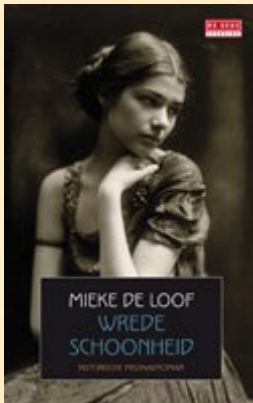




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Mieke de Loof

Cruel Beauty

Original title: *Wrede schoonheid*

THRILLER

Longlisted for the Golden Noose 2010

Winner of the Hercule Poirot Prize 2004

**An incisive historical crime novel:
exhilarating, disturbing and stylistically
superior**

‘A gem of malevolence!’

– *Ineke van den Bergen* in *de Volkskrant*

Mieke de Loof
Cruel Beauty

About the author

Sociologist and philosopher Mieke de Loof (Aalst, 1951) won the 2004 Hercule Poirot Prize – an annual prize for the best Flemish crime novel – with *Satanic Sacrifice*, which sold a little under 20,000 copies.

Her second 'Ignatz novel', *Labyrinth of Illusion*, appeared in 2006 and was nominated for the Hercule Poirot Prize and tipped for the Diamond Bullet 2007. *Cruel Beauty* is the third novel in the cycle and the first to be published by De Geus.

De Loof is one of the driving forces behind the Society of Flemish Crime Writers (www.misdaadauteurs.be) and has served as its president since the end of 2007.

De Loof's books embody the mentality and atmosphere exuded by fin de siècle Vienna, at that time the European epicentre of art, culture and philosophy. Her style is jagged and suggestive; her narrative, plot development and style demanding the reader's constant attention. Reviewers consistently praise the originality of her work.

About the book

Vienna, 1914. Ksaveri Ignatz – by all appearances a psychiatrist, but in reality a Jesuit and secret agent – bumps into Von Graff, his old sexology professor, in the hallways of the renowned faculty of medicine, and accepts an invitation to join him for lunch. The professor is found murdered the next day. The last person to have seen him alive is the controversial Viennese artist Egon Schiele.

Shortly thereafter, Ignatz' lady friend Elisabeth confides in him that a public prosecutor has approached her to help solve a series of horrific murders. All the victims were young girls and were found in positions that seemed to refer to the paintings of Schiele. Everything seems to suggest that the killer was also responsible for Von Graff's death.

Ignatz and Elisabeth set out like a pair of bloodhounds in search of the artist-sex killer, only to find that they themselves are being hunted ...

Mieke de Loof, *Wrede schoonheid*
ISBN 978 90 445 1558 9
Hardcover, 224 p.

Bibliography

En niemand hoort je huilen ('And No One Hears You Cry'); nonfiction, Kritak 1982
Duivels offer ('Satanic Sacrifice'); crime, The House of Books 2004
Labyrint van de waan ('Labyrinth of Illusion'); crime, The House of Books 2006
Wrede schoonheid ('Cruel Beauty'); crime, De Geus 2010

Prizes and awards

2004 – Hercule Poirot Prize
2004 – Nomination Shadow Prize
2006 – Nomination Hercule Poirot Prize
2007 – Tip list Diamond Bullet
2010 – Longlist Golden Noose
2010 – Nominated for Knack Hercule Poirot Prize

The press on *Labyrinth of Illusion*:

‘De Loof’s book does more than confirm her talents, it shows us that she is capable of more.’ – *Crimezone.nl*

‘An impressive and well-documented thriller about the intrigues of a church in danger of losing its authority. A novel peppered with superlative dialogues, in which the emotionless pursuit of power takes centre stage.’ – *Knack*

‘An original thriller, unyielding and lucidly composed, based on a plethora of historical sources and figures.’ – *Het Nieuwsblad*

The press on *Satanic Sacrifice*:

‘A gem of malevolence!’ – *Ineke van den Bergen in de Volkskrant*

‘An original and exceptionally un-Flemish historical thriller. The surprise of the year.’ – *De Standaard*

‘Fascinating short thriller ... very much outside the mould and perhaps one of the most original thrillers to have been written in Flanders in recent years.’ – *De Morgen*

‘A praiseworthy breath of fresh air in the world of Flemish thriller writing.’ – *Crimezone.nl*

‘Erudite and subtle [...]. An astounding debut.’ – *Jos van Cann in De Limburger*

Fragment from the novel

It was March 8th 1914, quarter to six, and the stars pierced the deep blue sky. Ignatz enjoyed visiting Vienna's Naschmarkt on Saturday mornings, at the crack of dawn. He could see the smoking braziers in the distance. He turned up his collar against the cutting wind that blustered unimpeded around the Secession building, the 'golden cauliflower' or the 'Assyrian toilet', as the scoffing Viennese had dubbed the magnificent Jugendstil edifice. In the glow of the streetlamps, its golden dome of laurel leaves looked like a field of outlandish, golden frostwork, serrated, frizzed and stiff in the icy morning air. Ignatz huddled into his black leather jacket, pulling the earflaps of his fur hat over his ears in order to muffle the shrill voices of the newspaper vendors shouting out the sensational headlines, the one trying to outdo the other in volume. He passed an advertising column plastered with a less than flattering photograph of his former professor. Although he had made up his mind to pay no attention to the disgraceful utterances of the gutter press, he could not help but notice the strident text beneath the photograph:

WHO IS THE REAL PROFESSOR VON GRAFF?

