

## FLEMISH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE<sup>1</sup>

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### Resumen

Este artículo de Vanesa Joosen ofrece un panorama de las corrientes más actuales dentro de la literatura de Flandes, la parte norte de Bélgica donde el idioma oficial es el holandés. En concreto se centra en la novela psicológica para adolescentes y los libros ilustrados, dos de los géneros por los que Flandes ha conseguido el elogio internacional.

**Palabras Clave:** Flandes, novela psicológica, libro ilustrado.

### Abstract

In this article, Vanessa Joosen gives an overview of recent trends in the children's literature of Flanders, the Northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. She focuses in particular on the psychological novel for young adults and the illustration of picture books, two genres for which Flanders has received international acclaim.

**Key words:** Flanders, psychological novel, picture books



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Flanders, the Northern and Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, has needed quite some time to develop its own tradition in children's books. Historically, Flanders first had to emancipate from French influences before literature in Dutch was accepted as valuable. In the first half of the twentieth century, Flemish children's books were often criticised for being too moralistic and superficial. Yet, from the 1970s onwards, more innovative and original works started appearing, and recently, Flemish writers and illustrators have gained much praise abroad. Several publishers give new and 'more difficult' authors and artists an opportunity to publish their work, and this has resulted in some interesting tendencies that will be the subject of this survey. In the final part, I will briefly introduce the most important institutions which help to promote the production and research of children's literature.

Children's literature in Flanders is very diverse, and supplemented with strong influences from foreign literature and translations. Especially books from the United Kingdom and the United States are frequently translated and usually well received. Few authors from the French-speaking part of Belgium seem to cross the language border but books from the Netherlands have always been popular in Flanders. When Flemish children's literature was still developing in the 1960s and 1970s, progressive Dutch authors such as Annie M.G. Schmidt, Guus Kuijer and Miep Diekman helped to break taboos in Flemish books. Nowadays, influences between The Netherlands and Flanders no longer work unilateral. Flemish authors, such as Bart Moeyaert and Anne Provoost, also publish their books at Dutch companies (Querido), and cooperations between Dutch and Flemish authors and illustrators have become more and more frequent. A number of important prizes, such as De Gouden Uil [The Golden Owl] and De Gouden en Zilveren Griffels and Penselen [The Golden and Silver Slate-Pencils and Paintbrushes] are awarded for the whole Dutch-speaking area, to authors and illustrators from both The Netherlands and Flanders.

Some genres have gained more popularity than others in the last decades. The historical novel was particularly popular in the 1980s and still accounts for a substantial part of the literary production in Flanders, with authors such as Henri Vandaele, Marita De Sterck and Aline Sax. Vandaele sets his stories in the region where he grew up and invests them with dialect words and couleur locale, De Sterck often draws parallels between past and present, and Sax is remarkable young talent who explores various periods from history in lively stories with vivid characterisation.

Realistic fiction has become more disparate during the last thirty years. Whereas the so-called "problem books" of the 1970s and 1980s were sometimes criticized for being superficial, several authors nowadays use taboos and social or personal problems as a basis for widely-praised literary works. A good example is Jan Simoen's *Met met mij gaat alles goed* [I'm doing fine], published in 1996. In this book, AIDS and the civil war in former Yugoslavia are the central themes. These stories are not unfolded in the usual, linear way, but the reader gets multiple perspectives on the tragic events through letters from two brothers and their family. Because of its original structure and beautiful imagery, the novel gains more depth and literary quality than other problem books that deal with similar themes. More prolific authors in this genre, most notably the highly popular Dirk Bracke, are often criticized by adults for cheap sensationalism and literary superficiality.

