

## A Guided Tour of the Gilded Cage

Jan Van Loy Takes the Reader by the Ear

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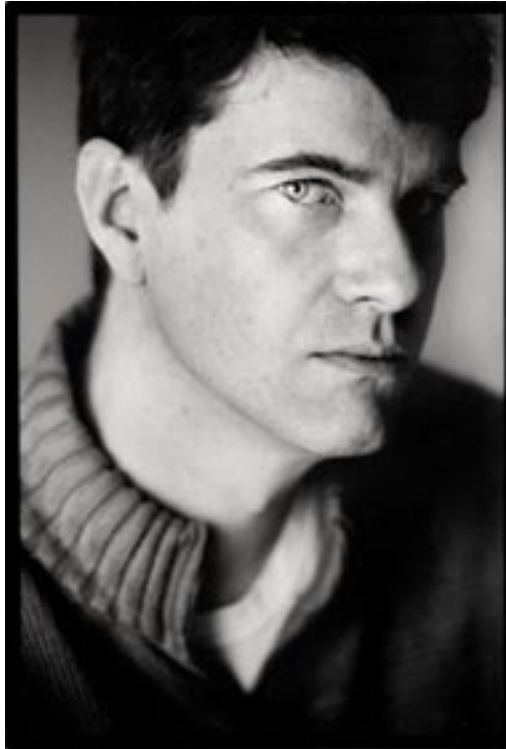
'It's not very nice when the rest of the world sees you as an idle layabout', Jan Van Loy (1964-) told the Flemish newspaper *De Standaard* in 2006. For years he had cherished the dream of becoming a writer, but not a single text had ever made it into print. 'In the end I became a computer scientist, because there was a shortage of those. The firm I applied to for a job wasn't in any hurry to take me on, but, well, there wasn't anybody else and I had a website that didn't look bad.'

And then his career as a writer suddenly took off. The short story 'Jan Foster's Hell' ('De hel van Jan Foster') won the Rabobank Lenteprijs for 2001. His debut novel *Scraps* (Bankvlees, 2004) received the Debutprijs for new writers in 2005. His second book, *Alpha America* (Alfa Amerika, 2005), was shortlisted for the Gouden Uil, one of the most prestigious awards in the Dutch-speaking world. And if the book didn't actually make it all the way, so what – it was reason enough to look out for Van Loy's third book, published in the autumn of 2008.

*The Pound* (De heining) revolves round a gated community. Much against the husband's inclination, a young couple buy a fantastically expensive house in the Windroos, a neighbourhood that is completely fenced off from the world and closely guarded. (The title alludes to this total compound ('omheining'); Van Loy has dropped the first syllable. That does not change the meaning, but it makes for a striking title). The pair have barely moved in when Van Loy dumps a torrent of calamities on them. The neighbouring village, it turns out, detests the people from the gated community. Racism, corruption, alcohol abuse... the Windroos has it all. The couple's relationship hits a crisis and things are not improved when a neighbour's little boy disappears from the face of the earth when the man was supposed to have been looking after him.

Quite a dense plot, and yet Van Loy tells the tale in a mere 160 pages. In 61 chapters you hurtle through a controlled nightmare with a happy ending. Sprinting, it seems, is what suits Van Loy best. His first book ran to barely two hundred pages; his second, *Alpha America*, is sometimes referred to – rather strangely – as a novel, but in fact the book consists of four clearly separate short stories; *The Pound* is roughly the same length as a single story from *Alpha America*. One interesting difference is that in his second book Van Loy employed a detached, almost documentary-like narrative style, whereas a good three-quarters of *The Pound* is made up of dialogue. Whatever his approach, Van Loy's

Jan Van Loy  
(1964-).  
Photo by Stephan  
Vanfleteren.



narrative is always tight and cinematic. In *The Pound* his camera glides over the story and zooms in on every absurdity, every possible sign of something being amiss. And that makes the book unputdownable.

True, the message is on the simple side: a walled community may feel safe, but danger lurks in every corner (and will not hesitate to leap out). Nonetheless, *The Pound* is a thrilling tale – and that in itself is not so easy to write. It is only with this third book that Van Loy clearly reveals what his literary world is really all about.

### **Flight from predictability**

To illustrate this, let us return for a moment to *Scraps*, a picaresque novel about two highly-educated twenty-somethings who opt out of the rat race and disregard all society's expectations of them. They live on welfare benefits, on handouts from rich people's children, and on the backs of accommodating girls who don't mind being prostitutes. The 'scraps' of the title is a synonym for 'trimmings', discarded oddments of bacon or meat. The only meat the two of them

can allow themselves at the end of the month, is 'groin and fat trimmings and lumps of gristle and goodness only knows what other bits and bobs. (...). The good thing about a meal of meat scraps is that it stays in your belly as long as possible, because the money for food's almost run out.' The anonymous main character and the diehard trouble-maker Celis are social off-cuts, the scraps of society. The meat metaphor is carried through into the chapter titles. 'Chicken' refers to the innocent chick who lets herself be pressed into service as a prostitute by Celis. In 'Carpaccio' the action moves to Italy and 'Strasbourg' is the name for the cold meats served to the main character in a psychiatric institution to which he has had himself admitted on account of the free meals and warm bed.

