

Farewell to the Serial

About Comic Strips and Graphic Novels

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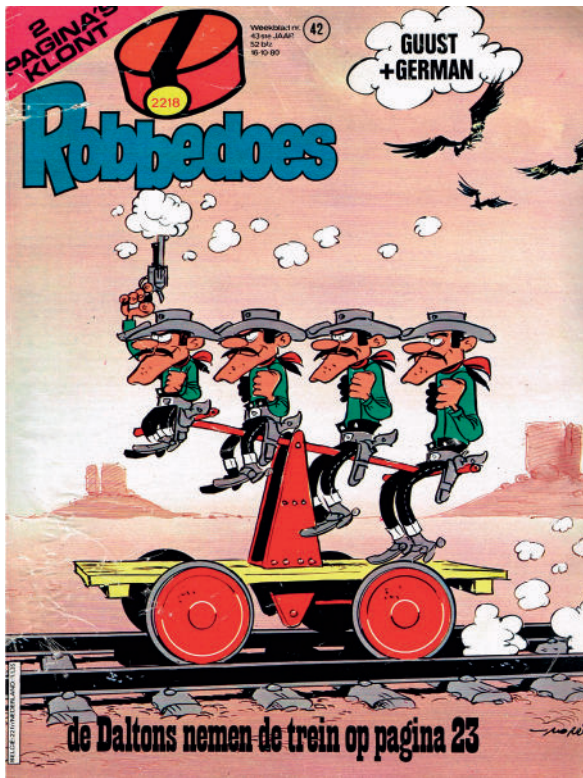
[TOON HORSTEN]

Comic strips first appeared in Dutch-language newspapers and magazines in the run-up to the Second World War, although these were still chiefly (with a few notable exceptions) American imports. Editorial boards found that translations of *Mickey Mouse* or *Flash Gordon* were considerably cheaper than new, commissioned works. Only when German troops occupied Belgium and the Netherlands, and the supply of American comics was cut off, were they forced to look for alternatives. Many illustrators grasped the opportunity to start their own series. For instance, the classic Dutch comic strip *Tom Poes / Tom Puss*, illustrated and written by Marten Toonder, made its debut on the pages of the Dutch daily newspaper *De Telegraaf* in 1941.

Domestic comic strip production received a second boost immediately following the war. The populace was hungry for information, and newspaper sales skyrocketed. Most papers also wanted to include a serial of some sort, and the comic strip proved to be the ideal formula, as it was hugely accessible and popular among all age groups. The strips were, by and large, adventure stories laden with humour, drawn mainly in a caricatural style, with realistic elements reserved for the backdrop. *Suske en Wiske* (known in Great Britain as *Spike and Suzy* and in America as *Willy and Wanda*), conceived by the Flemish cartoonist Willy Vandersteen and introduced in 1945, was immensely popular from the outset. After completing several stories, the author decided to switch newspapers, taking some 20,000 subscribers with him. The newspaper he left behind, seeking to fill the gap, invited Marc Sleen to introduce a new series. This became *Nero*, the second Flemish post-war comic strip series that became very popular.

Newspaper comics in the Netherlands differed fundamentally from those in Flanders. In the Netherlands they took on the form of a single strip containing three or four panels, with captions underneath describing the action. Flemish dailies resolutely opted for the two-strip format with speech balloons. Dutch comics were thus far more text-oriented than their Flemish counterparts. Marten Toonder is still regarded as an influential man of letters: he invented countless expressions that have made their way into everyday language. Not coincidentally, well-known authors such as the immensely popular Godfried Bomans and C. Buddingh' also wrote comic strips.





Lucky Luke by Morris on the cover of Robbedoes Magazine

Many newspaper strips were later collected into magazine format albums, giving the stories a second life. In Flanders, these albums were often issued by the publisher that produced the newspaper where the comics first appeared, and sales quickly reached astronomical heights. Not so, however, in the Netherlands. Marten Toonder's bookshop sales only truly took off after they were brought out by the literary publisher De Bezige Bij.

Eppo

There were also youth-oriented comic magazines. In Flanders, translations of the French weekly magazines *Tintin* and *Spirou* (in Dutch, *Kuifje* and *Robbedoes*) were the most popular. *Kuifje* also hired Flemish illustrators, including Willy Vandersteen and Bob de Moor, who would serve as Hergé's (the creator of *Tintin*) right-hand man for thirty-five years. The best-known Flemish *Robbedoes* associate was Morris (Maurice De Bevere), whose 'Lucky Luke' would become an international sensation. Later, in the 1980s, the weekly magazine *Robbedoes* would play a key role in the growth of the Flemish and Dutch comic strip. Marc Legendre (*Biebel*), Luc Cromheecke (*Tom Carbon*) and Gerrit de Jager (*Roel en zijn Beestenboel*) were among the magazine's contributors.

