

Durk van der Ploeg. **De Belvédère.** Ljouwert, Netherlands. Friese Pers. 2012.
240 pages. €17.50. ISBN 978 90 330 0314 1

Ever since his retirement in 1990, Van der Ploeg has been extraordinarily productive and has distinguished himself as one of the foremost writers in Friesland of novels, often anchored in historical persons or events, that display mastery of language, an astonishing eye for detail, and an in-depth exploration of the human psyche.

In that time he has been recognized and honored for his writing through diverse prizes, climaxed by last year's winning of Friesland's most prestigious award, the Gysbert Japicx prize, the year that saw the publication of his marvelous 20th novel, *The Cold of the North* (De kjeld fan it noarden). When *De Belvédère* (The Belvedere) came out in 2012, the author was honored with the ribbon that distinguishes him now as Knight in the royal Order of Oranje-Nassau. Hence, reader expectation is always high with the pending publication of yet another Van der Ploeg novel.

But *De Belvédère* does not live up to high expectations. It focuses primarily on Age Looxma-Ypeij, one of the 19th century wealthiest landowners in Friesland, and to a lesser extent on Helena Mallinckrodt, who had been his mother's live-in social companion and remained after his mother's death. At the age of 57, Age receives a death sentence: incurable throat cancer. Within two years, Age will die.

Those are the historical facts. Van der Ploeg imagines what those last two years in Age's life may have been like, and it is those two years that fill the pages of the author's twenty-first novel, an almost entirely interior world. What emerges is a character who as an extremely introverted boy irritated his fun-loving grandfather, frustrated his ambitious father, and as an adult rarely ventures off his palatial estate, preferring interaction with his hunting hounds to persons. He has failed his grandfather and his father's efforts to make him after their own image: a public persona of expansive ambition, authority, influence, and esteem. When his mother dies soon after he receives his grim medical diagnosis, he loses the only person who had understood and accepted him for what he

was. But Age does have one magnificent obsession: the collection of rare coins. And he has Helena, the woman his mother always intended for him.

Except that Age is incapable of expressing the feelings he has had for Helena but then promptly repressed. Again and again he descends into the overwrought caldron of his conflicted emotions and thoughts about the origins of his inherited wealth, his pending demise, and his lifelong self-doubt and uncertainty that make it impossible to yield himself to Helena. Sometimes self-indictments for a wasted life torment him, as they do Helena as well. Still, a frustrated but devoted Helena tries to make his fading life as stable and comfortable as possible. At the end, there is no resolution: Age and Helena remain forever apart.

Unfortunately, in contrast to most of the author's other novels, here the characters fail to come alive. Neither the vivid use of detail nor the cerebral lore of a rare coin's history are enough to compensate for two passive and static characters. The occasional snatches of dialog are often the author's conspicuous means of supplying readers with background information, context, or analysis. Mostly the characters are speechifying, to themselves or to each other, like a pair of author-directed talking heads. The many monologues of misery remind the reader of characters in *In beferzen mar* and *Bertegrûn*, but the more minor flaw in those novels turns into a major one here. The repetitive wallowing in unresolved internal warfare finally leaves the reader impatient and disappointed with an author who has proved himself again and again as an impressively accomplished writer.

Henry J. Baron
Calvin College, Grand Rapids
2012