

The Underbelly of the New Century

On the Remarkable Novel of Manners *Bonita Avenue*

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[MARK CLOOSTERMANS]

Siem Sigerius, the vice-chancellor of a university in Enschede in the Eastern Netherlands, is busily pressing the flesh at a reception, when he suddenly recognises his daughter. Nothing special about that, except that he recognises her as the nude model on his favourite porn site.

That in itself is a good starting point for a novel of manners, but for Dutch readers there was another reason why *Bonita Avenue* attracted attention. The author incorporated the Enschede firework disaster into his book: the explosion of a firework storage depot on 13 May 2000, which wiped out an entire neighbourhood and caused hundreds of casualties and 23 deaths. In *Bonita Avenue* the explosion coincides with the moment when Siem Sigerius' happy, perfect family is torn apart.

In the course of 2011 Peter Buwalda, previously a journalist and a publisher's editor, metamorphosed from an unknown beginner into a best-selling author. The novel of manners, which took him four years to write, was on the Bestseller 60, the official Dutch list for book sales, for over a year. A number of awards and nominations completed the wealth of acclaim.

Explaining the success of *Bonita Avenue* is not that easy a task. Certainly Buwalda writes powerful, graphic prose that does not pull its punches. One reviewer talked of a style that was 'cutting edge [...], rich, vivid language, charged with testosterone.' (*HP/De Tijd*, 6/10/2010) A catalogue of all the ingenious turns of phrase in this book, always surprising but not so thick on the ground that they get in the way of the plot, would be going too far. In addition the novel, because of its rock-solid structure full of cliff-hanging moments, is quite simply compulsive reading.

A winner

Yet it is mainly the characters that make *Bonita Avenue* unforgettable. In an interview Buwalda stated: 'I'm fed up with wimps in fiction'. That is why Siem Sigerius, the main character, is a winner, someone who has proved his exceptional qualities both physically and intellectually. In the distant past he played competitive judo and would have taken part in the Olympic Games if he had not



been ruled out by an untimely injury. While he was recovering from that injury his talent for mathematics was discovered. His mathematical studies won him a Fields Medal. In the course of the novel the very media-friendly vice-chancellor will also receive an attractive offer from the world of politics.

However, Siem inevitably has an Achilles heel: his children. In the first instance the trouble seems limited to Wilbert, the son of a previous marriage, who has become mixed up in crime. Wilbert is 'a criminal who had worked his way into crime like a corkscrew'. But that is not all. Sigerius suddenly sees a shocking likeness between his foster-daughter Joni and a nude model. In the course of the novel it becomes his mission to find out whether or not he is wrong. Is Joni really using her body as a commodity?

Buwalda tells the story from three perspectives. The chapters narrated from Sigerius' point of view take place in 2000. The others are set (mainly) in the present. The focus is on Joni (who has become a successful businesswoman in the porn industry in California) and on Aaron, Joni's ex, who has retreated to a village near Brussels following a psychotic episode. He does not know the course of events in Enschede and tries to fit the pieces of the jigsaw together.

Peter Buwalda (1971)
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Sex and class distinctions

Bonita Avenue appears to be first and foremost a novel about sex, and about how two successive generations deal with it. For Sigerius and his contemporaries sex is a rather embarrassing necessity, preferably indulged in in silence. For Joni and Aaron sex has in fact been split in two, there is the role that it plays in a relationship, but besides that it is simply merchandise. Joni is not a sad prostitute-by-necessity, but a smart young woman. All she does is to play the cards dealt her by nature to the greatest possible advantage. Aaron is halfway between Joni and Sigerius. He has no problem with photographing his girlfriend for a porn site, but blows his top in a big way when he suspects she is about to ditch him as her lover. That dichotomy proves fatal. However, in the figure of Siem Sigerius, Buwalda broaches a second theme. Siem Sigerius has broken free of his working-class roots, has climbed the social ladder, and loses his self-control when his origins rear their heads. Here Buwalda touches on a very sensitive issue. In the 1990s the Netherlands saw itself as a model state, a finished project whose main features were open-mindedness and professional political administration. But in the twenty-first century the breakthrough of populist politics obliged the nation to take a painful look in the mirror. The Netherlands consisted not only of a head, but also of an underbelly, which was constantly making itself felt. Sigerius' struggle is the conflict that seized hold of the Netherlands in this new century: the head that realises with dismay the existence of the rest of the body.

