

# Hylke Speerstra

## The Comfort Bird

The true story of two Frisian families

**There is no better way to keep the past alive than by telling personal stories. In *The Comfort Bird* Hylke Speerstra reconstructs with great skill and affection the history of two Frisian families whose fate was determined by the course of history on a larger scale.**

During migration, Hylke Speerstra tells us, practically every flight of *wilsters* (the Frisian for golden plovers) is accompanied by another species of bird, which flies with them as a 'comfort bird'. On a long migration that involves great hardships, you do after all need comforting. Speerstra could not have chosen a better title for his book.

In *The Comfort Bird* he follows two families from Hichtum in Friesland. In 1911 three generations of one family set out together for America, to make their dreams come true in the land of limitless opportunity. They manage, with great difficulty, to survive in arid and poor South Dakota. The other family keeps its roots in Friesland but sees Germany as the promised land.

The stories of the two families intersect when their descendants serve on the front line in the Second World War, one family as reluctant attacker and occupier, the other as liberator of Europe; one as victor, the other as loser.

Making use of family records, diaries, conversations and surviving letters, Hylke Speerstra, who was himself the boy next door to one of the family members, has reconstructed both histories and brought them back to life. With his dazzling, vivid language, his huge capacity for empathy and his eye for crucial, striking anecdotes and details, he enables the reader to hear not only the words and thoughts of people from earlier times but their heartbeat as well.

His description of tough ways of life, in rural Friesland and in rural America, the dangerous crossing, the profound homesickness, the comfort of family and finally the insanity of the war are inimitable and unforgettable, bringing back forgotten times and resonating long after the book ends. *The Comfort Bird* is literary history writing of the highest calibre.

**Hylke Speerstra** (b. 1936) is one of the best known of living Frisian authors. His work is a mixture of fiction and non-fiction, of the kind often found in Anglo-Saxon literature. He is regarded as a born storyteller, 'a chronicler of his time,' according to Geert Mak. For years Speerstra worked as a journalist. He is best known for his stories about emigrants. His book *It wrede paradys* (*Cruel Paradise*) is one of the best-selling Frisian books of all time. It also appeared in Dutch and in English.



### Publishing details

*De treastfûgel* (2013)  
208 pp., 53,000 words

### Publisher

Bornmeer  
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### Translated titles

*De troostvogel* (De treastfûgel, Atlas Contact, 2013)  
*Het wrede paradys* (It wrede paradys, Atlas Contact, 2013)  
*Cruel Paradise: True Stories of Dutch Emigrants* (It wrede paradys, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2005)  
*The Comfort Bird* (De treastfûgel, Mokeham Publishing, 2017)

'Beautifully told.'  
– Gerben de Vries,  
*De Moanne*

'With his almost fairytale style of narration, in *Comfort Bird* Speerstra creates a combination of historically factual account and compelling literary story.'  
– Kim van Goethem -  
*NPO Geschiedenis*

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