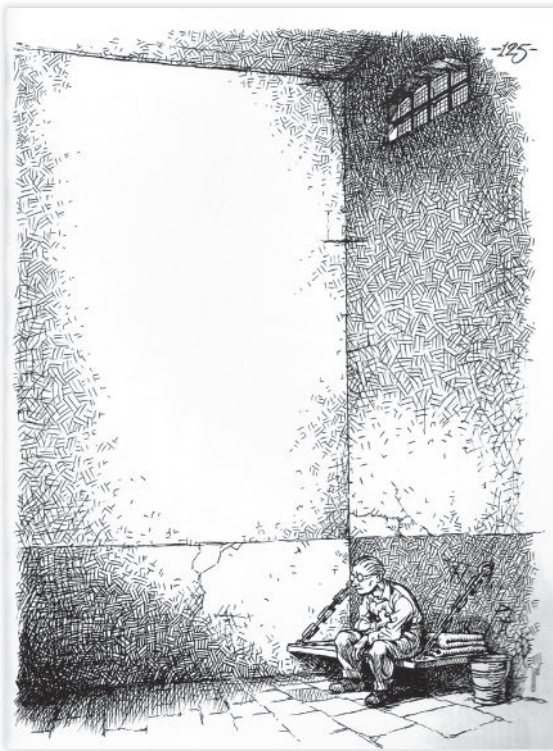
In the Netherlands, *Donald Duck* became one of the country's most popular weekly comic books. Much of its content consisted of translations, but today it also includes original Dutch work. Another important comic strip weekly

that frequently changed both its name and logo was known, in its most familiar guises, as *Pep* and *Eppo*. The magazine published many French comics in translation, but it was also instrumental in the emergence of a specifically Dutch comic strip scene. Illustrators like Peter de Smet, Henk Kuijpers, Dick Matena, Martin Lodewijk, Daan Jippes, Hanco Kolk and Peter de Wit made a name for themselves with their contributions. Additionally, popular news journals and even women's magazines included comic strips: the news weekly *Nieuwe Revue* brought Gerrit de Jager fame with his *De familie Doorzon*, and the women's weekly *Libelle* treated its readers to a full-page *Jan, Jans en de kinderen / Jack, Jacky and the Juniors* by Jan Kruis.

Today many comic strips produced in Flanders and the Netherlands still adhere to the traditional newspaper or magazine format. In Flanders these are known as 'family comics', as they appeal to young and old alike. They still boast impressive sales: *De Kiekeboes* by the cartoonist Merho is good for some half a million albums annually, closely followed by *FC De Kampioenen* by Hec Leemans, a spin-off of a popular television series. Even *Suske en Wiske* – some twenty-five years after its creator Willy Vandersteen's death – sees four new albums per year. *Suske en Wiske* is still the only classic Flemish comic to get a foot in the door in Holland, with sales in Dutch-language regions reaching 440,000 copies per title in the 1990s. Since then the numbers have dropped sharply, in part because the newspaper serialisations have largely been discontinued. And the publications where it does still appear have a much reduced impact on overall sales of the albums. Since *De Kiekeboes* in the late 1970s, no Flemish comic strips aimed at the general public have managed to break



Cover of *Eppo* Magazine by Hanco Kolk



Kraut by Peter Pontiac

through via newspapers alone. The ‘serial’ aspect has consequently become less important over the past three decades. Likewise, family comics are today produced mainly with album publication in mind, which in turn opens new doors and offers new possibilities, as the violent but popular *Suske and Wiske* spin-off *Amoras* by Charel Cambré and Marc Legendre proves.

What does continue to thrive in newspapers, especially those in the Netherlands, is the daily ‘gag strip’: single-strip jokes, comparable to the internationally-syndicated *Peanuts* or *Calvin and Hobbes*. Peter de Wit draws *Sigmund* and joins up with Hanco Kolk for *Single*, Mark Retera pushes the boundaries of goofiness with *Dirk Jan*, Gerrit de Jager’s *Zusje* is a longtime favourite, and Aimée de Jongh contributes *Snippers* to the free commuter daily *Metro*. These are just a few examples. Humorous Flemish comics appear for the most part in weeklies, usually with a single full-page comic per week – *Boerke* by Pieter De Poortere, *Esther Verkest* by Kim Duchateau, and *Kinky & Cosy* by Nix – while alternative cartoonists Brecht Vandenbroucke and Jerom Snelders tend to follow in the absurdist footsteps of Kamagurka and Herr Seele, who made it onto the pages of Art Spiegelman’s international underground magazine *Raw* in the 1980s.



