

# DOING DOUBLE DUTCH

THE INTERNATIONAL  
CIRCULATION OF  
LITERATURE FROM  
THE LOW COUNTRIES

ELKE BREMS  
ORSOLYA RÉTHELYI  
TON VAN KALMTHOUT (EDS)

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Edited by  
Elke Brems, Orsolya Réthelyi and Ton van Kalmthout



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## CHAPTER 17

# June is Dutch Literature Month!

## Online Book Reviewers and Their Role in the Transmission of Dutch Literature to the English-Speaking World

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Peter Boot (Huygens ING, Amsterdam, The Netherlands)

About twenty-five years ago Tim Berners Lee, a physicist working at CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, introduced the World Wide Web. The World Wide Web is deeply influencing our ways of doing research, studying, making friends, socializing, shopping, and many other things. This article will discuss how the web also affects the international circulation of literature. Next to the institutions that are usually studied in this context, i.e. authors, publishers, translators, critics and professors, a new group is claiming a place in the literary field. This group of online book reviewers is a heterogeneous group of individuals about whom we know only very little. This article reports on a provisional study that we conducted in an attempt to get a better picture of the phenomenon.

The study was done within a larger project studying the Circulation of Dutch Literature (CODL), focussing on thirteen canonical Dutch-language texts.<sup>1</sup> Our interest in this study was specifically in international circulation, outside the Dutch-language area.

### INCREASING DEMOCRACY?

The changes that the web is bringing about have often been hailed as an increase in democracy: the decreasing cost of publication creates a space where the public, what Jay Rosen called ‘The People Formerly Known as the Audience’,<sup>2</sup> claims a right to discuss and judge the output of the media industry, or, in our case, books. This democratization of the literary field is not always seen as a positive development. Web criticism has been vehe-





mently attacked as the ‘cult of the amateur’,<sup>3</sup> as ‘user-generated nonsense’<sup>4</sup> leading to ‘The Death of the Critic’.<sup>5</sup>

Readers who want to share their opinions about a book can use any of the many alternative places that the Internet offers non-professional readers: book sellers’ sites such as Amazon and its Dutch equivalent bol.com, book blogs, social network sites specializing in books such as Goodreads, lovelybooks.de and in the Dutch-language area for instance watelesjij.nu [what are you reading now], forum discussion sites, and of course general purpose social networks such as Twitter or Facebook.<sup>6</sup>

Not all book discussion sites are open to the general public. In the Netherlands, Recensieweb, 8weekly and deReactor.org are examples of ‘closed’ sites that have editorial boards and editorial polices, where people only write upon invitation. As they all publish in Dutch, they are of limited importance for the international circulation of Dutch literature, which was our main focus of interest in this study. We have looked at sites where access is unrestricted, and where the reviewers need have no professional training or experience. The changes that the existence of these sites brings with it are the subject of this article.

## METHOD

In our study we looked at book discussion on some of the open sites, mostly on private weblogs. The study was done in the autumn of 2014. Criteria for the selection of bloggers were as follows: Since the study was undertaken as part of the CODL-project, the focus was on the discussion of books written by Dutch-language authors, either in Dutch or in translation. Since our interest was in the circulation of Dutch literature across the boundaries of the Dutch language-area, we selected non-Dutch reviews, and chose to limit ourselves to reviews in English. This does not necessarily mean that the bloggers or reviewers were native speakers of English, since many Dutch bloggers write in English to reach a wider public.

Earlier research into book bloggers has suggested they are usually well educated and sometimes have a day job working with books.<sup>7</sup> We wondered whether that would be the case for our reviewers as well. We asked about demographics (age, sex, education), about the motivation for writing about books, and about possible relations with the literary field, i.e. are the bloggers just ‘general readers’ or do they fulfil other roles in the literary field, perhaps as a consequence of their blogging.

