

Durk van der Ploeg. *Foarby it Boarkumer fjoer*. Ljouwert, Netherlands. Friese Pers. 2002. 368 pages. €19.95. ISBN 90 330 126 69

A small, poor fishing village in northern Friesland virtually lost its livelihood when in a terrifying storm most of its fishermen were drowned. The place was Moddergat, and the year was 1883. This fateful event is at the center of Durk van der Ploeg's latest novel (*Past the Boarkum Fire*) and informs its theme of survival.

The story begins with Minne Holwerda, a proud, hard-hearted, and well-to-do farmer in nearby Peazens. He does not deal kindly with others, but neither does life deal kindly with him. His only son, as future heir, dies in childhood. His next child is a girl, turns into something of a rebel, and eventually conceives out of wedlock. Kicked out of her parental home, Swaantsje, the daughter, gives birth to a son, Botte, and eventually marries a fisherman from Moddergat, people for whom Minne has nothing but scorn. When Minne's wife, a kindly, loving woman, dies, Minne's spirit is wounded but not broken. He wants to make grandson Botte his heir, but Botte's loyalty goes to his mother and his adopted father, who wants him to follow in his footsteps as fisherman. When Minne eventually reaches his deathbed, he finds himself bereft of all that was once dear and important to him.

But Van der Ploeg makes the grandson, Botte, the main character of this story. It is Botte who has to decide between farming and fishing, and therefore between affluence and a constant struggle for survival. It is Botte who, barely in his teens, decides to assume his father's enormous debt-load and way of life when the sea takes his life in the 1883 disaster. It is Botte who later has to choose between loyalty to the memory of his father and love for his sweetheart. It is Botte who after too many heart-wrenching choices and years of lonely wanderings as a reluctant exile finally comes home to love and family and a goodly measure of happiness.

It is also the story of Botte's mother, Swaantsje, whose heart nurtures her life-long resentment and bitterness toward her father's rejection of her and the absence of his love. It meant the termination of her education, her love and gift for music, her hopes for freedom and romance. It meant a life of harsh poverty, of anxiety, of contentiousness, of self-doubt and regret.

And it is the story of the religious, economic, and social culture of a fishing village between 1862 and 1945. As such it is of significant value to students of the past and lovers of historical novels.

But this is a Van der Ploeg novel. And a reader may grumble that the author writes too many words; a literary critic may argue that an author ought to engage the reader in co-creating a character by leaving spaces between the lines. No matter. Both may as well submit to, though arguably a weakness, what is also the author's greatest strength—a richly rendered interior life of the main characters. Creation, motivation, interpretation are all rolled into the in-depth characterization that has become a Van der Ploeg trademark. The interior monologue is his forté, not dialogue. When dialogue occurs, the characters often lapse into giving speeches rather than remarks or simple response. For here is a writer who always dives below surfaces, texturing his writing with multiple layers of details that surely slow the pace, occasionally elaborate and repeat needlessly, but more often deepen the reader's understanding, insight, and experience.

Currently, Van der Ploeg may well be Friesland's best writer. His extraordinary command of vocabulary provides an education in itself for the reader of Frisian. And the fierceness of loyalties and rejections, of the blindness of pride and the patience of love—all these and more vicariously invade and inhabit the reader's psyche during and after the reading of *Past the lights of Boarkum*.

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