

A Gaze Trained on the Horizon

Children's Books in the Low Countries

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A country by the sea is boundless, or perhaps it would be better to say, it seems boundless. The open water with the distant, intangible horizon urges exploration and adventure, but close by the undulating power of the salt sea and the constant wind cause continual commotion. Inevitably this is coupled with a battle for space. What is the most sensible solution? Contain it with dams and polders? Or let the water flow freely?

The cultural landscape of the Low Countries as a battleground for freethinkers and those who would draw boundaries is a tempting metaphor for the conflict which once again flared up at the start of the twenty-first century in the land of children's writing, where child-oriented people and literary figures tussle over the notion of the children's book.

This battle really springs directly from the question of what children's literature is. Does it actually exist? And if it exists, how does it relate to adult literature? Is a children's book just meant for children and, if so, should it be written specifically for the target group and judged as such? Or is a good children's book one written with literary devices to be criticised according to text and image and only considered a success if adults, too, can appreciate it? Under the motto that pedagogical principles and target groups are foreign to the nature of literature?

By the end of the twentieth century this battle seemed to have been settled in favour of the literature camp. Children's literature had grown up, or so it appeared. Imme Dros, Wim Hofman, Joke van Leeuwen, Bart Moeyaert, Anne Provoost, Toon Tellegen, the writers of children's books who allowed their language and imagination to flow freely, were applauded, as were illustrators such as Kristien Aertssen, Carll Cneut, Gerda Dendooven and Klaas Verplancke, who have elevated the art of illustration in Flanders through their courage to colour outside the lines. Until the turn of the millennium these now established linguistic and visual artists lived happily in a boundless country by the sea, where the artistic quality of their work was highly regarded. In the end everyone agreed that children are not half people. That children are familiar with all the emotions adults are familiar with. And that therefore children's books are not half books and children's authors are not half authors. They try, just like writers for adults, to imagine 'the space of life in its entirety', to quote Lucebert (1924-1994), each in their own poetic manner.



Kaatje Vermeire in *De vrouw en het jongetje* (The Woman and the Boy)
by Geert de Kockere and Kaatje Vermeire (De Eenhoorn, 2007)

'The sky sewn onto the world'

What makes their books unique and distinguishes them from adult books is the fact that they are 'written from the bottom up', as creative all-rounder Joke van Leeuwen puts it. With a subversive, childish gaze, which often guarantees a fare dose of absurd logic – certainly in the case of Van Leeuwen's stories – they force us to see the world through other eyes, or new ones, for a while. Sjoerd Kuiper, whose work won him the triennial Theo Thijssen Prize in the Netherlands in 2012, along with his younger, much-praised colleague Edward van de Vendel, supports Van Leeuwen's vision. A good children's book, said Kuiper, in 2009, in his Annie M.G. Schmidt Lecture – one of the few platforms in the Low Countries offering respected children's authors the opportunity to express their views on developments in their profession since the start of the new century – is 'written with the heart of a child and the hand of an adult'. Or, to put it in Van de Vendel's words, there should be 'a child's breath blowing through

the book' (from his Annie M.G. Schmidt Lecture, 2006). The aim of these children's authors, however, is the same as that of adult writers: they seek to create amazement and confusion through words. Great life issues, such as death, are therefore excellent subject matter, as long as the author gets the child's perspective right and treats it with respect.

Van de Vendel himself does this very well. The poetry collection *Superguppie* (2003) – with lively illustrations by Fleur van der Weel created with pen and ink – offers children's poems whose deceptive simplicity goes straight to the heart. 'Merel' ('Blackbird') for example: 'A blackbird lay dead / fallen, folded / on the platform before me. / I didn't know such a thing could be. / People dashing everywhere, / leaving him uncovered there. / I didn't know such a thing could be. / Everything in vain. / Mummy rushing in a hushed voice called, / We're going to miss our train.' Kuyper, too, knows how to describe the emotional world of a young child cleverly from the inside. His imagery always fits perfectly into the referential frame of a young child, leading to clever dialogues and reflections which are telling in their simplicity. There is a particularly beautiful scene in *O rode papaver, boem pats, knal!* (Oh red poppy, boom bang, crash! 2011) Kuyper's ninth and last book featuring the disarming little Robin, charmingly illustrated in dreamy colours by Marije Tolman. Here, on the edge of the village where Robin lives, Kuyper captures in words the immensity of the world as a child might experience it: there – where the village ends – 'there you come to the meadows. They're so big – from your toes to the horizon. On the horizon are trees. They look small and thin as threads - the thread mummy uses to sew buttons onto Robin's trousers. It's as if the sky were sewn onto the world there.'



