

Sex, Death and Rock 'n' Roll in Peter Pontiac's Cartoons

When Peter Pontiac was ten years old, his aunt took him to a music shop to look for a guitar. At last it was all going to happen. But the shopkeeper gave him a disparaging look and told him to come back when his hands were bigger. He left the guitar shop disappointed. Before his hands were big enough, his aunt committed suicide. Pontiac became not a musician but a cartoon artist.

Peter Pontiac (Peter Pollmann, b. 1951 in the Netherlands) would still rather be a musician. He has been drawing now for more than forty years, but he would still like to strike a bargain with the devil and swap his pencil for a guitar. Speaking of the devil – he doesn't exist in 2012, but in Pontiac's Catholic childhood he was all over the place. Now the lord of darkness appears only in his comic strips, with a swishing tail and usually in the company of a group of pretty girls. It's a good thing the devil has disappeared because otherwise Holland would have had to do without one of its finest draughtsmen. Pontiac creates strip cartoons, graphic novels and illustrations for newspapers, books and record sleeves. He has added something to the Dutch comic strip that was not there before: a combination of authorship skills and artistry. For this he was awarded the Marten Toonder Prize in 2011, the most important Dutch prize for comic strips (worth 25,000 euro) and intended for strip cartoonists who have made a contribution to Dutch heritage with their work.

For Pontiac, who had never had any training, the deciding factor was the record sleeve *Cheap Thrills*, which the American strip cartoonist Robert Crumb drew in 1968 for Big Brother & the Holding Company (which Janis Joplin once sang with). "A sign, a revelation. That you could have something like that on a record sleeve!" It was a sleeve, but at the same time a strip cartoon. Every number was depicted visually. He wanted to do that too. He wanted to draw like Crumb,

as an underground artist. The underground was unashamedly autobiographical and critical of society. In his early years Pontiac focussed on the themes to which he is still faithful: sex, death and music. In his opinion art has little to do with anything other than sex and death. And in his case there is music too, or rather rock'n'roll. Rebellious and mutinous music that really took hold of the general public in the sixties and is, of course, about sex and death. The Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix and later the Ramones: lots of lovely noise. Just as the rockers and punkers were doing their own thing without giving a damn about anybody else, that was how he wanted to draw. "If you're not living on the edge, you're taking too much space", says Pontiac.

He drew his own lonely path. And that provided him with a multitude of faithful fans and national and international admiration. The Marten Toonder Prize is not the first accolade for Pontiac. He exhibited in Amsterdam, Angoulême, Brussels, Barcelona, Beijing and Rio de Janeiro. In October 2011 the collection *1001 Comics You Must Read Before You Die* by Paul Gravett, was published (with a preface by Terry Gilliam). Pontiac is one of the seven Dutch cartoonists in it. Gravett recommends that everyone should be sure to read *Kraut*.

Kraut isn't a strip cartoon in the classical sense of the word, with text balloons, but it is certainly a graphic novel. It's designed in the same way as one of the very greatest of graphic novels, *A Contract With God*, by the American Will Eisner, who coined the term 'graphic novel'. The drawings are no longer constantly imprisoned in frames, as in the usual strips, but can also stand free of the text. In this way Eisner demonstrated that text is an extension of image, a narrative bridge. The lettering is an important medium for the artist to give a page atmosphere, depth and dynamic. Therefore it is important that the lettering is not computer-originated but that the text is written in the hand of the artist. Pontiac took this advice of Eisner's to heart. For *Kraut* he was even urged on by Eisner, who scribbled on



Peter Pontiac, *Iron Cross 2nd Class. Paternal Heroics*, illustration for a limited edition of *Kraut*, 2005.

a packet of cigarettes: "Please keep going. Do a graphic novel too... I need company it's too lonely out there." Pontiac had already carried the idea in his head for a long time. He speaks about it an interview in 1983. Even strip cartoons need time to incubate. *Kraut* did not appear until 2000.

