

It's the Journey, Not the Destination

On the Work of Frank Westerman

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[T O M A S V A N H E S T E]

It's not uncommon that a band's first album is its most exciting. The debut has a raw power. The first light of all the stars that will twinkle in this musical universe can be discerned. Later work may gain in technical control, compositional sophistication and musical depth, but it loses energy and originality. After the explosive first fruits – OK, if you're asking me for examples: *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn* (1967) by Pink Floyd, *Three Imaginary Boys* (1979) by The Cure and *Beautiful Freak* (1996) by Eels – there may be lots more good music to come, but nevertheless the work gradually becomes shrouded in an air of predictability. As if you already know the formula.

Something similar can be said about some literary oeuvres. To some extent, fortunately not entirely, this applies to the work of Frank Westerman (Meppel, 1964). Over the past twenty years, the Dutch grandmaster of literary non-fiction has produced a rich and varied oeuvre. His most recent full-length book, *Stikvallei* (Choke Valley, 2013), is without question a highlight. Yet the thought of his debut, *De brug over de Tara* (The Bridge over the Tara, 1994), makes me nostalgic. It's the only one of Westerman's works that's out of print and can only be found in second-hand bookshops. Perhaps this is because it's slightly dated, having been written during the war in the former Yugoslavia, before the drama of Srebrenica came to an end and the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement. A less generous critic could also say that it's not really a wonderfully composed book, rather a collection of journalistic reports.

This might well be true, but *The Bridge over the Tara* was and is a pearl. Right from the opening sentences of his debut, Westerman shows he's a master of atmospheric description. 'That evening, we smoked Arabic Hollywoods and drank coffee from a fildžan, a Turkish coffee cup the size of a thimble. Eighty kilometres away raged the battle for the fildžan state, as the Muslims came to call the lost war.' In his debut, he demonstrates his great talent for finding just the right words to penetrate to the heart of a situation. Although *The Bridge over the Tara* sparkles with fine sentences, his prose is at the service of the story and occasionally, in his urgency to record what happened, also clunky and rough. His later work sometimes gives the impression of endless polishing. The sentences are often too perfect, which sometimes makes his prose sound a little affected.



Frank Westerman (1964)

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The mystery of war

In his first book, Westerman practises the methods that he refines later on. In *Ingenieurs van de ziel* (*Engineers of the Soul*, 2002), he picks up the trail of the Soviet writer Konstantin Paustovsky. Just as in *The Bridge over the Tara* he follows in the footsteps of the Dutch novelist A. den Doollaard, who considered Yugoslavia as a second home. Westerman's books often have a puzzling question as their point of departure. In *De moord op de boekverkoopster* (*The Murder of a Bookseller*, 2014), a journalistic long read which was published as an e-book, the mystery is how an intelligent bookshop owner from Wageningen could fall for an illiterate charmer who would go on to murder her. In *El Negro en ik* (*El Negro and Me*, 2004), it's the identity of the stuffed black man who was on display in a glass case in Bayoles, Spain, until 1997. In *Engineers of the Soul* (2002), it's how the Gulf of Kara-Bogaz-Gol, the subject of Konstantin Paustovsky's 1932 book of the same name, seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth. In *The Bridge over the Tara*, it's 'the riddle of war: the towering, blazing difference between groups of people who were completely identical.'

Just such a conundrum is the point of departure for a journalistic quest. When it comes to journalists, Westerman is the real deal. He was one of only a few reporters to meet the Serbian war criminal Arkan and reach the Muslim enclave at Srebrenica. 'Death to journalists, we're going to put you lot against the wall,' one Serbian soldier told him at a checkpoint. As well as courage, he also possesses a huge amount of perseverance. After innumerable attempts, he eventually gets to speak to Mirjana Markovic, the wife of President Milosovic. 'The result is a fascinating interview, in which Markovic passionately attacks the nationalists who destroyed the multi-ethnic state of Yugoslavia, as if her husband were not among them.'

However, it never remains a journalistic quest in search of facts to solve a mystery. Westerman's investigations are always to do with social, sometimes almost philosophical issues. In *De graanrepubliek* (The Republic Of Grain, 1999), he uses the histories of three different gentleman farmers from Groningen to explore how the region and the farming industry fell prey to the ideology of progress, expansion and industrialisation, and how this ideology reached its limits. In *Engineers of the Soul*, he tries to understand how it was that in the Soviet Union *fiziki* and *liriki*, engineers and writers, forged a mass alliance in order to establish physical and intellectual realities on a Socialist footing. In *El Negro and me*, he investigates the once flagrant, now more hidden tradition of European racism and the always problematic relationship to the Other. *Ararat* (2007) is an attempt to shine light on the love-hate relationship between science and religion, a subject he revisits in *Choke Valley*, in which he juxtaposes mythical and scientific explanations for the disaster that struck the African valley.

