

# Marcel Möring on *Hokwerda's Child* to his English publisher

This isn't something I often do, but I would like to draw your attention to a book that has just been published in The Netherlands. It is a book by a writer I have admired ever since his debut in the late seventies and who, after a long period of virtual silence, has come forward with an absolutely breathtaking novel called 'Hokwerda's Child'.

Oek de Jong, that's his name, is fifty-ish and has made his name with two novels: *Opwaaiende zomerjurken* (something like 'Billowing Summer Frocks') and *Cirkel in het gras* ('Circle in the grass'). The last one is one of my favourite Dutch novels of the past century. The first rapidly reached a hundred thousand copies and was very much the critical and commercial success of its time. 'Circle in the grass' was an even bigger hit.

Now, what about this wonderful book?

It is in a sense a return to qualities of the Russian novel, in terms of narrative, treatment and style. It is no way 'heavy', but the story is told with intense attention to detail, musicality and imagery. Just to illustrate how well this works, I would like to tell you about the strange apprehension I felt after reading the prologue, which vividly shows us the image of a young child, Lyn, who is over and over again tossed into the black water of a stream by her father, Hokwerda. It is a game, that father and daughter are playing (how far can he throw her), and without telling us, De Jong makes it absolutely clear that there is something very deep and very dark and ominous about it. The child shivers. It is the close of day. The water looms dark and deep. And she keeps asking her father to throw her in, again, and again, and again. This about trust, surrender, danger and safety. And then, the child is tired, very tired, she doesn't surface anymore. Hokwerda stares into the deep darkness of the water, looking for bubbles, movement, anything, and goes in to rescue her. Saved, the girl asks: 'Be it far, dad?'

The prologue is almost too much. After reading it I felt drawn to the prologue and just couldn't get myself to read it again. When, after a week, I finally summoned up the courage to do it, I was as touched and horrified as the first time. That doesn't happen very often to me.

What is so special about the prologue and the way it leads you into the actual narrative, is that it grips you by the throat and leaves you with no illusions whatsoever about what is to come: this is going to be a story about fate and doom. But as Lyn's story gets on the way, everything changes, and we dip into the life of sensual, self-assured young woman who relishes a good roll in the hay (sorry to be so corny), carefully picks her lovers and knows how to surrender and be her own woman at the same time. Life, vivid, bright full, that is what the rest of the book seems to be.

The narrative encompasses two stages in her life and, effectively, two

lovers. The first one is tough and sensual Henry from Amsterdam, a welder who works on an oil rig on the North Sea. She leaves him for the second one: a barrister, from her native Frisia, a cultured and well read man, the kind of man you want her stay with. But the raw passion that was between her and Henry, the mutual surrender to each other, the inexplicable magnetism they exert on each other, draws her back to her first lover, even after he has horribly betrayed her.

Back with Henry, with child, they pick up where they once left off. One night, out for the weekend on his little boat, he goes to town to buy provisions, and doesn't come back. She is, as they say, great with child and waits as the evening falls. She lights the lanterns, broods about what might have happened and gets more and more frightened as the hours go by. When he eventually comes back, after a long, frantic night alone, she sits up, hears him entering the cabin and kills him.

It was a story about fate and doom after all.

And it is a story that is beautifully told. I'm not the only one to recognize the qualities of this heart-wrenching novel. It has been in the top ten since it was published and is bound to be high on the lists of the jury's for next years big prizes. After some ten years of silence an writer has come back on the scene to sweep the Dutch readers of their feet.

I would very much like to urge you to read the translated sample that is available at Augustus and consider it for publication. I feel that publishing this book is not just buying the rights to 'Hokwerda's Child' (and a backlist of two equally beautiful books), but also an investment into a writer who will continue to grow and grow and grow.'