

Staying up for Days in the Chelsea Hotel

The Jan Cremer Phenomenon

170

[PHILIP HOORNE]

The writer and visual artist Jan Cremer was born on 20 April 1940 in Enschede, a large factory town in Twente in the east of the Netherlands close to the German border, which even as a small boy he wanted to cross to meet the 'infinite'. His father came from a family of farriers and professional soldiers from Prussia and Hesse and was himself a smith as well as an explorer and author of travel letters. On one of his trips he met the Hungarian ballet dancer, Rózsa Csordás Szomorkay, who studied at the Budapest Conservatory and danced with the Hungarian State Ballet. He was gone sixty, she just twenty. According to one theory, to which Jan Cremer evidently subscribes, as a member of the Magyar people the woman who was to become his mother could trace her roots back to the Huns, a confederation of nomadic tribes from Central Asia. It was from her that Jan Cremer inherited not just his incorrigible restlessness, but also his passion for art. When he was still very young she instilled in him a love of drawing and painting. Without too much exaggeration one might say that, considering the genetic material he got from his parents, Jan Cremer could not have turned out any differently than the phenomenon he finally became.

Originally Jan Cremer wanted to be a journalist. For two years as a teenager he was in charge of *De Tukkerbode*, a supplement to *De Kleine Zondagsvriend*, an Antwerp-based magazine for young people. He won a few essay competitions with horror stories written in a cold-blooded style - evidently he realised even then that there was no harm in a story packing a punch. He could not settle at school, was expelled and had a series of small jobs. In 1956 he enrolled in a course in painting and graphic techniques, but had difficulty fitting in and was expelled again. After a year working as a seaman on tramp ships he signed off and ended up in Paris, where famous painters had their studios. In the autumn of 1958 he returned to the Netherlands, where he took lessons at the Vrije Academie art school in The Hague and did all sorts of odd jobs to earn the money to buy paint. In October 1958 he held the first one-man show of his *'peinture barbarisme'*, in which he deliberately wiped the floor with every painting tradition: *'I chuck paint on the canvas, I drip, splash, hit, kick, I fight with the paint and sometimes I win.'* His unconventional canvases and provocative behaviour - at the 1960 Hague Salon he stuck a 1,000,000 guilder price ticket on his pentaptych, 'The Japanese War' - earned the painter such nicknames as 'Paint

Biker', 'Art Biker' and 'Wild Beast' and a whole lot of publicity. Even before his notorious novel appeared Jan Cremer had acquired a fearsome reputation as a painter. It was he who said: *'Rembrandt? Who's he? I don't know anything about sport.'* Cremer was a staunch advocate of barter and what he called the season ticket system. Whenever he found himself running short of money he would sell one or more of his paintings or drawings so that he had some dough for a hot meal, a packet of cigarettes or somewhere to sleep.

Jan Cremer (1940-). 1964.
Photo by Wim van der Linden.
Courtesy of MAI.



A real biker

In 1960 Jan Cremer moved to Ibiza, a refuge for artistic types including Hans Sleutelaar and Cornelis Bastiaan Vaandrager. He was familiar with both these Dutch poets from work they had published in the avant-garde literary magazine *Gard Sivik* and told them he was working on a book. Sleutelaar and Vaandrager were enthusiastic and placed some of his pieces in *Gard Sivik* - extracts from 'Operation Bullet-Wound' (Operatie kogelwond) and 'Algerian Diary' (Algerijs dagboek), which were later included in their entirety in *I Jan Cremer* (Ik Jan Cremer). These extracts provoked some indignation, a harbinger of the huge furore that was to come later. Lack of money forced Cremer to return to the Netherlands in the autumn of 1962. His book was as good as finished and he was looking for a publisher. As *Gard Sivik* was published by Nijgh & Van Ditmar he thought it logical to submit his manuscript to them. 'There I had to deal with the writer and critic Pierre H. Dubois,' says Cremer. 'I asked for an advance of a thousand guilders and the loan of a typewriter to finish the book. But Dubois said that decision wasn't up to him and I didn't hear a word after that.' Apparently his work was rejected because it didn't fit in with the publisher's list, and also because Cremer was suspected of using a ghost writer.

