

Characters in Search of an Author

Maria Stahlie's Engagement

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[K E E S ' T H A R T]

“Hey, you there!”

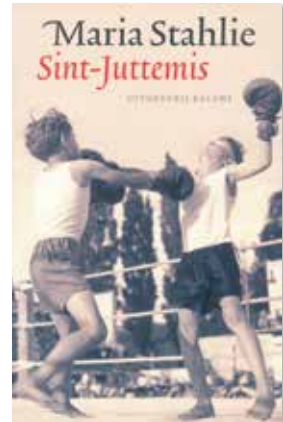
The first sentence of the extremely witty and poignant story *Galeislaven* (Galley Slaves) from the 2004 collection of the same name by Maria Stahlie (the pseudonym of Madelien Tolhuisen, 1955). It continues as follows: ‘Even before I opened my eyes I knew who was rousing me so abruptly from my afternoon nap. I also realised immediately that she had not come alone.’ That first-person narrator is the writer Maria Stahlie, who here features in one of her own stories. She is just having a nice snooze and her characters come and shake her awake. To work, you! Incidentally you can also interpret this cry as an appeal from Stahlie to the reader, not only of this story, but of her whole work. Hey, you there, the reader of this book, pay attention, wake up, I’ve got something to tell you.

Formulating dreams

So it is no accident that this exhortation forms the first sentence of Stahlie’s bulky Collected Stories. The character Maud Labeur (note the meaning of the name: labeur = hard graft) addresses her writer. Hey, Stahlie, get to work. ‘Having a snooze in the middle of the day then... what about us then?’ That Maud has a right to speak, as the Stahlie-watcher knows; she occurs in many novels and stories. For example as a young, hypochondriac woman in *De Sterfzonde* (The Deadly Sin, 1991), as a little harridan in the story ‘Understanding Thought’ and as a woman obsessively in love in *Het beast met de twee ruggen* (The Beast with Two Backs, 1994). In ‘Galley Slaves’ she is accompanied by other Stahlie characters, at the bedside: Maud as a ten-year-old girl, Miriam, her twin sister Nadine, Lucien, plus the grown-up Maud, who has just woken the writer with a cry. They want to get back to work, be characters again, where are the stories, they want to be involved again. And then there follows a new subtle witty aside: “And I want to be called Debbie,” said little Maud. She looked at me with open aggression. “She’s already called Maud Labeur...” She nodded towards her forty-year-old namesake.’



Maria Stahlie
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Characters in search of a story, precisely when the writer is having a nice nap. The nice thing about this scene is that the 'I', the writer Maria Stahlie, if you read back carefully, was not sleeping at all, she saw the characters before she opened her eyes. Her novel characters were already with her, she was dreaming of them. They appeared to her as if in a dream. In this ambiguous scene, Stahlie formulates a starting point for her literary agenda: reality is a dream in which many worlds may appear to you and which you as a writer can flesh out as you see fit. All you need is a bunch of characters. And so she has created again and again in her expanding oeuvre characters who want to set out into the world and fathom it. In the hope of being able to change, and perhaps even to save, themselves and others. The work of this extremely ingenious writer consists in formulating these 'dreams'. What else is literature but a dream about reality? In her novels she introduces her characters into a world that at first sight slightly resembles ours, she always gives that world a realistic setting, and then brings that setting into sharp focus. She charges it with electricity, might be a better way of putting it. And then it all begins.

Further on in this basic story the 'I' (that is, Stahlie) states that she wants to transport her characters step by step from their realistic world, not to reality but 'to regions where mythical forces define reality, to regions where excessive behaviour is a necessity.' Then she writes this: '(...) Don't you understand that I do that so that all of us, you, the reader and I... can wind up in the same dream! What could be more intimate, radical, more far-reaching than sharing a dream?' This is her writing programme, a programme that she has been presenting to us since 1987 in fifteen novels and story collections.

