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Joke Spaey

The Loneliness of the West

Original title: *De eenzaamheid van het westen*



NOVEL

There's no escaping fate.
Worse, the attempt to flee will
determine your fate even more ...

Dynamic characters and intriguing
storylines, written down succinctly

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About the author

Johanna Spaey (Leuven, 1966) studied Assyriology in Leuven, Belgium and Leiden, the Netherlands. She worked as a freelance journalist and editor-in-chief for several newspapers and magazines.

In 2005, she published her debut novel, *DEATH OF A SOLDIER*, which won her the Dutch Golden Noose Award and the Belgian Hercule Poirot Award. By now 50,000 copies of the book have been sold. Spaey's novel *FLIGHT*, the story of two young women during the First World War, appeared in 2007.

In addition to novels and stories, Spaey writes TV screenplays. She is currently also active as a ghostwriter.



About the book

At the end of the 19th century, tens of thousands of people emigrated from Western Europe to Canada, by all appearances a country of unlimited opportunities. But life in the promised land is hard. Only the strongest will survive, as Cassandra's parents find to their cost. Her father is seduced by the love of gold and heads for the frozen North to prospect for the precious metal. Her mother gets on the very first train that stops. Nova Scotia is its final destination, a fetid city where women are scarce. She earns her money laying out and embalming dead bodies. Cassandra shows artistic talent. A professional artist sees that she is gifted and starts to give her lessons. Later, her talent takes her to the 'killing fields' of the First World War, where she once again faces the existential dilemma of living ... and surviving.

Joke Spaey, *De eenzaamheid van het westen*

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Bibliography

Dood van een soldaat (DEATH OF A SOLDIER) (thriller, 2005)

Vlucht (FLIGHT) (novel, 2006)

De eenzaamheid van het westen (THE LONELINESS OF THE WEST) (novel 2010)

Prizes and awards

2005 – Golden Noose Award for DEATH OF A SOLDIER

2005 – Hercule Poirot Award for DEATH OF A SOLDIER

The press about DEATH OF A SOLDIER:

‘Spaey formulates convincingly and with a great sense of style and humour.’ – *Vrij Nederland Detective & Thrillergids*

‘A beautifully written debut thriller. A gripping book, as historical as it is romantic, this novel could contend for any literary award.’ – *Jury Gouden Strop 2005*

‘This a stunning crime novel. Cleverly written with exceptional dialogue, haunting characters, an excellent plot, barbed eroticism, and icy humour.’ – *Knack*

‘Spaey is a promise for the future and an asset to the genre. She deserves a substantial incentive award.’ – *De Standaard*

‘Assyriologist Johanna Spaey immediately proves that she is cast in the mould of an exceptional thriller author. With sharpened feeling for ambiance and setting, she depicts the relationships within a village community where shrouded lust, jealousy, and restrained frustrations prevail.’ – *Het Belang van Limburg/Gazet van Antwerpen*

‘A tight plot, witty dialogues, and characters who are anything but caricatures. The author deftly captures the stifling village mentality, mutilated by the atrocities of war.’ – *Humo*

‘This novel's superb eloquence, full of suggestion and razor-sharp dialogues in which no word is superfluous, merits a meticulous reading.’ – *Leeuwarder Courant*

‘Spaey knows how to vividly and persuasively evoke a threatening, imminent ambience (...). Some of the passages in her novel remind one of the writings of Hugo Claus.’ – *Friesch Dagblad*

The press about FLIGHT:

'The flawless way in which Spaey constructs her story wins admiration. She has readers flying through the book from cover to cover. (...) This novel could easily have been twice as long.' – *Trouw*

'In short, gripping sentences Johanna Spaey depicts the tragic atmosphere down to the minutest detail. She does not need frills to create real drama. It is as if she uses a camera to zoom in on the story. Brief film shots appear in sequence and keep the story moving. Yet another beautiful novel by the winner of the Hercule Poirot Award.' – *Metro*

