recognizably cosmopolitan.

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GERBRAND BAKKER, *The Twin*, Archipelago Books, 2009, 343 pages.