After selecting appropriate candidates for the study, we searched the blogs for the information we needed to get a good grasp of bloggers’ background and the reach of their blogs. Not all information could be found online, so a series of (email) interviews followed. Twenty-two of the fifty-one bloggers responded and were willing to give the information we asked for. For the remainder, we only have the information available on their blogs or sites.<sup>8</sup>





## FINDINGS

Our initial search concentrated on reviewers who discussed a sizable number of books in Dutch, but in the final database we also added some people who wrote only one or two blog posts on Dutch books.<sup>9</sup> Most of the reviews appeared on single-person weblogs. Some bloggers post on a group blog; others use the book-based social networking site Goodreads.<sup>10</sup> Most weblogs are devoted solely to literature, but there are exceptions. Blogger Branko Collin posted only a few blogs on books; his usual subject is digital developments.<sup>11</sup> Iris of *Irisonbooks*<sup>12</sup> also writes about her young child. The blogger behind *Beauty is a sleeping cat* writes about 'books, movies, cats and other treasures', Susanne of *LibrarianLavender* also writes about cosmetics and fashion accessories. Some of the reviews appeared on the *Dutch Language Blog* of a language-learning institute.<sup>13</sup> One of the bloggers uses YouTube as her platform: Sanne Vliegthart is a 'vlogger', a video blogger. Besides her job at a publishing company in Great Britain she has her own YouTube channel, *booksandquills*, where she posts weekly vlogs, mostly about books.<sup>14</sup>

What follows is some of the information we collected on these reviewers.

*Gender.* The majority of the bloggers is female (twenty-nine people), while seventeen of the bloggers are male. The gender of four reviewers is unknown, one blog was written by a couple, named Mary and Gerry.<sup>15</sup>

*Age.* Age is unknown for twenty-four persons. The others are spread equally over all age categories, as Figure 1 shows. Blogging is not necessarily, as sometimes thought, exclusively for the young. The person in his seventies is Stephen Durrant, a retired professor of Chinese literature, who writes on the Goodreads platform.<sup>16</sup> Some of the younger ones have started book blogging in their teens. Some bloggers (Sanne Vliegthart, Nina of *J'adore Happy Endings*) regularly discuss literature for young adults.

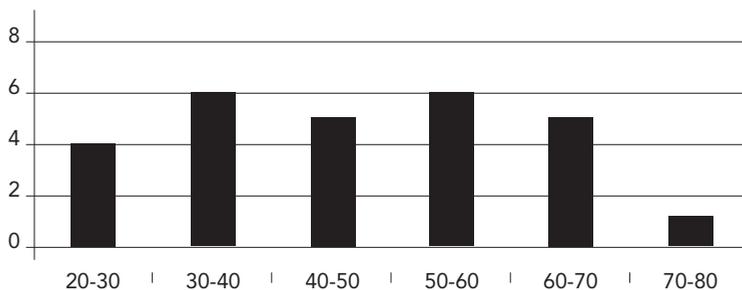


Figure 1. Age distribution of the book reviewers in this study





*Education.* Educational background was identified for only nineteen out of fifty-one participants. In this group, the majority has a university degree. At least three have a PhD. Clearly, the selection of people writing online is not random. A large group consists of students.

*Occupation.* Professionally, the reviewers are a diverse group: teachers, librarians, academics. Some work in ITC departments. Some are artists (actor, musician, documentary maker). Some describe themselves as writer or author, but what they write are usually magazine articles or website content. One reviewer was the author and publisher of a collection of stories, another wrote for television, yet another produced a book about people of Asian descent in Texas and there was an author of a series of books on computer programming. M.A. Orthofer (see below) wrote a book about his review site (*The Complete Review*).<sup>17</sup> There are reviewers who are also part-time publishers; there are (PhD) students, self-employed, unemployed or retired people. Many of them seem to have worked in multiple fields. Again, this is clearly a very literate and cultured group of people and it would be misleading to describe them as a bunch of ‘ordinary readers’.

