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Marek van der Jagt

Gstaad 95-98

Original title: *Gstaad 95-98*

NOVEL

Marek van der Jagt was proclaimed an extraordinary talent from the moment his debut was published by De Geus. In spite of the secrecy surrounding the fact that Marek van der Jagt was a pseudonym for Arnon Grunberg, the true identity of the author quickly became the subject of considerable speculation. In his short existence (starting out in 2000 and announcing his demise in an essay written for Philosophy Month in 2005), Marek van der Jagt has inspired more writing than his own pen has produced.

Marek van der Jagt is an author you will constantly want to return to – a fascinating genius and an intellectual sensualist.

About the author

Marek van der Jagt (Vienna, 1967) was born, so he claims, the son of a Dutch father and a German-speaking mother. In 2000 he appeared, completely out of the blue, on the front line of Dutch literature with his novel *The Story of My Baldness*, about a grotesque search for the perfect amour fou. Without further ado, the book was awarded the Anton Wachter Prize – a biannual prize for the best literary debut. The award ceremony came to an abrupt halt, however, when rumours had it that Van der Jagt was a guise used by novelist Arnon Grunberg (internationally renowned since his successful debut *Blue Mondays* (*Blauwe maandagen*)). The subsequent uproar swelled when the Dutch association for the promotion of books CPNB commissioned Van der Jagt, whoever he might have been, to write the annual essay for the Dutch Book Week. For the very first time in history, the author of the essay (67,000 copies sold in one week) did not show up at the Book Week's literary ball, let alone anywhere else in the country.

Gstaad 95-98 is Van der Jagt's second novel. It was presented by Arnon Grunberg to the Dutch ambassador in Vienna at an international press tour in May 2002. During the tour, rumours were confirmed when it was revealed that Grunberg and Van der Jagt were indeed one and the same person. The novel immediately climbed the major Dutch bestseller lists and it was nominated for the AKO prize for literature.

The essay *Monogamous* was published in 2002 on the occasion of the Dutch Book Week, followed, in 2005, by the essay Van der Jagt wrote for Philosophy Month, *Otto Weininger or Is There Such A Thing as A Jew*.

In 2008, on the occasion of De Geus' twenty-fifth anniversary, a special edition of Van der Jagt's entire oeuvre appeared under the title *I Passed From Hand To Hand: Collected works*.



'The past is an inexhaustible domain, and yet it doesn't seem to have really existed. As if it only exists in the documents that have appeared about my past, in the facts that could not sufficiently satisfy inquisitive individuals, in the hastily assembled news reports by journalists who, through no fault of their own, are no Hemingways.'

– Marek van der Jagt

About the book

François Lepeltier is a beloved sommelier at the Palace Hotel in Gstaad. Nobody knows more about wines than he does. Then he makes an unforgivable faux pas that will be talked about for a long time. In this novel, the ‘monster of Gstaad’ – being held in custody – relates in a lucid apology what it was that drove him through the years, how he came to be the way he is, and how he and his mother survived a bizarre journey involving a variety of guesthouses and hotels before they ended up in the luxurious Swiss ski resort of Gstaad.

Those who cannot become anything, must, in Lepeltier’s philosophy, become what they play at.

And he manages to do just that. In Baden-Baden he plays a feeble-minded child while his mother steals from shopkeepers, in Stuttgart he plays dentist to the poor and needy, and in Châteaux d’Oex all the girls are convinced he is the perfect ski instructor.

‘Nothing is more horrible than the proximity of another person. Nothing is more desirable either. If, indeed, I have sinned, then it is only because I sought the proximity of the other – and found it.’

[Marek van der Jagt, *Gstaad 95-98*](#)
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Bibliography

De geschiedenis van mijn kaalheid (‘The Story of My Baldness’) (novel, 2000)

Gstaad 95-98 (‘Gstaad 95-98’) (novel, 2002)

Monogaam (‘Monogamous’) (essay, 2002)

Otto Weininger of bestaat de jood (‘Otto Weininger, or Is There Such A Thing as A Jew’) (essay, 2005)

Ik ging van hand tot hand: verzameld werk (‘Passed From Hand To Hand: Collected Works’) (collected works, 2008)

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The press about Gstaad 95-98

‘Contrary to the hero in a conventional novel, young François Lepeltier does not opt for evil as a survival strategy, but as the expression of a measured philosophical point of view. Thus he rises high above the half feeble-minded, half brilliant little monster he is at the outset (...). One of the most bewildering, and yet one of the most fascinating books I have set eyes on lately.’ – *Jaap Goedegebuure* in *Eindhovens Dagblad*

‘*Gstaad 95-98* is a beautiful book. Cross out most of what has appeared between today and the Hermans-Reve-Mulisch generation, and one is left with no other conclusion than that Grunberg/Van der Jagt, as one of the few, has given the Netherlands a literary voice again.’ – *Max Pam* in *HP/De Tijd*

