

'I Continue Where the Text Ends'

The Wondrous World of Illustrator Carll Cneut



140

[ANNEMIE LEYSEN]

In 2011 Carll Cneut celebrated fifteen years as a professional illustrator. An exhibition, four new books and enthusiastic media attention put him and his work constantly in the spotlight. This attention and appreciation are totally appropriate. Cneut is an illustrator through and through, a craftsman with a passion for the book as an object and an obsession for drawing and painting. Together with a number of other talented illustrators of the so-called new 'Flemish School' he re-invented the picture book. With his typical, unmistakable style, Carll Cneut has become well-known in recent years, both at home and abroad. His books have been translated all over the world into more than thirty languages and also received many prestigious prizes and other honours. At first glance, this success doesn't seem inevitable. Cneut's characters aren't creatures you'd want to hug or stroke. The often abstract style demands an attentive viewer, with imagination and empathy, and stimulates one's creativity. His pages are filled with grotesque, silent creatures, often against a sober, almost stylized background. Cneut is especially masterful in his eccentric compositions and his arresting use of colour, which create striking images and powerful narratives.

Commedia dell'arte

Carll Cneut (born in Roeselare, in 1969) studied graphic design at the Sint-Lucas Institute in Ghent. After a short career in the communications sector he became a full-time illustrator. He also teaches illustration at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent. Since 1996 he has illustrated more than twenty children's books, of which a great number have found their way abroad. He works for the major British publisher MacMillan and has done illustrations for The New York Times. For *Dulle Griet* (Mad Meg) and for *Mijnheer Ferdinand* (Mr. Ferdinand) he was awarded a golden plaque at the Biennale in Bratislava. The French Prix Octogone was given to *Rougejauneblancnoir* (Redyellowblackwhite; orig. title: *Roodgeelzwartwit*) and he received a Special Mention at the Bologna Ragazi Awards for *Woeste Mie* (Wild Mie). Time Magazine named *City Lullaby* one of the ten best American children's books of 2007. *Het geheim van de keel van de nachtegaal* (The Secret of the Nightingale's Throat) received nearly every

prestigious prize in the Low Countries. In 2010 he became one of the five illustrators nominated for the distinguished Hans Christian Andersen Award.

Carl Cneut is an illustrator who is not afraid to experiment. He paints a world that is related to the world of the commedia dell'arte, where surreal and life-like elements blend harmoniously. His figures often look like caricatures, as he plays around with traditional proportions, perspectives and ways of expression. In his first books the settings were mostly reduced to the bare essentials. Later on the backgrounds became more exuberant and colourful. He is constantly experimenting with innovative techniques. Acrylic paint is used a lot in his drawings. He mostly puts down several layers in different colours and then adds pastel, pencil, wax pencil or ink. His brushwork and style have become more delicate and precise over the years. Composition is his forte, the way he is able to suggest an unfinished world that continues beyond the page. His work is constantly evolving. His mastery of form, colour and layout increases all the time, and he uses these three basic elements brilliantly to visualize emotions.

Carll Cneut never allows the written story to limit or constrain him. Strict instructions from the author would be wasted on him. His imaginative pictures add a new and free dimension to the text and an original interpretation. 'I continue where the text ends', he has said in an interview.

