

While she thinks a pit bull is a fine dog, he sees it as a killing machine. It's a question of perspective that's determined by the experiences they grew up with: she as the carefree daughter of a rich family, he in juvenile institutions after his violent father had abandoned him.

'Would you follow me anywhere?' Gigi asks Bibi early on in the film over breakfast in her flat. 'Yes, of course,' she says and asks him the same. 'Yes, of course,' he answers. But then he reflects for a moment: 'No, it depends. Whether you looked behind you or not.' A sentence that is as crucial as it is casual, and which refers to the fidelity in the title. They can only be together if they dare to trust each other blindly.

Just as in the Greek myth, fate steps in. Once Gigi has ended up in prison, Bibi turns out to be terminally ill. She manages to arrange with a powerful Albanian underworld boss for Gigi to be freed after her death and to be shipped off to the city of their dreams, Buenos Aires. But Gigi does not wait for his ship: he slips through the Albanians' fingers and races to Bibi's grave in a superbly filmed drive through the mists of early morning Brussels. In the meantime we hear him – as a voice-over – asking Bibi, long ago, for her deepest secret too. To which she answers: 'I'm immortal'. Perhaps that's also why she said 'no flowers' – an answer that probably made him laugh just as much at the time as she did at his answer.

But which of them is it that looks back? Bibi at Gigi by arranging his destination following her death? Or him, as he races to her grave? Is this why the miracle of her resurrection in Buenos Aires does not happen? Or do they still meet again in the Elysian Fields? Roskam leaves it open: we do not see what happens to Gigi when he vanishes from view in the cemetery. This ambiguity perfectly fits the paradoxes that Roskam's work is founded on. And it challenges the viewers to figure out how far they would dare to put their faith in a mythical miracle themselves.

KARIN WOLFS

Translated by Gregory Ball

The Italian Rêve, 'Interview with Michaël R. Roskam: Torn Between Love and Noir', Valentina Carraro, 17 September 2017.

History

The Elites Consistently Charted a New Course

A Concise History of the Netherlands

James Kennedy's history of the Netherlands was not written for a Dutch public. It is part of a series published by Cambridge University Press, which includes concise histories of Spain, Brazil, Finland, Bosnia, Bolivia and many other countries.

Kennedy is an appealing choice for a project such as this. He is a popular historian and valued participant in the public debate. He is also 'an outsider': an American of Dutch origin, who grew up in the Calvinist Orange City, Iowa. He became a professor of contemporary history at VU University Amsterdam in 2003, and is now dean of University College Utrecht. His doctoral thesis, *Building New Babylon*, dealt with the cultural history of the Netherlands in the 1960s. All of that means he is able to view that history from an international perspective, perhaps less focussed on the historical discourse within the country itself, with all its hobbyhorses and pet topics. That discourse has become very lively of late, and has even taken on a strong political tint. So a little distance can do no harm.

The book is redolent with a spirit of solidity and restraint. Its very conciseness already makes it remarkable, covering the whole gamut from *homo heidelbergensis* up to and including Geert Wilders in around 400 pages.

Kennedy concentrates on the political, economic and social history of the Netherlands. He is especially sparing in his treatment of culture, and out of necessity he leaves out large swathes of the country's Asiatic history. But he does include the Caribbean territories, because a contemporary history of the Netherlands cannot ignore slavery. Kennedy rightly devotes attention to Tula, the leader of the Curaçao Slave Revolt of 1795, and to the poor Ghanaian Jacobus Capitein, the first black student to obtain a doctorate at Leiden University, in 1742 – though in fact there is some doubt as to whether he really did so.

The structure of the book betrays the fact that Kennedy's own expertise is in modern Dutch history, and he is particularly at home when discuss-

ing developments after 1870. He expresses little by way of any specific Christian opinions. Kennedy has said in earlier interviews that, whilst he knew that history was under God's leadership, as the course of that history is uncertain a Christian historian needs to adopt a modest stance.

Solid and restrained, then: the book could even be called strikingly traditional. As we know, history is 'one damned thing after another', and that's how it is interpreted in this book, too. Condensing the span of Dutch history into 380 pages is without doubt a very considerable feat. Almost everyone is there, almost every familiar figure makes an appearance, though they are rarely accorded more than a single line, with the exception of the stadtholder King William III, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt and William the Silent. The need for conciseness means that Kennedy allows virtually no distraction, embellishment or coloration. There is no space for 'experience'. Kennedy almost never allows any Dutch person to appear 'in person', with a snappy quote, a charming diary entry or a personal note. The book is as nutritious and dry as a ship's biscuit.

There is in reality also nothing particularly original in Kennedy's interpretation of the history and his pointing out of the longer haul. He starts from the perspective that the Netherlands is indisputably an exceptional country, which is wrongly ignored by international and domestic historians alike as a little country with a strange language. The factors which make the country great are the familiar ones. The country's maritime location, cut through by rivers, forced the Dutch to collaborate. They accordingly developed an above-average 'ability to create' and 'ability to adapt', and the country's geographical position also awakened a spirit of commercialism. Dutch history is also characterised by a remarkably lively culture, religious diversity and centuries-old tradition of tolerance or, to use a nice term introduced by Kennedy, 'everyday ecumenism'.

In the nineteenth century, the Netherlands was reborn as a unitary state, with a strong self-image, and even a sense of moral superiority. This positive self-image has taken an emphatic tumble in recent decades, however, and Kennedy too speaks of an identity crisis. But, he goes on, the historic achievement of the Dutch is still inspiring. Despite the many fractures and minorities, the country has

survived and even flourished; it has been engaged with globalisation and immigration from the start, and has absorbed all of that with a high degree of stability.

That sounds dull, but it is precisely in its dullness that the Netherlands can offer an example to other countries. For Kennedy, the origin of this success lies deep in the Middle Ages. There was a lack of centralised authority in the Netherlands even during the Roman era. Power was shared. The nobility and the Church were relatively weak; there was an independent farming community, and towns everywhere flourished from the twelfth century onwards. The Dutch also had a number of other political entities, such as the water authorities and the Hanseatic League. All later attempts at centralisation, or the introduction of a unitary culture by the Burgundians and Hapsburgs, met with resistance. It was only after the period of French rule that this decentralised state structure came to an end, but public life remained fragmented, divided into 'pillars' and separate communities. But that fragmentation in turn formed the basis for a stable democratic system, in which the elites have always managed to chart a new course in time, so that revolutions have rarely led to actual bloodletting.

It is all true, though that opinion could have been voiced more sharply. In his treatment of slavery, for example, Kennedy comments that the Dutch disapproved of slavery, but found it very easy to put aside their moral reservations – the slave trade was simply too lucrative. Is that also an example of 'ability to create and to adapt', or is it merely ruthless opportunism? Is the slave trade also an example of 'innovation'?

KOEN KLEIJN

Translated by Julian Ross

James C. Kennedy, *A Concise History of the Netherlands*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, 502 p.