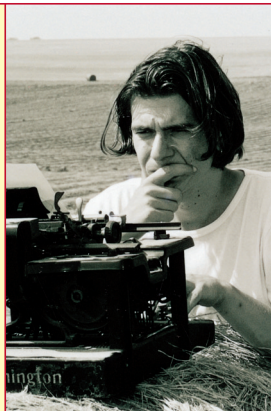


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Dimitri Verhulst

The Alasness of Things

Dimitri Verhulst (b. 1972) made a striking debut with *The Room Next Door* (*De kamer hiernaast*, 1999), a collection of short stories focused on the condition of a young man who knows that his girlfriend is making love with his friend in the next room. Verhulst also drew events from his own background: he comes from a broken home and spent time in foster homes and institutes as a child. He referred to this as well in *Nothing, Nobody, and Reasonably Quiet* (*Niets, niemand en redelijk stil*, 2000) and *The Boredom of the Goalie* (*De verveling van de keeper*, 2002), a satirical novel, set in the future, about a boy who has athletic talent but also a social handicap rooted in his background. A great hunger for emotional fulfillment emerges from his book of poems, *Love, Unless Stated Otherwise* (2001). He made his breakthrough with *Problemski Hotel* (2003), translated into English, German, Danish, French, Slovenian, Italian and Hebrew, a very funny but also poignant novel about the inmates of a closed mental institution in northern Belgium.

Verhulst likes to write about his own part of the world, even if he does so with a certain cynical distance. And in his most recent novel, *The Alasness of Things* (*De helaasheid der dingen*, 2006) he opens the gates to his childhood again, this time opening them wide. Undoubtedly he wants to confront his past. The protagonist is a boy in a highly dysfunctional family, living in a remote village. His haughty mother, who never nurtured her child after a difficult birth, has left husband and child, and the son now lives with his father and three uncles in his grandmother's house. The men are ill-mannered and coarse, unpredictable and unmanageable, they drink far too much, they criticise those who feel themselves to be superior. They dangle from the bottom of the social ladder and make a shambles of their lives.

Using episodic chapters, Verhulst paints the anecdotal aspects of this life in highly amusing scenes. The drinking bouts in the café, the idolization of Roy Orbison, the shameless skirt chasing. When a representative of the Children's Aid Society comes to inquire about the boy's living conditions, she is treated as if she is a cheap slut. Everyone seems to accept this closed-off, dead-end existence. Yet underneath this rambunctious anarchy, several people conceal a great sense of neediness. The father decides to undergo detoxification, but when he returns home after three months, old habits soon undermine his good intentions. Only

the son succeeds, as a young adult, in establishing some distance and putting this life behind him, though not without emotional pain and melancholy.

Dimitri Verhulst takes the reader into a world without shame or manners, alienated from ordinary society by social want. He succeeds marvellously in maintaining an unsteady equilibrium. On the one hand he depicts his boorish characters with hilarious exaggeration, on the other hand loyalty and empathy alternate in a subtle emotional balance. *The Alasness of Things* is a new high point in the work of Dimitri Verhulst.

QUOTES

He is one of the greatest, wildest talents in Flemish literature, who has the capacity to write a novel the way a twenty-first century Louis Paul Boon would. — *NRC Handelsblad*

Verhulst is a writer with an understanding of those who fail, and writes acutely and authentically. He is well on the way to becoming the Jacques Brel of Flemish literature. — *De Standaard*

In *De helaasheid der dingen*, the dark romantic Dimitri Verhulst brings radiance to the deepest misery. It's almost worth being a prole. — *Knack Magazine*

Verhulst is probably one of the most sensitive, most poetic of the new young writers. But none of his contemporaries has the same hardness. Sometimes his pen comes down like a hammer. — *De Morgen*

RIGHTS SOLD

Luchterhand (Germany)

OTHER TITLE IN TRANSLATION

Problemski Hotel, in German (Claassen Verlag, 2004), English (Marion Boyars, UK, 2005), Danish (Ries Forlaget, 2005), French (Christian Bourgois Editeur), Hebrew (Carmel Publishing House, 2006), Slovenian (Zalozba Goga, 2005), Italian (Fazi Editore, 2006).

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