'Playing with contrast, the writer paints her story in the colours of a (grim) fairytale as she depicts two characters who really manage to move and affect the reader.' – *Libelle*

'A literary story that makes a lasting impression and provides food for thought about the wanton destructiveness of war.' – *Boekblad*

'Once again this book proves that an account of the individual is far better at stirring the soul than the story of the group that he belongs to (...). This novel will get people talking about the refugee issue.' – *Boekdelen*

'With its powerful imagery, cinematic structure, and controlled use of language FLIGHT is one of the better Flemish novels of the year.' – *Stijl*

Excerpt

I will not easily forget the day that the League of Amputees in Toronto invited me to come and talk to them. The League was looking for a painter who could record the situation after the War for their new overseas quarterly magazine. They wanted to combine veterans' articles, stories about heroic deeds, and requests for information on comrades that were assumed missing with pictures of the fields of honour, where the limbs of their members had been painfully reduced. They had money, but were not exactly bathing in riches. One of their board members had once ordered portraits from Mr. Francke and had enquired if he knew somebody. A talented person, young and fearless, who could make a historic and pictorial record of their postwar inferno. At least according to Mr. Francke, whose plumage belied the fact that he understood the soldiers' lingo better than he let on.

To help me, Mr. Francke had written all the letters, filled in forms, and dreamt up recommendations. Even in this crowded room, on that enormous table, my file looked impressive.

The men were seated according to, let's say, gradations of amputatedness. As I went round the room, trying to shake hands with everyone, I counted one arm, no arms, one leg, no legs, one arm plus one leg, finally meeting a wretched fellow that had been totally relieved of his limbs. Nothing seemed to be wrong with the chairman, apart from his kingsize moustache. No eye, not even a finger was missing. I was afraid to probe into the matter, and during the entire

conversation, I feared sudden demonstrations of his incompleteness. Fortunately, I was spared this experience.

Mr. O'Hara had taken it upon himself not to confront his fellow soldiers, who were already struck down by fate, with his own deficiency.

I was offered a cool drink, which I nervously accepted.

Few people know that I am a two-faced woman whose brashness in the presence of my brothers, my mother, or Mr. Francke usually turns to blushes in the company of strangers.

'You are young', chairman O'Hara observed.

'You are a woman', he subsequently said.

'And you don't even know what war is', he concluded, twirling his moustache.

I had to admit he was partially right. Although the war had stared me in the face for four years in Halifax, I wasn't a soldier who could show his war wounds. Or even a nurse who had looked after amputees.

Providentially, I had my brothers.

'My two eldest brothers were killed in action in Passchendaele on the same day', I said as I heard how my brashness came to the fore.

'My two youngest brothers died at the explosion in Halifax.'

The man without arms looked up drowsily. Our eyes met, and I nodded in his direction to emphasize my suffering. Unlike my brothers, he still had legs. I would never put it this blatantly but that's what I meant.

'And my mother is Belgian. I know the language.'

'Belgian?' asked the chairman, whose foreign war experience had likely been restricted to the forelands of the Canadian waters.

'Flemish', the armless man said sleepily.

'Or French', the man with one leg pronounced.

'Both', I lied as I laughed amiably at the one-legged one.

'But still, you're a woman', the chairman said.

'There are larger tragedies in life', the man with one arm stated.

Some laughed, some coughed. I joined in with the laughing.

I had the impression that these were sensible men who didn't seem to be burdened down by the body parts they had lost. I knew everything about loss. Perhaps that was why they were so lenient.

The chairman started browsing in the bulging folder filled with papers. Mr. Francke had included my lovely portraits as an example.

'You are talented', he said. I could see that the other men had long since decided that I should be chosen. The tragic girl without brothers, who excelled at drawing. They were still romantics at heart.

I fell silent and waited until he would tell me that it was going to be me.