You must change your life

For that matter, the characters make all kinds of demands on their writer: they do not want to strive for fine and noble goals, they want anarchy, they don't mind being the victim of incest, or an SS officer, if need be they will accept some autobiographical role, provided the aim is not to make the world a better place. Here too Stahlie is formulating an aspect of her view of literature. She does not want to become engaged with what happens to be in fashion, no political engagement then. She wants disruptions, experiences, enchantments, transformations, the wide ocean of literature. Only then will she be better able to plumb human desire. And that is the crux of her work. In the novel *Egidius* (2014) it is expressed as follows: '[...] painters in the Golden Age were convinced in every fibre of their being that there was no better chance of penetrating the fire hidden in the human spirit than through a composition produced by the fire itself.' That is, getting closer to the fire via a story, a composition, via literature. In the story *Stoomcursus* (Crash Course) it is put thus: 'As if literary problems were not made of flesh and blood, as if a composition could not be flesh and blood! Oh, to make a composition, a rich and full and playful plot that is impossible to unravel.' In an interview she states that 'every passion has its origin in the imagination. Love, rage... it is no more and no less than what a person gets into their head.' And what a person gets into their head constitutes Stahlie's work as a novelist.

The first sentences of her novels and stories are always striking, she immediately focuses her 'dreamed' worlds with challenging introductions. In this way, like a fisherman, she draws the reader into her (narrative) net:

- 'Merciless physicians make merciless wounds.'
Het beest met de twee ruggen (The Beast with Two Backs, 1994)
- 'Downstairs in the stone hallway the telephone started ringing for the second time within half an hour.'
Sint-Juttemis (Saint Never, 2005)
- 'It was because of the flame that counting down the days had been not only solemn but also exciting.'
Egidius (2014)
- "'Françoise, I beg you: come back!'"
Boogschutters (Archers, 2008)
- 'Everything comes to an end, including living in the place where you were born.' The story *Verstand van denken* (Understanding Thought) from the collection *Verleden hemel toekomst* (Past Heaven Future, 1998)
- 'Here's hoping for the best: after all, the story has to begin somewhere. Johan has just gone to the kitchen to pour us a glass of orange juice.'
The story *Van alle verhalen op aarde* (Of All the Stories on Earth) from the collection *In de geest van de Monadini's* (In the Spirit of the Monadinis, 1989)

Of course this is a classic writer's trick: involving the reader in the story with a bang, but Stahlie gives it a twist of her own, she takes us, readers, out of our everyday mode ("Hey, you there") and promises us a new world, one that is ready to explode.

'It was on the third morning after I had been pulled out of the path of an approaching bus by an unknown woman, that I looked in the mirror and officially established that I was not myself.'

The story *Uit de best denkbare wereld* (The Best Conceivable World) from the collection *Zondagskinderen* (Sunday's Children, 1999)

Note particularly here the witty compelling tone that characterises all her writing. In this way she gets us where she wants us: in a world where the characters are propelled by rampant ambitions, by ardent longings, by half-magic dreams, by involvement, by attempted rescues of themselves and others, by unlimited astonishment and curiosity and mainly by constant attempts to change oneself. All her sentences, constructions and 'full and playful and inextricable plots' are focused on this. Something must happen, and quickly. Stahlie's engagement is characterised by a desire for transformation. In 2011, Peter Sloterdijk wrote a particularly penetrating book under the title *You Must Change Your Life*, which can serve as a background model for Stahlie's original oeuvre. All the main characters in her work want to change their life, preferably through interminable and constant rationalisations about it. What went wrong and what can be improved? What should I do? Occasionally by acting energetically, to the point of murderousness. Everything always has to change in the lives in her work. Sitting still is not an option, come on, come on, do something. Hey, you there. In *Honderd deuren* (A Hundred Doors) she has one of her heroes formulate it yet again:

'Every human being must work out for themselves if they must go in search of that one door. Very occasionally someone walks into it by accident. Once eye to eye with the hundredth door one great question still remains: can you go through it or must you leave it closed for ever.'