It was none other than the celebrated Dutch writer Willem Frederik Hermans who drew the work published in *Gard Sivik* to the attention of Geert Lubberhuizen, director of the publishing house De Bezige Bij. Cremer got his typewriter and his thousand guilders - in two instalments, it's true, but at the time it was still quite a hefty sum. He moved in with Simon Vinkenoog. One evening they spread the 145 chapters of the book on the carpet to put the manuscript in order. Then they put it all back together again. After publication critics pointed out that some bits were not in the right place. It was true. They had run out of paperclips while they were sorting out the pieces. (In a subsequent edition the chapters were put in their proper order.) Jan Cremer wanted his photo on the front cover. That was unheard of and caused a row with the designer, but Cremer got his way. Like a real biker the writer sat on a shiny motorbike, ready to charge the public straight out of the cover. Cremer had the announcement 'the irrefutable bestseller' printed next to his head - before even a single copy of the book had been sold. One of the boldest prophecies in Dutch literature, because there was nothing to suggest that *I Jan Cremer*, number 64 in the Bezige Bij's Giant Literary Pocket Book series, would be a success. The first edition ran to a mere five thousand copies. But a bestseller it was, with translations in more than thirty countries. The dedication in the book read: 'For Jan Cremer & Jayne Mansfield'.

Jan Cremer's daring only partly explains the success of *I Jan Cremer*. The overwhelmingly scathing comments in the Dutch newspapers actually had the opposite effect to that intended. Critics called the book 'a dirty piece of pornography with a sadistic-fascistic slant', 'moronic infantilism' and more in the same vein, but without quoting specific examples. So the public at large had to read it to discover the 'dirt' for themselves, and they did so in huge numbers. Jan Cremer built his fame and fortune on the innocent curiosity of good Dutch citizens, who finally began to realise that the tame postwar years of reconstruction were over once and for all. The wild '60s brought with them long hair, raucous music and free sex. *I Jan Cremer* fitted the picture, but that was not intentional. It was the product of an author who carried hardly any cultural, artistic or re-

Jan Cremer
and Jayne Mansfield.
New York, 1966.



religious baggage and simply wrote the way he was. Some nit-picking critics directed their bile at his publisher, De Bezige Bij – literally The Busy Bee – devising nicknames for it like ‘Dirty Bee’, ‘Busy Thigh’ or ‘Stink Publishers’. De Bezige Bij sued the Protestant newspaper *Trouw* for libel, and won. The firm was not interested in the shock factor, only in the book’s literary merit – a good story well told, a ‘wake-up call’, the same sort of thing as Wolkers was writing, young people loved it.

The right book at the right time

It was with Jan Cremer that literature first encountered publicity focused primarily on the writer. His profession was not being a writer or a painter but being ‘Jan Cremer’. When an over-zealous policeman in Hengelo confiscated some copies of the book, letters of support for him from concerned parents appeared in the newspapers. It turned out they had all been written by the author himself. There were reports that during a raid on lockers in Amsterdam Central Station

investigators had found hundreds of copies of the book which belonged to commuters who didn't want their wives to find out they were devouring *I Jan Cremer*. These too were fabricated by the author. In divorce cases, reading the book was considered to be incriminating evidence. Football hooligans were accused of 'Jan Cremerism'. Vicars condemned the vulgar book from their pulpits. 'Jan Cremer -types' appeared in police descriptions. According to the newspaper *De Telegraaf*, the Jan Cremer look was 'denim jeans and jacket, dull blue in colour'. The up-and-coming football star Johan Crujff was told that he had the same initials as the well-known writer. He answered that he hoped he would do as well as him. Dutch teachers who wanted to discuss the book in class risked dismissal. Libraries refused to buy it. Sometimes things got out of hand. The house of Cremer's mother in Enschede was set on fire, which prompted the well-known television presenter Mies Bouwman to appeal on tv for people to have a go at Jan Cremer, by all means, but leave his family alone.

Positive reviews were swamped in the tumult. The most level-headed and broad-minded critics remarked, rightly, that *I Jan Cremer* was a smoothly written pseudo-biography of a Till Eulenspiegel-type rascal who observed society with a cynical, condescending eye, an attitude which led him into countless adventures. There is swearing, love-making, fighting – yes, even murder – in the book, but it is quite unputdownable and that is an undeniable merit in a powerful novel. Willem Frederik Hermans, one of Cremer's few literary friends, called the book a riotous explosion halfway between autobiography and mythomania, and admitted that he had read it in one sitting. Jan Cremer was the first writer to publicly identify himself with his book – half truth, half the fictitious bragging of a ruffian run wild. A working-class lad who had been an ordinary seaman, a marine, a fighting soldier in the Foreign Legion, an assistant in an abattoir and a factory worker. *I Jan Cremer* was the right book at the right time. Five years earlier it would probably have been sold under the counter; five years later it would hardly have raised any eyebrows. But why exactly should Jan Cremer have become the King of Shock and not Gerard Reve or Jan Wolkers? First of all, it had to do with sex. Jan Cremer behaved as if he personally had discovered 'fucking' in the Netherlands. He became the symbol of healthy, uncomplicated sex. What is more, Cremer wrote about everything in plain terms. It was he more than anyone else who introduced colloquial language into Dutch literature, in other words the coarse vernacular of 'the people'. 'Getting pissed', 'stuffing', 'screwing', 'shitting', 'pissing', 'fucking' were words that in the early Sixties still sounded extraordinarily gross. Cremer himself said he wrote the language that was spoken in barracks, factory canteens and ships' galleys. It was a language unknown until then in Dutch literature. Jan Cremer was at one and the same time the desecrator both of sacred sexuality and of the sacrosanct temple of literature.