Goodbye to journalistic distance

In attempting to answer these questions, Westerman also throws his own experiences and personality into the fray. Even in his debut, he's already begun to abandon the journalistic credo of objectivity. 'I became involved, when I really should have kept my distance,' he writes. 'Involvement would cloud my perception. I'd braced myself, but once it was there I began to give in'. Until 2002 he worked as a journalist, first as a correspondent for *de Volkskrant* in Belgrade, then as a correspondent for *NRC Handelsblad* in Moscow, and his books were characterised by a journalistic approach. Later he decided to become a full-time writer, and his work became increasingly literary and personal.

The prominence of his relationship with the world is evident from the programmatic title of *El Negro and me* alone. His investigations into the origins of *El Negro* and into how it was that white men came to desecrate the grave of a black man, skin the body, and stuff and mount it like an animal is also a confrontation with his own experiences of racism. Westerman studied tropical land development in Wageningen. Later he formed the opinion that 'development originated from motives that were basically racist. The urge to teach others 'our' techniques or lifestyle or articles of belief presupposed that 'we' knew better than 'them', that white civilisation was superior to non-white civilisation.'

Even closer to his personal obsessions is the subject of *Ararat*. In this book, Westerman climbs the mountain on which, according to Genesis, Noah's ark ran aground. The writer has heard this story umpteen times as a child. He comes from a strict Dutch Reformend Church background. His mother froze one time when he showed her a piece of work that began with the sentence, 'Although humans descended from apes...' He may have shaken off his parents' faith, but not his fascination with mythical stories. In fact, his ascent of the holy mountain is a sort of test: does he really want to break free of his parents' heritage, can he really resist the lure of higher things? But the mountain doesn't yield any mystical experiences, only physical hardship and fear, and he doesn't reach the top. As he suffers, he thinks about his young daughter, and about how she uses the term 'counting letters' for numbers. He comes to the conclusion that her

creativity and his imagination come closer to the miracle of reality than the set forms in which religion tries to capture things that are beyond comprehension.

The main theme of *Ararat* is the strained relationship between science and religion. It was the sciences that first shook Westerman's faith, but not because reason overcame imagination and broke the spell. He tells how imaginary numbers bewitched him as a schoolboy. With a number which, when squared, gives a negative result – impossible in the world of common sense – you can create a world of countless practical applications. 'For me, this touched on the divine.'

Food, drink and fairy tales

His most recent full-length work, *Choke Valley*, is yet another exploration of the relationship between science and myth. When, on 25 August 1986, 1746 people and thousands of animals drop down dead in a remote valley in north-west Cameroon, a desperate search begins to find out the cause of this terrible event. What in God's name happened? The situation lent itself, writes Westerman, 'to an almost creepily perfect way of investigating the way stories sprout and produce shoots'. And people live by stories, argues the writer. 'Everyone in the world raises their children on food, drink and fairy tales.'

To start with, two different and conflicting scientific explanations are put forward. According to the French *éminence grise* on volcanology Haroun Tazieff, a volcano erupted beneath Lake Nyos. Volcanic gases shot straight through the water and a cloud of carbon dioxide and sulphur vapour took the lives of man and beast. CO₂ is definitely the culprit, agrees rival Icelandic scientist Haraldur Sigurdsson. However, he contests that this was a case of active volcanism, arguing instead that a huge bubble of carbon dioxide that had accumulated in the lake was released when the balance of the top layer of water, which had acted as a cork, was disrupted by an unknown trigger.

In the first part of *Choke Valley*, Westerman achieves a masterful depiction of the conflict between these two figures and their adherents. In so doing, he proves he has what it takes to produce a literary form of scientific journalism: the ability to demystify complex issues combined with a feel for the social and psychological sides of science. He is the ideal combination of artist and scientist.

It would be implausible in a novel, Westerman writes, but it's true none the less: the first people to enter the valley of death were three white missionaries, two of whom were Dutch. They came from different directions, but met each other on a deserted road. In the part entitled 'Myth bearers', Westerman tells the story of the Dutchmen, who each tried in their own way to grasp the horrors they were confronted with and help the survivors. One chose to explain the disaster using the Bible story of the Tower of Siloam, which collapsed killing eighteen people as a warning to sinners. The other reached the conclusion that his spiritual care was irrelevant, and lost his faith.

And then there's the version of the 'myth makers'. One of these is the Cameroonian lecturer in drama Bole Butake, who wrote the play *Lake God*. According to Westerman, Bole 'is not satisfied with the answers offered by Western religion or science. Looking closer to home, he examines each scene one by one to find out what went wrong among the people themselves. Bole describes the feuds that took place in the run-up to the catastrophe'.

