

Writer in Service to the Underdog

On the Oeuvre of Chris De Stoop

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[T O M A S V A N H E S T E]

'They want us out of here.' Chris de Stoop (1958) committed his brother's exclamation to paper in his book *Dit is mijn hof* (This Is My Farm, 2015). His entire oeuvre can be read as an attempt to give a literary journalistic voice to people for whom society has left no space: farmers like his brother who watch the advance of industry and new nature reserves around them and feel stifled by a forest of rules and regulations; psychiatric patients hidden away in woods and used as guinea pigs for the wildest experiments; illegal immigrants seen as con men and profiteers who should be forcibly deported.

De Stoop continually takes the part of the underdog. In his first book, *Ze zijn zo lief, meneer* (They Are So Sweet, Sir, 1992), that means trafficked women. A quarter of a century after its publication, the book still makes a deep impression, providing insight into the world of gangs operating internationally to recruit women as 'dancers', saddling them with debt for the journey to the west and then forcing them into prostitution and abusing them. After extensive digging and taking on various roles as an undercover journalist, from randy, drunken customer to pimp in search of merchandise, the reporter succeeds in exposing a worldwide network of women traffickers. *Ze zijn zo lief, meneer* contains uncomfortable revelations on the role of police inspectors and officials in the Netherlands and Belgium, who turn a blind eye in exchange for sexual and financial favours. It led to outrage and the appointment of a parliamentary research committee into women trafficking.

His second book, *Haal de was maar binnen* (Just Bring the Laundry In, 1996), is no less cutting. It is an indictment of the way in which illegal immigrants are portrayed and treated in Europe. De Stoop shows how in Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium special patrols, prisons and transport systems are set up to track down and deport illegal immigrants.

Moral blueprint

However disconcerting De Stoop's many stories may be, there is also something formulaic about his style of *J'accuse*. He sees pure injustice, not moral complexity. When the city of Cologne wants to deport a Roma woman because



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she has not responded to an interview invitation she never received, the mayor reacts to the social protest against that decision 'with all the classic arguments of governments in Europe,' De Stoop writes. 'The deportation served as a deterrent to stop the "unrestrained surge" and "abuse of the right to asylum". The false refugees must be removed to protect the genuine ones. If illegal immigrants were not dealt with, it would damage social support for the integration of legal foreigners.'

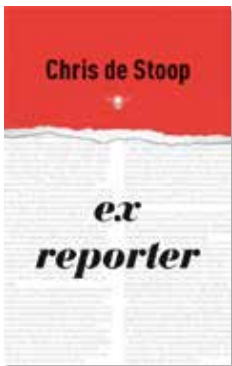
In De Stoop's view the mayor's response is first and foremost an attempt to restore his reputation. The author does not indicate whether he believes those classic arguments might possibly have some basis, resolutely portraying the ministers responsible for asylum policy and those who execute that policy as ogres, not people confronted with a thorny task.

The Antwerp professor in *Dit is mijn hof* receives similar treatment, having done a deal with the devil in De Stoop's eyes to permit expansion of the port in exchange for the creation of new nature reserves, requiring farmers to give way. He speaks 'hurriedly and agitatedly, as if the devil is at his heels' and has a 'nervous laugh'.

Dit is mijn hof is a probing, personal book. The tragedy of De Stoop's brother who took over the farm from his parents and later committed suicide plays out in the background. De Stoop does not say so explicitly, but it is implied that a sense of having to leave played a role in the mixture of factors which led to his brother's act of desperation. In beautiful language De Stoop interweaves his brother's death, the destruction of his birthplace and his mother's decline into a narrative. But moving as the book is, we are left with the impression that the author's personal involvement clouds his view. His rage is focussed on 'the greens'. Previously farmers and nature lovers had joined forces in fighting the expansion of the Port of Antwerp, but in the eyes of De Stoop 'the greens' have sold their souls, suspending their resistance to the advance of the port in exchange for 'nature compensation', new nature reserves which flood or bulldoze old farmland.

