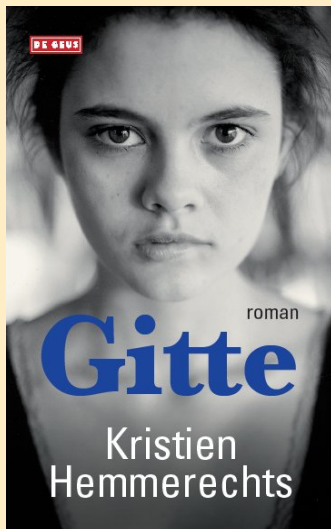




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Kristien Hemmerechts

Gitte

Original title: *Gitte*

NOVEL

Twin Peaks in a Belgian village

Sensual novel about the myth of
innocence

Kristien Hemmerechts is one of the most important writers in the Netherlands and Flanders. She has written several novels and collections of stories dealing with love and sexuality, our inability to face death, and the inadequacies of interpersonal communication.

About the author

Kristien Hemmerechts (Belgium, 1955) is one of the most important writers in the Netherlands and Flanders. She studied Germanic languages and literature at the Catholic Universities of Brussels and Leuven. Her first novella was *A PILLAR OF SALT* (1987). She has since published more than twenty books, both novels and short story collections, and has been awarded numerous prizes.

In 1998 Hemmerechts published *LANGUAGE WITHOUT ME*, an autobiographical essay in commemoration of her late husband, the celebrated Flemish poet Herman de Coninck, who died in 1997. In 2007 she was nominated for the Anna Bijns Prize for her novel *THE TRULY HAPPENED STORY OF VICTOR AND CLARA ROOZE*.

Hemmerechts teaches English literature at University College Brussels and creative writing at the Herman Teirlinck Institute in Antwerp.

In 2009 Hemmerechts transferred to De Geus, feeling De Geus was better suited to the future development of her work. Her first book for De Geus, the nonfiction title *DEATH PROPOSED TO ME*, fits into her oeuvre perfectly as far as its theme and its form are concerned. It is a commercial success.

In her new novel, *GITTE*, Hemmerechts develops a theme that is both psychologically and structurally exciting. The content – the budding sexuality of the main character Gitte, which is shaped by anxiety, shame, lust, love and uncertainty – is brought to life by an exciting storyline.



About the book

Gitte lives with her parents and brothers on a hill outside the village. Their garden borders on a forest, where her great-grandfather Lionel was murdered by poachers. Decades later, stories about the murder are still doing the rounds in the village. The family lives in blissful ignorance, however, until the eldest son Woud starts having delusions about the past.

Gitte senses that something is being hushed up and tries to break away. She plunges into amorous adventures, unaware of the dangers and with no idea of the outcome. But time and again she stumbles across clues to the hidden past that both entice and frighten her.

‘A skilful novel about the unrelenting impact of the past on new lives, about how we are both inspired and tainted by the lives from which we have been born.’ – **Bernard Dewulf**

‘Since her debut, Kristien Hemmerechts has been a grande dame. Her voice and her style have always remained equally sharp and unique, and true to her temperament, she still never shies away from any taboo. No one can imagine our literature without her and without the influence she has exerted on it for many years.’ – **Tom Lanoye**

Kristien Hemmerechts, *Gitte*
ISBN 978 90 445 1727 9
Hardcover, 256 pages
Publication: January 2011

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Zonder grenzen (1991)
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Wit zand (1993)
Lang geleden (1994)
Amsterdam retour (1995)
Veel vrouwen, af en toe een man (1995)
Altijd met uw gezever, gij (1996)
Kort kort lang (1996)
Anna, Esther, Suzanne en de anderen (1997)
Margot en de engelen (1997)
Literatuur na de dood (1998)
Taal zonder mij (LANGUAGE WITHOUT ME) (autobiographical essay, 1998)
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De kinderen van Arthur (2000)
O, toen alles nog voorbij kon gaan (2000)
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De kinderen van Arthur (2005)
De laatste keer (THE LAST TIME) (novel, 2006)
Als een kinderhemd (2006)
In het land van Dutroux (2007)
Ann (2008)
Kleine zielen (LITTLE SOULS) (novel, 2009)
De dood heeft mij een aanzoek gedaan (DEATH PROPOSED TO ME) (nonfiction, 2009)
Gitte (GITTE) (novel, 2011)

Rights

Hemmerechts' work has been sold to numerous countries, including Spain (*Intempestivas*), France (*La Différence*, *Actes Sud*), Germany (*Diana*, *Ullstein*) and Czechia (*Eroika*).

