

Between the Lines of the World

Klaas Verplancke, an Illustrator with Passion

In my drawings I create my own stage, my theatre,
where I can use surrealistic tricks to make things digestible.

(Klaas Verplancke)

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Klaas Verplancke (1964-) is one of the most important representatives of the 'Flemish school': a group of 'young savages' who are revitalising Flemish illustration and causing more and more of a stir both at home and abroad. Both in Flanders and beyond his work is constantly winning prizes and can be found in translated editions almost all over the world. But that is not all. With astonishing flexibility he steers a zigzag course between theatrical productions, designing advertisements, illustration work and writing his own texts. In addition he is also an assiduous organiser of exhibitions as well as being the driving force behind the Flemish Illustrators Club (VIC), an organisation that seeks to mentor and provide opportunities for budding illustrators. A man of many parts, then, and a very active one, at home in many different markets. A man, too, who takes his job and both his juvenile and adult public seriously.

After training as a graphic designer at the Sint-Lucas Academy in Ghent, Klaas Verplancke quickly opted for the world of publishing. His record shows over 130 book designs and illustrated books, as well as a number of picture books for which he has done both text and illustrations. Add in regular publications in newspapers and periodicals, and he is certainly exceptionally productive. Moreover, he reaches a very broad public: from toddlers to adults, and from China to Canada. His work repeatedly wins awards: the Flemish Boekenpauw 2003, for example, for the beautiful, ingeniously conceived tarot cards in Henri Van Daele's *Little Witch Toad's Wart* (Heksje Paddenwratje, 2002), and a Dutch Vlag en Wimpel for *Djuk*. In 2001 he was the first, and thus far the only, Fleming to receive the prestigious Bologna Ragazzi Award in the category of fiction for children aged 6 to 12 for his illustrations to *Ozewiezewoze* (2002), a collection of old songs and rhymes compiled by Jan van Coillie. This was a thoroughly deserved award, for the task was certainly no sinecure: to illustrate nonsense texts from times long past in a way that is fresh and meaningful for today's children. Verplancke's solution was brilliant: he 'illuminated' three or more verses at a time in one expansive and funny illustration. In 2004 he had a place on the international jury of the Bologna Illustrators Exhibition – another first for Flanders.

Illustration as extension

Since his debut in 1990 Klaas Verplancke has evolved from a semi-realistic, accessible style of drawing to a highly individual and eloquent idiom that is still constantly shifting. His work can be recognised by its unique combination of surrealistic humour, unbridled fantasy, surprising perspectives, cinematic layering, striking colour contrasts and astonishing craftsmanship. For every book he thinks up a new and unique creative approach. To this end he employs a range of techniques: scraperboard, acrylic paint, collage, photographic materials, pen and pencil and computer. With a great sense of humour and figuration he sets down on paper caricatural, almost grotesque, figures, in which no obvious proportions can be found.

In recent years he has been increasingly selective in the commissions he accepts. He wants to set a clear stamp on the book with his illustrations, to mean more than the obligatory 'embellisher' of someone else's story. Or as he himself says in an interview: *'Illustration is sometimes also described as illumination, as if our work must only be light and airy, as if it serves only to make texts easier to digest. I refuse to submit myself to that servile role. On the contrary, as far as content goes I want to give the reader even more space. I want to go a step further, demand more mental effort from the reader.'* Klaas Verplancke does indeed succeed in expanding stories and adding his own pictorial value in a credible and inventive way. His pictures suggest a personal interpretation. They tell their own story and in a subtle way make a substantial addition to the text.

That is clearly the case in *Jot* (2000), where Verplancke was responsible for both text and drawings. In word, image and striking typography *Jot* tells the tale of a near-obsessional longing for fame and recognition. A little fellow with a long nose spends page after page brooding about ways of thinking up something new to make him immortal. It is a funny and touching book, in which text and pictures in turn take over from each other. The extravagant detail of his earlier work has gone from this. Everything is reduced to a sober essence in calm colours.

From *Little Witch Toad's Wart* (Heksje Paddenwratje, 2002).



From *Jot* (2000).

Beckett for children...and a cherub looking for love

From *Roots, or the Time whose Name is Waiting* (Wortels of de tijd die wachten heet, 2003).



Roots, or the Time whose Name is Waiting (Wortels of de tijd die wachten heet, 2003), which was awarded the Publieksprijs of the Vlaamse Cultuurprijzen in 2004, is much more than a picture book. Here too Verplancke wrote the strange, philosophically tinged story for this book with its equally strange illustrations. And again there is a tormented protagonist. A shy, eccentric loner, a short, stocky, grumpy little man ('no bigger than a couple of sneezes'), with a sturdy helmet on his head to protect him from unwanted intruders, sits waiting like a hill warden on the top of his mountain. What he is waiting for he does not know 'and it never comes'. It all sounds good Beckett stuff. 'There's time, a lot of time, the time whose name is waiting.' The valley below is the enemy, a black, greedy snake that snaps at anything that comes down the slope. Until Kerel appears out of nowhere, a warm-hearted caring friend and a natural storyteller who draws his inspiration from his roots and from the earth. In the end Kerel opens up undreamt-of prospects for the hill warden: his felled trunk is like a footbridge ready to let his friend explore the world. *Roots* is a sparingly written book, with functional, repetitive passages and sober, often minimalist illustrations. The subdued use of colour and the cunning composition complete the whole thing.