De Stoop prefers to overlook the fact that the romantic farmland of his youth has long been lost. In his reply to the question of whether it is a problem that farmland should make way for new nature reserves, the professor he derides touches on a truth: 'Admit it, we are talking about over-fertilised cornfields and flat potato fields, with pesticide-filled canals in between.'

Curiosity and indignation



In his latest work *Ex-reporter* (2016), a collection of his best journalistic reportages, De Stoop says farewell to the field he worked in for decades as a journalist of the biggest Flemish weekly paper *Knack*. He describes the development in journalism which he rejects as follows: 'The media increasingly wanted to surf the waves of public opinion rather than swim against the current, which seemed wrong to me. When we constantly try to please everyone, we become lap dogs rather than guard dogs.'

In the prologue De Stoop also provides some insight into himself. On his journalistic career he writes, 'Indignation could be a motivation, but I am mainly driven by curiosity about human relationships and social processes. Relationships of trust, empathy, a critical reflex as a sixth sense, those were my primary tools.'

De Stoop's work undeniably springs from a combination of curiosity and indignation, but in my view he judges the balance between these forces a little too favourably. Indignation has the upper hand, certainly when he focusses on those in power, but also in his attack on contemporary journalism. Do today's quality newspapers really exhibit less depth and are they less inclined to play the guard dog than they were a few decades ago?

But curiosity wins out in the best of his work, where his viewpoint is not crystal clear but more nuanced, as in *Zij kwamen uit het oosten* (They Came from the East, 2003). In contrast with most of De Stoop's writing, this is a work of fiction. An author who ten years previously had written a book about trafficking of women now tells the story of an Albanian who, after much wandering, ends up

as a sex worker in Antwerp. 'No one enters into dialogue with sex workers,' she says, 'but everyone wants to rescue victims. They are seen as passive, naive, weak creatures who should be protected and even controlled, as children who cannot look after themselves.'

We can also read it as criticism of early De Stoop. The writer does not spare himself. In Antwerp's Schipperskwartier, a brothel owner bitterly accuses him: 'Ten years ago, after that famous book of yours, there was one raid after another.' The sarcasm with which she calls him a 'knight' dents the image of the 'undaunted hero who had infiltrated one of the most dangerous criminal gangs in the world'. Self-doubt sets in. How honest was he really in his journalistic drive to expose the truth? 'Suddenly he saw himself: someone who played the role of a quiet, reliable interlocutor with a soft voice, a loyal look in his eye and an understanding smile,' the writer observes.

Ze kwamen uit het oosten is a hall of mirrors. It is scarcely possible to distinguish fact from fiction, culprit from victim or good from evil. We are left with moral confusion which sets us thinking rather than moral certainties which close down the discussion.

Equally ambiguous is *Vrede zij met u, zuster* (Peace Be With You, Sister, 2010), the story of a young Belgian woman who blows herself up in a failed suicide attack in Iraq. At the same time it is a group portrait of a circle of young people in Brussels who feel attracted to jihad. The writer does not judge, nor does he unfold a sociological theory as to the roots of terrorism. In the stories of these young people a multitude of more or less coincidental experiences might be seen to have nudged them in the direction of this path: psychological factors such as the inability to have children; school failure and frustrated social ambitions; discrimination against Muslims in the labour market; the sectarian character of Salafism; the distressing pain of the population in the Middle East; the self-image of jihadists as idealists fighting an occupation and injustice.



Translated by Anna Asbury

A soft voice, a loyal look in his eye

De Stoop tells their stories as if he is inside their heads. Initially the way these jihadists constantly murmur 'Peace be with you' is jarring. The reader laughs about their medieval belief in evil spirits and is surprised by the disconcerting oversimplification of their worldview. But thanks to De Stoop's great empathy you gradually begin to understand how they see the world. At times you catch yourself almost feeling sorry for those poor wretches who become terrorists.

