

The Tale of a Frog

Max Velthuijs, an Artist with More than One Talent



From *Frog in Love*
(*Kikker is verliefd*, 1989).

All over the world the friendly, green, ever-so-naïve Frog in his red and white striped swimming-trunks is a much loved figure in families, schools, nurseries and libraries. His father and creator Max Velthuijs, a modest Dutch artist who was *'only trying to do the best he could'* never achieved the same fame as his green alter ego. He died on January 25, 2005, only four months after he received the Hans Christian Andersen Award for Illustrations in Cape Town, still busily creating new stories about his best friend Frog. *'Velthuijs has proven many times over that he understands children, their doubts, fears and exhilarations. His books are little jewels of image and text that come together to comfort children and reassure them as they venture out into the world around them,'* commented the international members of the Andersen jury. The award winner was amazed and delighted at this recognition, since for him children were the most hopeful thing there is in life. *'Children are still pure, not touched by sin or guilt. It's they who drive us to do whatever we can do. We can't take away the evil and sorrow from them, but as long as we also provide hope and respect they will be able to cope.'*

A spirit of togetherness

Max Velthuijs was born in The Hague in 1923, the youngest in a family of four children. Both his parents were trained schoolteachers, but his mother never actually worked as such. As was usual in those days she was kept busy looking after their three daughters and late-born son, a fanatical drawer, sketcher and musician who hated school life. During the Second World War his parents were forced to move to the east of Holland, a change in his life which enabled

Max to join a class in graphic design in Arnhem. As soon as the war was over he moved back to The Hague. There he started working for newspapers (producing political prints and cartoons) and came to be in great demand as a designer of stamps, book jackets, advertisements and posters for big international companies such as Shell and KLM. He also started teaching at the Royal Academy for Visual Arts. Only when a Dutch publisher asked him to give a fresh new look to an old book of nursery rhymes did he discover the pleasure of working for children. In *Poems We Never Forget* (Versjes die wij nooit vergeten) his admiration for Henri Rousseau is clear to see.

Shortly afterwards his powerful and original talent was recognised by Dimitri Sidjanski of Nord-Süd Verlag in Germany, who at the time published a wide range of international illustrators such as David McKee, Josef Paleček, Fulvia Testa, Ralph Steadman, Binette Schroeder and Štěpán Zavřel. In this company of talented artists Max was challenged to combine his pictures with his own words – as he discovered, a much more satisfying activity than illustrating somebody else's text. And one which was not without results. His third picture book, *The Good-Natured Monster and the Robbers* (Het goedige monster en de rovers, 1976) was awarded a Golden Pencil, a prominent Dutch prize for illustrations, and this was soon followed by numerous national and international awards both for his pictures and his writing.

Right from the start, with *The Boy and the Fish* (De jongen en de vis, 1969) followed by *The Poor Woodcutter and his Doves* (De arme houthakker en de duif, 1970), his picture books strongly embodied the spirit of the seventies. They were playful pleas for freedom, to make peace not war, both on the

From *Poems We Never Forget* (Versjes die wij nooit vergeten, 1962).



international and the personal level. In Velthuijs' opinion the most important thing in life is to accept yourself, to be who you are and enjoy what you have. Consequently, a lot of his books end with some kind of togetherness: eating, drinking, dancing, chatting...

Aestheticism and psychology

At the beginning of his career as a maker of picture books Max Velthuijs used strong, virtually primary colours comparable to those used by Picasso, Klee and Janosch. The outlined figures and the combination of blocks of colour and lines, especially when integrated with hand-drawn letters, demonstrate his qualities both as graphic artist and painter.

It was important to him that his 'pictures' were not seen as art objects for a museum, so he made sure his work was reproduced only in printed form. In this way many more children would be able to enjoy what he had made – an attitude which again reflects his strong social engagement.

With *Little Man's Lucky Day* (Klein-Mannetje heeft geen huis, 1983) and *Duck*



Little Man.

and *Fox* (De eend en de vos, 1985) his style slowly began to change. The palette became more lucid, simple and transparent like the paintings of Morandi. Many a scene painted in gouache is placed within a frame which provides the story, the reader and very likely the artist himself with a feeling of security. Velthuijs once explained this development as follows: *'My illustrations used to be heavier: strong outlines, thick paint. I was primarily concerned with the painting as such, the pleasure of doing it. My work was in the first place decorative; the characters were not so important. Since they have come to the fore, both in writing and in drawing I can leave out more and more.'* The development from narrative into aestheticism and psychology began with *Little Man*, a bold little man who looks like Max himself. In the three books about *Little Man* Velthuijs experimented with a new approach in style and technique. *'I wondered how one could paint glass, water, ice and other transparent materials. The best I could think off was contrasting the transparency with something colourful.'* And so a green frog landed in a jam jar.