The nice thing about *Bonita Avenue*, nevertheless, is that Buwalda never forces his theme too crudely down the reader's throat. The picture (political, social, erotic) that he paints of the period is not a vehicle for an unambiguous message. Ambitious novels sometimes have the pernicious tendency to reduce everything that takes place within their covers to a single moral, a single line of thought. In *Bonita Avenue* readers are allowed to interpret and, if they wish, judge for themselves.

The following excerpt from Bulwada's novel immediately precedes the moment when Sigerius makes the fateful discovery about his daughter. During a ceremony at the university his two lives collide: his ex-brother-in-law seizes this perfect moment to tell him that his son Wilbert has been released early from prison. The suppressed aggression implicit in this passage foreshadows the blood-curdling hand-to-hand fight between father and son later in the novel.

America is mentioned in this excerpt. Sigerius and his family lived there for several years, while he was writing his doctoral thesis. Their house, on *Bonita Avenue*, gradually becomes a symbol of a moment when their lives were perfect. A moment in the past, of course. ■

An Extract from *Bonita Avenue*

By Peter Buwalda



Once Tineke had dropped him off at Enschede station, as soon as the strain of the college's anniversary week slid off him, he started fretting about what he had seen. All the way to Schiphol Airport he'd asked himself questions, absurd questions (were they the same size? were they the same age? the same build?), after which he reprimanded himself (it just can't be, it's too much of a coincidence, this is what psychiatrists mean by paranoia), checked in relatively calmly, and without slipping into outrageous fantasies browsed through the bestsellers in the bookshop display, only to catch himself posing even more absurd questions while boarding (is she capable of this? is this *in* her? in her genes?) — a steady tidal motion, panic and calm, panic and calm, that had possessed him for the past three days.

Tubantia's fortieth anniversary celebration had gone as these kind of public events usually did: it washed over him, it was as though he had dreamt the past few days; and just like in a dream, there was no opportunity to look either forward or back. Pampering four honorary doctorates and their spouses; re-writing, rehearsing and reciting his keynote speech on nanotechnology, hardly the meatiest of subjects; breakfasts, lunches and dinners with his guests, the endless chitchat, that tedious blather, good god, he might just drop dead in the middle of his speech.

It was Thursday afternoon, during the closing reception, when things started coming undone. After he'd draped the Tubantia regalia onto his four honourees at the Jacobuskerk, the whole circus moved to the Enschede Theatre. He, Tineke and the four honorary doctorates and their spouses mounted the raised black-velvet platform in the foyer, ready to be fêted by the hundreds of schmoozing guests who snatched glasses of wine and fancy hors d'oeuvres from silver platters, or took their place straight away in the discouragingly long reception line. He must have stood there for three hours, shaking hands, exchanging witty repartee, the long garland of patience reflected in his patent leather shoes.

About an hour into the handshaking he spotted Wijn. Menno Wijn, his ex-brother-in-law and former sparring partner, towering head and shoulders above the hundreds of students and almost exclusively toga-clad professors, inconspicuous at first, clearly ill at ease, glancing around awkwardly with a mineral water in his fist, almost, it seemed, on the verge of leaving. When he looked again five minutes later, Wijn was standing in the queue like a clay golem. "Psst, look, two o'clock," he whispered to Tineke. Her chubby hands released the arm of a professor's wife and she turned towards him. "To the left," he said. Mildly amused, she scanned the queue and froze. "Well, I'll be goddamned." She lifted her shoulders and shook her freshly coiffed hair that smelled of cigarettes and pine needles.

Wijn had the expression of someone sitting in a dentist's waiting room. Before he had arrived, the foyer was the picture of diversity, so many different faces, so many nationalities, but since noticing his ex-brother-in-law Sigerius realized that every academic looked like every other academic. Back when he and Wijn were in their twenties, he had a rough but rosy face and a ready laugh, preferably and most boisterously at someone else's mistakes, until those mistakes started to close in on him. Those mistake-making others were his sister Margriet and his nephew Wilbert, but most of all him, Siem Sigerius, traitor, the cause of Margriet's undoing. According to Wijn. What on earth was he doing here? He hadn't been invited, he must have read about the reception somewhere. Had he come all the way from Culemborg for this?

