



Black Pudding and Cheese?

'Read it: it doesn't say what it says.'

'In the soaring, soberly furnished hidden church (1639) of the Mennonite congregation on the Singel in Amsterdam a book lies open on the pulpit. Pages flutter as if playfully caught up by the wind to be suspended frozen in the air. Time seems to stand still.'

You'll find this quote on Lynne Leegte's website, beneath the first of the three works comprising the project titled *Flight*, which you can see opposite. The book lying open can only be the Dutch Authorized Bible, the cornerstone of the culture of words in the young Republic of the seventeenth century. In the North people read God's Word and even interpreted it; the Word emancipated them. In the Catholic South the Book usually remained closed; people tiptoed around it.

Timeo hominem unius libri is an ambiguous warning. Beware those who swear by one book. Or is it just the opposite? A person with a thorough knowledge of one book, one author is the one to fear because of the depth of his knowledge.

In 1993 Dutch literature was, for the first time, the guest of honour at the *Frankfurter Buchmesse*, the biggest book fair in the world. This year it will again be the guest of honour, which is unique. It is not a nation state but a language that links this literature, written in Flanders, the Netherlands and the 'warmer parts of the kingdom' such as Suriname and the Antilles.

Blessed are a language that is spoken and a literature that is written in different countries. They can only be enriched by it.

There are many clichés doing the rounds about the different characteristics of Dutch language and literature in the North and the South. Apparently minimalism is prized in the North. Writing there is sober and accurate. In the South, on the other hand, extravagance - linguistic diversity and impurity, mannerism - is said to be rife. The critic Kees Fens once used the metaphor of black pudding and cheese to characterise the literature of Flanders and the Netherlands.

But the truth is more nuanced.

In five substantial essays in this yearbook we take stock of the most important literary genres in the Low Countries today: poetry, prose, essays and non-fiction, children's and young adult literature, the art of illustration, comics and graphic novels.

We sing the praises of language, the raw material of all the writers who use it. We give a platform to translators, the ultimate carriers, for they journey back and forth not only between languages but between cultures. What a paradox that the more successful their work, the more they disappear behind the text, the more we forget them. After all, as Umberto Eco once remarked, the language of Europe is translation.

To round it all off we suggest a canon, a clear choice of the books that matter in Dutch literature, from an amorous eleventh-century lament to Harry Mulisch and Hugo Claus. It is a canon that is intended as an invitation not as an imposition. A canon is, after all, always the conversation, the discussion about the canon.

In this book you will also find illustrations of people reading, in all forms, attitudes and formats, caught in all sorts of places. Those who read withdraw, absorbed into a parallel universe, to emerge again changed.

Finally, I am delighted to announce that at the opening of the 68th *Frankfurter Buchmesse* on 19 October 2016 we shall make all the articles about Dutch literature, the oeuvre sections, book reviews and translations of prose fragments and poetry that have appeared in the 23 editions of *The Low Countries* yearbook available via open access for interested readers [see www.onserfdeel.be/en].

Tolle et lege. Take and read. For this is a treasure trove.