Columns

Another observation: many illustrators explore the overlap between political cartoon, comic strip and editorial column. Erik Meynen, for instance, provides a political current events comic strip for *Het Laatste Nieuws*, Belgium’s most



The Jewish Brigade
by Marvano

read daily newspaper, depicting the Belgian politicians as cartoon characters. And for the Dutch daily newspaper *Trouw* and the monthly news magazine *Vrij Nederland*, Pieter Geenen produces madcap comics that lean toward the column or editorial.

Illustrators of realistic comic strips have always faced an uphill battle, as these are labour intensive and the market is limited. Many illustrators therefore set their sights abroad. Some specifically turned, in the 1980s and '90s, to the French market. The Dutch illustrator Paul Teng, for instance, worked at the French comics monthly *A Suivre*, and in 2009 he published a comic strip based on a scenario by the Brussels-born top scenarist Jean Van Hamme (*Thorgal*, *XIII* and *Largo Winch*). Van Hamme also wrote scenarios for Griffio, the pseudonym of the illustrator Werner Goelen, who in the early 1970s was part of the

Antwerp underground collective Ercola but later chose for a career with the large French publishers. Since then he has worked with numerous scenarists, from Jean Van Hamme to Stephen Desberg and Jean Dufaux, all heavyweights in the French comic strip market.

Another fascinating oeuvre is that of Marvano. He was the editor of *Kuifje* in the early 1980s before focusing on his own career as an illustrator. At first he produced mainly science fiction (*De eeuwige oorlog / The Forever War*, *Dallas Barr*), but more recently he has turned to historical trilogies (*Berlin*, *Grand Prix*, *The Jewish Brigade*). Marvano's work can be considered a turning point in the evolution of the comic strip in the Low Countries over the past few decades. It is still in the tradition of the classic adventure comic of the French-Belgian school, but it also differs from it. Marvano's stories lack 'heroes' as they are generally portrayed in the Adventure comics. Good and evil do not exist; nothing is cut-and-dried. He allows himself a great degree of freedom, and expects his (adult) readers to follow his lead.

Younger Flemish and Dutch cartoonists have embraced that freedom in the past fifteen years. Series with recurring characters have taken a back seat to the graphic novel, nowadays usually a self-contained story of unspecified length using a wide variety of techniques. And, not unimportantly, they are intended primarily for adults. On the international stage, Marjane Satrapi (*Persepolis*) and in particular Art Spiegelman (*Maus*) have set the tone.

Tante Leny

Alternative or literary comics are, of course, hardly new: in the 1970s some twenty issues of the magazine *Tante Leny presenteert!/Aunt Leny presents!* appeared in the Netherlands, and included work by Joost Swarte, Marc Smeets, Aart Clerckx and later Peter Pontiac. In Flanders, a few issues of *Spruit* by the Antwerp-based collective Ercola appeared during that same period. But the abundance of illustrators outside the mainstream is a recent development, and for them the serial comic strip is dead and buried.

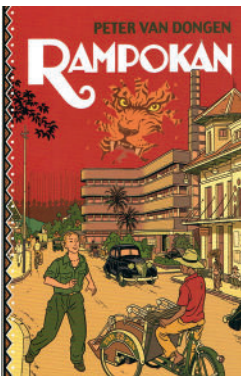
Currently popular Flemish illustrators include Judith Vanistendael (*Toen David zijn stem verloor/When David Lost His Voice*), Brecht Evens (*Panther, Ergens waar je niet wil zijn/The Wrong Place*), Randall.C (*Slaapkoppen/Sleepyheads*) and the imaginative Olivier Schrauwen (*Arsène Schrauwen*). Some have been nominated for an Eisner Award (USA) and for the Best Album prize at the Angoulême International Comics Festival. Willy Linthout, the author of the long-running and folksy 'Urbanus' comic (based on the eponymous singer and comedian, popular in Flanders) has many nominations to his name, and achieved worldwide recognition with *Jaren van de olifant*, a graphic novel drawn entirely in pencil in which he attempts to come to terms with his son's suicide.

