

The Graphic Novel in Flanders

Why Comic Strip Artists of the Older Generation are Gnashing Their Teeth

178

[G E E R T D E W E Y E R]



Men who let their beards grow, horny hares that make whole African villages pregnant, limbless kids set in some ancient Little Nemo decor, a Flemish farmer from the polders who willy-nilly becomes Hitler's doppelganger, a surrealistic story about a real-life suicide, and so on - for a while now something remarkable, joyful even, has been happening in the world of Flemish comic strips. More and more artists of the younger generation are managing to get themselves published by foreign publishing houses - and not just any publishers either. Twenty-four-year-old Brecht Evens, for example, has recently seen his third graphic novel *The Wrong Place* (*Ergens waar je niet wilt zijn*) published in translation (by Drawn & Quarterly, a Canadian publishing house that has the world's greatest graphic novelists in its catalogues. Many an author would kill to be published by them. By the way, *The Wrong Place* won the Prix d'Audace at the prestigious Angoulême Festival in January 2011. And this is far from being a one-off event. Something similar happened to Randall C. and his *Sleepy Heads* (*Slaapkoppen*), a dreamy/poetic book that was snapped up straightaway by



the French company Casterman, another internationally renowned publisher. The list doesn't end there: both Glénat France and Le Figaro came knocking at Pieter De Poortere's door for his wordless stories about the pessimistic little farmer – known simply as *Boerke* (Dickie in English)- who doesn't shrink from committing suicide at the end of the page. And then there was the quiet Jeroen Janssen, who once worked in Rwanda and had a minor hit in Flanders with his stories, based on his life there, about the adventures of a cunning hare, Bakamé – he managed to have his 300-page collection published simultaneously by his own publishing house Oogachtend and the French company La boîte aux bulles.

These are just a few examples, but they do illustrate the international interest in the new generation of Flemish authors. And this is new. But where has this major sea-change come from all of a sudden? Probably it is largely due to the way the new generation thinks of today's comics, and their resolute break with earlier generations.



Randall C., *Sleepy Heads*.

Successes in France

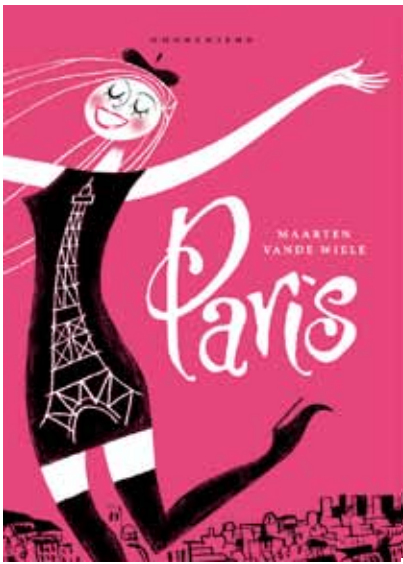
In its heyday, Belgium used to be called the Mecca of the comic strip. But its success was due to its Walloon authors rather than those from Flanders: Peyo, Jijé, Franquin, E.P. Jacobs, Hergé, and many more. With *The Smurfs*, *Jerry Spring*, *Blake and Mortimer*, the *Marsupilami* and *Tintin* they showed what their small country had to offer. Their approach, talent and enthusiasm gave rise to some of the most successful comics ever published in Europe: *Robbedoes/Spirou en Kuifje/Tintin*, which sold so many copies they would make the editors of today's top magazines blush with shame. The comics not only attracted European authors to this little country, they also generated space for local talent to develop. But once again these authors were mainly French-speaking, with the majority of Flemish comic strip artists remaining stuck far too long in the Flemish clay. Even now, a great many of the older authors are still stuck fast in the same clay.



Jeroen Janssen,
The Revenge of Bakamé.