‘This author throws caution to the winds without losing control. An endless chain of crazy and hilarious scenes passes before the reader (...) in collected tones, larded with recalcitrant one-liners – as if it’s the most ordinary thing in the world.’ – *Arnold Heumakers* in *NRC Handelsblad*

‘If Grunberg is behind this, it proves his versatility as well as his talent for writing a complete novel, besides producing books that are both funny and chatty (...). *Gstaad 95-98* unsettles the way *Das Parfum* by Patrick Süskind does, or *Le Roi des Aulnes* by Michel Tournier and *Les Particules élémentaires* by Michel Houellebecq do – novels that portray a human condition we thought we had left behind.’ – *Rob Schouten* in *Trouw*

‘Scenes you will never forget include the one about Mr. and Mrs. Ceccherelli in which Grunberg demonstrates that he is a splendid author who refuses to play the sociologist, the know-all or the society reformer. He is not looking for generalities, but detailed agony, precision and breathtaking humour.’ – *Kees ’t Hart* in *De Groene Amsterdammer*

‘This is how Van der Jagt catches the reader: whatever appears nasty and abnormal becomes something sweet and tender in the account of Lepeltier’s experience. The description of Lepeltier as a totally inexperienced dentist, for example, who attempts to cure a poor Kurd’s toothache (...) is a brilliant sketch, which makes you laugh without wondering whether it is appropriate to do so.’ – *Arjan Peters* in *de Volkskrant*

‘Whether you want to or not, Van der Jagt succeeds in making you sense not only rage, disgust and pity, but sympathy as well. In François Lepeltier’s sadistic universe, “distastes” become acts of true love and genuine goodness.’ – *Onno Bloem* in *De Standaard*

‘Statistically speaking the amount of wickedness François Lepeltier has to endure is very large – but it is not implausible. An oppressive conclusion.’ – *Eline Verburg* in *Spits*

‘*Gstaad 95-98* makes clear that Dutch literature has had Mulisch and Grunberg, and then, for quite some time, there’s nothing. So be it.’ – *Koen Eykhout* in *De Limburger*

The press about The Story of My Baldness

‘A refreshing, original novel. (...) Van der Jagt pulls the strings in his story like an accomplished novelist. (...) His humour is that of a wasp in a jar. (...) We were warned from the very start: “This is the story of my baldness and I have no intention of ever putting another word on paper.” Let us hope that this statement refers to the character Marek van der Jagt, and not to the author. Yet if it does, I for one propose a petition.’ – *Jeroen Vullings* in *Vrij Nederland*

‘Exemplary!’ – *Martin Ros*

‘A very funny and witty book (...) it leaves all other debuts far behind.’ – *Maarten 't Hart*

‘The tone, the humour and the narrative’s fast pace amply demonstrate that Van der Jagt has been an apprentice of Grunberg.’ – *de Volkskrant*

‘What magnificent scepticism triumphs in this novel, that as a book of life and death provides a dignified access to the key of life. And that is *l’amour fou*. (...) A subtle and gracefully written little masterpiece. (...) This book has surpassed all others and made them superfluous.’ – *Jury Report of the Anton Wachter Prize 2000*

‘A virtuoso stylistic exercise! Apart from an entertaining story, *The Story of My Baldness* also offers several pleasant asides on philosophy, truth and lies, fiction and writing.’ – *De Morgen*

‘Beautifully formulated gems of wisdom. (...) Its impressive ending places this book among the best novels of the year.’ – *Trouw*

‘A wonderful book, at times immensely sad, at times hilarious and rich.’ – *NRC Handelsblad*

‘This is not just a good book, it is a very good book indeed. In some ways it is even better than Grunberg’s recent novel *Fantoompijn/Phantom Pain*.’ – *HP/De Tijd*

‘Aren’t we lucky to have another wonderful novel.’ – *Standaard der Letteren*

‘If this book is by Arnon Grunberg, it is his best book to date, even if he calls himself mediocre and characterizes writing as one of life’s most subtle and sly negations. If this is mediocre, it certainly is a superior mediocrity.’ – *Hervormd Nederland*

A fragment from the novel

Everybody longs for pain. Either I should have remained single, or people should have avoided me, or I should have been instantly removed from the community. Perhaps they are afraid to admit it – after all, there are universally accepted propositions and profundities, colleagues and relatives to take into account, dogmas no one dares to challenge, taboos that have changed, quite by accident it would seem, into the umpteenth golden calf. But the biggest and deepest pain is the absence of all pain, is the ultimate painlessness, is the absence of all drama, and therefore of any story.

What offended me most in my reconciliation with coincidence was coincidence's shitty nature.

Surrendering in advance, before even a single shot was fired.

Apart from my conception, coincidence has not been of any consequence in my life. I have manipulated coincidence, I have played with it. And I am still playing now.

From my father I inherited my name, François Lepeltier. Pronounced *le-pel-chay*, but in Heidelberg everyone consistently said *lay-pel-tiah*, and so I started saying *lay-pel-tiah* myself. Even the experts now address me with 'Mister Lay-pel-tiah'.

