

# Misanthropes, Boring Assholes and Amoral Winners

The Literary Work of Herman Koch

138

[ JEROEN VULLINGS ]

It is exceptional for a writer from a small language region to break through in the United States, but Dutch writer, TV producer and actor Herman Koch (1953) has done just that. Never before has a novel originally written in Dutch risen so high on the American bestseller list.

Looking back, in the comfortable tradition of the successful, there is only one success story: that of the continuous rise, without hitch or setback. Not so for Koch. In the course of his literary career he has had to work hard for this, picking himself up after many a fall to re-enter the fray. He debuted almost silently in 1985 with the collection of stories *De voorbijganger* (The Passerby), and achieved some success with his novel about angry adolescents, *Red ons, Maria Montanelli* (Save us, Maria Montanelli, 1989), but after that it was some time before the publication of *Het diner* (*The Dinner*) in 2009 brought Koch to a large readership. In the preceding decade he wrote four novels, and many stories, without arousing significant interest.

Koch could have commanded that success much earlier if he had picked the easy route. As co-creator and actor in the innovative, satirical TV programme *Jiskefet* (1990-2005) – in the tradition of *Monty Python* – he became a popular Dutch celebrity. Had he produced literary work resembling *Jiskefet*, the masses would have devoured his books.

But his literary work was not about vanity, and he refused to play the clown. His prose was reserved for the serious, anguished, solitary Herman Koch. *Red ons, Maria Montanelli* came across as a spontaneous, accessible, youthful work, but in his next (negligible) book *Eindelijk oorlog* (War at Last, 1996), Koch exhibited quite the opposite of naivety – rather a hyperconsciousness, as if the leaden prose could prevent the author being identified with the types he satirised so hilariously in *Jiskefet*: nasty men, sly sadists, sniggering practical jokers, suspiciously pernickety inspectors, inhumanly formal superintendents.

In the satirical novel *Eten met Emma* (Eating with Emma, 2000) too, that hyperconsciousness undermines the urgency of the narrative. Yes, his prose up to then had known many good scenes, the dialogues were well-timed, the style precise, but it didn't quite form a compositional and thematic whole. Too fickle to restrict himself to the novel form, I thought at the time.

Herman Koch (1953)

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## Finding a balance

I adjusted that view after the publication of the novel *Odessa Star* (2003). There Koch presents the misanthrope Fred, who, beyond his hatred for others (his invalid elderly neighbour from downstairs, his brother-in-law or his former French teacher) despises what he himself has become: a boring member of the middle class. He prefers the scenes of gangster films to life with wife and son in his terraced house, scenes which give his existence that special glow. He sees his chance when at the cinema he bumps into a friend from his youth, Max G., now a glamorously infamous criminal. Fred immediately imposes himself on Max.

Koch had rich material in his hands there, familiar to us from gangster films. Childhood friends, one from the underworld, the other from the straight world, pick up where they left off after years apart. Who turns out 'good' and who 'bad'? What better setting could you wish for? Add to that the fact that Max is modelled on Dutch mafia boss Klaas Bruinsma (1953-1991), nicknamed 'de Dominee' ('the Reverend'), who still appeals to the imagination.

But in this novel again Koch's hyperconsciousness rears its head. He could not simply write an entertaining page-turner. Perhaps he was bored by the lack of depth. That, at least, would explain his almost irrepressible tendency towards satire, repeatedly undermining the authenticity of his realistic story. *Odessa Star* is told from Fred's perspective; Max has been murdered in the meantime and Fred is looking back. It is the choice for Fred's perspective that causes trouble for *Odessa Star*: Fred is too Jiskefet. For pages we share in his

hatred of elderly Belgians plundering hotel buffets, people with Down's syndrome who, in his opinion, should be put away, and English tourists with their preference for greasy junk food. In *Odessa Star* the Fred-&-Max intrigue shifts into the background, destroying the intended suspense.