Kraut is a letter to his father, a biographical work, as he himself says. It's a long letter because he has an awful lot of questions. To begin with: where is his father? He disappeared in 1978 in Daaibooi Beach, on Curaçao. Only the car he had hired was found, along with all his personal belongings. The key was still in the ignition. If he deliberately wanted to disappear why? Was it a staged vanishing trick? Had he become unwell while swimming? And there are other unanswered questions. His father was an SS Storm trooper in the Second World War. He worked as a War Reporter for the Waffen-SS. What did he find so attractive in national socialism? Why was he a fascist? In *Kraut* Pontiac provides himself and his readers with pictorial answers. In *Kraut*

we see the answers to the questions we read. We see his father walking into the sea, though whether that is exactly how it happened we don't know. There are witnesses who saw someone walking into the sea. But Pontiac is a master in the art of asking questions. Was it *his* father they saw, or was it a different middle-aged white man? Beneath a fragment from the police report ("It is not known whether Mr J.J.A. Pollmann could swim") we see the skeleton of Mr Pollmann stuck between the rocks. He still has his glasses on. Image and text vie with each other and that is what makes *Kraut* so exceptional. The tension between the questions and the answers, between text and image increases enormously. This design makes *Kraut* a masterpiece, a book that you must indeed read before you die, the best *graphic novel* in Dutch. Drawings and text complement each other and contradict each other at the same time. Pontiac tests the limits of his story and the story of his father as well as the limits of the comic strip medium.

Pontiac's style of writing and drawing is baroque. Almost every plate is a treasure chest which he fills with as much information as possible. "Nothing's lovelier than a drawing where there's a lot to see", he says. What distinguishes this book from most graphic novels is that the text is equally ambitious and baroque. Pontiac is not content just to write. His father is neither a drowned person nor a drunkard, but a victim of the sea 'a prey of Poseidon'. The book is mercilessly frank. Every aspect of his father's life is touched on. Pontiac quotes from his diaries and does not hide his affairs with other women. Pontiac waited for publication until after the death of his mother. "It also had something to do with her 'feeling for Germany'."

When Pontiac started to create comic strips in the late sixties they were open-hearted stories, but mainly about his own life, his addiction and his relationships. He observes and questions himself and the world at large. Why do we do what we do? The world could come to an end at any time. Pontiac doesn't see any horsemen of the Apocalypse, but tanks of destruction. "I am sailing on the Styx." His longer story *Requiem Fortissimo*, from 1985, is exquisite and taut but far from joyful. It is jet black romantic, which indicates a preference for the sublime wherein desire and suffering, pleasure and pain, blend into shivering enjoyment. It is pain of the world, pain about the world. Just like Nescio's *Young Titans*, Pontiac wants to do everything differently. He wants to use not only reason but also his feelings and imagination as the norm. To that principle he has remained true. He is lord of a rainy kingdom, where the sun shines now and then. "I'm pessimistic about the world, but not about life."

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www.peterpontiac.nl



Peter Pontiac,
Self-portrait on the occasion of
the Marten Toonder Award, 2011.

An Open Book in an Open Landscape

Dutch Writers in Beijing

From 31 August to 4 September 2011 the Chinese capital, Beijing, took on a somewhat orange hue. During that period the Netherlands was playing host to the eighteenth edition of the Beijing Book Fair, one of the largest and most rapidly expanding book fairs in the world. After such major powers as Germany, France, Russia and India, the Netherlands was the first 'smaller' country to be given the opportunity of presenting its writers and literature to the Chinese. The host country's stand covered an area of over 1,500m², and in its form and imagery it symbolised the theme 'Open Landscape - Open Book'. In this way, the intention was to draw people's attention to specific elements of the Dutch way of thinking: openness, transparency and a desire for practicability.

Just over twenty authors travelled to Beijing and sixteen publishers were present on the host country's stand. During the varied writers' programme, the Dutch authors were able to forge contacts with their Chinese colleagues, both at the fair and in the city. In beautifully presented exhibitions one could become acquainted with Vincent van Gogh's correspondence, with books with the finest of layouts, with illustrations for children's books and literary strip cartoons.

Immediately after the fair ended the Dutch Foundation for Literature, which was ultimately responsible for the host country's presentation, spoke of its having been a success. It pointed out that this eighteenth edition of the Beijing Book Fair had attracted more visitors than ever before (half a million). The attraction of the host country's stand was reportedly so great that the other stands had on average to make do with fewer visitors than previously. The press too showed a real interest - and that was absolutely not restricted to the Dutch media. The folder compiled by the Dutch Foundation for Literature with articles from the Chinese press is most impressive.

