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# Kristien Hemmerechts

## *Death Proposed to Me*

*On death, life and love*

Original title:

*De dood heeft mij een aanzoek gedaan*

*Over dood, leven en liefde*

NONFICTION

**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.**

**Hemmerechts lets the reader into her private domain without making them feel like voyeurs. What she reveals is all-baring excellence.**

## About the author

Kristien Hemmerechts (Brussels, 1955) studied Germanic languages and literature at the Catholic University of Brussels (KUB) and the Catholic University of Leuven (KUL). She made her debut as a writer of fiction in 1986 with three stories in English, published in the collection *First Fictions: Introduction 9*. Her first novella was *A Pillar of Salt* (1987), for which she won the Triennial Prose Prize of the Province of Brabant. In 1990, she won the Triennial Flemish National Prize for narrative prose. Recognition from the Netherlands followed in 1993 with her nomination for the AKO Literature Prize for *Christmas and Other Love Stories* and winning the first Frans Kellendonk Prize for her entire oeuvre. In 1998 she published *Language Without Me*, an autobiographical essay in honour of her husband, the renowned Flemish poet Herman de Coninck, who died in 1997. Hemmerechts was nominated in 2007 for the Anna Bijns Prize with *The True Story of Victor and Clara Rooze*. Her novel *Little Souls* appeared in March 2009.

With a total of more than twenty novels, story collections and essay titles to her name, Hemmerechts has also written a number of short film scenarios. In addition to teaching English literature at University College Brussels (HUB) she also teaches creative writing at the Herman Teirlinck Institute in Antwerp.



## About the book

Death proposed to me  
I turned white from blushing.  
(I blushed like white roses.)

Herman de Coninck, poet and husband

Hemmerechts' writing explores the major themes – life, love and death – in a plethora of literary forms. Her new book is a diary about death. The author kept a diary between October 9<sup>th</sup> 2008 and July 9<sup>th</sup> 2009 in which she intermingled what troubled her on a personal level with what was going on in society at large. She noted events, ideas, anecdotes, reflections, facts and statements about topics varying from the death of a loved one to extreme cases of

murder. They undermine, reinforce and put into perspective the author's self-image and the image she has of society.

The nine months covered by the diary do not lead to a cathartic birth of something that started in embryonic form. The book does not relate a growth process leading to a mature definition of death; rather it represents a series of attempts to grasp an ungraspable reality with words. *Death Proposed to Me* is not a sombre book. It talks about our lust for life and the fundamental need to give that life meaning. 'The best thing of all is to be loved for who or what we really are.'

Kristien Hemmerechts, *Death Proposed to Me*  
ISBN 978 90 445 1568 8  
Hardcover, 224 pages

### Bibliography

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Brede heupen (1989)  
Zonder grenzen (1991)  
Kerst en andere liefdesverhalen ('*Christmas and Other Love Stories*') (stories, 1992)  
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)  
De tuin der onschuldigen (1999)  
De kinderen van Arthur (2000)  
O, toen alles nog voorbij kon gaan (2000)  
Alle verhalen (2001)  
Een jaar als (g)een ander. Dagboek 5 februari 2001 - 15 februari 2002 (2003)  
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De waar gebeurde geschiedenis van Victor en Clara Rooze ('*The True Story of Victor and Clara Rooze*') (novel, 2005)  
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)

## Rights

Hemmerechts' work has been translated into German, Spanish, French, Czech, Polish, Bulgarian and Russian.

## 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 *Kleine zielen* (*Little Souls*) (2009)

'In *Kleine zielen*, 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, *Kleine zielen* 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 *Kleine zielen* 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 *Kleine zielen*, 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 *De laatste keer* (*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 *Taal zonder mij* (*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

October 9<sup>th</sup>

I am a white fifty-three year old woman and I'm thinking about rounding off my life. Voilà, it's on paper in all its purity. We don't commit suicide, we round off. It's Thursday October 9<sup>th</sup> 9.54 pm and this morning I talked at a press conference on our country's alarming suicide figures. And that it's high time we did something about it! I am the incarnation of ambivalence. You don't have to look at me long to realise it. A lot of people avoid me because of the ambivalence. It's not my choice. It's just there. A human condition. A survival strategy. Or the essential characteristic of a writer who has to be alert to every side of a situation, no matter how conflicting.

'Ever meet a normal person? Were you impressed?'

An inspirational slogan.

I turn it into: 'Ever meet an honest person? Were you impressed?'

But both statements are equally honest: the yearning to round off *and* indignation at the high number of suicides.

This is a project.

The project consists of the question: Why do I want to round off my life?

And also: How can I develop an attitude, a mentality, a frame of mind that leads me away from this yearning to round off?

Why do people want to live? Why do they want to die? What is life anyway? Why is it so wonderful and at the same time such a pain?

The answers are still pending. Keep reading.

Don't despair. Perhaps it'll be revealed to you. We shall see, *we shall see*.

It's 10.01 pm. Bart hasn't called yet, or sent a text. If he mails, it'll have to wait till tomorrow. I've already switched off my computer.

Should I consult my GP?

Doctor, doctor, give me the news.

You're in good health.

You're not a candidate for euthanasia.

Sorry, but we can't help you. Think of all the wonderful years you still have left.

P.S. Some might suspect from my handwriting that I've been drinking. That I procured some booze. That I partook. I can confirm that suspicion.

October 10<sup>th</sup>

A man referred to by the BBC as 'Doctor Death' has arrived in London from Australia to give a workshop on *assisted suicide*, the term the British use for euthanasia. The difference with assisted suicide is that you need to do the deed yourself. The people at the workshop think it's unfair that doctors have the knowledge and the means at their disposal to end lives and others don't. Doctor Death provides the knowledge, but not the means.

Someone told me recently that suicide is very simple: You take some sleeping pills and then pull a plastic bag over your head. Seemed smart enough to me. But the question is: When exactly do you pull the bag over your head? If you're still conscious there's a fair chance

you'll pull it off again. If you wait too long you're likely to slip away and forget the bag. What if you don't have the strength? Another question: Do I want to be found with a plastic bag over my head? And what kind of plastic bag? Department store chi seems okay to me, so does a neutral black bin liner. Whatever you choose, it's not exactly dignified. But is there such a thing? And is my yearning to round off my life not inspired by an awareness of the complete absence of dignity I can expect to have to face? Do it now. Go out in glory. Fifty-three. Many a man's heart packs it in at fifty-three. Perhaps it's a natural terminus, time to get off the bus.

In spite of – or thanks to? – this project, today was a good day. When I arrived home a moment ago I was overcome by a feeling of normalness (is that a word?). After a busy day with two school presentations of *Too Crazy for Words!*? I was looking forward to a quiet night in. I had earned it and was even looking forward to a visit from my husband, with whom, alas, I no longer share the same roof.

In an effort to preserve the feeling, I cycled to the local supermarket and bought a cabbage in a fit of nostalgia. Cabbage was often on the menu in Amsterdam because it was cheap.

I told the director about the struggle I had on stage with the fear that people would think I was a cow. Or a slut. And that it probably had to do with my sister, who tried to convince me daily when we were young that nobody could stand the sight of me. According to him, this trauma was why I was on stage in the first place. I said: 'Maybe I would have made it on stage earlier without the trauma!'

You can never tell the whole truth. There's a pitch-black hole you can never put on display.

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Translated by Brian Doyle  
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