And from a purely technical device the frog with no capital developed into a character with a capital and an identity of his own.

On becoming a frog

With the green frog through which he could express all his emotions and thoughts a whole new life began for Max Velthuijs. All thirteen picture books about this friendly character – from *Frog in Love* (1989) to *Frog is Sad* (2003) – were published by Andersen Press in England and spread around the world in some 35 different languages.

In *Frog in Love* (*Kikker is verliefd*, 1989) Frog is so uncertain about his feelings that Hare has to explain to him that the thumping he feels in his chest might be love for Duck. This charming and humorous story is, quite understandably, popular with children and young lovers. *Frog and the Birdsong* (*Kikker en het vogeltje*, 1991), the first book to receive a major Dutch award for text and pictures



From *Frog in Love*
(*Kikker is verliefd*, 1989).

combined, deals with the mystery of death. *Frog in Winter* (*Kikker in de kou*, 1992) is the perfect combination of nature, atmosphere and colouring in only twenty-one pictures, all extremely well composed. Frog, who has no suit of feathers like Duck, no fat like Pig, no fur coat like Hare but only his green naked skin, is suffering. The ever-stronger zigzag line of his mouth reveals his fear, cold and loneliness. When his friends find him on the slippery ice, carry him home and nurse him with food, fire and stories, the rescue comes as a true catharsis. The warm red and yellow tones Velthuijs used in these later pictures contrast perfectly with the thin grey and cold blue of the beginning. *Frog and the Stranger* (*Kikker en de vreemdeling*, 1993) exposes prejudice and xenophobia in a very convincing way. *Frog is Frightened* (*Kikker is bang*, 1994) and *Frog is a Hero* (*Kikker is een held*, 1995) demonstrate the two sides of fear and heroism. And all the subsequent Frog books deal with universal questions like 'who am I?', 'what does being a friend mean?', 'what causes sadness?', expressed in matching colours and subtle details: a bird looking backwards, a cloud announcing danger....

Until the very end of his career Velthuijs wondered why people all over the



From *Frog in Winter*
(*Kikker in de kou*, 1992).

world, children and grown-ups alike, loved his little green Frog so much. He had no idea. For him there was only the concentration on a balanced chromatic spectrum, the optimal brush-stroke, the ideal composition, the line of the mouth expressing Frog's feelings, the striking details of a sunset, the horizon or the endless distance. And so Frog became the incarnation of Max's feelings and thoughts about love and death, fear and happiness, friendship and hostility, prejudice and solidarity, loneliness and the pleasures of life. In the fifteen years of creating his Frog books Max turned into Frog; Frog became Max's alter ego.

Octogenarian fame

The Frog stories are a distinct literary genre, not fables in the traditional sense. The world in which Frog, Duck, Hare, Pig, Rat and Little Bear meet, is not that of the fairy tale where things happen according to a formula. Rather, they are meditations on life itself, self-portraits of huge and difficult topics, masterpieces of graphic and narrative simplicity. More than any of his other books, the Frog stories grow out of the image. The picture demands that the animals match each other in dimensions, nature and circumstances. Each animal has its own character and skill. Sex is not important; status doesn't exist. Frog is the child just born that hasn't yet a view of his own, a dreamer in thought and deed. Like all children he looks at the world with great expectations. Freedom is just as important to him as security, loyalty and friendship. *'How lucky am I,' said Frog, admiring his reflection in the water. 'I am beautiful and I can swim and jump better than anyone. I am green, and green is my favourite colour. Being a frog is the best thing in the world.'* (*Frog is Frog*). Not that he is all on his own. Fortunately Frog has friends he can rely on: the sweet, ever-so-childish and talkative Duck; Hare a real father with a great many books and wise words; Pig who is always

caring and arranging things; Rat the stranger, always curious/enquiring and the most reliable of all.

The great international success of the Frog books came relatively late in Velthuijs' life, at a time when most people give up work and settle into retirement. Not so with Max, who became world famous on reaching his eightieth birthday. The Literary Museum in The Hague set up an exhibition covering all his activities and drawings; the Queen of Holland made him a Knight of the Order of the Golden Lion; Joke Linders wrote his biography *How Lucky to be a Frog* (Ik bof dat ik een kikker ben, 2003), followed soon after by the supreme international recognition, the Hans Christian Andersen Award for Illustrations. Three years after his death, his touching stories are being transformed into 26 animations that will be shown on television in many countries, ensuring once again a whole new life for this sympathetic green figure. ■

All illustrations by Max Velthuijs, courtesy of Uitg. Leopold & Ploegsma, Amsterdam.
www.leopold.nl



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