

Sietse de Vries. *Bak*. Ljouwert, Netherlands. Friese Pers. 2012.

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In this slim novel De Vries continues to play with variations on the crime novel formula. In *Kûgels foar Kant* the detective in search of the murderer is himself murdered. In *Potstro Fongers* neither the motive for the crime nor its perpetrator is ever discovered. In *Bak* the reader knows both the motive and the perpetrator from the start, but the police and the public remain in the dark.

Obviously the author is playing with the reader as well. Here the tension is not so much whether the guilty will be discovered as it is when and how. The guilty in this case is Sherp Bak who in his 50 years of life has little to show for. Reminiscent of Marten Bok in *Potstro Fongers*, Bak has been an underachiever since childhood, now stuck in an undistinguished 20-year career as a newspaper reporter. More or less accepting of his unremarkable life, he cannot, however, tolerate others' view of him as a loser. Thus when Remco Beets, an arrogant city councilman, half drunk, begins to assault him with physical and verbal abuse, Bak fights back. When Beets tells him that he's the laughingstock of Frisian journalism and contemptuously spits him in the face, it triggers a violent rage that makes him grab Beets's head and bang it against the floor so hard and often that it kills his antagonist.

Deftly Bak clears the scene of all criminal evidence, and deftly De Vries turns his killer-reporter into a journalist assigned to the murder case. Ironically, Bak gains public stature as he manages to "discover" background details that point to possible mafia involvement. His new-found recognition attracts another member of the city council to him, Geke Jensma, a divorced beauty with a lusty appetite for sexual intimacy. Their trysts and dinners flood Bak with a warm sense of a new lease on life; for the first time he has fallen deeply in love.

But there's still the unsolved murder of Beets threatening Bak's future bliss. When Geke confronts him with incriminating evidence only she knows about, Bak panics. But

when she scoffs at his ridiculous stories about shady international criminal organizations, telling him that they are likely to make him the laughingstock of his profession, Bak snaps. Hearing his denunciation as a fool with Beets's identical taunt, the fury of fifty years of humiliation explodes, and Bak ends Geke's life the same way that he had Beets, but this time it's the one who had met his need for love, a potential home, an identity, a sense of worth.

And again, De Vries fools the reader who expects that surely this time Bak will be unmasked. Instead, the police, impressed by Bak's sleuthing ability, recruit him as their chief assistant in the expanding criminal investigation. Already soaked in irony, the story takes one final twist when at the end Bak is accosted by the very mafia he had invented in his exposé of the killers; they want to know who's betrayed them. When Bak tries to confess the whole sordid truth to his attackers, they dismiss him as a lunatic, the final insult to Bak's already shattered ego.

No doubt De Vries is aware that he's straining the reader's credulity, an otherwise serious flaw in a detective novel. An underachieving reporter who turns into a star by becoming a killer and a betrayer of his profession without raising the suspicion of colleagues or police may make for delicious irony but hardly for a challenging engagement by the serious reader of crime novels. For the appreciative reader of De Vries, however, the treat of an entertaining page-turner is enough.

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