Since the 1990s, critics have identified a new trend in psychological and philosophical children's books and it is in this genre that Flemish literature has recently excelled. The genre of the young adult novel benefited from writers such as Bart Moeyaert, Ed Franck, Anne Provoost, Jan Simoen, and more recently, Do Van Ranst and Jan De Leeuw. Bart Moeyaert was one of the finalists for the 2002 Hans Christian Andersen Award and is probably Flanders' best known author of young adult fiction. He started his career with *Duet Met Valse Noten* (Duet with false notes) in 1983, and soon grew to be one of Flanders' most widely appreciated authors. He has published work in various genres, including picture books and theatre for children. With his poetical style, Moeyaert succeeds in creating atmosphere through writing, and to provide the reader with a deep introspection into a character's mind. *Bare Hands* (1995, translated into Spanish as *Manos Desnudas*) is a good example of this. The story deals with transition, growing pains, and a young boy's heart-felt inability to accept change. The conflict of little Ward with his mother's new lover reaches a climax on New Year's Eve, and leaves the young boy completely traumatized. In Moeyaert's more recent books, he worked together with illustrators and musicians to create a unique experience that appeals to different senses. *De Schepping* (2003, translated into Spanish as *La Creacion*) is a humorous retelling of the biblical genesis, illustrated by Wolf Erlbruch and accompanied by a CD with music by Haydn.

Anne Provoost does not publish many books, but likes to spend several years on each story. This procedure leads to well-structured, multi-layered novels that have been widely praised by both young readers and critics. She is best known

for her story *Falling* (1994, translated into Spanish as *La caída*), a book that mingles reflections on past and present in a sensitive story about a teenager who feels drawn to neo-Nazism when he spends a holiday in France. Discoveries about his grandfather's past lead to a personal crisis, and neo-Nazism offers easy and simple answers, radical as they may be. Anne Provoost enjoyed writing this novel because she likes to explore the unpredictability of adolescents and their choices. In every good novel, the writer argues, there has to be some alienation: a book should not merely satisfy a reader's longing to identify with the protagonist. Provoost has rewritten several well-known stories from a new and provocative angle. In her version of *Beauty and the Beast*, entitled *De Roos en het Zwijn* [The rose and the swine], angels and demons help to create a mystical atmosphere. Her Beauty is a highly unconventional one, who up to the final pages, cannot resolve to choose for her family or her beast. Equally original and internationally widely acclaimed was Provoost's retelling of the biblical story of Noah's ark in *De Arkvaarders* (2001, *In the Shadow of the Ark*). This time, Noah is not the main character of the story, nor is God. The protagonist is Re Jana, daughter of a boat builder and a lame mother. When she falls in love with one of Noah's sons, she discovers the secret of the ark: it is reserved for a small group of people, whereas all the others are predestined to die. Once again, many philosophical and ethical questions linger in this beautifully stylized novel, which sheds a completely new light on the story of Noah and the concept of predestination.

Even though the quality of adolescent novels and picture books has been very high, critics sometimes complain that books for young readers (age six to twelve) still lack quality. Authors such as Sylvia Vanden Heede tried to bridge this gap. This author is known for her *Vos en Haas* (Fox and Hare) series, which gradually grow more complex as the child develops his or her reading skills. The typography helps children to find the right tone when they are reading aloud, and the gripping stories are written with much humour. Another successful author for young children is Hilde Vandermeeren, who combines originality, depth and humour in stories that are fresh and easy to read.

### Illustration

In the 1990s, the production of Flemish picture books rose from five titles in 1990 to 47 in 1999 (Van Coillie 2002: 138). Precursors of the 1980s, such as

Gregie de Maeyer and Lieve Baeten paved the way for many young talented artists in the next decade, who have gained international acclaim. Gerda Dendooven is known for her creative collage style and grotesque figures. In *Meneer Papier gaat uit wandelen* (Mister Paper goes for a walk), from 2002, the main protagonist creates a whole world with cuttings from his newspaper. Gerda Dendooven often works with big, black shapes and colourful backgrounds. Other well-known Flemish illustrators include Klaas Verplancke, André Sollie, Kristien Aertssen, Ingrid Godon, Anne Westerduin, Erika Cotteleer, An Candaele, and Goële Dewanckel.