Left:
Whistle as You Are
© Carll Cneut

The Secret of the Nightingale's
Throat © Carll Cneut

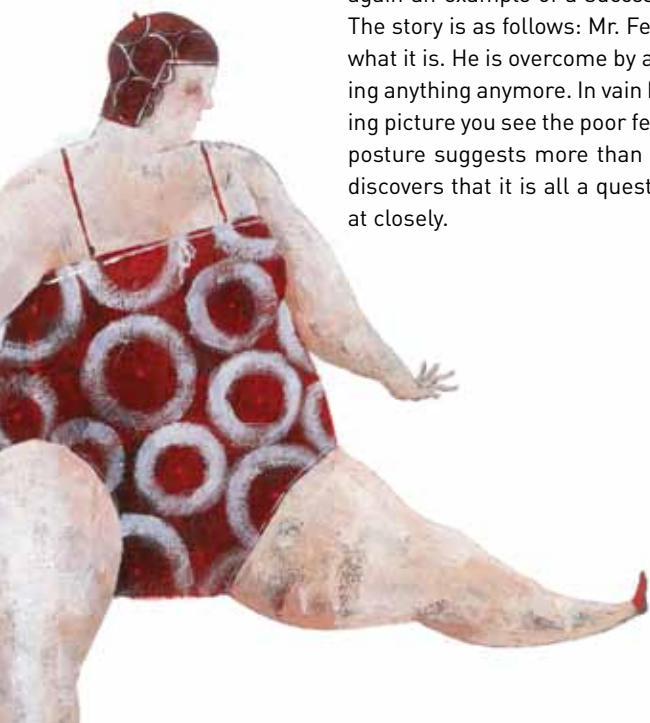


Cneut made his debut in 1996 as the illustrator of *Varkentjes van marsepein* (Marzipan piglets), a book of poetry by Geert de Kockere. He immediately demonstrated his surprising personal style. You didn't see the usual adorable piglets on the cover, but a joyful tangle of pink energy. In another book by Kockere, *Een straatje zonder eind* (A little street without end), the illustrator lays the foundation for what will remain a stroke of genius: an original composition that takes the viewer far beyond the pages of the book. With *Willy*, Cneut makes a real breakthrough. A clumsy elephant that has become a target of abuse because of his plump legs, his big flapping ears and dangling trunk, discovers that his flaws are also his greatest strengths. In 2000 the book received the Flemish Peacock Award.

The first picture in *Roodgeelzwartwit* (Redyellowblackwhite) is intriguing to say the least. Four cube-shaped blocks seem to be floating against a yellow background. You only partly get to see the massive figures. The four colours subtly hint at the rest of the story. For *The Amazing Love Story of Mr. Morf* (*Het ongelooflijke liefdesverhaal van Heer Morf*), Carll Cneut also provided the story. It's about a circus dog, on a hopeless quest to find his true life's partner. Cneut lets his sad, yearning hero almost literally step off the page, at the top of which only the legs of his paired-off colleagues are shown. A very inventive device that makes words unnecessary.

Carl Cneut portrays emotions through the postures of his characters and a suggestive page layout, rather than by explicit facial expressions. "The postures tell you more about the characters in my work than their physiology or their expressions. (...) When you put all the expression into the face, the character becomes complete. He has become who he is and that creates a distance." That is also the underlying strategy in *Zie ik je nog eens terug?* (Will I See you again?), in which a tense little girl slowly thaws out by relinquishing her secrets bit by bit. Slowly but surely the illustrator brings little Sara out of her isolation by making her more and more dominant on the page.

Mijnheer Ferdinand (Mr. Ferdinand), a poetic story by Agnes Guldemont, is again an example of a successful symbiosis of colour, composition and form. The story is as follows: Mr. Ferdinand has lost something, but he doesn't know what it is. He is overcome by a kind of midlife crisis and he doesn't feel like doing anything anymore. In vain he starts looking for what he has lost. In one moving picture you see the poor fellow on a park bench, sliding into total apathy. His posture suggests more than words can ever convey. Gradually Mr. Ferdinand discovers that it is all a question of looking. A book to read slowly and to look at closely.



Brueghel, Ensor, Bosch

With his striking illustrations for *Dulle Griet* (Mad Meg), Cneut's drawing technique and use of form and colour reaches an impressive height. The book is inspired by the intriguing painting of the same name by Pieter Brueghel the Elder. The illustrator wanted to give this bizarre, apocalyptic scene his own interpretation. To this end he has lifted Mad Meg from the Brueghel painting and given her a new life and a different background. She is no longer the warrior woman in helmet and breastplate, but a vulnerable and at the same time recalcitrant female, who, because she has been cast out by her community, tempts fate and presents herself to the devil. Brueghel's full, turbulent background has been replaced by random snapshots of people and composite, hallucinatory monsters with fish heads and bird bodies. The book becomes grimmer with each new page, with hatred, envy, spite and despair on the large faces, reminiscent of those by Ensor. Good and evil, hypocrisy and ruthless cruelty are all given timeless expression in toothless skeletons and abhorrent monsters. The tone is black, both on the intriguing cover and in the images full of war, hell, rage and madness. In this book, Cneut ingeniously connects the Flemish present with its past, through images and themes, and boldly shatters the dividing line between minor and major literature. Like no other he is able to give expression to the deeper meaning of the story. His daring interpretation caused a lot of commotion, especially in Italy.