*Scraps* is an engaging novel about the longing to build a life that goes beyond the established patterns of expectation. For the main character that is just a phase, a delayed puberty: for his companion it is a way of life. 'Predictability', Van Loy fulminates as he describes what his anti-heroes are fleeing from: 'Being like this when you're twenty, and like that when you're thirty. (...) And material progress, and the conversations that are never about anything else. The house, the car, the next holiday, the photos from the last one. The kids.' And in the end that is exactly the life he chooses.

## In the margins of reality

In *Alpha America* too we see attempts to break free. In 'Manhattan on the left bank', set at the beginning of the twentieth century, a penniless Flemish man travels to New York where he amasses a fortune (see extract further on). In 'The train of tears' ('De trein der tranen') the singer Eddie Eijkelboom flies to the US, there to make a name for himself with his band. In 'Bodega Vespucci' the main character wants to 'make it' in Hollywood and, finally, in 'Pornology' ('Pornologie') the American credo of 'sex sells' is tried out on Flemish television. The link between the tales is as clear as crystal: America is seen as the continent for those with ambition, Europe as the place where people fail. And one by one Van Loy brings his characters back to Flanders.

Also striking is the fact that the stories take place right alongside reality. 'Pornology' begins as an accurate description of the Flemish television landscape of the 1980s, but then suddenly a fictitious broadcasting station is introduced. And 'Manhattan on the left bank', almost universally regarded as the strongest story in this uneven collection, could have been a true story – apart from the ending. The stock market millionaire returns to Antwerp, where he builds a city of skyscrapers on the Left Bank. However, people refuse to go and live in the towers. His city is destroyed by bombing in World War Two. Anyone who knows a bit about Antwerp knows that there really are a good many tall buildings on the left bank of the River Scheldt, but they do not owe their existence to Van Loy's stock exchange prodigy.

## Failed rebels

As we have already said, stories about breaking free, every one of them. No wonder, then, that for his most recent (and best) book to date, Van Loy ended up with the controversial phenomenon of gated communities. Crucial to the novel

is Bril, the only inhabitant of the Windroos with whom the main character forms a kind of friendship. Bril is a cynical drunkard who now and then says something sensible. But he is also a typical Van Loy personage: a failed rebel. One minute he is calling a mobile phone an 'ankle tag': *'Telephone calls from the wife. Mobile controllability. Now, how can you trust one another if you don't give each other a chance to cheat?'* But a bit later he is imploring the main character to stop him drinking that first glass next time: *'No! Bullshit. No personal responsibility. That cop-out of "leave him be" – bullshit! (...)...generations have let each other be...And this is the result. Where we are now. The Pound, that's the result.'*

Bril is a man of independent means: thanks to an inheritance, he doesn't need to work. Yet even he ricochets back and forth between freedom (of speech, as regards sexual relationships...) and the longing above all to be kept in check (his drinking habits, his decision to go and live in the Windroos). Maybe that is the reason why he and the main character get on so well together, because the main character has these contradictory longings too: one minute he is trying to get himself rejected as a resident of the Windroos by the committee (much to the wrath of his wife), but a bit later he is putting down more money so they can buy the house.

## The ear of the reader

So, after three books, we have a fairly clear picture of what interests Van Loy: modern, over-indulged, people and their relationship to the gilded cage in which they live. That theme gives scope for a lot of humour (as *The Pound* shows once again) and for feelings. Because *Scraps* is about friendship and *The Pound* about fatherhood.

*'I am motivated by my dissatisfaction with contemporary literary prose: it's too often an excuse for amateur philosophy and pseudo-poetry',* said Van Loy, in a (rare) interview in 2006. *'Or the umpteenth adulation of sadness and melancholy. For me it's all about the art of the narrative, in which the events contain the philosophy and the poetry, and the passages with lyrical or intellectual aspirations come only from the mouths of stupid and/or pretentious characters. W. Hermans, one of my idols, once said: "you have to take the reader by the ear and drag him through the story". That's my ambition. I want my own ear to hurt and to make my readers' ears hurt too.'* (*De Standaard*)

Thus far he has given his readers mainly pleasure, because if there is one thing that sticks out a mile, it is that Van Loy is an extremely talented storyteller, particularly of stories to do with freedom and all the illusions that go with it. And thanks to his previous history as someone who spent years as an unemployed layabout, he is also someone who knows how it feels to pursue a dream. ■

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