The sequels

After the runaway success of his first book Jan Cremer fled to the United States, where he wrote *I Jan Cremer 2*. This second book is written in an unrelenting reportage style, with the different sections better delineated than in its predecessor. One critic compared it to James Joyce's *Ulysses*. *I Jan Cremer 2* has

Jan Cremer and Nico (Velvet Underground). New York, Chelsea Hotel, 1967.



two main themes. On the one hand, the adventurous trips Jan Cremer went on with his friend Barry, usually on Silver Monster, a Harley Liberator 750 cc with a sidecar. On the other, the many fragments from his 'life with Claudia', in which Jan Cremer strikes a note of genuineness, even oftenderness and emotion, which is nowhere to be found in the first book. Between the acts this second book contains a number of memories from his youth, in italics. The shortest section of the book, which like the first is divided into consecutively numbered chapters, says: '*You come alone, you live alone, you die alone*' - an example of the author's worldly wisdom. In 1967 *I Jan Cremer 2* won the city of Amsterdam's Proze Prize. To no-one's surprise, this caused a bit of a stir. Two of the jury members were pro-Cremer, one was against. There was some brief talk of appointing a new jury, but it did not come to that and Jan Cremer got the award.

The huge success of his first book - millions of copies were sold worldwide - made Jan Cremer a millionaire. Eager for profit, his American publisher wanted to adapt the translation to the American market and demanded that the author - then only twenty-five years old - should cooperate. Cremer would have none of it, resulting in a quarrel. In America Jan Cremer was introduced by his agent to Jayne Mansfield, the American film star and sex bomb to whom he had dedicated his first book. She fell for him and was his fiancée for a year. As her lover and chief bodyguard he went with Mansfield to South America. These and other turbulent adventures from the underbelly of New York and Hollywood are recounted in *I Jan Cremer 3*. It was 2008 before it appeared, but there just had to be a Number Three sometime. After all, doesn't it say '*To be continued*' at the end of the second book? In Sixties New York, Cremer stayed in the famous Chelsea Hotel, where scores of artists and pop stars passed through or even lived. The passages that deal with his encounters with Bob Dylan have been the subject of

heated discussion. Cremer speaks rather condescendingly of Dylan and claims that his famous motorbike accident in 1966 never happened. He claims it was all a sham to allow Dylan to disappear from the public arena for a time while he underwent rehab. Fans of the singer-songwriter tried frantically to find out whether what Cremer claimed might be true, or whether it is just one more embroidered story. Note in this connection the quote with which *I Jan Cremer 3* opens: 'Everything I say and write is the truth. My truth.'

Between the second and third 'I' books Jan Cremer published a series of other works with varying success. He thought *Made in USA* so appalling that he withdrew it from the shelves himself. *Jan Cremer's Logbook* is a collection of travel stories. He is particularly proud of *The Huns* (De Hunnen) a tome 1535 pages long which he worked on for eleven years and which he regards as his magnum opus. *The Huns* consists of a thousand chapters, organised into thirty parts which in their turn are divided into three novels entitled *War*, *Liberation* and *Peace* (Oorlog, Bevrijding and Vrede) In this trilogy Cremer intertwines his own wartime youth in Enschede with the history of the people of Attila the Hun to whom, as a half-Hungarian, he feels related.



Plan for Jan Cremer Museum.
Enschede.

In the Chelsea Hotel Jan Cremer began to paint again, no longer in the abstract style of 'peinture barbarisme' but enormous fields of tulips – the Dutch national flower – and other aspects of the Dutch landscape as it is usually presented to foreign tourists in travel brochures. He uses bright colours, with a preference for scarlet. He sees this profusion of colour as a counterweight to the greyness of his youth in postwar Enschede. Jan Cremer's visual art is on show in many places in the world and, if everything goes according to plan, from 2010 his work will find a permanent home in *het Cremer*, an art house in Enschede. It was Jan Cremer himself who came up with the idea. In 2003 Enschede city council decided to do something about this project concerning the famous artist who had been born there more than sixty years ago. The eventual museum will be housed in a former cotton warehouse and, besides the actual museum, will also include rooms for visiting artist's studios and tempo-

rary exhibitions as well as providing a stage for critical, high-profile creative spirits of a rebellious nature. That this inspiring environment will ever give rise to a new Jan Cremer is pretty much unthinkable. A phenomenon such as Jan Cremer is unique. ■

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