

Janneke Spoelstra

Being Jiks

A frank account by a young woman who discovers she is a lesbian

Whenever there is a game of football she plays with the best of the boys. No one is as good at lighting fires, and she is the cheekiest at ringing doorbells and running away. But when it comes to love everything gets complicated, because Jiks discovers she is attracted to her own sex. She wonders how people cope with 'being different'. This is the story of a quest, with both comic and melancholic touches.

In the first chapter everything still seems innocent and unproblematic. When Jiks goes home at the end of an afternoon of building dens with friends, two boys and a girl, her grandma gives her a treat to go with her cup of tea. The final words of the chapter are from grandpa, who comes into the room and says to Jiks: 'Hello there, young man!' Those four words sum it all up: the warm-heartedness and love, but also the unintentional emphasis on being different, the pleasures along with the painful situations, in short both the ordinary and the far from ordinary.

In each chapter the author looks at another aspect of the life of a lesbian approaching adulthood. While still a child, Jiks feels different, which is difficult enough. When she becomes a teenager

and a young adult her childhood friendships have to make way for new relationships. She watches boys and girls flirting and naturally wants to join in. But she doesn't really get anywhere: 'The whole thing was almost real, she thought.' Only after leaving school does she become conscious of her sexual orientation. She moves in with the love of her life, but what will the neighbours say?

Spoelstra switches between different narrative perspectives, genres and styles. There are dreams and there are reports almost like diary entries, redolent of melancholy and despair. There are realistic sketches that can sometimes be sober but are often comical or even hilarious, as well as stories that are striking for their revealingly honest self-examination. Despite all this variation, the stories are so closely connected that *Being Jiks* is more like an entirely new type of novel than a short-story collection.

The book is very strong stylistically. The terse, jagged sentences perfectly depict a vulnerability wrapped up in matter-of-factness, and the alternation between unpolished spontaneity and precision in the choice of words and in composition comes across as entirely natural.



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AFÜK
PO Box 53
8900 AB Leeuwarden
Editor-in-chief Ernst Bruinsma
t +31 58 234 30 70
www.afuk.nl
e.bruinsma@afuk.nl



Janneke Spoelstra (b. 1962) trained as a medical laboratory technician but then went on to other studies and now has her own translation and copywriting agency. She made her debut in 2004, as a poet. Since *Being Jiks* she has published a further volume of poetry.

'Spoelstra has a controlled way of writing and she succeeds in moving the reader again and again. Fortunately she is not afraid of humour, and all these things combined make for a wonderful book.'

– Jelle van der Meulen

Photo: Linus Harms