

Words Are Just as Powerful as Imagination

The Magic World of Tonke Dragt

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J O K E L I N D E R S]

'In words one can express one's feelings,' the shield-bearer Tiuri concludes at the end of *Secrets of the Wild Wood* (Geheimen van het wilde woud, 1963). The opposite - words that disguise what occupies the mind - is equally true. This paradox is as much part of Tonke Dragt as the two sides of a door are inseparable. As an author she is the very expert in both revealing and concealing the many sides of the human being, fascinated as she is by different worlds, times and spaces where nothing is fixed and everything moves, floats and changes all the time. *Panta rhei* - all things are floating all the time.

Tonke Dragt's oeuvre is teeming with mirrors, stairs, doors, mountain passes and gates leading to unknown grounds where charms, skills and dreams help both the hero of the story and the reader to discover new dimensions and aspects of 'the self'. In this way 'the unknown' is a source of enrichment and deeper understanding.

More than any other Dutch artist for children, adolescents and adults Tonke Dragt, born in Batavia (now Jakarta) in 1930, likes to explore the boundaries of space and time. In 2004 this earned her the prestigious *Griffel der Griffels* (Slate of the Slates) for *Letter for the King* (*De brief voor de koning*, 1962), a once-and-once-only award selected from half a century of *Slate* winners. Impressive sales and a great many literary awards show how happy publishers, librarians, educational institutions, booksellers and readers are with an author who caters both to readers who have just discovered the wonder of language and to those who are already fully addicted. Even adolescents and adults feel comforted and inspired by reading *Letter for the King* or *The Other Side of the Door* (*Aan de andere kant van de deur*, 1992).

The secret of her writing is not easy to detect, as Dragt combines epic with lyric, visual with scientific, fairy tale with chivalry, moral with adventurous. Depending on the focus of her interest, her stories may be set somewhere in history, in a realistic present or an unknown future. Where possible she will reinforce anecdotes with philosophical reflections and combine poetry with the eerie. Her narrative displays an equally clever mixture of descriptions, dialogues, letters and diary notes.

The explanation for this multi-footed authorship lies in her ability to capture the realistic and the fantastic simultaneously. Supported by her unusual im-



Tonke Dragt (1930 -).

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February 30

January February March April May June July
August September October November December

"Write it down," he said. "Everything. From the very beginning."

I looked at the white page and chewed on my pen. "Make it into a diary," the old man said. "Write down all your experiences. Write what you thought and what you are thinking, your dreams and fantasies!"

I've heard that before somehow and wish I knew when and how.

I asked, "What day is today?"

He didn't answer. I asked again.

"February thirtieth," he said.

I wrote it down! (See above.) And I read what I had written. I read it and remembered something. I wrote some more, underneath the day (date, he says); I filled two lines.

The old man is looking at me. He's got very bushy white eyebrows. His face is asking me something.

"February is a month!" I said. "There are twelve months in a year. I know them all. I've written them down."

He nodded and laughed. "Wonderful," he said. "You see, my boy, it works! That's something you know again. Now you can start your diary."

But I'll wait a bit. I start counting the empty pages. How many days in a month?

A page from *The Towers of February* (William Morrow and Company, New York, 1975) with correction from the author.

(NOTE: For Far original Dutch title: "DE WOODEN WERELD" - No - Schrijfdag - Lucht)

agination, she processes everything that life has offered her: the years of her youth spent in a Japanese internment camp, prey to anxiety and danger and lacking the companionship of the opposite sex; the books she grew up with; the cats that keep walking into her life; her experiences as a teacher of fine arts; her memories of people and landscapes; the periods she reflects on in her oeuvre and all the scientific, philosophical and emotional knowledge she has collected through the years. 'The very wellspring of an artist is her memory', Dragt often says. 'Without memory there's no recollection, without recollections we are nobody, nothing at all.'

With her stories and pictures she guides her readers through obvious but essential questions such as 'Where will this end? Is this right or wrong? Will it be sorted out? Who is the evil genius? Where can the answers be found?' She knows the effects of cliffhangers, retardations, asides or forebodings in dreams. The tension in *The Twin Brothers' Stories* (Verhalen van de tweelingbroers, 1961), *Letter for the King*, *The Secrets of the Wild Wood* or even *The Folk Dance* (De zevensprong, 1967) is greatly enhanced by fairy-tale ingredients such as colours, numbers, nursery songs, archetypes and metaphors. Blue for magic and secrecy, white for innocence, red for danger and love. Woods are usually impenetrable, mountains impossible to climb while far-away planets offer new perspectives. These familiar elements invite her readers to surrender themselves to Dragt's unrestrained imagination.