The characters come invariably from the upper middle class, they have no money worries, they are not mentally disturbed, do not suffer from illnesses or self-pity, they are white, hetero, they are art connoisseurs, academics, adolescents, landlords, schoolchildren, trainee doctors, high-school pupils, or simply wives. They are as 'normal' as can be and live a more or less domestic life. Subsequently she exposes all her characters, who are like test subjects, to big problems and starts gnawing away at their normality, until everything collapses. In inner monologues, letters, diaries, or fiery reports, they give an account of this. Stahlie's work relies on digressions and manipulative language. She lets her characters rationalise to their heart's content, lets them contradict themselves, dig holes for themselves, be incredible, talk nonsense and in any case never resign themselves to the unchangeable and unavoidable. She can't stand quests for vanished treasures, stories of misery from petits-bourgeois who are tormenting each other, existential problems of gloomy artists, or sob stories about failed marriages, racism and discrimination. Those are for fashionable writers who want to get on *The World Goes On* (about the most popular show on Dutch television). There is always an oddly optimistic tone implicit in her work, even when drama approaches or is irrevocable. As a reader, you feel you are on an emotional roller-coaster. A striking feature is the regularly recurring anecdote about two characters who force each other to choose. What

would you prefer to do if you commit suicide? Hang yourself or jump off the bridge? 'You must choose, you must... you must.' What would you prefer to be: an alcoholic, or a junkie? 'You must choose, you *must..* you *must.*' In *Sint-Juttemis* (Saint Never), an absolute high point in her work, she puts it as follows: 'You had to leave all your certainties behind you, give up all control and plunge blindly into the inhospitable, hostile area.'

Pure urge to write

In her case all this is written in a bright, hurriedly advancing, electrifying, often witty and laconic style, which is unique in the Dutch language area. A tone that says: we are going ahead and won't let ourselves be ground down. Complete with digressions, details and odd associations. Sometimes her sentences meander on and on along the deep valleys and high summits of rationalisation, at other times she writes reportage-like accounts of colourful experiences that have sprung only from the writer's imagination. As in *De lijfarts* (The Personal Physician, 2004):

'I redirected my eyes towards the grass, towards the people, and it struck me that the park had a lot to offer in inclement weather and wind, snowed on, covered in ice, sodden with rain, under low, ink-black clouds and also beset by the great shadows of high, white clouds, but that neither of those two spectacles was a match for the way the park looked on a sun-drenched, summer Saturday like this: everywhere there were men and women sitting and lying, in groups or alone, on benches or on the grass, reading or just looking around them, sunning themselves or eating, in thin, colourful clothes or partially unclothed and everyone had time off from their work, time off school, and no one had to hurry, not even the inevitable solitary figure who was trying out his bungalow tent, not wanting any surprises when he went on holiday with his family the following week. Among all these sitting and lying people the children ran, played ball, climbed, pestered, yelled and crawled, the two to twelve-year-olds who could never sit still for very long at a time. The difference between this prospect and the prospect I had had two months before from my living quarters at the time in the interior of America, is almost too crazy for words. At that time I had no balcony but two narrow high windows and if I stood on a chair I could look outside, at the bare field where Pig lived in his battered caravan, amid discarded refrigerators, the carcass of a small horse, four burnt-out cars and a growing number of non-identifiable rusting parts.'

Typical Stahlie: full of the urge to write, full of enchantment. Wanting to see everything in an intoxication of writing, wanting to describe everything. She uses a style and a tone that does not shy away from either irony or pathos and often creates magic from the combination of the two. '(...) I was in search of real understanding... had to confront everything... my God, Christophe, my God! I dropped the box containing the incontinence bandage and opened the tail-board' (*Sint-Juttemis*). This is Stahlie's world in a nutshell.

Shall we play about with elastic bands?

She often takes family relationships as the initial setting, quite simply because she and her readers are familiar with them. A woman falls in love with her husband's son from a previous marriage, a woman hears that she originally had a twin brother who died at birth, a woman tries to beat her twin sister at everything, a woman hears that the former boyfriend of her youth, now a famous film star, has been committed to an asylum, a growing boy tries to maintain his high ideals about love and life. She then takes all the time in the world to develop these settings with great precision, she is curious about the motives and backgrounds of her characters and writes about them with great flair and in great detail. Stahlie practises the art of expansive writing: in her work one detail evokes another. She assumes that her readers are as curious as herself. How did her hero(line) come to be as he/she is? She is always on the side of her characters, though she often makes them look before they leap. She sets them down in small, but delicate scenes which regularly set you giggling. All is welcome in her literature, even the children's games her heroes used to play. Take, for example, in *Egidius* the two sisters who, right at the beginning of the novel, are bored. One says to the other: 'Shall we play with elastic bands? It's only raining a bit...' This is graphic writing, you see the room and the girls in front of you, their longing for change. And you want to know more.