Prizes and awards

1986 - Triennial Prose Prize, Province of Brabant (1986)
1990 - Triennial Flemish National Prize (1990)
1993 - Shortlist AKO Literature Prize (1993)
1993 - Frans Kellendonk Prize (1993)
1996 - Longlist AKO Literature Prize
2002 - Longlist AKO Literature Prize
2003 - Longlist Libris Literature Prize
2004 - Longlist AKO Literature Prize
2007 - Nomination Anna Bijns Prize
2008 - Longlist Libris Literature Prize

The press

On DEATH PROPOSED TO ME (2010)

'Hemmerechts describes her internal conflict in a matter-of-fact and occasionally hilarious way.' – *Mind Magazine*

'A tender and haunting book. [...] Very confrontational, but always with the necessary rays of sunshine.' – *Nieuwsblad*

'Fascinating. She divulges her thoughts with unrelentingly candour.' – *Noordhollands Dagblad*

'Surprisingly enough, not a sad book: this exploration of death also generates a wealth of thoughts about life and love.' – *Gazet van Antwerpen*

‘I began reading it immediately and couldn’t stop. That is the best compliment to any writer.’
– *comedian and singer Paul van Vliet*

‘Hemmerechts’ tone is vulnerable, searching, relativising, incisive, restrained and sometimes hilarious.’ – *Ezzulia.nl*

‘A beautiful, intimate book that moves the reader.’ – *Algemeen Dagblad*

‘Not a sombre book, but a moving account in which she tells how she is still struggling with what happened to her.’ – *Libelle*

‘The account of a genuine quest for meaning, a quest which also delivers a wealth of topics for discussion.’ – *De leeswolf*

‘The book is a kaleidoscope, it is certainly not just dark and depressing; it brings its reader all the shades and hues of life and death. Beautiful, sincere, moving.’ – *NBD-Biblion*

On LITTLE SOULS (2009)

‘In LITTLE SOULS, Hemmerechts brings St Theresa of Lisieux back to life (...) and demonstrates how much she can empathise with her subject. Hemmerechts gives a unique twist to the story of the saint, with considerable room for detail. The author’s pleasantly retiring narrative style, which fits perfectly with her subject, gives the book a special place in her writing. (...). What’s more important is that Hemmerechts has found the correct tone for her novel and has been able to maintain a balance between all sorts of extremes: slavish devotion and a sense of reality, Catholicism and atheism, faith and superstition.’ – *Opzij*

‘This novel is also about faith in the miracle that the author performs. (...) The reader is reminded of the rich and vivid imagery of Jane Austen.’ – *Het Financieele Dagblad*

‘From beginning to end, LITTLE SOULS remains an entertaining, easy-to-read book that deals with a variety of different themes and actually succeeds in presenting a positive message without being pedantic. One cannot but admire the way Hemmerechts transforms a historical narrative into a contemporary novel about human vanity and infidelity, and for her desire to write a solid story in which life’s blows no longer appear to be meaningless coincidences.’ – *De Standaard der Letteren*

‘Given the pen from which it flowed, the fact that LITTLE SOULS is a rich novel that you can read in one sitting doesn’t come as much of a surprise.’ – *Algemeen Dagblad*

‘Hemmerechts describes events with poignancy, but without cynicism. Miracles exist, if only you believe.’ – *Elsevier*

‘When she’s researching and writing essays, Hemmerechts is in her element and really has something to say.’ – *de Volkskrant*

‘A gem.’ – *Libelle*

‘In *LITTLE SOULS*, Kristien Hemmerechts describes our need to believe in miracles in a convincing and effective manner.’ – *Maria*

On ANN (2008)

‘The sincerity, wisdom and honesty with which the author writes about sensitive matters, about loss and death, is nothing short of touching.’ – *De Telegraaf*

‘Hemmerechts’ pure, affectionate, but never sickly or sombre tone is what holds this collection together.’ – *Trouw*

On THE LAST TIME (2004)

‘An ode to the imagination.’ – *de Volkskrant*

‘A novel that fascinates because of its melancholy, but also because of its mental leaps, somersaulting all over the place. This mourning process is as ghastly as life itself, but it has produced a magnificent book.’ – *Algemeen Dagblad*

‘A pleasantly readable mix of satire and relational humour, a deconstruction of the erotic in a light-hearted wrapper.’ – *De Standaard*

On LANGUAGE WITHOUT ME (1998)

‘More than a homage to a partner and poet: a work of integrity from a sensitive and powerful writer.’ – *NRC Handelsblad*

‘A vigorous and witty book offering an affectionate portrait of an exceptional man.’ – *Opzij*

Excerpt from the book

To the old folk in the ramshackle houses by the church, I was ‘the forester’s Gitte’. And my brothers were ‘the forester’s Woud and Onno’. His framed photo was kept tucked away in the bottom drawer of the kitchen cabinet, among the tablecloths and serviettes that were too ragged or too stained to be used anymore, but that we kept for when we needed a rag. Lionel Ghyssele. A tall, mustachioed man in a green uniform decorated with badges and medals, and with that infamous shotgun over his shoulder, the one with which he peppered the buttocks of poachers with shot. One dark night his head was beaten in and he was left for dead in a pool of blood.

