

Reinder Brolsma

Land and People

Utterly convincing portrait of a remarkable man in an epic with modern appeal

Daniel van Kuken is a mystery. This does not trouble him, but it troubles his parents, wife and children all the more. His oppressive presence drives them out of the house one by one. So what does he do? He stubbornly carries on working. But he is well aware that not only do his family and neighbours fear him, they laugh at him as well. In the end he asks himself: what kind of a man am I?

Anyone reading *Land and People* will see film scenes before them: a couple with an eleven-year-old son, their household effects piled up on two farm carts, slowly creeping along an endless sea dyke. To left and right is flat farmland with nothing but potatoes and turnips. As they get closer to their new home, they are watched by the strange inhabitants of the labourers' houses along the old dyke. What can they expect of the new residents of the farmhouse?

The small Van Kuken family features an unusual combination of rigid piety and an extreme urge to get on in the world. They live as simply as possible and do all they can to earn money. But young Daniel has his odd moments. One day he unexpectedly comes home with a beautiful young horse, and he refuses to listen to any more pious talk. He is not trying to provoke conflict but simply obeying his instincts.

Young Daniel does not try to connect

with anyone else in the new village. He lives purely for himself. Even the jovial and vivacious young woman who stays with the family for a while and later marries him does nothing to change that. But neither does she simply accept her husband's boorish gruffness. She refuses to relinquish her little pleasures and sees to it that the children are able to live elsewhere. The village community naturally follows all this with great fascination.

The novel describes the goings on in and around Daniel van Kuken's farmhouse against the background of the social and economic developments of the turn of the twentieth century. The presence of a capricious narrator is one striking aspect of the book. He sometimes makes fun of the characters a little, but nevertheless he indulges them a great deal. He shows complete understanding for their emotions, while at regular intervals taking his distance from them. He contemplates how people mess things up and how nature is completely unconcerned about human beings. In asides he also reflects on his role as narrator. All this gives a novel about the old farming life a modern vivacity and appeal, all of it reflected in the narrator's spontaneous delivery.

Land and People is astonishing for its richness of perspective, its stylistic power and its remarkable irony and humour.



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Reinder Brolsma (1882-1953) started his working life as a housepainter, and the stories he heard when working in people's homes provided him with material for his early published work. He later earned his living as a journalist, and the lives of simple people remained a source of inspiration. He was undoubtedly influenced by the work of Charles Dickens. His oeuvre includes many short stories and ten substantial novels. A thousand blue handwritten notebooks have survived.

'Brolsma writes completely instinctively. He may more than once have violated standard grammar to some degree, but only ever deliberately, which makes him exciting to read.'
– *De Harpe*

Photo: Kolleksje Tresoar