

De helaasheid der dingen

The Misfortunates

Presented by: Dorota Walczak-Delanois

The novel is composed of twelve distinct stories-chapters about the life of Gunther Strobbe, who also embodies the voice of the book's narrator. He presents the microcosm of his family: Pierre (Pie) Verhulst, his father, and André, Herman and Karel Verhulst, his three uncles, who all live together somewhere deep in the countryside, in a small Flemish village in Belgium named "Reetveerdegem". The figure of the mother is absent; we learn that after years of marriage she decided to leave. The only woman present among these five men is his old grandmother, Maria. Every day she tries to feed all these non-working but beloved men and to wash their clothes. The family lives, and this is an important context of their poverty, on a street with a water pump and "communist toilets" outside, listening to the "marimba of the rain in the leaky roof". Tenderness, irony, humour and a poetic quality are the real strength of the vivid literary language and of the juicy, precise and finely crafted style of narration.

Although the name of the village is fictional, the novel is largely based on the true life of its author, Dimitri Verhulst. In it, his narration forms an incredible, humorous but also terrifying and realistic portrait of the family and of the small rural community on the margins of society. The narration depicts the fatality of the intergenerational transmission of passivity and of individual and collective inertia, poverty, alcoholism, machismo and various heavy social and political stereotypes, repeated from grandparents to grandchildren in a vicious circle. From the first chapter, entitled "A Beautiful Child" (*Une belle enfant*), to the last, "An Uncle for This Child" (*Un oncle pour cet enfant*), which together form a kind of framing device, readers can watch the telling develop in parallel with the growing up of the author-narrator. He is also the principal protagonist: thirteen years old, he emancipates himself through telling his own story, until years later he returns to the village with his own child, a son for whom Gunther will try to build a different future.

Reading the pages of this novel, one witnesses the many "events" running through Reetveerdegem – the centre of the narration and of Gunther's life – meets the different members of its community, and comes to know the timetable of the Strobbes' days and nights. Their day-to-day is built of always the same things: loafing and killing time, drinking alcohol, picking fights and hitting on the girls and women who pass by, tuning their motorbikes, visiting pubs, and inventing strategies to avoid the bailiffs, the representatives of the welfare office and the law, and even postmen and policemen as the announcers of invariably bad news. Every visit by someone from outside, someone who does not belong or no longer belongs to the community, like aunt Rosie and her daughter Sylvie, who come from Brussels, ends in the inevitable clash of cultures and social spheres. In the end, the small world of the village of Reetveerdegem and of the Strobbe family remains unchangeable, always the same, always isolated from the big "real" world and always preoccupied with basic everyday needs: eating, drinking, defecating, watching TV, receiving social benefits, and ignoring bills and penalty notices.

The novel's stories contain some extraordinary portraits of other villagers, such as Palmyre, the old, cruel and lonely woman; Omer, who attempts the world record in drinking alcohol, and Big Zulma, a strong, hard-drinking woman. Within this basic everyday existence, extraordinary events occur, and the names of the famous, and of other people, appear only through the radio or the screen, or else as the executors of social justice and punishment. In this sense Reetveerdegem is always a caricature of the real, distant world. The Tour de France, for example, is also staged in the village, with the participation of a member of the Strobbe family, though the contest in Reetveerdegem has its own rules. It too is about cycling, but the riders are naked, with obligatory stops for drinking set amounts of beer, whisky and other alcohol; and the stages of the race are in fact the names of cafés, pubs and bars: Olympia, Liars Pub, Rio, Le Gui, L'Oiseau sans tête and others.

The father and patriarch of the Strobbe family professes his attachment to communist ideology, but his struggle consists of not owning anything because if you own something, it can be taken away by the debt collector.

However, Verhulst's novel is also about love, family attachment and affection, and human solidarity, sometimes strangely and poorly understood, and laced with plenty of laughter but also about the melancholy of losing one's illusions and innocence, about a childhood that is always, in a way, happy, and about the effort to preserve dignity even with no hope of a better future. The separation of the child, who is finally placed with a new family, and the ordeal of detoxification and abstinence from alcohol, are among the strong points in the telling of this fascinating novel.

The novel is political in its committed portrayal of the margins, in the sincerity of this literary testimony and in its social dimension. One can see all the problems of contemporary European society, such as the question of emigration, in a kind of caricatural mirror of the small Flemish village. It is also about passions and hobbies and "Baraki" culture, however strange, such as collecting Smurfs or small Jewish plastic figurines, or holding a contest to see who will first glimpse the colour of a passing woman's underwear. The real absence of strong women from the family landscape forms part of the novel's social and political landscape. It also shows the total incompatibility of the rich, educated, institutional world, represented, for example, by Nele Fokedey, who will carry out the final separation and placement of young Gunther with another family. The novel raises the question of social mobility, of self-determination, and of how one is defined by one's place of birth. Its political dimension lies in pointing to the impossibility of ignoring the health of the smallest societal structure, the family, as it grows and declines, confronting readers with the question of its importance. Ultimately, this village and this family can be found, in a universal and symbolic way, in every European country.

LANGUAGE: Flemish / Vlaams

This title was not censored before publishing