Verplancke also wrote the text to accompany his illustrations for *Johnny Moon & Lankyjack* (Jannemaan en Langejan, 2002), three stories intended for reading aloud. Again the pictures are a feast for the eye. And the two heroes, the moon and a gangly beanpole of a giant, are appealing characters who by their own nature also seem to form a perfect expressive duo. The whole architecture of the book is beautifully balanced and very colourful.

Giant (Reus) and *Nopjes* (both published in 2005) form a splendidly designed diptych: two picture books that complement each other perfectly, both in content and in their impressive layout. The tone here is restrained and philosophical. The subject is friendship and homecoming, and the seeking and finding of



From *Giant* (Reus, 2005).



warmth and shelter in stories and in the liberating world of the imagination. The understated and layered illustrations in coloured crayon open doors to the economically restrained text. We are a long way here from the first, easily accessible books for tiny tots with which Verplancke made his debut. These picture books demand the full attention of those who look at them and read them. There is more to them than at first meets the eye.

In *For Love's Sake* (Vanwege de Liefde, 2007), a story by Edward van de Vendel, Klaas Verplancke shifted his boundaries yet again. A naked, curly-haired cherub falls from the sky and lands in the fishpond belonging to Benny-Bob and Sjarelisse and their children Loei and Tufje. He comes for love's sake and immediately subjects his surroundings to an investigation on that subject. Benny-Bob's predilection for bratwurst with curry sauce, Sjarelisse's obsessive devotion to her immaculate garden, and Loei's ultimate hobby of bad behaviour scarcely feature in his research. Only quiet little Tufje, with her unconditional adoration of the neighbours' dogs, seems to fit his mission. But her time, so it turns out, has not yet come. In a telling composition Verplancke has drawn two contrasting worlds: that of a rowdy, banal, macho father and ditto son, who fill the whole page with their cumbrous tattooed bodies, and the delicate, modest pale blue world of the little girl Tufje – a contrast that is also cleverly reflected in the typography. A touching and powerfully drawn story.

From For Love's Sake
(Vanwege de Liefde,
2007).

A Flemish Master of our time

Verplancke likes to draw inspiration from the Great Masters of the Low Countries: 'I feel myself more and more drawn to the collective memory and in particular to the medieval pictorial language of the Flemish Masters. That universality that you can't pin a time on, that intrigues me more and more. Nowadays we've become much too explicit and we still have little understanding of the symbolism that those painters used.'

From *Reynard the Fox. The Fierce One with the Red Beard* (Reinaert de Vos. De felle met de rode baard, 2007).

From *Till Eulenspiegel. Faithful Right to the Begging-Bowl* (Tijl Uilenspiegel. Trouw tot aan de bedelzak, 2008).

The influence of the sturdy Flemish painter Constant Permeke (1886-1952) is omnipresent in *Djuk, the Coal Horse of Fort Lapijn* (Djuk, het kolenpaard van Fort Lapijn, 2002), written by Henri Van Daele and inspired by a story from a lower-class district in Bruges. A horse tells very expressively about his master's tiny house, where he had to go through the hallway and the kitchen to get to his stall, about the hard work and the rough people in the neighbourhood, about the haughty city horses and people. But also about festivals and fairs. Klaas Verplancke has provided the tale with very appropriate and humorous pictures, with striking composition. For *Little Witch Toad's Wart and Glamp! Or How Toad's Wart Cheered Up Goblin* (Glamp! Of hoe paddenwratje Kabouter opkikkerde) by Henri Van Daele, Verplancke drew witty, slightly ironic and cleverly worked out parodies of medieval miniatures and tarot cards.

And then there is *Reynard the Fox* (Reinaert de Vos), without doubt one of the



most intriguing Mediaeval texts from the Dutch language area. With Henri Van Daele – again – Verplancke created a splendid contemporary interpretation in 2007. It is hard to imagine a more perfect combination of text and picture for an undertaking such as this: a folksy-sounding authentic Flemish narrative style and a graphic signature inspired by the Flemish Masters go harmoniously hand in

From *Confidences
in a Donkey's Ear*
(Confidenties aan een
ezelsoor, 2005).



hand here. In eleven wonderful pictures, almost tableaux vivants, he has ingeniously intertwined countless stories, just as Hieronymus Bosch or Bruegel did. You never get tired of looking at them, and you keep discovering new and surprising references and symbols. The legendary Till Eulenspiegel also got a surprising new lease of life in the recently published version *Till Eulenspiegel. Faithful Right to the Begging-Bowl* (Tijl Uilenspiegel. Trouw tot aan de bedelzak, 2008).

With his playful, narrative style of illustration Klaas Verplancke increasingly appeals to an adult readership. His highly individual interpretations of the fables of Frank Adam, *Confidences in a Donkey's Ear* (Confidenties aan een ezelsoor, 2005) and the 2003 *What the Donkey Saw* (Wat de ezel zag, an original version of the Christmas story) are full of cunningly contrived hidden meanings, humorous winks and subtle digs at society. He is also regularly in demand as an illustrator of columns and articles about reading and literature.

Klaas Verplancke is always on the lookout for new challenges, and as a consequence his work is constantly developing. He refuses to sit back in the comfortable security of a 'Verplancke signature' and an established position. Over the years he has evolved from handy 'gap-filler' to an immensely inspired artist of exceptional virtuosity, an 'illustrator' (as he likes to describe himself) who tells stories in words and pictures with vintage and sturdy professionalism. With humour and gravitas, at once light-footed and philosophical, he explores the world around him with amazement and masterfully depicts what he finds there 'between the lines'. ■

www.klaas.be All illustrations courtesy of Klaas Verplancke.

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Translated by Sheila M. Dale