



# The story catcher

Peter Verhelst is used to crossing genres, and now he's jumped the generation gap

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**P**eter Verhelst has been a bright star in the Flemish literary scene for many years now. Although some readers find his poetic and often sensual language inaccessible, this novelist, poet and playwright stirs up strong emotions in fans of Dutch-language literature.

Last month, Verhelst received his third Golden Owl – Flanders' much-coveted annual literary award – for his adaptation of the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale *The Nightingale*. He won his first Golden Owl in 2000 for *Tonguecat*, which he says was one of the most important events of his entire career.

"It gives you enough freedom to do whatever you want," the 47-year-old tells me from his home in Nazareth, a small town in East Flanders near Ghent. Not only did *Tonguecat* win the Golden Owl that year, it was also awarded the Golden Owl young readers public prize. Verhelst said he was moved by the enthusiasm of such a wide audience when he accepted both awards. "It was only then that I realised that the book had meant something to so many people," he says.

At that point, Verhelst was teaching language and history in a secondary school in Bruges, the town where he was born. But "*Tonguecat* became quite popular in Belgium, so I stopped teaching and started living as a writer," he says. "Money means time; you can buy your freedom."

He discovered he wasn't a teacher who wrote, he was a writer in every fibre of his being. "I wrote *Tonguecat* in some kind of fever... and I loved it. I really love to write... It's a way of life for me. During those moments, I'm at my best."

His work – the novels in particu-

lar – have always been tough for critics to label. More aesthetic than your average Postmodernist, his language is startlingly beautiful. In *Tonguecat*, Prometheus flees the violence of his own world and descends to earth, only to find himself in an underworld of junkies and prostitutes. By frequently using myths and symbols, Verhelst creates magical environments in which the artificiality and chaos of modern life still prevail. Readers must find their own way through a vast labyrinth of inter-textual delights.

"It's strange that my books became popular, because I don't write normal books," he admits. "In a normal book, you have a story from A to Z. I really don't write that kind of book. There are a lot of black holes in my work that you can only fill in with your own experiences. My way of writing offer readers the opportunity to projecting their fears or desires in the language and images I use – which makes it personal."

## Sing sweet nightingale

Bearing in mind Verhelst's love for an elusive, fairytale-like atmosphere, it isn't a big surprise that he chose to adapt *The Nightingale*. "When my kids were younger, I always told them stories every night. I promised them that one day I'd do a book for kids. When they asked me to adapt this fairy tale, I thought, 'Well, here is my book.'"

And this story in particular – about a Chinese emperor who prefers the sound of his mechanical nightingale to the real one outside his window, only to be brought back from death's door by the real bird's authentic song – appeals especially to Verhelst. "I like the story very much. It's an ode to art and what art can do to us – how it can change our

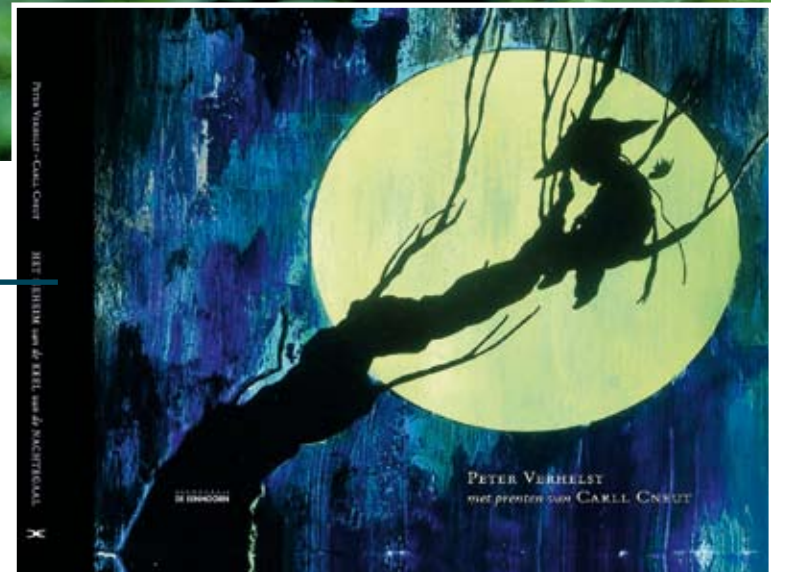


Worlds of myth: Peter Verhelst combines non-narrative prose with fantastical imagery

way of seeing and living."

Verhelst is also planning on writing more children's books since it's "not that different from writing for adults". Although he did have his doubts at first: "I had never done it, so I was really not sure it would work because I use a lot of images and a very poetic language, and that means you have to listen to it two or three times or re-read it to find all the possibilities."

And the story allowed him to keep the surreal atmosphere of his adult novels. "By using mythology and fairy tale, you



can really do anything you want as a writer; it gives you an incredible freedom to use your imagination. Every single thing I'm writing is about imagination. It's about history, the way people have always been dreaming of better places. It's about longing – and what people do to get what they long for."

Verhelst is in fact fascinated by people who are longing. "Because then they are at their best. They do things you can't believe – the most beautiful and horrific things you can imagine. And even when they are doing these horrific things, it's still human. It's one of the most beautiful aspects of human nature, this longing."

Influenced by contemporary American novelist Thomas Pynchon, Verhelst admires authors who create their own universe without worrying what readers will think of it. The Flemish novelist doesn't want to guide his readers too much, either, but rather let them

discover their own feelings. "The only thing you can do as a writer is to use words we all use and to put them in sentences that make a reader think: 'Oh, that's what I always wanted to say – or just the opposite.'"

Not only does Verhelst frequently shock or confuse his readers, he seems to have the same effect on Ghent's city council. When they asked him to be the next city poet, he told them he would be – but only if he didn't have to write poems. "I don't like it that you have to write about things in the city itself," he says. "The opposite would be more interesting: to ask the people of Ghent for stories, to be a real story catcher. I think it would be great to hear their stories and to put them into a nice work. Then you have some kind of dream book of Ghent. What are the people of Ghent dreaming about?"

At the time Flanders Today went to press, the city of Ghent was on the brink of appointing Verhelst as city poet. ♦

## The best of Verhelst

### *Het Geheim van de keel van de nachtegaal* (*The Secret of the Nightingale's Throat*)

Based on the fairy tale *The Nightingale* by Hans Christian Andersen, this new adaptation earned Verhelst his second jury-selected Golden Owl. The poetic and magical story about an emperor who wants to confine nature was turned into a true work of art thanks to the beautiful illustrations by Flemish illustrator Carll Cneut.

### *Tongkat* (*Tonguecat*)

Verhelst's 1999 breakthrough novel, the pinnacle of his sumptuous languages and mythical atmosphere. In his multi-layered tour the force, Prometheus descends to earth to encounter horror, decay and, eventually, humanity. Verhelst's only work to be translated into English.

### *Nieuwe Sterrenbeelden* (*New Constellations*)

The writer's most recent excursion into poetry landed him this year's Herman de Coninck Prize. Seemingly simple language conveys striking imagery and complex ideas.

### *Zwerm* (*Swarm*)

Verhelst's biggest and boldest work to date, this 2005 novel is infested with numerous themes and countless characters that cross each other's paths yet never seem to connect. Political and criminal syndicates both hunt down and protect war survivors and other psychological vulnerabilities in this apocalyptic novel that is in constant flux, like it's on a voyage where the destination is still unknown.