The facts speak for themselves; a survey of the five best-selling comic series in Flanders comes up with the following: *Jommeke*, *Kiekeboe*, *Suske en Wiske*, *F.C. De Kampioenen* and *Urbanus* – in short, purely Flemish comics. And even though each of them sells 100,000 copies on average, with the one exception of *Suske en Wiske*, the Walloons, the Dutch and the rest of the world ignore them completely. Critics, too, often turn up their noses at them. During the 1980s a second generation tried to get a foot in the door with such major Walloon comic publishers as Lombard, Dupuis and Dargaud. But that was no easy task. They purged their stories of any trace of Flemish identity so as to reach a larger (read: more international) readership. William Vance achieved unprecedented success with his *Bob Morane* and *XIII*, as did Griffio, Ersel, Ferry, Marvano and, more recently, Steven Dupré. But this was often at the cost of a lot of blood, sweat and tears, and some of these authors were ignored for a long time by the typical 'Flemish' comic artists, who may have sold a lot of copies but were seldom talented.



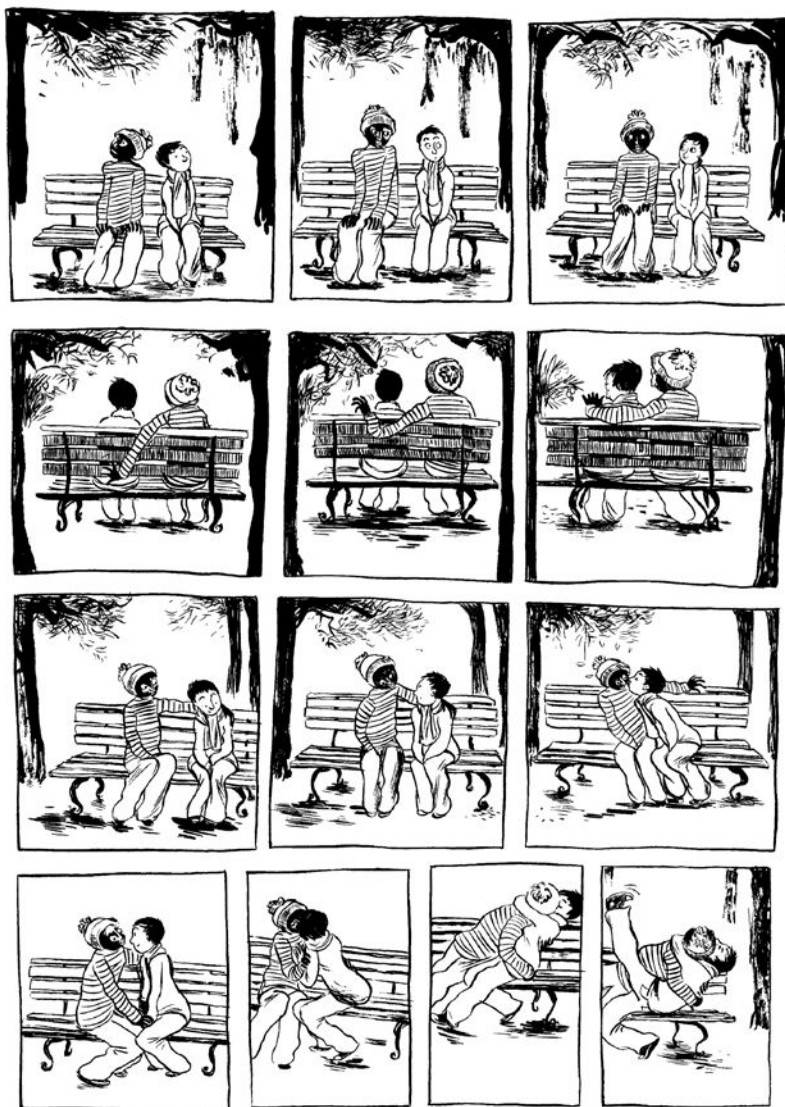
Earning a place on the world map

During the last decade a new generation – the third – has dared to take things one step further. Their sources of inspiration are not the great comic strip giants of yore but rather those international authors who dare to experiment with storyline, colour and style, those who dare to evolve from being merely one who draws comic strips to a comic strip author to a comic strip artist, those who are no longer willing to comply with the demands and norms of the traditional publisher. They also looked at the work of film makers and visual artists, at TV series and animated film series, the Flemish Primitives and legendary American comic strip artists. Heroes and series or stories 48 pages long were no longer an end in themselves. This new generation seemed to look for inspiration mainly in longer stories, many of them (semi-) autobiographical. Their characters are almost without exception real flesh-and-blood people. Their stories became more literary and were more quickly, though sometimes wrongly, termed *graphic novels*. The result was a completely different, more refreshing approach, and one which, probably to their own surprise, caught the attention of an international audience. Their Graphic Novels put Flemish comics on the world map. But something needs to be said here: for some years now they have had the unconditional support of the Flemish Literary Fund (Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren, VFL), an organisation that subsidises literature at some remove from the government but uses government money to do so. For the last few years the VFL has promoted this new generation abroad, which has resulted in a considerable number of foreign contracts. To their great delight, the one-man publishing houses Bries and Oogachtend, the true discoverers of this new generation of Flemish comic strip authors, found that an agent in the form of the VFL was working for them: new translation grants were awarded, and a major exhibition about these young authors organised by the VFL during the Angoulême comic strip festival did the rest. Again thanks to the VFL, these authors had plenty of time to work on their books. Grants were made available for work, production and travel.



Judith Vanistendael,
*Dance by the Light of