In nearly all her books Janus, the god with the two faces, arrives sooner or later. Sometimes in twin brothers or twin sisters, sometimes hidden in dilemmas, reflections, contradictions, duplications or distortions in time and space. Aunt Willemijn, a leading character in *The Folk Dance*, said it: in each human being there lives more than one person. For that reason many characters in Tonke Dragt's books have an alter ego or *doppelgänger*. This obsession with hidden meanings, complex personalities or the other side of the coin is part of her life. It was in the books she read as a child, in the circumstances of her adolescence, in the various cultural contradictions she experienced. The down-to-earth Dutch mentality versus the silent powers of Indonesia; the atheism of her father against the piety of her free-thinking Remonstrant mother; the exotic rituals of the Islamic servants as distinct from the stiff upper lip of the British rulers.

To this day such doubling and redoubling remains an essential part of her life. The all-embracing motif of the *doppelgänger* provides excellent opportunities to investigate universal themes like good and bad, life and death, war and peace. In doing so she can avoid the issues of the day and still reflect the spirit of the time.

This two-in-one approach also dominates her daily life. Apart from the gigantic doll's house through which she devises her stories, Tonke Dragt needs two apartments. One for storing everything that has to be saved because of her work, and one for sleeping and eating.

The Twin Brothers' Stories demonstrates how even her plots reflect the topics she investigates. As the two brothers become older and wiser and go through many more adventures the narrative follows the same pattern. Every new scene offers new views on our complex world, while perfect look-alikes are a natural opportunity for the game of double-cross that people have been playing since the beginning of time.

As an artist Tonke Dragt is a kind of Janus as well. She expresses herself just as easily in language as in images. From her childhood on she was always busy drawing, painting, making pictures and collages. Long before 'double talents' were seen as something very special, she used to illustrate her own stories. A rather natural thing, she has said more than once, as writing and drawing spring from the same source. For practical reasons she chose to train as a teacher of fine arts and worked as such till 1980. From then on she concentrated more on her writing skills, but continued to embellish her stories with her own visual images.

Like her talent and her mind, Tonke Dragt's oeuvre consists of two different parts. The novels that refer to a vague past date mainly from the early years of her writing career (1956-1969). In combining action with fairy tale, narrative art with conflict, adventure with moral lessons, they fall into the same range as many stories by colleagues like Paul Biegel, Jean Dulieu, Harriet Laurey, Leonie Kooiker or Daan Zonderland. The only exception is that Dragt's 'other worlds' are never populated by dwarfs, trolls or fairies. She prefers protagonists who are at the same time childish and mature, while her children despite their age find themselves confronted with adult dilemmas and tasks.



Letter for the King. Cover.

Comments or Observations?

Without being contemporary all her novels reflect the period they were written in. As was common in the 1960s and '70s, her characters are willing to break the rules if necessary; they are constantly seeking new reasons to fulfil their dreams. This is just as true of Tiuri in *Letter for the King* as of the main characters in *The Folk Dance* or *The Other Side of the Door* who criticise the establishment. This longing for freedom and emancipation in religion, politics and social patterns is often explained as a reaction to the dullness of the post-war reconstruction in the Low Countries.

Tower-High and Miles Across (Torenhoog en mijlenbreed, 1969), the first of the more rational novels of Tonke Dragt in which imagination is fed by facts and scientific marvels, can be seen as a bridge to the more complex novels later in her career. In this book the struggle between tradition and renewal is crystallised in the Institute of General Welfare that tries to keep the people, even the scientists, in ignorance. In this *Tower-High and Miles Across* ties up with the later *Tigers' Eyes* (Ogen van tijgers 1982), which is often seen as a reaction to the utopian ideas of Cobra artist Constant Nieuwenhuys. His New Babylon is a place without hunger, pain or slavery; instead the *homo ludens* pulls the strings. *Tigers' Eyes* shares that view but at the same time shows that even art and creativity can't banish struggle and tyranny completely.

Towers of February (De torens van februari, 1973) stresses the importance of memory. If people and society start forgetting the past, we are lost. To turn the tide Tom, the hero of the story, has to take big risks. Only by doing so will he be able to find out who he is and where he comes from. The story is set on the border between horizon, sea and dunes at a moment in time - 29 February - when it is possible to switch between one world and the other. For Tom as for his creator the urge to cross borders and take responsibility is truly a matter of saving one's life. Through this concept Dragt evokes a rather more fantastic or psychedelic world than colleagues like Miep Diekmann, An Rutgers van der Loeff, Karel Eykman or Jan Terlouw.

