

Sixty-one-year-old rocker Alice Cooper will play at Rock Zottegem on 10 July. Whether he will perform the song "I'm 18" is anyone's guess



The littlest Belgians

In the First World War, thousands of children were shipped to "children's colonies" across Europe

LISA BRADSHAW

In 1915, the very first train carrying "The Children of Yser" left West Flanders for Paris. Its passengers ranged in ages from 14 all the way down to five. They arrived in what was known as the first kinderkolonie, or children's colony. Many of them did not see their parents or their homeland again for several years.

One of those children was eight-year-old Anna Vandewalle, and she is now the grandmother of Flemish novelist Anne Provoost. In the next instalment of the Canvas television series *Verloren Land* (Lost Country), Provoost explores the story of her grandmother and the flight of thousands of Belgian children to colonies in France, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Britain when Ypres became the front-line during the First World War.

"She left when she was eight and came back when she was 12 – the years that make up what you remember most from your childhood," says Provoost of her grandmother. "She must not have had childhood memories that didn't go back to the colony. And it really affected her for the rest of her life."

Children began being evacuated from the Ypres area in 1915 after the Germans released chlorine gas, the first-ever instance of chemical warfare in history. Farms emptied as entire communities fled to safety, and the Belgian government began the process of shipping its children

to safety.

The children's colonies became famous, particularly in France, the first country to establish them. The French were extraordinarily grateful for neutral Belgium's resistance to the German offensive, and VIPs would visit the seminaries where hundreds of Belgian children at a time were housed. The American author Edith Wharton, who lived in France, was instrumental in establishing the colonies and rallied the upper-class of France around the cause.

According to official records of the nuns who cared for the children, the French plied the colonies with gifts of food, toys and chocolate. They painted a picture of happy, robust children safe and free from the horrors of the war.

What bothered Provoost was that her grandmother's memories did not click with this picture. She never saw a toy or a piece of chocolate. Her shoes were stolen. Letters home were dictated by the nuns. Most disturbing, she said that she and the other children went hungry. And her sisters, who were also part of the first colony in Paris, confirmed this. "Oh, haven't we been hungry there," the grandchildren would hear them say, even decades later.

Was her grandmother exaggerating or were the children's colonies a pretty face with a dark underbelly?

Verloren Land has Provoost looking



Anna Vandewalle (far left) with her sisters in the Paris child colony

carefully for answers. "If this were a novel, I would try to understand each one of my characters; I would want to see their dilemma," she says. "So I try not to judge any of the parties."

But what you don't see in the documentary's limited 27 minutes is perhaps even more revealing. One of Provoost's grandmother's sisters was slightly mentally retarded and was shipped to a different colony. She somehow went missing, and the family never saw her again.

Does Provoost think that, in the end, the colonies were a good idea? "When my grandmother came back, and they went to see the farm, it was gone. If she hadn't left, she would have been killed." Still, the mother of three admits: "From my current perspective, I cannot understand that you could let yourself be separated from your children in wartime. Because I cannot imagine that anyone else could take as good of care of them as I can. I would give

my life for them; no one else would do that."

Verloren Land is a series that looks into a specific history of well-known Flemish people. Last week, actress Katelijne Verbeke went in search of information on her favourite aunt, who is rumoured to have helped girls during the Second World War. Next month, TV personality Steven Van Herreweghe tries to find out why his grandfather travelled all the way to Russia to risk his life fighting Communism.

"They are historic programmes," says Provoost, "but they show the emotion behind history. ♦"

Verloren Land:
Anne Provoost
12 May, 21.35, Canvas
→ www.canvas.be

CULTURE NEWS

Brasschaat resident Luc Doms was greeted by movie stars and champagne when he bought his ticket for the Flemish film *SM Rechter* in Antwerp last week. Doms was the 100,000th person to buy a ticket for the film, and both lead actors, as well as the director, Erik Lamens, were on hand to thank him personally. The popularity of the film, which has been playing in Belgian cinemas since 11 March, is good news for the Flemish director. Not only is it his first feature, he took a chance on the controversial true story of a Mechelen judge who was removed from the bench for practicing sado-masochism with his wife. The movie will release in the Netherlands next month.

The new Flemish literary magazine *nY* premieres this week. Pronounced "nu", the new quarterly is a fusion of *Yang* and *Freospace nieuwzuid*. The first edition contains articles on writer Kristien Hemmrechts and philosopher Baruch Spinoza.

→ nytijdschrift.blogspot.com

A 12-hour marathon reading of the works of Flemish author Willem Elsschot will take place on 7 May in Antwerp's Central Station, on the occasion of the 127th anniversary of his birth. The reading begins at 7.00, with readings by writers such as Tom Naegels and Joke Van Leeuwen, actor and singer David Davidse and city culture alderman Philip Heysen.

→ www.destadvanelsschot.be

Members of the public can take a look inside the studios of 100 Brussels artists on May 17, as part of the VISIT intercultural arts festival. The artists, both professional and amateur, work in various media and include representatives from a number of nationalities and cultures.

Brussels is spending €2 million to install an artistic lighting plan on the buildings of the Kunstberg, public works minister Pascal Smet announced. The plan will be designed by Guillaume Joël, who is responsible for the much-celebrated urban lighting in Ghent.

Singer-songwriter Suzanne Vega has been booked to perform at the open-air theatre in Antwerp's Rivierenhof Park in July. Vega will be part of a series of concerts in the park, which includes Bart Peeters, UB40, Sinead O'Connor and the Jef Neve Trio.

Flemish artist Jan Fabre was awarded an honorary doctorate by Antwerp University last week for his services to the arts. Fabre who has worked in opera, theatre, painting and film – was described as "an absolutist who only gives up when perfection has been attained".

books

REBECCA BENOOT

Wij²

Two Flemish authors publish books with the same title

What are the odds that two contemporary Flemish authors publish a book with the same title just weeks apart? That's exactly what happened during this year's Literaire Lente (Literary Spring), an annual festival that highlights new Flemish books. Both Elvis Peeters and Jeroen Olyslaegers released a book titled *Wij* (We). But the resemblance ends there.

Georges is the protagonist in Olyslaegers' *Wij*, a disgruntled cartoonist who is vacationing on the Costa Brava with family and friends. He feels suffocated by a lingering "we" sensation. Shared memories and a constant feeling of togetherness seem to have a stranglehold on him. This battle between the individual and being part of society

is painted on a vivid 1970s canvas filled cynicism, drugs and modern subtexts.

Peeters' *Wij* on the other hand, deals with the exact opposite: a young group of friends who only act as a collective. Spending every waking minute with each other, they explore the boundaries of their bodies and values by conducting numerous experiments. Raw and often shocking, Peeters explores the dormant immorality in all of us and the idea that one can only survive in society by accepting it.

The good news is, if you get the two mixed up, you still can't go wrong. *Wij* is the first book in 10 years from novelist and playwright Olyslaegers, and it was worth the wait. Peeters' effort, meanwhile, is ensconced in realism and extraordinarily effective.