the Moon.*

In the meantime, criticism from members of the second, in-between, generation whom strangely enough the Fund refuses to subsidise, is becoming increasingly loud. And their criticism is to some extent justified, for some of these young authors seem now to be subsidised for life, while the Fund persistently refuses to offer grants to authors from the second generation (Marvano, Ersel, Bosschaert, Ken Broeders, Bosschaert, Tom Bouden, and others), despite the fact that their comics are of equally high quality.



Judith Vanistendael,
*Dance by the Light of
 the Moon.*

Be that as it may, the new generation is flourishing as never before. And compared with the preceding generation, you come upon more idiosyncratic worlds when you look at the work of each of this new generation of Flemish graphic novelists. One of them has attempted an autobiography of Louis Armstrong (Philip Paquet), another has produced a pure soap in which three sluts – these are his own words – set out to drain the glamour and glitter of Paris to the dregs (Maarten Van de Wiele), while yet another places a limbless young boy in a setting undeniably inspired by the American master, Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo*. Others again – bearing in mind the international trend in the graphic novel – have taken the autobiographical track. In *No Stories*, Serge Baeken worked out of his system an old incident in which a man was murdered right in front of his house. Judith Vanistendael drew on her love for an asylum seeker from Togo to tell us a heart-rending story about lack of understanding, love, cultural differ-

ences and a defective Belgian asylum policy. Success doesn't seem to stop for Vanistendael. After a French translation, there is now one in English too. And they are not the only ones.

More than Flemish

Nowadays, though, open-minded first- and second-generation Flemish comic strip artists are also looking further than ever before. For example, following his popular humorous Biebel series Marc Legendre turned to producing graphic novels which were outstanding for their dark themes and artistic graphic styles. He was even nominated for the Libris Prize, which till then had seemed to be reserved exclusively for 'real' literature.

But perhaps the most striking among them is Willy Linthout, the creator, please note, of the arch Flemish folk comic strip *Urbanus* – a comic that is in the top five best-selling comic strips in Flanders. The surrealistic approach he used in that resurfaces in his heavily symbolic graphic novel *Years of the Elephant* (Jaren van de olifant) in which he tried to come to terms with his son's suicide. The work has been published in translation by many foreign companies but in 2010 the U.S. provided the cherry on the cake with its nomination in not one but two categories: Best U.S. Edition of International Material en Best Writer/Artist Non Fiction. He won neither of them. A few years earlier Judith Vanistendael's *Dance by the Light of the Moon* (De maagd en de neger) just missed out on the top prizes at Angoulême. It was a pity for them, but the very fact that they were nominated for these Oscars of the comic world was a feather in the cap for Flemish comic strips in general, comic strips which at last are no longer purely Flemish. As a result Flemish graphic novels will only continue to grow in importance. They are centre stage now in Belgium. ■

Translated by Peter Flynn