At the end of *Towers of February* Dragt claims that she wasn't the author at all, a form of mystification that invites the reader to complete the story. Even forty years after the book was published she keeps receiving reactions to it: answers, requests for information and suggestions as to the word that reveals the mystery behind the story. The use of a diary as part of the plot entitled her to reflect the thoughts and feelings of a fourteen-year-old boy who is very much in love. To focus her brain during the writing she listed her feelings and thoughts in a separate booklet left-handed and backwards. This kind of experiment, related to the technical side of her mind, reveals a third component of her authorship, besides imagination and wisdom (or knowledge).



Closeby and far away from here. Cover.

Workmanship

Tonke Dragt was certainly one of the first authors in the Netherlands to raise big universal questions for young people. Long before Anton Quintana or Els Pelgrom presented their philosophical quests in *The Baboon King* (*De bavianekoning* - the individual versus the mass) or *Little Sophie and Lanky Flop* (*Kleine Sofie en Lange Wapper* - what has life to offer) she was experimenting



Bathroom (from: *Dichtbij ver van hier*: Closeby and far away from here).

with narrative structures and references to great stories from other cultures. She finds her inspiration as much in the Greek myths as in the Bible or the tales of King Arthur and the Round Table. Shakespeare is just as important to her as the traditional stories from Arabia, India or Norway. In her work there is a constant dialogue between literature, music, the visual arts and scientific reasoning.

Her way of telling a story is at one and the same time old-fashioned and post-modern. By using set formulas like 'Once upon a time' or 'Far far away on an island' she allows the narrator to play an important part in explaining, indicating or warning what the reader can expect. *Letter for the King* for instance starts with 'This is a story from the time when knights were all over the place.' In *The Twin Brothers' Stories* numerical aspects are combined with subtitles, graphic effects and a device borrowed from Hans Christian Andersen: 'So! Now we start. When we reach the end of our story we will know more than in the beginning...' And to make things even more complicated, that story finishes with lots of clues as to what might happen after or even outside the story. This passion for making things more complicated than they are is almost postmodern as is her urge to explain how a text came about or which choices she made.

Bathroom (from: *Dichtbij
ver van hier*. Closeby and far
away from here).



The profusion of references in Tonke Dragt's oeuvre follows her way of thinking and sensing. She never has to search for associations, they come naturally from the characters she creates or the conflicts in her stories. Only in *The Other Side of the Door* (the first part of the still unfinished *Oceans of Time*) did she deliberately use an idea from the German poet Christian Morgenstern, since his ability to create mysterious worlds fully coincides with her own expectations and spinings. Following Morgenstern, Christian the gallows-child becomes the first and most important person to Otto, the main character of *The Other Side of the Door*. Like most of her characters, Christian and Otto get to grips with the world by using the craft of language and imagination, the two gifts of the gods that enable people to live their lives.

By subtle intertwining of imagination and experiences, both from her childhood and later in her life, Tonke Dragt explores the various dimensions of her theme: the search for universal truth and true love. All the protagonists in her oeuvre – Tiuri, the blue Buccaneer, Master Frans, the knight Ristridin, the planetary researcher Edu Jansen, Otto – want to know who they really are. As they are seen by the outside world or as they feel themselves to be. This scanning of feelings, sublimated in the telepathic potential of the people of Venus, is an



Januarian Embassy
(Januaraanse ambassade)
(from: *Dichtbij ver van hier*:
Closeby and far away from
here).

important aid to grasping one's 'real' or 'true' identity. This quest has little to do with religion. As a matter of fact Tonke Dragt dreads all religious institutions, as whether they are Islamic, Christian or Jewish they often turn into fundamentalism. As soon as one claims to own the truth, things can go awfully wrong.

For that reason Tonke Dragt herself opts for plurality, the art of being as the Taoists practise it, the road of life on which one can meet so many different people and things. Male and female, earthly and heavenly, light and darkness, yin and yang, fantasy and reality, pretence and substance, boys who turn out to be girls and girls who pretend to be boys, scoundrels who behave like heroes and vice versa, strange figures on Venus – all dressed in green – who communicate without words, a frightening and at the same time challenging system through which each can understand the other without using words.

This use of imagination has turned her into a so-called religious atheist, a contradiction in terms that brilliantly expresses what and who she is, an on-looker in heart and soul. Someone who makes her own choices and belongs to nobody at all, no group of people, church, fashion or mainstream movement. It is the same attitude we recognise in her characters. For each of them counts what the Flemish poet and novelist Herwig Hensen sings in his *Panta Rhei*:



Wrong Tracks (Dwaalwegen)
(from: *Dichtbij ver van hier.*
Closeby and far away from
here).

*Become who thou art.
Dare asking what no one ever did.
Only s/he who crosses his own lines
won't get lost at the border.
Nothing is perfect, nothing the final end.
Rigidity leads only to delusion.
What ever was, flows into what shall be.
Panta Rhei.*