

# The lit lovers

REBECCA BENOOT

## Journalists, professors and ordinary readers come together in Antwerp for two of the region's best literary festivals



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Quintessentially Flemish: Walter van den Broeck

The days are getting noticeably shorter. Soon the winds will be blowing and rain will be falling – perfect, then, for a cup of hot cocoa and a good book.

But where to start? Never was the phrase “so many books, so little time” as relevant as it is now. In order to help you make your autumn selec-

tion, may I suggest you find time in the coming weeks for not one but two literary festivals in Antwerp.

On 20 September, you'll find the 10th edition of *De Morgen* newspaper's *Zuiderzinnen*: Festival of the Word. This year the theme is “*Moeder, waarom lezen wij?*” (*Mother, Why Do We Read?*), referring to the classic 1932

Flemish novel *Moeder, waarom leven wij?* (*Mother, Why Do We Live?*).

Each year, a variety of authors, actors and even musicians head to the south of Antwerp to entertain, educate and surprise using the simplicity and power of words. This year's theme has the participants going back to where it all started, the books of their youth that made them want to keep reading.

Although the heart of the operation will be Antwerp's trendy Zuid neighbourhood, countless locations will host interviews, debates and bittersweet performances by Flemish and Dutch authors such as Bart Moeyaert, Christoph Vekeman, Erwin Mortier, Joke van Leeuwen, Pia de Jong and one of this year's Golden Owl winners, Robert Vuijsje.

Flemish folk singer Raymond van het Groenewoud kicks it all off with a concert in the city's Royal Museum of Fine Arts. The museum, along with the Permeke library, will host a second-hand and antiquarian book fair. A programme especially designed for kids in the Steiner School finds authors like Marc de Bel and Marc Tjismans showing kids the fun and fantastical world of fiction.

### The other festival, the other book

Two weeks later, *Het andere boek* (The Other Book) will head in an entirely different direction – abroad. The goal of this festival, still flourishing after 33 years, is to get up close and personal

with both local and international writers. Readers get the chance to meet contemporary greats in intimate interviews, readings and debates.

Fiction, poetry and non-fiction are equally feted at this intellectually stimulating adventure. This year, the Balkans, Iran, the Great Lakes of Africa and even the suburbs of Edegem will show a way of life at once completely foreign and surprisingly familiar. Subject matter is eclectic, to say the least, ranging from Darwin to Islam with both the First and the Second World Wars somewhere in between.

This festival, which, at its heart, honours the authors behind the books also gives you the chance to poke around the latest releases at the many retail booths.

Some highlights of this year's event: American investigative journalist Andrew Rice gives a talk on murder and memory; Lisa Appignanesi, director of the Freud Museum in London and author of *Mad, Bad and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind Doctors*, leads a discussion on psychoanalysis; and the Kurdish award-winning poet Baban will be interviewed by Flemish poet and journalist Bart Stouten.

Closer to home, Flemish writer Tom Lanoye will present his latest novel *Sprakeloos* (Speechless); Leonard Nolens reads from his famous diaries and Walter van den Broeck debuts his new novel *Terug naar Walden* (Back to Walden). ♦

## From tower to pasture

### The bizarre road trip of Walter van den Broeck

Walter van den Broeck is a legend of Flemish letters: his oeuvre of plays and novels includes the 1,000-page *Het beleg van Laken* (The Siege of Laken), which earned comparisons to Hugo Claus' *The Sorrow of Belgium*. He'll talk about his new book *Terug naar Walden* (Back to Walden) on 4 October during *Het andere boek*.

*Terug naar Walden* is “about downfall – the highs and the subsequent lows,” says Van den Broeck. “The protagonist decides to take his revenge on capitalism after some very bad news from his doctor. In one simple sale, he initiates an economic crisis that causes financial institutions to crumble. He decides to leave the Marsh Tower in New York, guided by a voice that leads him down a turbulent road to his final destination – a pasture in the Antwerp Kempen.”

Like any good road book, the central character makes a number of remarkable acquaintances, says Van den Broeck, who was born and bred in the Kempen, including “a man who sells 9/11 souvenirs, two retired interrogators from Guantanamo and a 12-year-old girl, who ultimately helps him realise the error of his ways.” Another of the book's characters is Frederik van Eeden, a real-life influential Dutch author who became one of the key figures in the Dutch literary movement against Romanticism towards the end of the 19th century. He was also famous for creating Walden, an agricultural colony near Bussum in the northwest of the Netherlands. Besides being a reference to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, this colony also played a vital role in the evolution of socialism in the Low Countries and is the symbol for a simple, community-oriented lifestyle. “I

just try to give voice to all the horrors that we have to deal with through a story with a very unique atmosphere,” says Van den Broeck.

Considering the state of the current economy, *Terug naar Walden* couldn't wish for a better release date. Although it wasn't the author's intention to base the novel in this reality, he says it's a natural outcome of his “artistic antennae. I often sense things a lot sooner than other people.”

Although Van den Broeck frequently writes about the Belgian royal dynasty, they are completely left out of the picture this time, except for one brief reference to the late King Boudewijn. His normally strong autobiographical references are also in short supply. “This time, I've had to put ‘myself’ on hold,” he says. “However, when you

place the name of the protagonist beside mine, you'll soon realise that this book isn't about me, it is me. You could then say then that this is my most autobiographical book to date.”

Van den Broeck appreciates the audience of *Het andere boek*. “These people are really interested in literature with a capital L and in thought-provoking non-fiction. A lot of journalists, professors and students attend. It's not like the Boekenbeurs in November where you have to get past a lot of cookbooks and celebrity stories before you find what you are really looking for.” ♦

### ELSSCHOT ARCHIVES FINALLY PUBLIC

Had he not died before it launched, Willem Elsschot would have been just the sort to relish a literary festival like *Het andere boek*. An advertising exec by day and writer by night (under a pseudonym), his droll novels about the struggles of ordinary people in business and at home walked a beautifully fine line between popularity and critical appeal.

Elsschot, who published his last book in the 1940s, is one of a handful of Flemish novelists translated into English (*Cheese, Villa des Roses*). His archives, which were scattered around over the years, were painstakingly pursued by his daughter, who died last week at the age of 91. Now the finally complete archives will be housed at the Letterenhuis, or House of Literature, in Antwerp, the largest literary archive in Flanders. This means they will be open to students and other researchers – and part of a huge public exhibition next year.

Lisa Bradshaw

→ [www.letterenhuis.be](http://www.letterenhuis.be)



### Zuiderzinnen

20 September, 13.00-20.00  
Across Antwerp

→ [www.zuiderzinnen.com](http://www.zuiderzinnen.com)

### Het andere boek

3-4 October, from 11.00  
Zuiderpershuis  
Waalse Kaai 14, Antwerp

→ [www.hetandereboek.com](http://www.hetandereboek.com)