

Ulbe van Houten

Holwerda's Sin

A collision between tradition and modernity,
the familiar and the strange

A powerful man is slowly being destroyed, by his servants and his wife, but just as much by his own nagging conscience. The trial of strength is vast and tragic, but described with a subtle sense of humour and the refinement of a modern psychological novel.

A pious and universally respected farmer, Holwerda feels himself lord and master in his house and on his land. But the members of his new haymaking team seem unimpressed. He has hired them for five weeks, and even on the first day the ease with which they move around his land, his farmyard and his house unnerves him. So much spontaneity and humour, energy and appetite: they are directly undermining his authority!

He hopes the weather will stay fine and he will be able to send them home after four weeks. The workers make very clear that they are expecting work – and pay – for five weeks. The farmer forces them to work even harder. Five weeks' pay for four weeks' work – in the farmer's eyes that's absurd.

Yet something is playing on his mind. He finds himself in a moral dilemma, which enrages him even more. Everyone can feel the tension. What will the farmer do if the hay is in after four weeks? Will the haymakers force him to pay?

The contrast between the farmer's rigid outlook and sense of superiority and the deftness and self-confidence of the workers gives the novel an almost physical strength and a subtle humour. The confrontations between the farmer and his wife put things even more on edge: he feels he risks becoming inferior not only to the labourers but also to his wife, and in his powerlessness and repressed rage he makes himself appear ridiculous.

The short interior monologues in which the tension and despair of the farmer are expressed alternate between raw vexation, bizarre rationalization, repressed fear of the people he has to live with and a holy fear of God. Tragedy with comic touches is the result. The novel continues to speak to new generations. Several years ago it was again chosen as the best Frisian novel.



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The oeuvre of **Ulbe van Houten** (1904-1974) consists mainly of short stories and novellas. *Holwerda's Sin* initially appeared in serial form. The author knew both the rigid world of the Reformed Church farmers, in which his father worked as a labourer, and that of the workers from the progressive Frisian region of Het Bildt where he found work as a teacher. Van Houten is a subtle stylist who always manages to find precisely the right linguistic register for his characters and to make the tension almost physically tangible.

Photo: Kolleksje Tresoar