

Hidde Boersma

The Most Ordinary of Men

The quiet life of Ale van der Meer, a dude from Friesland

A roadmender without high ideals or grand passions, a man who draws sustenance from the minor vicissitudes and pleasures of life, Ale van der Meer is an anti-hero inspired by a character called Doede, introduced by Boersma in a poem five years ago. Doede is a reference to The Dude in the film *The Big Lebowski*.

Ale van der Meer used to work hard, but nowadays he needs to make sure he takes things easy. For the past year or so, the council has been tendering out the bigger jobs, so Ale and his colleague Anton are left with nothing more demanding than crooked paving stones and broken picnic tables. Set straight a bashed road sign in one village in the morning, repair a bit of pavement in another village in the afternoon, then spend the rest of the day lying in the grass verge with an ice cream, listening to the Tour de France, is the schedule he proposes to his fellow roadmender. 'A busy day, I understand,' is the response.

When Ale isn't working, he peels potatoes for his wife, does a little rowing and chats with people on the street. He goes fishing sometimes too, but preferably using a rod without a hook, since he's not out to catch anything. He likes to just sit in

his boat or in the garden at the back of the house. There is nothing grand or significant about his life, but he is satisfied with himself and the world. This is the source of a freedom that makes him immune to the jokes about his all too scarce work for the council and causes his minor irritations to evaporate, a freedom that means he has room for thoughts that astonish even him. In young Frits, a holiday replacement, the foreman of the council roadmenders finds, without knowing it, a second Doede.

Now aged almost sixty, Ale looks back at his thoroughly run-of-the-mill life, takes stock and decides it has been pleasant enough. Frits, in his twenties, is right at the start and he devotes himself fully to everything life has to offer: the trivial chatter of his workmates, last-minute plans on a day off, a bizarre conversation with an eccentric who lives in a caravan. To this eager young man, the utterly ordinary Ale is a bit of a hero.

Devotion, admiration and putting things into perspective are the key themes of this novel. Dedication to the most everyday things proves exciting, often hilarious, and part of a subtle commentary on modern times.



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Hidde Boersma (b. 1980) studied humanities and has since done a wide range of work. After his debut as a poet in 2008, he published a short-story collection (2010) in which the central characters were rather unusual. Nevertheless they resemble Ale van der Meer in *The Most Ordinary of Men* in that they are all people who plough their own furrow without paying too much attention to what others say.

Photo: Reyer Boxem