As a native of Flanders, the writer of this article has to regret that no writers from the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium were present in Beijing. The host stand had just only one small table on which lay books by Flemish writers - no more than that. During the host country's lengthy preparations for the fair, Flanders ought really to have been invited by the head of the Dutch Foundation for Literature to make an appropriate contribution to the stand. Apparently, in the end this was not possible. As a result, however, the Chinese were left with the mistaken impression that Dutch-language literature extends no further south than the border between the Netherlands and Belgium. In the past, such joint presentations had indeed been possible. For example, the Netherlands and Flanders were able to put on a joint exhibit at the *Frankfurter Buchmesse* in 1993. This experience had positive spin-off, since at other international book fairs the Netherlands and Flanders also combined to be 'the host country', as at Barcelona (1995), Göteborg (1997) and Paris (2003) - and each time the Dutch-language literature as a whole made a good impression.

A grouchy type might well ask himself if a book fair in Beijing, so far from home, could be of any possible use to Dutch literature. But that would be to ignore the vast market that can (admittedly theoretically) be tapped. Billions of potential readers at the other end of the Silk Road are maybe just waiting for the chance to get to know Dutch writers.

Criticism was much more vociferous regarding the political and general social context within which the Beijing book fair was organised. China is not exactly a country where intellectual broad-mindedness and the free expression of opinion are self-evident concepts. Furthermore, the Chinese authorities seemed to adopt an even tougher attitude than before in the months leading up to the fair. Fear that the Arab Spring might have an inspiring effect on the Chinese intelligentsia could well have been a part of this. Many people also wondered if the Dutch literary world,

which is often so concerned about freedom and democracy, would really find it easy to present itself in its Sunday best in the Chinese capital. The Dutch Foundation for Literature parried this criticism by pointing out that during the long preparations for hosting the fair a great many contacts had been established between Dutch and Chinese writers and publishers. This had given rise to an intellectual climate based on the mutual exchange of ideas. The fact that Chinese writers were able to share thoughts with their Dutch colleagues during the period of the fair was also extremely important and could well lead to lasting contacts. Actually, it is possible to draw a parallel with the Olympic Games held in Beijing in 2008, and the World Exposition organised in Shanghai in 2010. Very much the same discussion took place on both occasions. As to whether the Land of the Dragon has shown greater openness since these events - the answer to that depends on who you ask.

But let us return to the literature. Now that the spotlights and microphones have long since been switched off, it will be interesting to see if the Chinese publishers retain their interest in Dutch books. If they do, which genres will they prefer, and will they invest appropriately in promoting their translations from the Dutch? Will the contacts established before and during the fair result in long-lasting cooperation? In any case, if Dutch literature wishes to keep a foot in the door in China, some form of permanent follow-up is essential. In short, the work is only just beginning.

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www.letterenfonds.nl/en/
www.bibf.net

Why Hella S. Haasse's Work Does Not Need Introduction Abroad

The sad news of the death of H el ene Serafia Haasse in September 2011 is – once more – an occasion to underline Haasse's literary significance, not only as a nationally and internationally recognised literary writer, but also as an author who has always embedded her work in a global context. This article aims to give a short overview of the reception of Haasse's work outside the Netherlands.

Most records of Hella S. Haasse's work emphasize her historical work, but Haasse wrote *across* genres: besides creatively "assembling" historical novels, she wrote experimental (auto) biographies, plays, essays, literary criticism, travel writing, contemporary novels and short stories. This is not an exhaustive list. Her work is diverse, it discusses a wide range of topics and is often hard to capture in traditional genre categories.

Haasse was a productive author who wrote throughout her life with a remarkable consistency: her oeuvre consists of around 30 titles that were published in the Netherlands with timely intervals of two to three years in between – from her literary debut, the short novel *Oeroeg* (1948, translated into English as *Forever a Stranger*), until her last novel *Sleutelooij* in 2002 (*The Eye of the Key*). The latter mirrors and expands on *Oeroeg's* theme in its description of an interracial friendship in the Dutch East Indies affected by colonial hierarchy. Born in 1918 in what is now Jakarta (then Batavia, capital of the former Dutch East Indies), Indonesia became a thread throughout Haasse's work. However, the author herself never referred to Indonesia as a "theme", for her the country simply meant "fertile soil for my imagination".