Koch's big problem as a writer was now exposed: he needed to find a balance. His brand remained diffuse. His handicap was that he was too intelligent, thought too abstractly to tell a story straight, to write a 'light' novel. The big question was how to proceed.

Koch's salvation from this destructive hyperconsciousness is simple: he must limit himself, keep his subject small, not go off at a tangent. He did this in his novel *Denken aan Bruce Kennedy* (Thinking of Bruce Kennedy, 2009), limiting himself in his choice of subject, but at the same time immersing himself in the finest details of a woman's life. Miriam is the wife of sidetracked Dutch director Bernhard Wenger, who is the only one who believes religiously in his talent. That would make him at worst a sad case, were it not for the fact that he is cursed with virulent jealousy towards anyone more successful. Koch wisely leaves it ambiguous whether Miriam's plight is due to the difficult task of living with Bernhard, or to depression. The fact is that she has made a run for it, to spend a week recovering by herself in a hotel in southern Spain. There she meets 68-year-old star Bruce Kennedy, a contemporary of actors such as Clint Eastwood, a living alcoholic film legend. A love affair begins, the home front laments, but then Bruce dies. Miriam returns home after his death, leaving the message of this moving novel clear, as in a striking, old-fashioned parable about modern human life: against the background of personal disasters such as cancer and death, vague relational discontent does not amount to much. Koch was now a fully fledged writer, but still almost no one could see it.

### **Instinct wins over morals**

That changed with *The Dinner*. The novel is deceptive from the outset: the first person narrator Paul appears as a rather stiff figure, referring very properly to 'my wife'. A stickler for details, moreover, who takes pleasure in explaining at length that his spouse's name is Marie Claire, but that because of the magazine of the same name she prefers Claire. The structure of the novel follows the stages of a dinner, from aperitif through to tip. The reader prepares for the worst: a whole evening in the company of a bore like that; in familiar Kochian idiom, an asshole – gives you the creeps.

But Paul Lohman turns out to be a fascinating, nasty piece of work, cursed with a good dose of malevolence and no stranger to violent fantasy. The tension lies in the fact that two married couples with little to say to one another must spend an entire evening in conversation. Wolfing their food down in silence is not an option. They need to talk, as we know from the start.

The other couple, Paul's brother Serge and his wife Babette, are a source of further tension. Babette enters in tears: a row. The fact that Paul cannot stand Serge, the opposition leader and a dead cert for new prime minister, is not conducive to the desired atmosphere of serenity at the table. Koch feeds us slowly, moving from one ominous announcement to another shameful situation, inside the increasingly claustrophobic universe of *The Dinner*.

It is as if the merest breath of wind might knock over the pieces on the chessboard: Serge's flirting with the clumsy waitress; the manager who repeatedly moves his fingers too close to the food as he introduces the dishes; an intrusive fellow diner who wishes to immortalise his daughter in a photo with Serge; lengthy incoming and outgoing telephone calls at the table during dinner.

Of course the story comes to us through Paul, and we are given more and more reason to doubt his reliability. The fantasy of punching the manager in the teeth, for instance, appears to come from a volcanic mind, which might erupt periodically. Paul apparently threatened a bicycle maker with a pump in the presence of his own eight-year-old son Michel; he beat up the headmaster who did not like Michel's project about taking the law into one's own hands; he apparently hit Serge over the head with a frying pan, and so on. It is difficult to distinguish fantasy from reality, but the increasingly frequent, nonchalant mentions that Paul has been suspended from his job as a history teacher and has not been taking his medication for some time have a disconcerting effect.

Together all these carefully arranged fragments make the tightly plotted novel *The Dinner* completely compelling; the reader is witness to a personal disaster on the point of completion. On another level, however, this tense relationship between the brothers might be seen to stand for the cleft between citizen and politician: an opposition leader without solutions versus the dissatisfied, assertive, even explosive electorate.