The Flemish critic Marita Vermeulen has noted in Flemish picture books a close bond with the famous Flemish painters of the past, such as Pieter Brueghel, René Magritte, James Ensor, Paul Delvaux and others. Flanders' best known illustrator, Carll Cneut, indeed uses intervisual references to the works of Brueghel and Ensor in his work. His recent *O monster eet me niet op* (2006, translated into Spanish as *Monstruo, No Me Comas!*) also includes many humorous references to his own previous works: it deals with a little pig who cannot stop eaten and when he is sent away by his mother, almost gets eaten himself. Like Dendooven, Cneut is a highly creative artist who uses grotesque figures and strong contrasts to create an often surreal atmosphere. Cneut's work breaks with the assumption that illustrations for children have to be 'cute' and 'safe', he provides his readers with depth and artistic and visual challenges. He has had several international exhibitions and whose work was awarded two Golden Plaques and a nomination for the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award.

Also translated into Spanish are some works by Guido Van Genechten, a highly popular illustrator who addresses themes and emotions that are recognizable for toddlers. His *Omdat ik zoveel van je hou...* (translated into Spanish as *Porque Te Quiero Tanto*), for instance, deals with a small ice bear who is full of questions about the world he lives in and a mother bear who loves him so much that she is prepared to reply to them all. Soft colours and a little patch which children can stroke make this book attractive for the youngest readers.

### Institutions

Several institutions in Flanders have been established to promote the production, reading and academic research of children's books. In 1978, the national centre of children's literature (NCJ) was established. It is now part of Stichting

Lezen, the organisation for reading promotion that also manages Flemish IBBY, and provides resources for the study of children's literature, through its extended library and website. Moreover, Stichting Lezen organizes regular events to promote children's books, for instance at the yearly bookfair in Antwerp, where it supports school events with several activities. Since 1986, the so-called 'jeugdboekenweek' has been celebrated in Flanders, a week in which children's books and reading are promoted. This week is a good opportunity for schools to address children's literature more explicitly than usual in the classroom. Each year, the 'jeugdboekenweek' has a central theme, for instance 'Family' (2006) or 'Adventure' (2007). Stichting Lezen makes a special reading list with books for different age categories, and these books are discussed in many schools.

Almost every public library in Flanders has a section of children's books. The bigger libraries organize several events to promote reading, for instance read-aloud sessions or reading groups for children. In 1982, the 'Kinder- en jeugdjury' (KJV) was established. KJV consists of panels of children who discuss books and award prizes. Interestingly, these prizes have made apparent a tension among children, critics, writers and parents. In the last few years it has become clear that the KJV children often elect completely different books than adult panels. On the one hand, everybody recognizes the literary quality of the more difficult children's books, and complex novels for adolescent readers have bridged the gap with adult literature. Adults appreciate, for instance, Bart Moeyaert, Anne Provoost and Ed Franck's mature styles in complex novels that explore psychological themes. On the other hand, some critics, teachers and publishers argue that the pleasure of reading should not be forgotten. More prolific authors, such as Marc de Bel, Dirk Bracke and Patrick Lagrou, are extremely popular with panels of children, but adult critics prefer to promote more literary and more difficult novels. The international *Harry Potter* phenomenon has once again raised this discussion.

Literary prizes, such as the Gouden Uil [Golden owl] and the Boekenleeuw [Book lion] have brought children's books to the attention of the general public. The Flemish section of Belgian IBBY, Stichting Lezen and the Flemish Literary Fund (Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren) all support different projects to promote books for young readers and to shape a better climate for authors, illustrators, mediators, and scholars of children's books. Specialized journals, most notably *Leeswelp*, are published regularly, and several newspapers now include sections on children's books.

Although it has taken Flemish children's literature some time to reach the present level, the outcome, for now, seems to have been worth the waiting.

### Further Reading

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