Other illustrators making local and international headway with highly diverse projects include Stedho, Conz, Ken Broeders, Steve Michiels, Philip Paquet, Simon Spruyt, Wauter Mannaert, Jeroen Janssen, Joris Vermassen, Ephameron, Serge Baeken, Ivan Adriaensens, Michael Olbrechts, Wide Vercnocke and Ben Gijsemans. Gijsemans's *Hubert* was sold to leading British and French comics publishers the very day it was released.

It is worth noting the current underrepresentation of women. But here, too,



Sleepyheads
by Randall Casaer



change is in the air. Recent graduates of Sint-Lukas in Brussels (part of LUCA School of Arts) include Charlotte Dumortier, Inne Haine, Shamisa Debroey, and Delphine Frantzen, all of whom have published promising graphic novels. The academy's comic strip faculty – Judith Vanistendael, Ephameron and Ilah (who creates tranches de vie for several newspapers) – is, incidentally, entirely female.

In the Netherlands, Peter Pontiac's *Kraut*, a graphic novel dealing with his father's wartime past, indicates a thematic shift. The illustrated autobiography is a form embraced by Jean-Marc Van Tol (*Opkomst en ondergang van Fokke en Sukke*), Gerrit de Jager (*Door zonder familie*), Michiel van de Pol (*Terug naar Johan*), Gerard Leevers (*Gleevers dagboek*), Barbara Stok and Maaïke Hartjes. Others who have garnered attention as author-illustrators of graphic novels include Guido Van Driel (*Om mekaar in Dokkum*), Peter Van Dongen (*Rampokan*), Floor de Goede (*Dansen op de vulkaan / Dancing on the Volcano*), Mark Hendriks (*Tibet*), Aimée de Jongh (*De terugkeer van De wespendiff*), and Hanco Kolk, whose at times awe-inspiring Meccano is his artistic masterpiece. Tim Enthoven's prizewinning *Binnenskamers / Within Four Walls* is perhaps the most remarkable illustrated book in recent years, as it attempts to bridge an autistic perception of the world with design and styling.

Compared with Flemish counterparts, today's Dutch illustrators are clearly still drawn to literature and the visual arts. In the past fifteen years, Dick Matena has transformed literary classics by Jan Wolkers, Willem Elsschot and Gerard Reve (retaining the complete text!), Milan Hulsing successfully adapted *De Aanslag / The Assault* by Harry Mulisch, and Nanne Meulendijks produced a

graphic novel from Ronald Giphart's *De wake*. Other illustrators have created 'graphic biographies': *Rembrandt* by Typex, *Vincent Van Gogh* by Barbara Stok plus *Jheronimus* by Marcel Ruijters.



Amoras is a spin off, aiming at an adult audience,
of *Spike and Suzy/Willy and Wanda*



The Mad Maiden by Joris Vermassen
(notice the eponymous sculpture by Rik Wouters)



Short Stories by H.P. Lovecraft
made into strips by Eric Kriek

Schooling

The paradigm shift from serials to freer, more artistic work is largely due to changes in the comic strip market, but also to the training available to illustrators today. In the old days, an aspiring cartoonist had to put in his or her time as an apprentice in the studio of an old hand, and pick up the tricks of the trade there. No other schooling was to be had. At present, however, arts academies in Brussels, Ghent and Zwolle offer distinct studies in comics, while elsewhere departments of animation, design and graphic design also devote attention to the graphic novel. The illustrators' artistic vision and development is now considered far more important than market norms.

Thanks in part to these developments, the artistic diversity of comic strips in the Low Countries is greater than ever. Yet it is becoming increasingly difficult to earn a living wage. There is still a market for illustrators. But for the makers of comic strips, the possibilities are few and far between. Newspapers and magazines have become limited as a platform, and album production is feeling the squeeze as well. Audiences are shrinking (the entertainment market being constantly in flux) and the deluge of titles means albums are published in ever-smaller editions. According to statistics provided by Stripspecialzaak.be, in

2014 some 1270 Dutch-language albums were published. Most of them were translations, but Flemish and Dutch illustrators nonetheless have to compete with these titles in the marketplace. The average edition of albums has been steadily declining for years. Most graphic novels appear in printings of between 500 and 1000 copies, and within a matter of weeks they have to make way for the next batch of new titles. And the shift to a digital income-generating model has yet to take place.

Governments in both Flanders and the Netherlands support comic strip authors as well as publishers of graphic novels through their respective literature funds. A more-than-welcome helping hand, but in order for the medium to remain viable, its makers must creatively confront the genre's challenges, problems and possibilities. Subsidies alone will not keep the ship afloat. ■



Translated by Jonathan Reeder

Kinky & Cosy by Nix