Koch limited himself in *Denken aan Bruce Kennedy*; here he achieves the same effect with a small group. We find ourselves inside Paul's sick head and through him in the heads of Serge, Babette and Claire as well, as he registers and interprets their verbal and non-verbal responses. We even see inside Michel, Paul and Claire's adolescent son, who along with his cousin (Serge and Babette's son) has an act of senseless violence on his conscience: the nocturnal molestation and immolation of a homeless woman, filmed by the boys, in the spirit of the age, with a mobile phone. An event no parent expects – certainly not if he's a prominent candidate at election time.

The plot proceeds through the courses, but the essence of *The Dinner* is the question: how far would you go as a parent to protect your child? A long way, says Koch's unpredictable, amoral novel. Instinct wins over morals.

## How to get away with the crime

What does an alchemist do when, after decades of stirring the cauldron, he knows the secret of making gold? Keeps stirring, probably, to produce the highest carat and transform the associated softness into hardness. After the international bestseller *The Dinner* Koch did something along these lines. In *Summerhouse with Swimming Pool* (*Zomerhuis met zwembad*, 2011) he has refined his method. How? He skips the foreplay. In the first chapter, as he sketches the line of the story and presentation of the main character (misanthropic family doctor Marc Schlosser) there is mention of the suspected murder of a patient (famous actor Ralph Meier) and a case with the medical disciplinary board. A thriller, the reader realises.

The main character's early confession gives Koch the chance to exploit the tension to the full. His affiliation with the thriller genre dictates that he build

suspense into every scene and close every chapter with a cliff-hanger. But the formidable tension in *Summerhouse with Swimming Pool* rests mainly in what we do not know. What is Doctor Marc capable of? What does deprived actor Ralph have on his conscience? Will Marc's affair with Ralph's wife Judith continue, will it be discovered, and if so, when? Will Marc's 13-year-old daughter's hormones play up? Is Ralph's 15-year-old son Alex a culprit too? Is Marc's wife Caroline up to no good either? What is the dark role played by Ralph's family friend, famous film director Stanley Forbes? Because there is so much we do not know, every scene is crucial and every word counts, as a clue, oracle or omen. Continually wrong-footing us and then turning out right after all, inserting fragments of truth everywhere, Koch's thriller is Hitchcock and situation comedy in one. That's the way to make a page-turner.

But for a book to be a page-turner the characters must also be interesting. Koch uses four methods to suck the reader into the life of his characters.

One: they rest on past success. Recycled success. Marc is a version of the father from *The Dinner* (2009), whose moral dilemma was: would you go so far for your child as to deny their crime, cover it up and become an accomplice yourself? In *Summerhouse with Swimming Pool* this dilemma is resumed and logically continued: would you go so far as to kill for your child?

Actor Ralph is the prototypical successful baby boomer characteristic of Koch's prose. Everything comes to him easily, and he gets away with everything. Americanised Dutchman Stanley is a resurrected Bruce Kennedy, the mythical film star from *Denken aan Bruce Kennedy*. Stanley's function in the story is to bring the reader into contact with a glamorous, glossy world he otherwise would not have access to. The story effect.

Two: the larger than life effect. The writer must offer readers familiarity – to some degree – but not the mess or incompleteness of their own existence. Peeking in on interesting neighbours is much more fun. You introduce readers into a world of power: the doctor has power over others, even over life and death. We see into his head, hearing our real chances of survival and his cynical thoughts about patients and their conditions. Such insights and grim prognoses are not what you hear in your average four-minute chat with your own doctor. Doctor Koch supplies them. Marc's friendship with Ralph takes him (and the reader) into the world of Dutch glamour. Ralph brings us into the homes of the artistic elite, even Stanley, who makes international series for the Dutch television channel, HBO. Stanley takes us to Hollywood. He is the man who can make and break everything, just as lawless and amoral as Marc – an echo of Koch's flirtation with super-villains in *Odessa Star*.

