

### The Father of Angels A Novel by Stefan Brijs

A fascination with the unusual was already apparent in earlier work by the Flemish writer Stefan Brijs (1969- ). In his second novel, *Eagle* (Arend, 2000) all attention is focused on a sluggish overweight young man trying to rise above and fly beyond the vale of tears in which he finds himself. In this book, which follows his debut as a novelist with *Degeneration* (De verwording) in 1997, Brijs manages to evoke his character's tragic attempts with considerable compassion and empathy. His lengthy novel, *The Angel Maker* (De engelenmaker), published in late 2005, at first appears to be about genetic experiments, a hot topic in many a committee of clerics and politicians but also a regular cause of academic squabbling. Research results published by a South Korean professor a couple of years ago, for instance, proved to have been rather economical with the truth. So there are obvious dangers lying in wait for any novelist wishing to illuminate such a complicated issue. His or her story would soon be eclipsed by the theoretical detail. But Stefan Brijs has handled the topic differently, and magnificently, in his masterful novel. Of course the book is about scientific experiment and cloning, but it is mainly a play of voices, a dialogue between truth and illusion, between suspicion and reality, a dialogue not so much between characters as by the villagers, neighbours and (so-called) witnesses. Brijs uses this interplay to build up the tension page by page, releasing its horrifying climax on the reader only at the very end of the novel.

In Part I a doctor called Victor Hoppe moves to Wolfheim, a village in Belgian Limburg close to the borders with the Netherlands and Germany, and settles there with his three sons Gabriel, Rafael en Michael. The locals are quick to remark that the boys are far from being archangels. Their father is a repulsive-looking introverted man with untidy rust-brown hair, dead white skin and a repaired harelip. At first he hides himself away in his practice, but in time begins to see the villagers. They come to him not only with their complaints and sicknesses but mainly to satisfy their curiosity: what do his children really look like and, more particularly, where is their mother? Hoppe manages to break the ice



by bringing the three boys with him to the local café. There the villagers see three lads with huge heads, each with a harelip like their father's and skin white to the point of being transparent. And the mother? Does she live somewhere else; is she dead? 'No', Hoppe tells them smoothly, 'they never had one'. Their fear and anxiety is transformed into admiration for this mysterious doctor, who with the help of a retired schoolmistress devotes himself to bringing up his sons in what the villagers consider an exemplary way. But the schoolmistress, Charlotte Maenhout, soon discovers that things are very far from what they seem. The children are constantly subjected to medical experiments, they are not allowed out of the house, their fates are sealed. They are all mortally ill and are going to die. Having discovered the terrible truth, she devotes herself with all her heart to looking after the children. At the same time she tries to draw Hoppe out. But she says and claims things that trigger something in him he has no control over. Brijs writes that the evil had entered into him, and evil has to be fought against. Then, before Hoppe's very eyes, Charlotte Maenhout falls backwards down the stairs.

In Part II, Brijs switches the perspective to Victor Hoppe himself. Hoppe's mother believed that her malformed son was a 'child of the devil'. He was put up for adoption and grew up in miserable circumstances in an orphanage run by nuns. Most of the nuns thought he was mad and dangerous, but a novice discovered he had a brilliant mind and was in fact very talented. He was allowed to continue his education at a Catholic boarding school, where the strict rules and schedules only helped him to progress. He becomes fascinated by Christ's Way of the Cross, by the Son of God who died, mocked and ridiculed, on the cross. From that moment on, Victor Hoppe decides 'he'll put one over on God'. He finishes his studies, becoming an embryologist, and is awarded a doctorate at Aachen where he writes a highly-praised dissertation on cell cycles. He becomes renowned in Bonn as a fertility specialist, producing strains of mice

from exclusively male or female parents. He continues single-mindedly with his research, but some of his colleagues accuse him of fraud. His experiments cannot be replicated and Hoppe refuses to give any explanation. He leaves the university and without informing his immediate colleagues moves to Wolfheim. These are the facts, but the novelist explicitly states that it is only half the truth and that another, much enlarged, story is about to be revealed.

This story is told in all its intensity in Part III. Dr Victor Hoppe has cloned himself, and the woman he needed for the purpose has discovered the awful truth through one of Hoppe's former colleagues. They make their way to Wolfheim separately; the former colleague has minimal contact with Hoppe but still notices how passionate and obsessive he is about his work. The 'mother' craftily manages to work her way into the household and takes over from the deceased schoolmistress. The villagers see this woman as a dangerous intruder, someone who will put the doctor and his children in danger. In fact she tries to save the lives of the doomed children, who nevertheless die one by one. Hoppe had stopped feeding them, thus leaving them in God's hands: *'it was up to God to decide when He would take their lives. It was God's own decision to drag it out and not to take all three of them in one fell swoop. The evil came from Him. From Him alone. What could he do about it?'*

Hoppe continues with his work; in some future attempt the cloning must be successful. No one could stop him now. He nails himself to the cross, the same cross he remembered from his youth, a cross that now marks the finishing point of a procession by the villagers. *'The body fell from the cross (...). Everything goes black before Father Kaisergruber's eyes (...) other people collapsing at the same moment.'*

*The Angel Maker* owes its success to Brij's handling of the topic. By zooming in on the various characters in the course of the three sections of the novel, he gradually reveals more and more detail, thus strengthening an already fascinating story-line. The novel not only deliberately switches perspective, it also shifts from one topic to another. What does a group or a partial initiate think of someone who is going off the rails? Is our sympathy for someone determined by irrational things or by

facts? Brij's is a master at playing with rumour and half truth. And this only heightens the importance of those passages in which he does no such thing. The young malformed Victor Hoppe is taken by his mother to be the devil's child. This is why he is rejected and grows up without love. Later on, his genius is neither guided nor curbed, with the result that Hoppe's alienated single-mindedness only gains in strength, finally degenerating into total religious delusion. The father of his self-'constructed' angels nails himself to the cross like a modern-day Christ. This ending is already announced halfway through *The Angel Maker* during an incident at school. Because of the stream of references to the road to Calvary, Victor Hoppe's life can certainly be seen as a procession from one Station of the Cross to the next, something which, because of the many interruptions and changes of perspective, only becomes apparent at the very end.

Stefan Brij's *Angel Maker* is a highly accomplished novel with many qualities. He offers us more than just a page turner, which of course the book also is: to quote the reviewer of the English translation in *SFX Magazine*, the novel *'has superglue-soaked covers; you can't put it down... compulsive reading... This is a great big clunking fist of a book. Prepare to be knocked speechless.'* The author has managed to build a highly topical social issue into his own imaginative world, a world dominated by the quest for identity, a world in which the dividing lines between good and evil are mainly a matter of points of view and perspective, all unfolding, as the reviewer in *The Independent* states, in this *'tall tale of angelic sons and lofty ideals'*

Daan Cartens  
*Translated by Peter Flynn*

*The Angel Maker*, the UK edition of Flemish writer Stefan Brij's novel *De Engelenmaker*, translated by Hester Velmans, was published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson in July 2008, and became available from Penguin USA at the end of 2008.

(see also [www.stefanbrijs.be](http://www.stefanbrijs.be))

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