She describes at length contemporary morals and habits in such, for us, exotic areas as South Dakota (*De lijfarts / The Personal Physician*), Greece (*Honderd deuren / A Hundred Doors*), or Paris during a heat wave (*Sint-Juttemis / Saint Never*). You begin thinking along with her heroes and talking at them, at least that is always the feeling I have when I read her work. Should you do that, no, you're right, that's not on, yes, that really is the only solution, you've got to do something now, keep your spirits up, don't hesitate, it will all come right. And before you know it, you find those elegant, daft or ingenious ruminations of her heroines (they are almost always women) perfectly normal and you are totally caught up in the stories that tumble over each other. With her one story simply evokes another, she has to tell them all, she has to and she will, otherwise it won't be right. Precisely this magical view of writing, which boils down to desire to map and plumb the world via stories, gives her novels and stories a sphere of great necessity. They *must* be written. For Stahlie writing is an obsession, not a game or a pastime.

Stahlie does not shrink from banal starting points, and in interviews admits that chivalrously. For example, in an interview in the Flemish daily *De Standaard*, she discusses the fairly banal starting point of her novel *Het beest met de twee ruggen* (*The Beast with Two Backs*, 1994): an older woman falls in love with a boy of eighteen. 'The intention was to appropriate the subject, to impose my own questions and images on it, so that it would stimulate my imagination.' In the same interview, and for that matter in others too, she states that what mainly matters to her is the tone of the story. And she creates that tone by having some characters repeatedly return. I already mentioned a few above. But the same themes and situations also crop up. Twins populate many of her stories, voyeurism plays a role, disobedient children, there are often tennis balls in roof gutters, awkward adolescents are involved, parents often keep their distance and excel at not understanding, deceit and misunderstanding

rule, strange rituals are regular features, magic is never far away. With these ingredients, Stahlie writes herself time after time into a world. Sometimes even longer scenes from one novel recur almost literally in another. The end of *Het beest met de twee ruggen* is roughly the same as *Egidius*. An admission of weakness? Big differences of opinion are possible. Stahlie does not usually work with neat endings, she can't be bothered to tie up all the loose ends, that is part of cheap airport literature. The stories and novels simply stop or she gives them a magic twist. For example in *Sint-Juttemis*. There she has Christophe, the film star who finally awakes from his coma, in a brilliant and very satisfying scene, simply fly away.

'We looked outside and saw Christophe flying away – it was more a kind of swimming flying – with arm movements that were very like the butterfly stroke with the occasional breaststroke movement from his legs. We watched him fly up at an angle, past the apartment of the lads across the road and after about fifty metres saw him (his heart was already at a bird's temperature, 42 degrees Celsius) turn westward in a smooth arc. We saw him fly – Liza, Sophia and I – we saw his swimming movements and much more besides... everything at once, interwoven, and yet as clear as glass.'

This is great writing. Note also in this extract the highly realistic details (for example, those 42 degrees Celsius in birds and the exact description of the swimming motion) which merge with the magic cores of her writing. As a writer you must simply want to show everything, 'everything at once, interwoven, and yet as clear as glass.' Like an enchantress.

Translated by Paul Vincent

The lame person saves the blind

The key word to her oeuvre, finally, is saving. This modest writer, who rarely appears in public and does not take part in 'literary life', has thus far created an extremely ambitious programme. She sends her characters into the world time after time to save others or themselves. They sacrifice themselves, they look out for others. To that end, they eschew no means at all. Lies, deceit and murder. Usually they are not capable of seeing that they themselves need saving. In her literature, the lame person tries to save the blind, that is the heart of the matter. In the last instance, Stahlie of course wants to save the world via her characters, although she will probably go on denying this. Nothing more and nothing less, as befits the tradition of romanticism to which Stahlie's work belongs.

“Hey, you there.”

Wake up! Read this work. Be amazed. ■