Three: the attraction of evil. None of the characters are really good. By far the most interesting is Marc, who, instead of conforming to prevailing moral standards, takes the law into his own hands, deliberately settling the score. His child is more important than the rule of law, his own interest or that of society. He does not care about democratic decisions and legal procedures; he trusts no one, least of all government authority. He may be a megalomaniac with a god complex, a common trait in doctors and teachers, but it is more than that. His type is always present in Koch's work, but the changing political times accentuate his profile. Doctor Marc appeals to the populist uprising and social unease of current times. Seen in this light he is the strong man who imposes order, outside the elite of the Randstad region, political regents and government. He

could not care less about their standards, values and the contemporary culture of affected moral perfection, of solidarity and condescension.

Robust malevolence suits this type of character, propped up by Marc's biological and social Darwinian convictions. Malevolence towards the 'boring asshole', the nobody with his mortgage payments, with whom women become involved quite unromantically when their biological clocks start ticking, the kind of dimwit that nice girls and fading older women end up with. These ostensibly insignificant, resoundingly witty passages have a message, drawing the line between winners and losers. Koch's characters are winners, great winners with successful children. Even the victims in this book are elevated above the losers. The reader persists in the hope of unravelling the secret of the winner's success.

Four: age-old stereotypes work their magic. Such as the myth of the false innocence of young girls (who turn out smarter than originally assumed) and the myth of the needy, naive woman. Women are weak, oblivious to what is happening, lacking in self-control, and useless in an emergency. *Summerhouse with Swimming Pool* is about the supremacy of the macho man: he is terrible, but he defends his wife and daughters like no other against the wolves at the door. A right-minded, refined, soft family man would not do that: he would run away and call the (corrupt) southern European police. Doctor Marc on the other hand commits murder to restore order. Koch's thriller teaches us not only how to restore your existence outside the law, but also how to get away with crime. All that time, due to Koch's choice of intimate narrative perspective, you empathise with a scoundrel who appeals to the most primitive in men. After all, he stands for the rightness of evolution. His life is no romanticised existence outside middle-class conventions. No, he is a middle-class outlaw, someone who could just as well be your neighbour. Ordinary, but with the power to move things his way.

All together it seems Koch has found the perfect mix. ■

#### FURTHER READING

*De voorbijganger* (The Passerby, stories, 1985)

*Red ons, Maria Montanelli* (Save Us, Maria Montanelli, novel, 1989)

*Eindelijk oorlog* (War at Last, novel, 1996)

*Eten met Emma* (Eating with Emma, novel, 2000)

*Odessa Star* (novel, 2003)

*Denken aan Bruce Kennedy* (Thinking of Bruce Kennedy, novel, 2005)

*The Dinner*, translated by Sam Garrett,

Atlantic Books, London, 2013;

Hogarth/Crown/Random House, New York, 2013

(*Het diner*, 2009)

*Summerhouse with Swimming Pool*,

translated by Sam Garrett, Hogarth/Crown/Random House, New York, 2014

(*Zomerhuis met zwembad*, 2011)

## **An Extract from *Summer House with Swimming Pool***

By Herman Koch

I am a doctor. My office hours are from eight-thirty in the morning to one in the afternoon. I take my time. Twenty minutes for each patient. Those twenty minutes are my unique selling point. Where else these days, people say, can you find a family doctor who gives you twenty minutes? – and they pass the information along. He doesn't take on too many patients, they say. He makes time for each individual case. I have a waiting list. When a patient dies or moves away, all I have to do is pick up the phone and I have five new ones to take their place.

