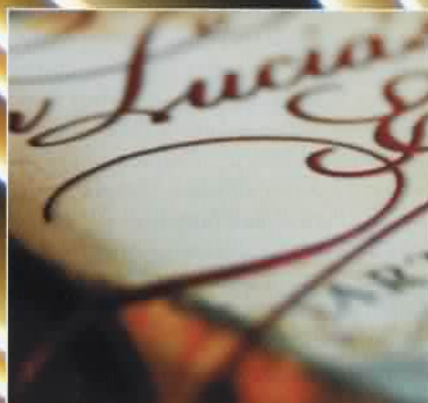


Have you ever heard of Anna Enquist or Tommy Wieringa or Ronald Giphart or Bart Koubaa or Margriet de Moor or Tomas Lieske or Peter Terrin or Arnon Grunberg or Abdelkader Benali or Adriaan van Dis or Oek de Jong or Tom Lanoye or Alfred van Cleef or Geert van der Kolk or Esther Gerritsen? How about Cees Nooteboom, Tessa de Loo or Harry Mulisch? Okay, now we're getting somewhere.

Sorting through the stacks:

An introduction to

Dutch Literature



It's Henk Pröpper's job to make sure these authors of Dutch fiction become household names around the world. Pröpper is managing director of the Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature (*Nederlands Literair Productie- en Vertalingenfonds* or *NLPVF*).

You might think he has his work cut out for him. Pröpper would be the first person to agree. 'On one trip to the US I looked in an encyclopaedia of literature. There were only two Dutch authors listed: Anne Frank and Xaviera Hollander!'

Don't laugh. How many Dutch authors can you name? And how many have you actually read?

Most people outside of the Netherlands complete their so-called Dutch reading in their teens with the two authors listed in that encyclopaedia (in fact, only one of them is Dutch!), forming a cliché impression of Holland full of WWII tragedy and really happy hookers. But what happens if your reading scope is widened to include those books the Dutch grew up reading in school or, for you're living in the Netherlands, those books your Dutch neighbours and co-workers are reading?

Monique Knappen is director of the John Adams Institute – the top platform in Europe for American – not Dutch – writers. But she recognizes the value of expatriates reading the local lit.

'There is a shared culture through reading,' she says. 'Although the Dutch are looking for an identity today, history is a large factor. What makes you Dutch? Books and reading represent who you are.'

With only about 24 million readers of Dutch worldwide, there is a surprisingly large and rich range of books creating a strong cultural tie. 'In my generation we had to read Haasse, Mulisch, Van 't Reve and Hermans in school,' she explains. 'In the generation before me, they read Multatuli.'

If you are what you read, a generation's – or country's – literature should provide a short cut to understanding your adopted home.

Pröpper agrees that reading experiences lead to certain national characteristics – and those experiences start early. 'Other countries have very sweet children's literature. Our novels for age 12 or so show a

world that's not just blue skies and bunnies. We show a cruel world for children, but in the end, the books are optimistic.' 'For instance, *Mijn Vader** by **Toon Tellegen** has a father character who is always away. He's very tall and can change forms, too. This teaches a child that a person is always changing – in moods and more completely. (...) In a way, Dutch people can cope quite well with things and can accept differences in people, ideas and religions – or not being religious – because of these stories.'

Liesl Olivier runs The English Bookshop on Amsterdam's picturesque Lauriergracht and is an expatriate herself. Reading Dutch authors has helped her understand her new home. '*Character (Karakter)* by **F. Bordewijk** gives a good explanation of Dutch behaviour and perseverance,' she says. 'In the story, a boy is repeatedly beaten up by his father. It's not until he beats his father up, that he earns his father's respect. It really illustrated to me how important it is to stand up to the Dutch. The story also captures Calvinism like nothing else and really helped me understand the rise of Socialism.'

What is a Dutch book?

But to understand the Dutch via their books you have to read between the dust covers. What makes a Dutch book Dutch?

Knappen, whose position keeps her reading more American than Dutch authors, compares the two countries' literature. 'American literature is broader in story and time span. Dutch literature does not sweep generations. There is a set of people and the story is inter-human. It's never that broader picture. It's not any less interesting; but strikingly different. I think it says a lot about Dutch culture. I would guess it's because we don't have the frontier. Americans are not afraid of moving, changing a whole family in one generation. Dutch literature is more sophisticated, with smaller movements – not as expansive,' she explains. 'There is a smallness that is present in Dutch literature. Look at **Manon Uphoff's** *De Bastaard**. The whole story is situated at a kitchen table. This is very Dutch.'