Carll Cneut in *Het geheim van de keel van de nachtegaal* (The Secret of the Nightingale's Throat) by Peter Verhelst and Carll Cneut (De Eenhoorn, 2009)

The masses dictate

Since the start of the twenty-first century, however, the world has changed rapidly. Life has come under great pressure from web 2.0 and the rise of new media. The entire world is on a digital drip: constantly online, we are now so stupefied that we systematically confuse the continual bellowing which washes over us each day with freedom of expression. The consequence is that the taste of the masses dictates and literature barely retains any status.

Obviously these developments have their repercussions on the world of children's books in the Low Countries. The old guard notes that 'the golden age of children's literature is gone forever' and speaks of 'a restorative tendency, which looks to return to safe times of yore, when an undisputed difference existed between children's books and adult literature'.

These critics are not altogether wrong. Seeing a children's book as a form of literature is immediately considered suspicious and child-unfriendly these days. The 'dictatorship of the literary norm' is feared by teachers, parents, librarians, reviewers and yes, even writers themselves. Publishers opt less and less for literary books, for children or adults, afraid that they will not sell. Best-sellers and formulaic series full of WhatsApp, Snapchat and navel-gazing, a clear example being Francine Oomen's contemporary series *Hoe overleef ik* (How to Survive), simply stand to make more money than exceptional literature such as Bart Moeyaert and Gerda Dendooven's *De gans en zijn broer* (The Goose and His Brother, 2014), or *De Noordenwindheks* (The Witch of the North Wind, 2004) by double talent Daan Remmerts de Vries. *De gans en zijn broer* is a small collection of beautiful short stories and equally appealing illustrations of two brother geese, who unintentionally go in search of the meaning of their existence. *De Noordenwindheks* is a disturbing reversible book in which two terminally ill eleven-year-olds sharing a hospital room tell their stories, meanwhile making up the myth of the dangerous 'witch of the north wind' against whom they are engaged in a life and death battle.

Against the tide

However, despite the fact that 'the space of life in its entirety' has been contained with dams due to commercialisation and fear, there are still children's authors and illustrators who set out to sea – following Paul Biegel's famous little captain – 'feet firmly planted, eyes on the skyline' against the tide, on their way to the horizon and preferably beyond, with a new, boundless generation of children's book makers in their wake.

What this new, boundless generation has in common with the old is its vision of authorship. They are all happy to be called *children's* authors, but feel they are first and foremost authors. Just because a book is prefaced with *children's* does not mean it is not worth adults reading it, they say. Young, valued and highly praised writers such as Gideon Samson and Simon van der Geest believe that literature for children and adults comes from the same source. In several interviews Samson has stated that he is not concerned with his readership when he writes: to him writing children's books is a way of expressing himself artistically. Similarly Kaatje Vermeire, currently one of Flanders' great illus-

trators, does not think of her viewers when she draws and, she admits, never started out with the intention of illustrating for children. In search of the core of life, she aims to cross boundaries freely. In short, she seeks to create art. The same goes for poet and visual artist Ted van Lieshout. When he won the Woutertje Pieterse Prize in 2012 for *Driedelig Paard* (Three-Part Horse) – an intriguing and unique combination of word, image and form, and a highlight in his oeuvre, for which he was also awarded the Theo Thijssen Prize in 2009 – he said frankly in an interview that for him every book had to be a work of art.

