

Josse de Haan

The Frog Years

A fascinating, colourful book about a peculiar, somewhat unholy trinity

The cover of the book says ‘novel’, but according to the subtitle this is a ‘grotesque or essay’. The first chapter is headed ‘The woman with the weekend arms’. We are introduced to De Grutsk (The Great), one-time poet and teacher, who is writing a book about his childhood in Friesland and what happened next.

De Grutsk is not yet completely down and out. He’s receiving psychiatric treatment, getting a divorce, arguing with practically everyone, drinking too much and living in the Big City, in other words Amsterdam. He watches video tapes about ‘the old country’ and engages nine prostitutes, making them dress up and behave like women and girls he once knew in Friesland.

So this did not turn out as an ordinary book. From time to time De Grutsk enters into a debate with the author. In between there are digressions on the subject of literature, socialist education, the connection between sperm and literature, socio-cultural training, poetry, works by Niki de Saint Phalle and much more besides.

It is Josse de Haan’s masterpiece, purely and simply a hybrid novel that comes screaming out of the bend, a poetic, insistent, pornographic and compelling book. Particularly penetrating and moving are the musings and experiences of De Lytsk (The Little), a boy from Snyp, an anagram of the village of Peins near Franeker, where De Haan was born.

The author succeeds in summoning up a convincing picture of a small rural community by putting himself in the place of the rather fretful little boy and looking from there at the incomprehensible and often horribly cruel world.

De Haan excels at coarse and shameless love scenes involving the same boy at an older age, after he becomes De Grutsk. He pulls no punches and the language is plain and unvarnished. In Frisian literature this is pioneering. He has his characters discuss the pornographic scenes he has just served up to his readers. Ironic indeed. This is an extraordinary and irresistible book that occupies a unique place in Frisian literature, of which it is an absolute highpoint.



Publishing details

Piksjitten op Snyp (1999)
510 pp., 232,050 words

Publisher

Elikser
Jitske Kingma
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Translation

Kikkerjaren (Piksjitten op Snyp,
Meulenhoff, 1999)



Josse de Haan (b. 1941) devoted himself to literature, especially Frisian literature, from the 1960's onwards, having taught in primary and secondary schools. He wrote poetry, novels, essays and plays and ran a one-man magazine called *iP2r90-Rendez Vous*. He was one of the founders of *Operaesje Fers* (1968, Telepoëzie), which was emulated elsewhere, including New York with its *Dial a Poem*. The novel *Piksjitten op Snyp* (The Frog Years) is his magnum opus. He publishes work in Frisian, Dutch and other languages, with thirty-five book publications to date, and has won a number of prizes including the most prestigious Frisian literary award, the Gysbert Japicx Prize (2007).

'I found this an exceptional and irresistible book. De Haan has created a marvellous show out of it all, resolutely bringing on stage one new tone and atmosphere after another, clowns, vulgar sex, higher acrobatics and profound seriousness...'
– Kees 't Hart in *De Groene Amsterdammer*

'The Frog Years is a surprising, polymorphous novel in which present and past, city and countryside, romanticism and pornography, realism and poetry form a dazzling amalgam.'
– Kester Freriks in *NRC*

Photo: Anneke Bleeker