While Sigerius planted kisses on powdered cheeks and endured flattering small talk, he could feel the brother of his late ex-wife gaining ground. Vengeance and venom filled the foyer like fumes. It was twenty-five years ago, damn it. In the first few months after the divorce, his old pal just ignored him, but once Margriet and Wilbert had moved into the attic of Wijn's sports school in Culemborg, things turned bitter. Hostile. For years, Margriet let her stable but angry brother do her dirty work for her: sis needed money, sis had to go to the liquor store. And for Wijn – by that time landlord, lawyer and foster parent all rolled into one – what was one more nasty telephone call? Sigerius was already in America with Tineke and the girls when, right around Wilbert's birthday, an envelope arrived with a greeting card – “congratulations on your son's birthday” – accompanied by a typed sheet of expense claims: bills from the glazier, fines, medical expenses, sessions with the juvenile psychologist, you name it, and at the bottom, the bank account number of Menno Wijn Martial Arts Academy. It was the prelude to a few phone calls per year, collect calls of course, fault-finding tirades in which Wijn, in his crude redneck lingo, filled him in on what that “punk” had gotten up to now, which school he been kicked out of and why, about the pulverized liquorice cough drops the “fuckwad” sold as hash, how Menno had to throw out the “scum” that came round to the house for pay-back, about the brawls at the carnival, the shoplifting – so when you coming back to Holland, Pop? Menno was down on that whole America thing. But when Sigerius himself phoned, Wijn gave him the cold shoulder, let the deserter know in no uncertain terms that he had no business with them, and via lengthy monologues rubbed it in that Wilbert had settled in just fine with his dutiful uncle. “He ain't a bad kid, you know, all of a sudden he got twenty-four canaries up in the attic. Loves 'm, y'know. Gerbits too, hamsters, it's a regler zoo up there.”

He always just let it go. Of course he was worried. You're here now, Tineke would say. We are in California. Menno only quit haranguing him after Margriet died. After that there was only the occasional telephone conversation, Menno grousing about his role as Wilbert's guardian, he as the disillusioned father trying to get out of his alimony obligations. Businesslike exchanges, the enmity of the past electrically dormant on the phone line.



Here he comes. His ex-brother-in-law, backlit by the glare cutting in through the tall front windows of the theatre, climbed the broad steps to the podium and stopped in front of him. You'd almost expect to see him holding a UPS clipboard, or wonder whose chauffeur he was, what was this guy doing coming after his boss? Straight as an arrow, arms dangling alongside his bony body, his weight on the balls of his feet, just like he used to take his place on the mat: here I am, just try me. No handshake.

"Menno," said Sigerius.

Wijn pulled in his chin. "Doin' all right for yourself, I see," he said with the exact same tacky accent they spoke back on their old stomping grounds, Wijk C, forty years ago. "I was passing by. I've come to tell you your son's free."

Sigerius cleared his throat. "What?"

"Reduced sentence. On accounta good behaviour. He's already out."

At times, language could have a physical effect on him, like ice cold water being dumped on his head from several metres above. "Oh no," he muttered. "Now that is news. Bad news."

Wijn picked at a penny-sized scab on his cheek, no doubt the remnants of a blister he'd got himself scraping across a judo mat, a self-conscious gesture that made him look, for a brief moment, like his dead sister. His middle finger was missing its nail. A blind finger.

"Just thought I'd let you know. And tell you that I wash my hands of 'm."

"He was supposed to be locked up until 2002." Tineke said that. She stood glowering at Wijn with eyes like barrels of a pistol, but he ignored her, just like he'd been ignoring her for the past twenty-five years.

"Where's he going to live?" Sigerius asked.

"Dunno. Don't give a shit."

Then they stood there looking at each other in silence, the rector and the gym coach. Two middle-aged men who used to stand in the shower room together, three times a week, year after year, after having mixed their sweat on dojos all over the west coast of Holland. It hadn't been of any use. Suddenly, without provocation, Wijn raised his hand and jabbed Sigerius on the forehead with that nasty mole-finger of his.

"Dog," he snarled.

Before Sigerius could realize he *mustn't* respond, before he realized he was *not* in the position to hoist the man up high and crosswise by his polyester collar, hurl him back down and, growling, yank him back up again – strangle him on the spot, as big and nasty as he was – Wijn walked off. Without looking further at anyone, he shambled in his cheap, ill-fitting suit past the row of laureates and stepped off the podium with a hollow thud. ■

Translated by Jonathan Reeder

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