But do the themes addressed in Dutch literature reflect life in the Netherlands –

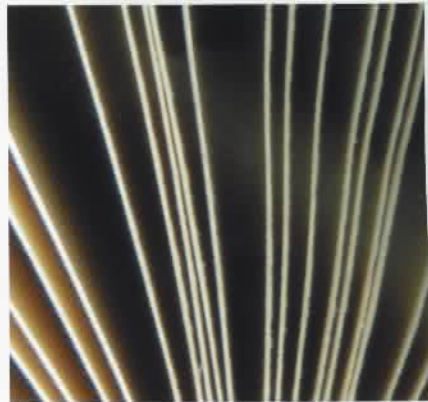
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colonialism, the Second World War, multiculturalism. It's safe to say these are as important to 'real life' as they are to the imagined life of fiction.

'Louis Couperus gives us a perspective of both sides of our colonial past in *Hidden Force (De Stille Kracht)*," says Pröpper. Couperus, who has been compared to Joseph Conrad, writes about how that colonial experience worked on the minds of people who returned to Holland.

Author **Adriaan van Dis** hits close to the expat home when he writes about a boy in *My Father's War (Familieziek)* who is caught between the oriental rice and Dutch potatoes of his repatriated family. **Hella Haasse** also addresses this theme.

Moving on in history to the last century, WWII is an ever-present theme, appropriate for a country full of memories, not only memoirs. 'WWII is one of the biggest issues in our fiction,' says Pröpper. 'It's very unclear what positions to take and were taken. It's not easily defined.' The Dutch have tried to clarify this for over half a century through their literature.

'I didn't so much as *experience* the war: I *am* the Second World War,' writes author **Harry Mulisch** in his autobiographical *Mijn Getijdenboek*°. Mulisch is one of Holland's most important and well-known literary exports. His *Discovery of Heaven (De ontdekking van de hemel)* not only was an international success, but it reached an even wider audience when it was made into a film. Much of his oeuvre addresses the unanswered questions of WWII. As does the work of **Willem Frederik Hermans**, whom Pröpper considers to be the best Dutch writer of the 20th century. 'He was never translated, so he is not popular internationally.' Only recently has his work begun to cross borders.

But it's not WWII that dominates the Dutch headlines these days, so it's no surprise that multiculturalism is an emerging theme in literature, a sort of updated identity struggle from the country's colonial past. '**Abdelkader Benali** is extremely funny and always playing with reality. One of his themes is "Rootless does not mean lost",' explains Pröpper. 'There is a certain lost quality, but it opens yourself to new things.'

Another Dutch author writing about identity is **Hafid Bouazza**. 'He writes about the Dutch language,' says Pröpper. 'His work is a bridge between his roots and Dutch literature.' Labelled a 'Moroccan-Dutch writer', Bouazza described that person as 'someone who walks with a slipper on one foot and a wooden clog on the other, and that's not easy'.

Who's reading all those Dutch books?

Twice a year, the NLPVF publishes a list of the ten best books for international audiences and sends it out to over 2,000 publishers around the world.

According to Pröpper, there is a misconception among Dutch authors about what is interesting to the foreign audience. 'They think readers in Spain want to read Dutch books about Spain, but readers are far more interested in books with a different cultural background. **Margriet de Moor's** book *Drowned (De Verdrunkene)* is set in 1953, during the floods that devastated the Netherlands. It has received a lot of attention because flooding is considered to be fundamental for our country; people know that about us. But the book is really a story about what floods do to people, not about location or history. It's about what happens to people right before dying. It's very well done – more about psychology and instincts than about a flood.' De Moor

does very well in Germany and France. *Drowned* will soon be published in English.

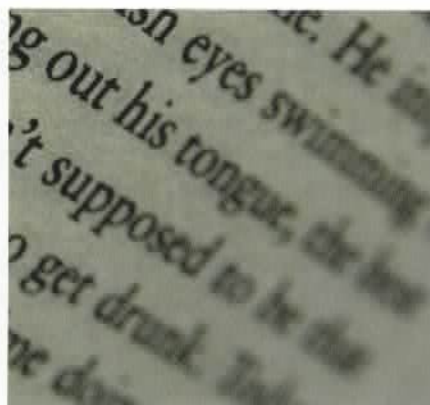
'Not every book works for every market,' explains Pröpper. 'Germany and Spain like Cees Nooteboom; France likes Haasse; and Mulisch is the American favourite. Germany is by far the hottest market for Dutch literature – they translate 140 Dutch titles every year.'