‘It was bound to happen some day,’ said mama, who thought that we should all be told the truth about everything. ‘Those people had nothing. What were they supposed to live on? Dew?’

Three poor souls got sent to prison for that murder, but nobody believed they were guilty. The real killers were in France. But just try looking there.

‘Especially then!’ said mama, as if France was bigger back then and Belgium smaller. Or the police more sluggish and less adept at investigating.

Mama’s grandad, the surly forester, decreed: ‘People have no business in a forest.’ He had a little hut there, but his wife and child were never allowed to visit it. *Hic sunt animalia et arbores. Et Lionel, the forester.* But he who sows the wind will reap the whirlwind. He was slaughtered without mercy by the oppressed wretches who were crying out for justice. And for a full belly.

‘When there is that much pent-up anger, something is bound to blow,’ pontificated mama. ‘He wouldn’t even allow people to pick mushrooms!’

My mother sided resolutely with the people, who had risen up against the tyrant. But now she herself was elevated above the people, living in the place where years before forester Lionel had built his humble log cabin.

‘We wanted to live well away from all the gossip,’ she said, meaning: I wanted to live well away from all the gossip. Her privacy was sacred to her. To protect it, no price was too high. And we were entitled to it too, she said. She never entered our room without knocking. The rumours welled up out of the ground. They nestled in our blood.

We weren’t very difficult to find. At the Spar, where Josiane and Mon served their dwindling clientele with never-dwindling devotion, you stood with your back to the church. You looked over your left shoulder at the house where mama had lived as a child. After the death of her parents it was sold to a carpet manufacturer, who had it completely renovated; he made it his ‘little place in the country’. It was usually empty. That made mama very sad.

Perhaps you quickly bought a bar of chocolate in the Spar and then you walked out of the village. You crossed the stream, in which the water was seething white, as if it wanted to rush away as quickly as possible. You paused for a moment to admire the dancing foam. At the foot of our ‘mountain’, you broke off a piece of chocolate and put it in your mouth. You broke off a second piece and put that in your mouth too. Then you took a deep breath and began the climb. One after the other, you quickly passed five villas, which were built long after the last poacher, robber, forester and smuggler had disappeared from the area. In the second lived chubby Elien, who was born on the same day and in the same hospital as Woud and who told everyone that one day she would marry him. ‘I just know it,’ she’d say with a

serene smile. When she called on us, Woud slipped away into the forest and Onno and I were stuck with her. ‘Just pretend I’m not here’, she said calmly. ‘I know I’m not welcome.’ – ‘So why do you come here then?’ asked logical Onno. ‘She comes for Woud’, I said. ‘But he isn’t here!’ shouted Onno. The only one who was glad to see her was papa. He called her ‘friend’. ‘Well, friend, what good news have you brought us?’ As if she were a messenger from a faraway city.

The road meandered on. The branches of the beech trees to its left and to its right reached out to each other longingly, their impatient roots breaking through the road surface. Every election brought promises that it would be resurfaced, but mama and papa preferred it the way it was. The worse the road, the less traffic there was to bother us. After the fourth bend a grey façade with discrete little windows came into view. That was our house. If you walked into the garden and turned to face the rear of the house, you could look inside and see the portrait photos aunty Chris took with her Leica when she was staying with us. Onno looked a bit cross-eyed, but that was because he had only just had his glasses. And my hair was combed straight back, which didn’t suit me at all. Woud looked like a young faun. Ten, eleven and twelve we were back then, although Onno only looked about eight at the most and Woud already had the start of an Adam’s apple. His blond curls fell to his naked shoulders and the cold sore on his lower lip made his mouth look sensual.

We had nothing to hide. You could see us sitting at the big table papa had made. He was standing with a wooden ladle, ready to serve some steaming soup into earthenware bowls. Pumpkin soup made from pumpkins from the garden. He looked more than ever like a priest who was about to break some bread and share it with his disciples.

‘Careful,’ said mama, afraid he would spill some soup.

Woud banged his spoon impatiently on the table. He was hungry.

‘Calm down,’ said mama, laying her hand over his hand.