Ten years of Haasse's life were spent in France. Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands once described her as a writer with three countries of origin: the Netherlands, Indonesia and France. These three origins are thematically represented in Haasse's

Hella Haasse.
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work: fictional returns to colonial and postcolonial Indonesia, French settings, characters and historical figures of several (double) nationalities. Yet the global background of Haasse also shows in the acceptance of her work by readers around the world. One of many examples is that the Chilean government awarded her work the Gabriela Mistral prize in 1996. Haasse's oeuvre is, indeed, widespread and widely read. The translations database of the Dutch Foundation for Literature mentions 136 translations of circa 28 individual titles into more than 20 languages, not taking into account the numerous reprints of her books abroad. As a result Vietnamese can read *The Tea Lords* in their mother tongue (published in 2002), and there are two Haasse novels in Welsh.

Haasse's popularity in France particularly deserves mentioning. Compared to, for example, the small selection translated into Indonesian (four titles), the French embraced Haasse's

novels with 32 translations. The author received several French honours and awards, of which the title of *Officier de la Légion d'honneur* in 2000 is probably the most important. Where literary critic Margot Dijkgraaf indicates that a more intellectual French reading climate is the reason for this popularity, we might also consider factors such as Haasse's extended stay in France, which enabled her to build strong relations with publishers and two outstanding translators, Annie Kroon and Anne-Marie de Both-Diez.

At the start of Haasse's career, in 1954, *The Scarlet City* was reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement*. The critic Alfred Duggan also mentions in passing the positive effect of an "excellent translation". He further describes the novel's main character, Giovanni Borgia, as "cultivated and observant", and the storyline as simply "moving". By framing Haasse's novel with three Anglo-Saxon historical novels and without explicitly introducing the young author, this early

reviewer elegantly accepted Haasse as an actor to watch on the global literary stage. Haasse's broad cultural interests, her insightful yet subtle psychological and political awareness travelled easily from the very start.

Haasse's poetical essay titled 'Parang Sawat' – meaning "elaborate, stylised pattern on a traditional Indonesian *batik* fabric" – starts with: "Sometimes I wander in thoughts through all the houses, the gardens, I have lived in on Java. I relive situations and events; I re-imagine landscapes." I believe that it is mostly Haasse's capacity to transgress temporal and national boundaries in her imagination that explains why her novels have always found international readership, without need for introduction. Maybe now is the time to open up the online Hella S. Haasse museum to the international reader? Not as a necessary introduction, but as an optional afterword to an impressive universal and diverse oeuvre.

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See also: JANE FENOULHET, "Hella S. Haasse and the Historical Novel or: The Triumph of Fact over Fiction", *The Low Countries* no 4 (1996), pp. 110-120.

www.hellahaasse.nl

www.hellahaassemuseum.nl

Hella Haasse in English

- *The Black Lake* (Original title: *Oeroeg*), translation by Ina Rilke, Portobello Books, in preparation since 2010.
- *The Tea Lords* (Original title: *Heren van de thee*), translated from the Dutch by Ina Rilke, Portobello Books, 2011.
- *In a Dark Wood Wandering* (Original title: *Het woud der verwachting*), translated by Lewis C. Kaplan, Academy Chicago Publishers, 1997.
- *The Scarlet City* (Original title: *De scharlaken stad*), translated by Anita Miller, Academy Chicago Publishers, 1997 / Allison & Busby, London, 1997. First published by McGraw Hill Publishing Company Limited, 1954.
- *Threshold of Fire* (Original title: *Een nieuwer testament*), translated by Nini Blinstrub - Anita Miller, Academy Chicago Publishers, 1996 / Allison & Busby, London, 1997.
- *Forever a Stranger and Other Stories* (Original title: *Oeroeg*), translated by Margaret M. Alibasah, Oxford University Press, 1996. (Contains stories by other authors too).