Patients can't tell the difference between time and attention. They think I give them more attention than other doctors. But all I give them is more time. By the end of the first sixty seconds I've seen all I need to know. The remaining nineteen minutes I fill with attention. Or, I should say, with the illusion of attention. I ask all the usual questions. How is your son/daughter getting along? Are you sleeping better these days? Are you sure you're not getting too much/too little to eat? I hold the stethoscope to their chests, then to their backs. Take a deep breath, I say. Now breathe out nice and slow. I don't really listen. Or at least I try not to. On the inside, all human bodies sound the same. First of all, of course, there's the heartbeat. The heart is blind. The heart pumps. The heart is the engine room. The engine room only keeps the ship going, it doesn't keep it on course. And then there are the sounds of the intestines. Of the vital organs. An overburdened liver sounds different from a healthy one. An overburdened liver groans. It groans and begs. It begs for a day off. A day to deal with the worst of the garbage. The way things are now, it's always in a hurry, trying to catch up with itself. The overburdened liver is like the kitchen in a restaurant that's open around the clock. The dishes pile up. The dishwashers are working full tilt. But the dirty dishes and caked-on pans only pile up higher and higher. The overburdened liver hopes for that one day off that never comes. Every afternoon at four-thirty, five o'clock (sometimes earlier), the hope of that one day off is dashed again. If the liver's lucky, at first it's only beer. Beer passes most of the work along to the kidneys. But you always have those for whom beer alone isn't enough. They order something on the side: a shot of gin, vodka or whisky. Something they can knock back. The overburdened liver braces itself, then finally ruptures. First it grows rigid, like an overinflated tire. All it takes then is one little bump in the road for it to blow wide open.

I listen with my stethoscope. I press against the hard spot, just beneath the skin. Does this hurt? If I press any harder, it will burst open right there in my

office. Can't have that. It makes an incredible mess. Blood gushes out in a huge wave. No general practitioner is keen to have someone die in his office. At home, that's a different story. In the privacy of their own homes, in the middle of the night, in their own beds. With a ruptured liver, they usually don't even make it to the phone. The ambulance would get there too late anyway.

My patients file into my practice at twenty-minute intervals. The office is on the ground floor. They come in on crutches and in wheelchairs. Some of them are too fat, others are short of breath. They are, in any case, no longer able to climb stairs. One flight of stairs would kill them for sure. Others only imagine it would: that their final hour would sound on the first step. Most of the patients are like that. Most of them have nothing wrong with them. They moan and groan, make noises that would make you think they found death staring them in the face every moment of the day, they sink into the chair across from my desk with a sigh – but there's nothing wrong with them. I let them reel off their complaints. It hurts here, and here, sometimes it spasms down to here... I do my best to act interested. Meanwhile, I doodle on a scrap of paper. I ask them to get up, to follow me to the examination room. Occasionally I'll ask someone to undress behind the screen, but most of the time I don't. All human bodies are horrible enough as it is, even with their clothes on. I don't want to see them, those parts where the sun never shines. Not the folds of fat in which it is always too warm and the bacteria have free rein, not the fungal growths and infections between the toes, beneath the nails, not the fingers that scratch here, the fingers that rub there until it starts to bleed... Here, doctor, here's where it itches really badly... No, I don't want to see. I pretend to look, but I'm thinking about something else. About a roller coaster in an amusement park, the car at the front has a green dragon's head mounted on it, the people throw their hands in the air and scream their lungs out. From the corner of my eye I see moist tufts of pubic hair, or red, infected bald spots where no hair will ever grow again, and I think about a plane exploding in the air, the passengers still belted to their seats as they begin a mile-long tumble into eternity: it's cold, the air is thin, far below the ocean awaits. It burns when I pee, doctor. Like there are needles coming out... A train explodes just before it enters the station, the space shuttle Columbia shatters into millions of little pieces, the second jet slams into the South Tower. It burns, here, doctor. Here...

You can get dressed now, I say. I've seen enough. I'll write you a prescription. ■

From *Summerhouse with Swimming Pool*, Hogarth/Crown/Random House, New York, 2014  
(*Zomerhuis met zwembad*, Anthos, Amsterdam, 2011)

Translated by Sam Garrett