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Peter Terrin – Belgium

De Bewaker

The Guard

2009

Publishing House **De Arbeiderspers**

Biography

Peter Terrin (b.1968) represents a unique voice in contemporary Dutch-language literature, touching on universal and highly topical themes alike. Terrin, who has been described as ‘a master of ominous detail’, is considered by critics to be a literary maverick, a classic writer who doesn’t follow trends, and a masterful stylist. He has also written for the theatre and is active as a columnist. Terrin has been nominated for major literary awards several times, including the AKO Literature Prize and the Libris Literature Prize. For *De bijeneters*, he was awarded the West Flanders Prize for Literature. The film rights to *Blanco* were sold to CCCP in Brussels, with the production selected for the Berlinale Co-Production Market in 2008.

Synopsis

In *De Bewaker*, Terrin tells a strongly allegorical story of 21st-century society, which holds the reader under its spell for 200 pages. Written in a sober style, the book slowly reveals the war of nerves underlying the narrative. Harry and Michel, two highly conscientious men, have been given an assignment to guard a block of 40 luxury apartments with their lives. They have taken up their position in a vast underground car park, from where they have an uninterrupted view of the entrance. The pair conduct their inspection rounds extremely meticulously and with an iron discipline. However, Harry and Michel are kept completely in the dark as to the whys and wherefores of their mission. They soon become entirely cut off from the outside world and have hardly any contact with the pompous, rich residents they are ‘protecting’. Is there a war going on outside, they wonder, as the streets become eerily quiet. Even when one day all the residents of the complex – save for one – do a moonlight flit, they continue to unerringly carry out their duties. Their nerves are strained to breaking point. The inspection rounds become more and more obsessive. This tension is described in illuminating detail by Michel, who registers every sound, every scent, every change in the light, as the story progresses. *De Bewaker* is not only an enthralling psychological novel, it is also a love story, one which encompasses oppressiveness, emotion and explicit sensuality.

De Bewaker

Peter Terrin

Fragment hoofdstuk 69

Door de stilte te verbreken heeft de fietser haar bevestigd. Hij heeft de stilte op slot gedaan. Zijn passage was het geluid van de vergrendeling. Er is niemand meer in de stad, een halvegare op een oude fiets en twee bewakers in een kelder niet te na gesproken.

Harry heeft zich vergist. Er is geen laatste bewoner in dit gebouw; na zo lang zouden we een teken van leven hebben opgevangen. Iedereen is vertrokken, iedereen is op de vlucht. De stad werd niet geëvacueerd, maar is simpelweg door iedereen op eigen houtje ontvlucht. Harry, ikzelf en de dolle fietser zijn achtergebleven.

Niemand heeft ons verwittigd. Zoals sommigen hebben voorspeld, doemt een nieuw soort oorlog op, gemakshalve de Nieuwe Oorlog genaamd. Een oorlog waarvan niemand weet of hij werkelijk bestaat, nog moet beginnen of reeds in alle hevigheid is uitgebroken. Iets uit een toekomstroman.

Wat het wapen is en wat de verwonding, welk doel is gesteld door welke partijen: daar heeft iedereen het raden naar. Precies hierin ligt het voornaamste kenmerk van deze wereldoorlog. Precies dit jaagt iedereen op de vlucht: de vijand is onbekend.

De organisatie is ons uit het oog verloren. Bij een nucleaire aanval op de zuidkust was men ons komen halen. Bij een virale terreuraanval zou alles in het werk worden gesteld om de quarantaine van dit belangrijke stadsdeel zo vlug mogelijk op te heffen. Harry en ik zijn hier achtergelaten. Er is niemand meer om te beschermen en het gebouw wordt niet concreet bedreigd.

Ons verblijf op deze post is een administratieve vergetelheid van een dolgedraaide overste. Daarom horen wij niets van de organisatie, en niet omdat we in stilte zo voortreffelijk onze boontjes doppen. Daarom daagt de bewaker maar niet op. Men is ons vergeten.

The Guard

Peter Terrin

Translated from the Dutch by David Colmer – Ch. 69

By breaking the silence the cyclist has confirmed it. He's locked it down. The sound of his passing was the turning of the key. There is no one in the city except a halfwit on an old bike and two guards in a cellar.

Harry was wrong. There is no last resident left in the building; after all this time we would have seen some sign of life. Everyone's gone, everyone has fled. The city wasn't evacuated, its inhabitants just ran for it as best they could. Harry, me and the mad cyclist have been left behind.

No one informed us. Just as some people predicted, a new kind of war has arrived – conveniently referred to as the New War. A war whose very existence is subject to question, no one knowing whether it's already raging or yet to start. Something from a futuristic novel.

The weapons and the wounds they cause, the objectives and who's set them are anybody's guess. And *that* is the chief characteristic of this world war. That's what makes everyone flee: the enemy is unknown.

We've slipped off the organisation's radar. After a nuclear attack on the south coast they would have come to pick us up. After a viral terrorist attack they would have done everything in their power to lift the quarantine in this crucial part of the city as soon as possible. Harry and I have been left behind. There is no one for us to protect and no concrete threat to the building.

Our ongoing posting here is an administrative oversight made by a commander who's cracked under the pressure. That's why we no longer hear anything from the organisation – not because we're doing such an excellent job of taking care of ourselves. That's why the guard doesn't show up. They've forgotten us.



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