In *Vrede zij met u, zuster* De Stoop again shows his ability to break through into parallel universes, worlds with which we normally have little contact. When it comes to people with power, sometimes he cannot refrain from judgement. Far stronger and more fascinating is the work in which he explores the perceptions of people for whom society has already decided on its judgement. The great strength of such work shows that his soft voice, the loyal look in his eye and his understanding smile are much more than just the attitude of a skilled journalist: they form the expression of a fertile curiosity as to motivation and an honest empathy for those scrabbling to make a living in this world. ■

An Extract from *Peace Be With You, Sister*

By Chris De Stoop

The Parting

Hurricane Katrina raged across America like a nemesis. Like a biblical flood that engulfed the city of New Orleans and drowned a few thousand poor blacks. And the diabolical Bush, who had used the money intended for the levees for the war in Iraq, could no longer escape his punishment. The flood was the curse of Allah, some brothers in Sint-Joost-ten-Node felt, not without schadenfreude.

In Brussels it was oppressively hot. Dark clouds scudded eastwards over the European capital. Muriel and Issam had loaded up the Mercedes and were ready to leave.

On 1 September they went for the last time to Monceau and Charleroi, where they drew money from the bank. The area was still plagued by high unemployment, but looked noticeably better than five years before, when Charleroi had the reputation of being a hotbed of corruption.

In the renovated mine buildings of Monceau there was now a rehabilitation centre for junkies, delinquents and the unemployed. The slag heap of the Four Domains behind her parents' house, where Muriel had once slid through the coal dust on a sleigh, was now dubbed a paradise for nature lovers. There were guides who led groups to the top at weekends. Look, a rare kind of toad. And what a view over the black land of Charleroi...

The last visit to Muriel's family had once again degenerated into a conflict. She could no longer restore the bonds of the womb. What was not visible and scarcely nameable, what had great significance in her life, she could not share with her parents. Jean and Liliane could not understand that their daughter concerned herself with dead texts and talked of things from fourteen centuries ago as if it were yesterday. Nonsense.

When Issam and Muriel got out of the white Mercedes in the avenue de l'Europe, there were stared at by the inhabitants of the cité as if they were extra-terrestrial beings. He in his white djellaba and prayer cap, she in her black niqab and gloves. Muriel had phoned her mother in advance to say that they would be popping in unexpectedly.

- It's hot today. Aren't you boiling under a burka? Her father asked for a joke.

Jeannine, the neighbour with whom Muriel had played and stayed over with so often as a little girl, was in the living room at that moment. Muriel hugged her and asked how her children and grandchildren were. She took her veil off. Her wavy hair fell a long way down her back.

But when Issam saw Jeannine, he went through the house to the back garden. He stood there stock still. His lips moved as if he were praying.

- He mustn't be with strange women, said Muriel's mother.
- Oh, said Jeannine. Will he stay outside the whole time then?
- If he shakes hands with you he'll have to wash. You're unclean.

When Jeannine left in a huff – she didn't feel at all unclean, on the contrary, she had clean hands – Issam came back in. He sat down and said almost nothing. He read his Koran.

Liliane laid the table for four people. Issam asked again if men and women could eat separately. Jean's first impulse was to throw him out of the house right away, but he controlled himself. When Issam went into the kitchen to eat with Jean, he wanted to say his prayers first. Then he cleaned his plate with his napkin, as if it were dirty or contaminated. Jean got two Jupilers from the fridge and put them provocatively on the table. Issam asked if they could leave the beers. Jean still said nothing. Only when he wanted to watch the news after the meal and Issam took hold of the remote to switch off the TV, did he blow his top.

- If that's how you want it, you can stay in Brussels, he said to his daughter.
- After a flaming row, they left the house.

Her father would not have anything more to do with her. He wouldn't have a fanatic like Issam laying down the law to him in his own home. In his view his daughter was letting herself be brainwashed by that weirdo in his tent dress. He thought the last straw was that he obviously wanted to convert him and his wife too.

Muriel had given her parents two books on the kingdom of the dead. *Before You Are Sorry*, a book in which Harun Yahya, the standard-bearer of the creationists, threatened those who did not quickly renounce their sins with hell and damnation. And *The Journey of the Soul After Death* by her favourite Salafist author Ibn Qayyim, which described the terrors that awaited one in the period between one's death and the Day of Judgement.