One or two people have asked, 'where's that funny name from?' Then I must say, 'actually it's *le-pel-chay*, from Brittany, but just call me *lay-pel-tiah*.'

Cancer of the bowel had reduced my father to no more than the baby I once was – a bag of bones, a name wrapped up as a human being. Sloppily wrapped, but healthy.

For some people their name is a curse, for others it's a blessing. I've never been able to see it as anything but the luck of the draw. Unlucky at cards, lucky in love, they say. The reverse is also true.

You make your own luck. That is another tradition I am rooted in – the tradition of the loaded dice, the marked cards. The tradition of making luck.

My mother was a chambermaid in a small, modest but decent hotel, so I'm told, in Heidelberg. That is where she met him. In room 17. And I was conceived in that room. Not on the bed, there was no time for that, but in the bathroom, standing by the washbasin.

The man whose name I bear was on his way to an important appointment when he succumbed to my mother's charms, to her breasts, her hair, and her nose. She entered without knocking, thinking the guest was already in the breakfast room, but he was standing there, shaving. A brief conversation about the weather followed. One thing led to another.

The first, the real François Lepeltier traded in down. Goose down mostly. He filled duvets with down.

They were thirty-eight years between them, but that is nothing to love.

My mother was nineteen when she delivered me into this world. More of a child than a mama, an older sister rather than a mother. Here I will give her the name she deserves, her own name – Mathilde.

Mathilde was her name and to me she has always been Mathilde. Three syllables to which my history clings, sometimes three syllables are sufficient to start and sustain a fever.

The past is an inexhaustible domain, and yet it doesn't seem to have really existed. As if it only exists in the documents that have appeared about my past, in the facts that could not

sufficiently satisfy inquisitive individuals, in the hastily assembled news reports by journalists who, through no fault of their own, are no Hemingways.

If it is true what they say, that the future is determined by the past, then what is the present, and more particularly, who am I?

To be able to influence the future, I started falsifying the past. Now I will undo the falsifications.

The faith of others, which has swept me along and whipped me up to unprecedented heights, has become unbearable.

I must return to the person I was – the remainder of a man I never knew, the result of an affair that started in room 17 and ended there. The remnant of love – what remains after fate has struck.

No other baby has probably seen the inside of as many hotel rooms as I have. When I could barely crawl, Mathilde already took me with her to work, in a kind of rucksack. It wasn't ideology that made her become a working mother, it was necessity. She had no time for ideologies. Her ideology was survival, the only ideology I respect, the only one that doesn't deceive you into thinking you won't be left empty-handed as long as you obey.

Look, my hands are empty.

Then why this catalogue? For precisely this reason, because my hands are empty. I open my life to disaster tourists, and then I will close it permanently.

She cleaned rooms, Mathilde said, because it helped her organise her thoughts. And because she did not know what else to do. There was nothing that did not bore her after a few hours, if not sooner. She spent the largest part of her life cleaning hotel rooms.

Perhaps she was a secret philosopher, one that had decided to be silent, my Mathilde, my sister who accidentally conceived me, because of animal magnetism she later told me. She had never experienced anything like it. She said such attraction has to be stronger than reason, the mind, fear of the future. Animal magnetism sees no future, it sniffs and smells only the present, just like a starving man can smell a kettle of soup simmering five hundred meters away.

I was offered up for adoption a few times. A couple that had fruitlessly tried to make babies for five years and had visited many renowned clinics, soon showed serious interest.

My grandmother and grandfather, Mathilde's parents, were filled with love and understanding, but this understanding could not mask their disapproval of Mathilde's conduct, and they had discretely urged Mathilde, not long after my father's funeral, to give the child away to 'people who need it more than you do'.

They knew a couple. The child would be in good hands there. It could be arranged discretely.

If I understand correctly, my grandmother and grandfather were friendly people. They had known Emperor Wilhelm personally. My grandfather used to be the director of the municipal library and he still fulfilled an important role in the cultural life of the town of Heidelberg.

Once a year they had dinner with the mayor.

Today, I realise, I got in the way of their social contacts and my existence cast a blot on their reputation. I was too much of a reminder of the kind of urge everybody prefers to forget, of their own child, Mathilde, who had decided not to move up, but to move down. Not because the gutter attracted her, but because her world view was too narrow to see the outcasts of the

earth and she therefore felt no need to run from those outcasts, who can sometimes, it must be said, run pretty fast in spite of their outcastness. She wasn't afraid of ending up where no one wants to end up.

The adoption came to nothing. The couple that needed me more than Mathilde did, chose an older baby, a little girl from Trier. Gorgeous. Lovely. Unblemished. My large hands had put the couple off. And a number of other imperfections that need not be named here. Ah, those writers who can dwell on a physical defect for 240 pages, or for 360 pages on a mild earthquake (6 on the Richter Scale) exactly 21 days before the protagonist's first ejaculation. They do have their use and should definitely be kept, but I don't have time for them. The path of vice takes much out of a man.

Translation Maggie Oattes
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