His masterful juggling with proportions and blown-up details turn *Monster, Don't Eat Me* (*O monster, eet me niet op*) into an ingenious picture book. It was published in 2006, in eleven languages and fifteen countries simultaneously. It's about eating and being eaten, with once again a greedy pig as its main character. Here Cneut uses, for the first time, busy, colourful backgrounds, with lots of attention to detail.

In *Een miljoen vlinders* (One million butterflies), a story by Edward van de Vendel, ethereal butterflies of every kind and size and colour can be seen flying around. The little elephant Stach is being harassed by whole swarms of them, which disappear when he gets company. He can't understand it. To his resigned parents, however, it is all too clear. "Oh, our very own big boy ... the time has come." With a knapsack, tears and wishes for "the very best" he is sent on his way to figure things out. Cneut has drawn this colourful butterfly universe with a flourish; you can nearly hear the rustling of their wings. The different compositions into which he has placed his characters are again masterful: for example, a whole throng of animals, with Stach in the middle, is spread over four pages, as the illustrator typically goes beyond the boundaries of his page. Other pages project emptiness and loneliness. Again, with such an abundance of colourful, intriguing characters, you are reminded of paintings by Ensor, Brueghel and Bosch.

On the cover of the collection of animal poems, *Fluit zoals je bent* (Whistle as you are), compiled by Edward van de Vendel, there is also a colourful animal parade going by. The drawings inside are sometimes mere illustrations, but just as often add something to the poems they accompany. Cneut has dressed up the animals in bright clothes, in keeping with each character, and has given them human traits and postures. Immediately the dividing line between the species becomes blurred. Human or animal, what is the difference actually? It isn't really important in this wonderful 'carnival of the animals'.



One Million Butterflies

© Carll Cneut

A book to feast on

For his many adaptations of world literature classics, Ed Franck found the perfect visual interpreter in Carll Cneut. In *Hou van mij. De mooiste verhalen over liefde* (Love me - the most beautiful love stories) with six adapted stories by Franck about famous couples and their tragic loves, Carll Cneut succeeds in evoking the spirit of the time in which the story is set and palpably bringing the passion, tragedy, sorrow and desperation of those loves to life. Downright masterful are the drawings Cneut made for the book *Te veel verdriet voor één hart* (Too Much Sorrow For One Heart), published in 2008, a re-telling of four tragedies by Shakespeare. For each character the illustrator had an interpretation and a separate technique. Collages, photographs and acrylic drawings alternate. Hamlet remains a shadowy face against a black background, while Ophelia's pale face nearly disappears into a black dress that becomes part of a dark background. King Lear is shown in profile in a black collage, while his beloved daughter Cordelia emanates tragedy and fragility in her white dress. Once again, Cneut leaves a lot to the imagination of the viewer. Black and blue are the dominating colours in the drawings for *Nachten vol angstaanjagende schoonheid* (Nights Full of Terrifying Beauty), an adaptation of stories by E.A. Poe. Here, too, Cneut is able to subtly capture the eerie atmosphere of the texts retold by Ed Franck, with spectres, shadows and skeletons looming out of the darkness. More colourful shadowy images illustrate *Verboden liefdes* (Forbidden Loves), Franck's adaptation of stories from *The Decameron*. Cneut shows himself a master in the art of suggestion in this book.

For his adaptation of the fairy tale *The Nightingale*, by H.C. Anderson, Peter Verhelst insisted on having Carll Cneut as his collaborator. The effect of this joint venture, *Het geheim van de keel van de nachtegaal* (The secret of the nightingale's throat), is overwhelming. In a perfect combination of text and images, author and illustrator put their own artistic signatures on the fairy tale. They wanted to make a book for people "to feast on" and they have certainly achieved their goal. It's hard to take your eyes off the more than forty small and lavish paintings. Cneut doesn't fall into the trap of using an obvious and affected oriental-looking style. Again he makes use of his strengths and turns the whole book into a masterful symbiosis of colour, form and composition and adds his original take on a different culture. Busy, dynamic images alternate with more intimate scenes that closely follow the rhythm of the story. He creates a beautiful play of light and dark and experiments with new techniques like Chinese shadows and with colours that are unusual for him. Blue, yellow and green dominate here. His typical red is hardly used. The brushwork