Beautiful border traffic

Remarkably enough, works of art in the form of children's books have been steadily gaining ground in recent years. Flemish writers Peter Verhelst and Carll Cneut, for example, have received a great deal of praise for their brilliant picture book *Het geheim van de keel van de nachtegaal* (The Secret of the Nightingale's Throat, 2009). This book is an altogether enchanting retelling of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Nightingale* (1843), in which adult writer Verhelst and master illustrator Cneut follow one another perfectly in movement and rhythm, as if performing an intricate dance, to create a new story with unprecedented panoramas. Similarly, spurred on by the drive to experiment, Bette Westera (the new Annie M.G. Schmidt of the Low Countries) and Sylvia Weve (originally a graphic designer) have pushed one another to great artistic heights in recent years. In two poetry collections, *Aan de kant, ik ben je oma niet!* (Scram! I'm Not Your Gran! 2012) – which can best be described as 'a paper care home' demonstrating that the elderly were once young too – and the taboo-breaking, highly praised collection *Dood-Gewoon* (Dead Normal, 2014), they show how skill and imagination result in extremely original, creative books, in which ethics and aesthetics, poignancy and humour go hand in hand with bold social criticism. A recent non-fiction highlight and delight for the eyes is *Het Raadsel van alles dat leeft* (The Mystery of Life, 2013), a surprisingly imaginative and at the same time clear representation of the story of evolution by Jan-Paul Schutten and new Dutch illustration talent Floor Rieder. It is, by the way, remarkable and delightful to note that this subgenre of children's literature has reached full maturity as a literary art form in recent years and that so many books are succeeding in making the invisible visible to children through a subtle interplay of fact, image and imagination.

Certainly the publishers of these eye-catching books deserve our compliments. Who dares stick their neck out these days, when we all know times are tough for the book industry? Who still dares to put children's poetry onto the market? Or books with cloth spines, ribbon bookmarks and gilt edging? Those who do are few and far between. Unfortunately. As the publishers who have taken the risk over the last decade are just the ones who have shown that there clearly is a market for less obvious books, and that creativity, quirkiness and quality still sell in our digitalised age. You can be sure that without a publisher such as De Eenhoorn, the Flemish art of illustration would never have grown to become the best of what is currently made in the genre. In her book *Buiten de lijntjes gekleurd* (Colouring Outside the Lines, 2006) children's literature expert and Eenhoorn publisher Marita Vermeulen discusses as many as twenty-one



Klaas Verplancke in *Confidencies aan een ezelsoor* (Confidences with a Donkey's Ear)
by Frank Adam (Davidsfonds, 2005)

talents who are exploring the fascinating boundary between illustration and autonomous art, with references to art history's old masters. The naïve approach is represented among others by Kristien Aertssen, Guido Van Genechten and Ingrid Godon, whose portrait book *Ik denk* (I Think, 2014) with texts by Toon Tellegen, sets her unexpectedly among the ranks of pure autonomous artists. The style of Klaas Verplancke seems inspired by the Flemish primitives and Hieronymus Bosch. While Tom Schamp's wonderful 'look and find' books about Otto contain many a nod to surrealism.

The innocent child is dead

Boundlessness: that is what the new twenty-first century producers of children's books have in common. In the knowledge that everything and everyone is constantly connected these days, they see the entire world as their playground. And why not? Why would you want to build walls? It's pointless. It does not make the world any safer. Children race down the electronic highway even faster than adults, with no need for a driver's licence. They go wherever they want to go. They stop wherever they want to stop. And they share whatever they want to share, with friend and foe alike. The innocent child no longer exists. That myth has been thoroughly debunked. The adult world has definitively permeated the world of children, and with it children's books.



Gerda Dendooven in *De gans en zijn broer* (The Goose and His Brother)
by Bart Moeyaert and Gerda Dendooven (Querido, 2014)



Kristien Aertssen in *Tikken tegen de maan*
(Tapping Against the Moon)
(Ons Erfdeel vzw, 2010)

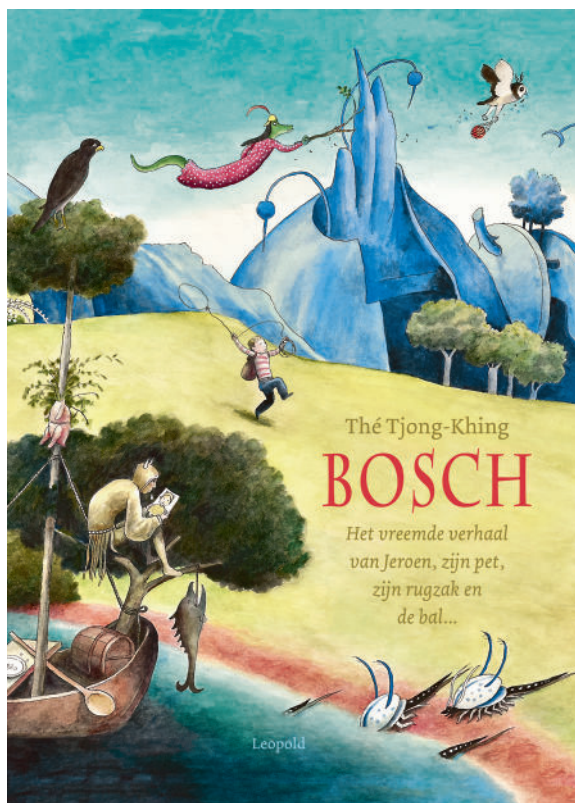
For example, Marjolijn Hof writes masterful stories of children confronted with complicated adult issues they can barely influence. What can you do, for instance, if you are ten years old and fear for your father's fate when he is sent to a dangerous warzone as an army doctor, as happens to Kiek, the girl in Hof's much praised debut *Een kleine kans* (Small Chance, 2006)? Wait until he returns safely? Or give fate a helping hand, perhaps against your better judgement?