She was obviously very preoccupied with dying. In the past she had already told her parents that later as a Muslim she wanted to be buried in Muslim soil, wrapped in a white shroud.

- She's not our daughter Muriel anymore, Jean and Liliane said to each other after that last visit of hers. This is someone else.

They had put the two books in the sideboard cupboard and would never read them.

From *Vrede zij met u, zuster* (Peace Be With You, Sister),
Uitgeverij De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam, 2010

Translated by Paul Vincent



An Extract from *This Is My Farm*

By Chris De Stoop

There we stand then, my brother and I, in the late afternoon, deep in the mud, blue with cold, calling the cows, 'come, come, come', while behind us bullets suddenly start ricocheting off the roof of the stall. Instinctively we duck and look around. Sodden fields and meadows extend ahead of us to the horizon, surrounded by over-full canals. The only unusual thing we see is a bulldozer on the far side of the meadow behind the fence.

The older cows allow themselves to be rounded up with no trouble. They respond to nicknames like Stamper, Stickhorn or Whitehead and have previously experienced a winter in the warm stall. They plunge good-naturedly through the gate to the yard, past the long, fresh maize pit, the bitter-sweet smell of which hangs in the air like wet steam. They waggle their way, twisting their fat behinds, growling with pleasure, blindly to the stall, straight to the manger to eat hay.

The seven young heifers, with their orange chips still shiny in their ears, refuse to go to the gate even when we use the stick, so that they only went into the meadow in September, together with the mating bull. We shoo them along waving our arms, shout and rage, slip over and get soaked. At the last moment they keep turning round and charge past missing us by a whisker. Lowing loudly, they scatter in all directions. And since it has been established since childhood that I am the quickest and my brother the strongest, it is always my job to chase them.

The wind is getting up, I jump on the grass tufts at the side of a puddle, lose my balance and fall flat on my face in the mud. Exhausted, for half a minute I look at the great areas of grey and black that slide over each other above me. How often have we done this together? I always loved driving the herd in and out of the stall with my brother. In exchange every couple of years I am given the hind quarters. Not of the best cow, which is worth too much, but the worst. I bought a freezer for it and sometimes eat cow for months on end until I'm sick of it. Which happens all the more quickly if I knew the cow in question well.

Finally we succeed by completely opening the wire round the meadow somewhere else so driving the heifers to the yard by a roundabout route – a well-tried diversionary tactic. My brother walks ahead of the animals with a pitchfork of hay in order to lure them into the stall. When the last one is in we hurriedly slide the bolt in. Dead tired, we lean against the wall, the bottom of which is black with muck. We are gleaming with sweat and dirt.

Although I stopped smoking twenty years ago, I roll a cigarette, together with him. A thin one, as he is careful with his tobacco and watches me carefully. We smoke and cough without saying a word.

All the livestock is now in from the field and only the bulldozer remains outside in the rain, which gradually turns to sleet. Inside it is pleasant among the



Hedwigepolder © Michiel Hendryckx

steaming cows' bodies. But we no longer talk as we used to with satisfaction at the whole operation, we do not endlessly rake up how tricky it was and how wild they were and how lucky we were to get the animals back in the stall. No.

'Farming is almost finished,' says my brother for the umpteenth time, with on his face a mixture of fright and rancour. 'They want to get rid of us.'

'Not for a long while yet.'

We fall silent again and look round the stall, in which the decay is gradually becoming apparent in the crooked piping and rusty drinking troughs. The cows have lain down, close together, with their heavy heads resting on each other's bellies. They look back at us with eyes shining. Their breath is visible as clouds of steam. The young heifers are still restless. Sometimes they can't stand the itch and they rub themselves against the walls. Sometimes they arch their backs and lift their tails to piss and shit. It splashes up in our faces.

'Good girls,' I say in a forced voice, to appease him. 'A nice, self-contained and healthy dairy cow business, what more could a farmer want?'

'They've got the shits,' he says, 'And the farm's not working any more.'

From *Dit is mijn hof* (This is My Farm),
Uitgeverij De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam, 2015

Translated by Paul Vincent

