

## 'Das Magazin' and the Literary Journal in the Low Countries

Anyone looking to write a history of the literary journal in Flanders and the Netherlands will undoubtedly discover that 2011 was a pivotal year. That was the year when the Dutch State Secretary for Culture, the right-wing liberal Halbe Zijlstra, scrapped all subsidies for literary magazines as part of a general cost-cutting exercise. The reason given was the small target readership. At a time when austerity measures were being taken across the board, it was argued that giving public money to journals with so few readers could no longer be justified.

Unsurprisingly, there was a fierce reaction to this decision, which seemed to be driven more by the anti-cultural climate in Dutch politics than by any thoughts of making major savings. There were fears in cultural circles that this would mark the end of the literary journal, which some declared would simply be 'wiped from the face of the earth'.

Where are we today, five years later? Sadly, a number of journals have indeed disappeared due to lack of funds following the withdrawal of government support, including *Kort Verhaal* (Short Story) and *Parmentier*. At the same time, however, developments since 2011 have made clear that the literary journal, even in this age of dwindling readerships and digital media, is stronger than had been thought.

Even in that accursed year 2011, for example, several new journals were actually founded, including *Terras*, *Extaze* and *Das Magazin*. This last journal, in particular, has grown into a phenomenon within a short space of time. Not only does *Das Mag* (as it is generally known) have a circulation of 4,500 and the self-proclaimed accolade, according to its website, of being 'the biggest literary journal in the Netherlands', but it also attracts a striking amount of attention from literary circles, the media and even the academic world. It has received an important cultural award.



*Das Mag* has succeeded in positioning itself in the market as young, fresh and modern. That is immediately obvious when you pick up a copy. It is attractively designed, with colourful, stylised images and a different, hip 'house illustrator' for each edition, and so manages to remain far removed from the cliché of the dusty, old-fashioned literary journal. *Das Mag* is also very adept at using social media to promote itself, and also at raising its public profile with grandiose events, such as the *Das Mag Festivals*, which are declared to be the 'biggest reading club in the country'. Reading clubs are held at several locations within the same city, with an author and twenty-five readers. Afterwards there is a party that everyone can attend. The formula works. Heavily attended meetings in the magazine's home base of Amsterdam were followed by festivals in Ghent, Antwerp and London. Berlin is on the agenda for 2016.

In the autumn of 2015, *Das Mag* went a step further, setting up its own publishing house. On the one hand, that sounds logical - journals have traditionally provided a fertile pool of literary talent, in which publishers have been keen to fish. But at the same time it is remarkable, because it demonstrates a great deal of self-confidence in an ability to launch a publishing operation at a time when the book world mainly appears in the news as an economically downtrodden sector. But the people behind *Das Mag* are confident that they have the support of their readers. Just as when the journal was launched in 2011, the publishing operation was partly funded through crowdfunding among the journal's own readers - who are often, though by no means always, young people.

This underlines yet again what may be the most important factor in the success of *Das Mag*, its abil-

ity to engender reader loyalty. *Das Mag* creates a club feeling, a sense of belonging to a literary community. We have already talked about the design, the social media and the events, but the content of the journal also reflects that club feeling. *Das Mag* does not espouse a particular literary opinion, does not engage in polemics with other journals or generations, does not nurture any lofty ideas about the Art of Writing. As the author Kees 't Hart wrote: 'you don't need to do anything, you don't have to do anything, and you can take part if you feel like it. *Das Magazin* simply doesn't have an agenda, and makes that its agenda.' The only constant appears to be a positive, inclusive tone.

This lack of a clear profile is sometimes levelled against *Das Mag*, with critics arguing that the journal and its writers are too conformist, too little inclined to kick against the traces, lacking in virtually any ambition except to be liked. Overall, however, the story of *Das Mag* is above all one of hope. There are clearly still enough readers to support literary journals; it is simply a matter of reaching out to them and garnering their loyalty. Literature can only benefit from this.

And what about the polemic, the edginess, the debate? These will come as night follows day. The first book published by the *Das Mag* publishing house, for example, a collection of stories by Maartje Wortel, met with a very mixed response, and some writers - including a number who are counted in the *Das Mag* camp, such as Joost de Vries and Daan Heerma van Voss - are quick to say in interviews that they do not believe there is such a thing as a *Das Mag* club, and that they therefore do not belong to it.

And of course, there is also life outside *Das Mag*. A visitor browsing through the literary journals of the Low Countries will find an extremely diverse mix. The journal *Terras*, launched in the *annus horribilis* 2011, like *Das Mag*, not only focuses on international literature, but is also a multimedia phenomenon, with literary texts, blogs, essays, films, photos and compositions published on its website every week. The journal also projects itself as the

successor to and guardian of the treasures of the famed (in literary circles) but demised journal *Raster* (1967-2008). Old *Raster* articles are posted online, making them accessible once again.

The new journals also include young iconoclasts which are published exclusively online (*Samplekanon*), traditional paper-based literary vehicles (*Passage*) and 'a journal that reads like a newspaper but is stuffed full of literature' (*De Titaan*). There are journals which first closed but then started up again, either exclusively in digital format ([www.armadawereldliteratuur.nl](http://www.armadawereldliteratuur.nl)) or once more in a traditional paper version (*Kluger Hans*). But established veterans of the world of literary journals have also reinvented themselves or been given new impetus. The oldest literary journal in the Netherlands, *De Gids* (launched in 1837), has been taken under the wing of the opinion weekly *De Groene Amsterdammer*; a new editorial team at *De Revisor* (first published in 1974) has drastically changed course; and *Tirade* (first published in 1957) and *Hollands Maandblad* (launched in 1959) continue to dig up literary treasures.

In Flanders, a number of journals stand out for their willingness to experiment, not just with content, but also with form. *DW B* (launched in 1855) seeks out the confrontation of visual art and literature, and each edition of the journals *nY* (started in 2009) and *Deus Ex Machina* (1976) takes on a different appearance. Flemish journals are also pooling their strengths in the umbrella organisation Folio. This offers a platform where they can meet to learn from each other, to strengthen their position in negotiations for government grants and to find new readers. They are also increasingly turning their gaze towards the Netherlands, where they are finding an interested ear.

The conclusion? It is far too early to write off the literary journal, let alone to write it out of history.

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*Translated by Julian Ross*