Such a story is certainly no less persuasive than the scientific version of what happened, suggests the writer. Just as a scientific theory is hung on facts but is never completely convincing, myths contain a skeleton of historical facts. Westerman does not side with any of the stories, even in the scientific debate. 'I can't get away from the impression', he writes, 'that the volcano theory shrivelled and died partly because Sigurdsson's story is stronger (and more unusual) than Tazieff's story, and therefore more likely to spread.'

The final part is a mishmash of stories from survivors of the disaster, passages from *Lake God*, conspiracy theories about neutron bomb testing, explanations put forward by Cameroonian tribal leaders, and speculation regarding the myth-makers. It is as if the book becomes increasingly fragmented. And perhaps this fits with the idea that searching does not necessarily lead us to the truth and that the world is a cacophony of stories.

Choke Valley is vintage Westerman. The continuing quest, the ever changing routes towards the puzzle. The part-journalistic, part-philosophical search. The searching and not finding. A critic might say that, over the years, the skeleton of his method is at times a bit too visible through the flesh of his story. The enthusiast would counter: of course there is a certain familiarity, because the author has found his own distinctive voice and developed a unique form of literary non-fiction that combines literature and journalism, science and art, Westerman and the world. ■

More information about Frank Westerman's books is available at www.frankwesterman.nl.

Frank Westerman hosted a TV Documentary
'Nederland in 7 overstromingen' (The Netherlands in 7 Floods)



An Extract from *Choke Valley*

By Frank Westerman

I love stories, be they true, plausible or pure fantasy. As a writer, I occasionally plant a new story in the forest of existing tales. The idea for this book came to me in 2009, the Year of Darwin, when Teylers Museum in Haarlem invited me to participate in an exhibition about two legendary ships: Noah's Ark and Darwin's Beagle. The former represented the myths of the Scriptures, the latter scientific truth.

'In the final room we'll have a theatrical finish,' the curator promised. 'We'll have the Beagle ram the Ark amidships and sink her. What do you think?'

I could already picture the breach in the hull. Later, however, it occurred to me that Noah's Ark has not sustained the slightest damage from Darwin's discoveries on the Beagle expedition. The impossible survival story of man and animal on that heaving sea, lapping against the earth, simply makes a stronger impression on the imagination than the young Darwin's research voyage. Before children have had the theory of evolution explained to them, they have already seen a procession of Noah's Arks go by – in books and films, Lego or Playmobil sets. Fignents

of the imagination can nestle so comfortably into reality that they become part of it. The missing room 13 in a hotel. The closure of the AEX index on Ascension Day. Newspaper horoscopes. Everyone in the world raises their children on food, drink and fairytales.

As a small child I was told time and again, wrapped up in the creation myth of Genesis, that the serpent in paradise brought injustice into the world. How? By tempting Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Later, as an adult, I came to see all religions as mythical stories interfering in the lives of billions with 'thou shalt's' and 'thou shalt not's' – to the point of cutting off one's nose to spite one's face.

What species of animal would do such a thing? When it comes to questions of life and death, the majority of the world's population prefer to put their faith in fiction rather than in fact. People are animals who tell one another stories; we are continually telling each other made-up tales to which we attribute significance at the very least, if not literal belief, as if voluntarily imprisoning ourselves in a cage of self-invented stories.



I wondered about the origin of myths which hold such formidable strength that they become mixed up with reality. Did they start small? And how?

Then I had a flash of inspiration. I thought back to the valley of death in Cameroon and saw in it the ideal test for what I wanted to know. The whole setting lent itself to an almost spine-chillingly perfect method of investigating how stories bud and bloom. Just imagine it. The Nyos valley is an orderly, clearly delineated area. On 21 August 1986, on the new moon, between nine and ten in the evening there is an explosion. This is my zero hour, the big bang with which everything begins. Sunrise is as quiet as quiet can be – even the crickets have stopped chirping. Not a word or a sign from the valley floor. Only afterwards does the sound of human voices swell again; in the days, months and years they speak, lament, dispute, speculate and make up fables regarding the valley of death.

I would like to tease apart all, or at least most, of what has been said and written

about it. By disentangling the material thread by thread, I hope to discover the words that have attached themselves to the facts, and how they became woven into sentences, metaphors and stories.

A quarter of a century may be short. I don't expect to find a full-blown, perfected 'death valley legend'. It must be possible, however, to observe the germination of new mythical narrative strands.

From *Choke Valley* (Stikvallei),
De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam, 2013

Translated by Anna Asbury