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Annelies Beck

Across the Channel

Original title: *Over het Kanaal*

NOVEL

A novel about the communal fate of Belgian fugitives in Glasgow before and during the First World War. It deals with xenophobia, and describes how an indomitable, assertive girl can make all the difference in the world.

Based on an autobiographical family history

About the author

Annelies Beck (Aalst, 1973) is a Belgian journalist who has presented various popular TV magazines for the Flemish national channel as well as programmes on the elections. She presently reports for the daily current affairs programme *TerZake* while working as an anchor for *Vandaag* on Radio 1. In addition she writes reviews for *De Standaard der Letteren*. Annelies Beck read history in Ghent and Brazilian Studies in London. She has directed a short documentary on her great-grandfather's stay in Glasgow during the Great War.

Beck's story is based on her personal family history. What happened to her ancestor inspired both the documentary and her novel *ACROSS THE CHANNEL*.

'My great-grandfather, August Keppens, was stationed in Glasgow during the First World War, together with three of his brothers. I don't know exactly when I first heard his story. As long as I can remember, they have been part of my life. August, the forebear I never knew, and Marie, one of his friends. She died in Glasgow a few years after I was born.

Over the past decade, I have occasionally set aside time to research the backdrop to this story. It was an intensive process. The idea took root that I should write it all down. In time, Marie foisted herself on me, as great-grandfather August receded into the background. She was feisty. He was a paragon of virtue.'



About the book

It is the summer of 1914. Marie Claes thinks that she is travelling with her parents to Glasgow for a week's holiday. Not long afterwards, the First World War breaks out. Thousands of fugitive Belgian citizens arrive in Glasgow. At first, they receive a warm welcome but gradually they are met by a wall of incomprehension and impatience. As her brother fights for his life in the trenches, Marie tries to carve out her own niche in a strange city. She loses her heart to a fugitive from Belgium and befriends a militant Scottish lady, who takes the lead in the fight against rental prices that are relentlessly driven up by war speculators. Then Marie discovers that some people within the Belgian community are also prepared to exploit the misery of their compatriots for their own gain. As Marie tries to denounce the abuse, she threatens to fall victim to a power struggle at the highest level.

Annelies Beck, *Over het Kanaal*
ISBN 978 90 445 1728 6
Hard cover, 320 pages

Excerpt

Never did the memories of that crossing resurface. All that remained was a feeling of ‘neither here nor there’: the notion that she purely existed in her thoughts, between two worlds that she couldn’t make out. That she had only known the place she had left when she had been part of it. The city where she would set foot ashore without ever having been there. Those worlds existed when she was not there, but she would never get to know them like that. As soon as she entered them, they turned into a different version of themselves. Years later she could still evoke the feeling of moving between parallel universes – but what good did that do to anyone?

Night had fallen when they arrived at the flat. Two men had brought them by horse-and-buggy from Central Station. Proud but shy, they had shown them around the dark apartment. A room, a separate bathroom, and a kitchen. That should impress them. Shouldn’t it? They had been far too tired to take it all in and show the proper gratitude. Only the next morning, after a night underneath improvised bedclothes, did they manage to manoeuvre their expectations round the limited space until everything fitted neatly. They were lucky to have found such a place. A bit of scrubbing, some of their own things here and there, and it would be like home. Marie was immediately convinced.

So this was Glasgow, she thought. A two-bedroom flat, at the rear overlooking a courtyard which included a washhouse and clothesline, at the front overlooking a street. On the far side of the road, there were ground floor shops that had the same sort of flats upstairs as the ones in which they lived. Big windows, walls the colour of honey. On one side, their street ended in a park. A church stood on the corner. To the other side, Stevenson Drive turned into a T-junction, with King Albert Road to the left and Kilmarnock Road to the right, the latter a busy main road that led to the centre of the city – but she only discovered that later.

For herself Marie claimed the alcove in the kitchen, close to the stove. Adventure came before comfort. At least it would give her something to write about. Her parents seemed relieved that she instantly regarded the flat as home. They took her along as they made their first round through the building in order to get acquainted.

The door on the other side of the landing was ajar. Her father knocked and called out half-heartedly: ‘Hello?’ It was as if the woman had been waiting for them behind the door. Straight away, it swung open widely. A lady in her sixties answered. She was dressed to the nines: ‘Yes?’ Her voice sounded posh but this seemed a matter of attitude rather than birth. After a false start, that earned him a haughty stare, her father managed to explain who they were. ‘We just wanted to make your acquaintance.’ Madeleine Stewart nodded, relaxing visibly. With a grand gesture, she invited them into her apartment. It was as if they entered a show-box. The rooms were arranged the same way as their own, but the furnishings were so sumptuous that the flat appeared much smaller. Everywhere on the ground lay deep-pile Persian rugs, whilst the trinkets on every surface, and the many portraits and paintings that

were hung on the walls made it difficult to stay focused. Only after a while did Marie see the cage near the window. It contained a measly parakeet hunched up on its perch over a heap of sawdust that was littered with bird droppings and feathers. The tiny animal didn't make any sound. An admonitory glance from her mother pinned Marie to her chair, until she felt the springs through the red velvet cushion. She knew very well that fidgeting was forbidden, so she tried to concentrate on the scene in front of her. They were seated so closely together that it felt uncomfortable, but still the mutual muster passed off in a fairly pleasant atmosphere. At least Marie thought so, based on the poses her parents and Mrs. Stewart struck. She couldn't understand the first word of the English that was spoken here.

Translated by Mooze Jacobs
Last updated 7-Sep-10