The violence of war, domestic suffering, incest, bullying resulting in death, a teenager's planned suicide, homosexuality: there is no subject nowadays that is not addressed in books for children and teenagers. The writers are ruthless, but stylistically they are strong, with a powerful view of the child's psyche.

The most uncompromising writer is Floortje Zwigtmán, who first caused a furore with the multifaceted, wide-ranging *Wolfsroedel* (Wolfpack, 2002), followed by her *Green Flower Trilogy* (2005-2010), three weighty tomes about the homosexual seventeen-year-old Adrian Mayfield who has to survive in the Victorian London of Oscar Wilde, the most famous homosexual figure in literature, and who finds himself in an existential battle on the edge of the abyss. Violence and bloodlust in *Wolfsroedel*, blackmail, explicit gay sex scenes and prostitution in the trilogy. Zwigtmán is ruthless. The unpleasant side of existence need not be corrected in her view, just because it is a book for children or young people. In several interviews she emphasises that she is allergic to people who still think children and young people live in 'a lovely world' in which everything works out fine in the end, with a moral to the story.

Heaven or hell or both

The same boundless development can be observed in the children's novels on the First and Second World Wars, which continue to appear in large numbers. These novels hinge less on their historical plot, than on the inner growth of the young protagonists and the impossible dilemmas of life and death, loyalty and betrayal, with which they are confronted. A prime example is *Allemaal willen we de hemel* (We All Want Heaven, 2008). In this sweeping, cleverly constructed narrative, set against the background of the Second World War, Els Beerten unfolds the life stories of four Flemish youngsters who, balancing on the thin line between good and evil, come to the painful conclusion that the heaven which everyone on earth longs for is in fact extremely ugly. And there are more of these strong psychological war stories about human shortcomings and human suffering. Equally impressive is *De Hondeneters* (The Dog Eaters, 2009), which is set during the First World War. Here Marita de Sterck paints a picture of the Flemish countryside in wartime through the eyes of an epileptic young man, revealing bitter poverty, deep hunger and sordid betrayal turning people into animals. Less grim but just as painful to read is *Bazaar* (2011), Martha Heesen's intriguing Brabant family history drawn over two world wars, dealing with waiting and hoping against all the odds, where 'someday' turns into 'never'. And anyone who believes that the story of the Second World War has been told and every war novel written, has not yet come across *De hemel van*





Joke van Leeuwen in *Waarom een buitenboordmotor eenzaam is*
(Why an Outboard Motor Is Lonely) (Ons Erfdeel vzw, 2015)

Translated by Anna Asbury

Heivisj (Heivisj's Heaven, 2010), by Benny Lindelauf. A closely composed novel about choosing and not choosing and losing all the same, rich in storylines, characters and powerful images, sparkling dialogue, humour and tragedy: in the Netherlands, the war claimed the highest percentage of Jewish victims in Sittard (Limburg). 'On a rainy afternoon I had to go to Heaven,' Lindelauf's opening sentence states hopefully. In the end, only one percent survived hell. *De hemel van Heivisj* may be the most complete children's novel of the past ten years, showing that children's literature has finally become adult.

Alive and kicking

However the Low Countries' battle for children's literature develops, and however sombre some old guard critics may be about the future of the artistic children's book, evidently each decade brings enough literally and figuratively magnificent, authentic, high quality books to prove that the genre is still alive and kicking. That freethinkers are more powerful than those who would draw boundaries. That you cannot – and never will – dam the flow of creativity. That 'the space of life in its entirety' is infinite and unpredictable. For everyone. And that all of us – children and adults alike – need our boundless imagination and the stories which spring from it in the twenty-first century, in order to stand up to the uncertainties of fate and live our lives freely and fearlessly with our gaze trained on the horizon. ■