THE *ILLUSTRIERTE WIENER EXTRABLATT* HAS BEEN LOOKING FOR ANSWERS.

TOMORROW, IN AN EXCLUSIVE EDITION OF *THE ILLUSTRIERTE WIENER EXTRABLATT*:

THE TRUTH ABOUT PROFESSOR VON GRAFF.

Vultures, Ignatz said to himself as he hurried towards the Naschmarkt, where he strolled past the delicatessen, past the trays of smoked fish, fresh salads and colourful toasts, past the wines, past the flowers, until he reached the small holders' fruit and vegetable stall. He needed leeks for the leek and sour cream soup he was planning to make for Elisabeth that evening. He resisted the temptation to rummage through the bookstalls and turned right, past Otto Wagner's Majolikahaus, heading home, the Judengasse, where his patients were waiting.

[...]

'I was living in paradise and I had no idea.'

Bérénice kicked off her lace-up boots, pulled her knees to her chin and folded her arms around them.

'I was spoiled, protected, daddy's little girl.'

Ignatz spotted a cheerless smile around her lips.

'It's 1910 and one of the first warm summer evenings in Adlerkosteletz. I'm lying under the cherry tree at the edge of the lake, the swans in sight, reading Rainer Maria Rilke if I'm not mistaken, and sensing the grass getting damper by the minute. I hear a Japanese nightingale and look up. I see mummy and daddy in the distance, arm in arm descending the castle stairs, a rare sight in those years. I close my book of poems and make my way towards them. Mummy has lost a terrible amount of weight, I think to myself, and look on as daddy carefully arranges her fox fur stole about her shoulders. I run to them and daddy catches me in his arms. Easy does it, little one, mummy is sick. I look at mummy and see her translucent porcelain smile. Mummy is dying, my sweet girl, I hear her say. I don't believe her and cling to her. For a couple of seconds we seem bound to one another, inseparable. Then she gently pushes me away. What's all this, silly girl, it's not going to happen today. She looks up at daddy and smiles at him. He looks back at her and sees only her. From then on nothing was the same.'

'You were sixteen.'

‘Only just sixteen.’

She stared into space, nursed a lock of blond hair between her lips and said nothing. Ignatz fished his watch from his pocket. They still had a good half hour.

‘Excellent, Bérénice, we’ll return to your life history next time. So, tell me about your homework.’

She sighed.

‘Where shall I begin?’ she asked.

‘With the most unpleasant.’

‘My father.’

‘What happened to your father?’

She rocked gently back and forth in her chair. She shivered. Ignatz stood and carefully draped a blanket over her shoulders. He waited.

‘I’ve done something terrible.’

She wanted to get up, but he held her back.

‘Don’t run away now. This is important.’

She looked at him, her eyes filling with tears, and opened her feeble lips.

‘I killed my father.’

Ignatz heard a thrush singing outside.

‘What happened?’

‘I chopped off his head.’

The song of the thrush stopped and for a moment he wanted to fly away with it into the evening sky.

‘And worst of all,’ her voice intensified, ‘worst of all ... I enjoyed it.’

Ignatz looked up, and for a second he thought he could see a strange sort of light in the eyes of Bérénice Kinsky, his last patient of the day. A glimpse of fascination rather than grief. During the previous session he had asked her to choose her favourite Bible passage – as they did in the Ignatian spiritual exercises – and try to identify with the character that attracted her most. Bérénice had hesitated between Judith and Salome, but had finally opted for Judith, the woman who had saved her people from the hostile general Holofernes by seducing and then beheading him. To Ignatz it was a dreadful story, typically Old Testament, nationalistic, but as a psychotherapist he didn’t dare pass judgement on her choice.

‘You identified with Judith, seduced Holofernes and murdered him.’

‘It started as Holofernes, but suddenly it was my father.’

‘When did he become your father?’

‘When I had to kill him.’

‘And you enjoyed it.’

‘More than that, I was thrilled by it.’

She looked up at him like a terrified bird, pressing her fragile body deeper into the cushions and started to sob.

Ignatz closed his eyes and realised he had been too hurried, too impatient. It had been the wrong approach and Bérénice was not yet ready for it. He had overestimated her resilience, but at once he sensed his own increased vulnerability. He wanted to protect her. An old malady. Yet for some unknown reason he couldn’t get around the impression that she was acting. It was as if she had learned to perfection how to imitate behaviour usually associated with intense emotions, without actually experiencing them. Or did he get that impression because she was protecting herself from the profound pain and grief with a mask, as Von Graff had suggested? He offered her a clean handkerchief and sat down at his desk. Bérénice Kinsky’s file lay

open in front of him and he noted: ‘June 1910, expulsion from paradise. Rivalry with terminally ill mother for exclusive attention of father. Opted for Judith.’

The sobbing had stopped and Ignatz returned to his seat in front of Bérénice.

‘Why Judith, Bérénice?’

His voice was soft and sympathetic.

‘Because she’s so strong and I’m so weak. Because she has courage.’

Ignatz said nothing. He noticed how she fiddled with the tiny golden cross around her neck; inherited from her mother’s side of the family, as she had told him during their first session.

‘Because she’s in charge of her own life, because she makes choices, because she’s not afraid to put her own life at risk ...’

Bérénice bit her lower lip as if she regretted what she had just said.

‘I’m so afraid, doctor. So terribly afraid.’

Translation: Brian Doyle
Last updated: 14 June 2010