Some people would attribute this to geography. Onno Blom of *De Bezige Bij*, a publishing house that started as part of the Resistance during WWII, has a little different take on the popularity. 'I think the most important reason is that – in the perspective of the Germans – Dutch writers are capable of writing about heavy subjects on a light tone. Harry Mulisch is praised for the fact that his work has so many mythical and universal powers without being hard to follow. On the contrary, his work is crystal clear.'

Joost Nijssen of Podium Publishers says the climax of the German market was probably in the mid 1990s, when – as everyone in the world of Dutch literature will remind you – the Netherlands was the featured country, or *Schwerpunkt*, for the 1993 Frankfurt Book Fair, the largest book fair in the world. 'There was a point when all of my authors and almost all of the authors on other publishers' lists were sold to Germany,' says Nijssen.

With other countries, however, the experience has been different. 'America, England and France are simply not interested. Why? I don't have an answer,' he says, but he'll take a guess. 'When I talk with the average American or British editor, they kind of look the other way. They see us just as another small northern country somewhere in Europe.'

'When I look at Finnish or Norwegian



literature, I guess I have a few of the same prejudices,' he confesses. 'I went to Oslo and Lillehammer to get closer to contemporary Norwegian fiction, but I really had to ask myself, 'What is my connection with trilogies about depressive, lonely people out in the countryside living next to lakes?'

'In the same way, Holland is not so very interesting to these editors,' he continues. 'They see us as a flat country with a bunch of people in *klompen*. How do I convince them otherwise? It's a question of quality. All national literature has its own characteristics. In the end, literature is about individual authors and individual books.'

Nijssen is quick to defend the quality of his own stable of authors: 'I have a few authors who can really compete [on an international scale]. They're only unknown because they haven't been translated yet. We have just as many great authors as other countries.'

Those authors, however, are still relatively unknown – and not just to international readers. Knappen relates a story to sum it up. 'When Norman Mailer came to speak at the John Adams Institute, he visited my house for dinner. I invited Harry Mulisch, as well. Mulisch, of course, had read Mailer, but he wondered if Mailer would have read him. All during dinner, Mailer never mentioned any of Mulisch's books. That just shows what it's like to be a Dutch writer. We are so influenced by wonderful writers around the world, but the rest of the world has not been influenced as much by us.' <

Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature (*Nederlands Literair Productie- en Vertalingenfonds* or NLPVF)
www.nlpvf.nl

People who know about books tell you what to read

So you're ready to dive into a Dutch book, or maybe add one or two to your holiday gift list? Where do you start? Here are a few suggestions from people who know about good books.

Beth Johnson, owner of Boekhandel van Rossum, Amsterdam Zuid:
'**Arthur Japin**, *In Lucia's Eyes (Een schitterend gebrek)*. It's the story of Casanova. Japin writes from a given, a fact, and builds a story around it. This story jumps between Amsterdam and Venice and explains why Casanova is Casanova.'

Montique Knappen, director of John Adams Institute:
'**Connie Palmen**, *The Friendship (De vriendschap)*. She has wonderful characters. She is more of a philosopher and clever thinker with profound knowledge and feelings that go wider than the smaller Dutch writers. It's a large novel, communicating about the universality of friendship.'

Dini Bolck, volunteer at John Adams Institute:
A trio of books: **Hella Haasse**, *Heren van de thee*; **Madelon Lulofs**, *Rubber*; and American **C. S. Godshalk**, *Kalimantaaan*. All three books address plantation life and in all three the women are considered negligible, not allowed to have their own lives.'

Henk Propper, managing director, fiction, NLPVF:
'**Willem Frederik Hermans**, *The Dark Room of Damocles (De donkere kamer van Damocles)* is a very intelligent book and a good read. It is a fundamental book for the Netherlands. When I was 16, we had to choose a book to talk about in front of other students for 10-15 minutes. I decided to talk about this book, even though it was quite complicated and not the usual book for a 16-year-old to talk about. Well, after an hour I still wasn't finished talking about this book! (To be released in English in 2006.)

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