Left: Redyellowblackwhite
Right: A secret to make
you grow
© Carll Cneut

of the backgrounds is rough. Carll Cneut clearly enjoyed himself painting the imperial Garden of Gardens, an abundance of wild flowers and plants, in lavish colours and a thoughtful layout. The clothes and attributes of the imperial household also turned out to be right up his alley. Each costume and object has the proper cut and texture, with beautiful hues and patterns. This delightful book was given nearly every prestigious prize. And it seems to mark a new direction in Carll Cneut's work, as can already be seen in *De blauwe vogel* (The blue bird). In this fairy tale full of symbolism by Maurice Maeterlinck and adapted by Do Van Ranst, the use of dark colours, the fascination with textures, the silhouettes and the eerie magical atmosphere continue.



Always pushing boundaries

Ten Moonstruck Piglets (*Tien bolle biggetjes keken naar de maan*), a cheerful cardboard book for young children, seems to be a recapitulation and finalization of fifteen years of illustrating. The fat, sleepy-looking piglets, the enormous moon, the suits in all colours and sizes, the house with windows open to the whole world, they all make reference to earlier picture books. Is it time for something else, a new beginning, surprising perspectives? The upcoming projects leave no doubt about that. A second collaboration with Peter Verhelst, a book with the Italian author and illustrator Anna Castagnoli and another with Saskia De Coster, plus illustrations for Ed Frank's adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales* are all in the offing.

With his unique style, Carll Cneut has definitely pushed the boundaries – in every sense – between literature for children and for adults, between local and distant cultures, between humour and emotion, between tradition and renewal. His work has given children's literature new colours, forms and structures in recent years, as well as breathing refreshing new life into it. ■

Translated by Pleuke Boyce

SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

- M. Maeterlinck, Do Van Ranst, *De blauwe vogel*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 2012
- Lindsay Lee Johnson, Carll Cneut, *Ten Moonstruck Piglets*, Clarion, Boston, 2011
- Lindsay Lee Johnson, Joke van Leeuwen *Tien bolle biggetjes keken naar de maan*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 2011
- E.A.Poe, Ed Franck, *Nachten vol angstaanjagende schoonheid*, Davidsfonds, Leuven, 2011.
- Ed Franck, *Verboden liefdes. Verhalen uit Boccaccio's Decamerone*, Davidsfonds, Leuven, 2011
- Edward Van De Vendel, *Fluit zoals je bent*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 2010
- Peter Verhelst, *Het geheim van de keel van de nachtegaal*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 2008
- Ed Franck, *Te veel verdriet voor één hart*, Davidsfonds, Leuven, 2008
- Eward Van De Vendel, *Een miljoen vlinders*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 2007
- Carl Norac, *Monster, Don't Eat Me!*, Groundwood Books, Toronto, 2007
- Marilyn Singer, Carll Cneut, *City Lullaby*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston, 2007
- Carl Norac, *O monster, eet me niet op!*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 2006
- Ed Franck, *Hou van mij! De mooiste verhalen over liefde*, Davidsfonds, Leuven, 2006
- Geert De Kockere, *Dulle Griet*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 2005
- Edward Van De Vendel, *Zootje was hier*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 2004
- Agnes Guldemont, *Mijnheer Ferdinand*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 2003
- Ed Franck, *Zie ik je nog eens terug?*, Querido, Antwerpen/Amsterdam, 2003
- Carl Norac, *Een geheim waar je groot van wordt*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 2003
- Brigitte Minne, *En toen kwam Linde*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 2003
- Carll Cneut, *The Amazing Love Story of Mr. Morf*, Macmillan children's Books, 2002
- Carll Cneut, *Het ongelooflijke liefdesverhaal van Heer Morf*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 2002
- Danie Billiet, *Een wereldkaart op ware grootte*, Averbode, 2002
- Brigitte Minne, *Roodgeelzwartwit*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 2002
- Geert De Kockere, *Woeste Mie*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 2000
- Brigitte Minne, *Heksenfee*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 1999
- Geert De Kockere, *Willy*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 1999
- Geert De Kockere, *Ik heb een idee!*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 1999
- Geert De Kockere, *Niel*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 1998
- Geert De Kockere, *Straatje zonder eind*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 1997
- Geert De Kockere & Annemie Van Riel, *Koetje in de klaver*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 1997
- Geert De Kockere, *Varkentjes van marsepein*, De Eenhoorn, Wielsbeke, 1996