*Relevant experience.* Most bloggers turn out to have some form of experience in the literary field in the widest sense: any activity related to the production and transmission of literature. Sometimes this is a by-product of their profession, as in the case of teachers of literature and librarians. *Leeswammes* founded Book Helpline, an editing service for writers.<sup>18</sup> Experience in the literary field may also be a consequence of blogging activities, as when M.A. Orthofer (see below) was asked to participate in literary juries based on his online reviews.<sup>19</sup> Experience may also be the result of a side activity. Lisa Hill, for example, chairs sessions at a literary festival in Melbourne,<sup>20</sup> and Branko Collin, who works in IT, volunteers in his free time as a proof-reader for the Gutenberg project.

*Link with the Dutch-language area.* Why are the reviewers discussing Dutch books? Twenty-seven do not have a visible relationship with Dutch or with the Netherlands. Eighteen bloggers do have some sort of connection with the Netherlands, some are Dutch (eleven bloggers), another has a half-Indonesian (‘Indo’) father, others have lived in the Netherlands for a while, or picked up Dutch elsewhere. Oddly, we didn’t encounter people from Flanders. Some of the Dutch reviewers are at least partially motivated by the desire to share their culture with the world and quite a few have lived in the UK for a long time. *Leeswammes*, who describes herself as bilingual, has both a Dutch-language and an English-language blog.

*Reach.* The number of people reached by the blogs varies, and depends on the bloggers’ aims. Some use their blog mainly as a diary, a place to keep





track of which books they have read and how they evaluated them. To them, followers are not very important. As Tim Patrick says in an interview, ‘the site was designed for my own edification, and was not meant to be a large-scale discussion forum for these books. Therefore, the audience for the site is rather small.’ Others use their blogs to get a message across. John Alvey, the person behind the huge website [themodernnovel.org](http://themodernnovel.org) explained his idealism in these terms: ‘My aim has been, at least partially, to introduce readers to books they might not otherwise be aware of and to promote authors who are worthwhile.’<sup>21</sup> *Little Dutch Book* blogs exclusively about Dutch literature, presumably with the intention of making the wider world read more of it.<sup>22</sup>

The blogs can reach their audience through multiple channels. A simple way of extending one’s reach is cross-posting the reviews to Amazon, as Mary Whipple does.<sup>23</sup> Some blogs offer their readers the possibility of enrolling in a newsletter or following an RSS feed. The number of followers varies from thirty-one to 7500. Lizzy Siddal (see below) has 1300 email followers. The highest number was found at Simon Savidge’s blog. He is a thirty-something writer and presenter at radio-shows on literature. The blogs’ reach is also indicated by the number of readers’ responses. Some bloggers accept no responses, but those who do reach an average of about twenty-five to thirty reactions, often the result of asking an explicit question of their readers. Simon Savidge, for example, concludes his review of *The Detour* by Gerbrand Bakker as follows:

Have any of you read *The Twin* by Bakker? As I am desperate to read it now but am slightly worried that *The Detour* being a later book it might be more accomplished? Is that a bad/lazy assumption to make? I tell you what though, it is books like this that remind me I need to be a bit more like (the legend that is) Stu of *WinstonsDad Blog* and read much, much more translated fiction.<sup>24</sup>

Questions like these invite other readers to participate and to discuss certain books. In this case, eleven bloggers responded. One of them answers: ‘*The Twin* is a beautiful novel and one of my favourites and I have loaned my copy to all my bookish friends and it is getting quite worn as a result. So your assumption is unfounded and a very accomplished debut IMO so read it and know you are in for a treat.’

In some cases, the blogger-reader relationship becomes a sort of friendship, and the comment-facility becomes a means of cementing that friendship. On Nina’s blog *J’adore Happy Endings*,<sup>25</sup> many commenters will say things like ‘Great review Nina’ or ‘Thanks for sharing’.

Some bloggers expand the reach of their writings by means of a Twitter and/or Facebook account. This is sometimes amazingly successful: Sanne Vliegthart has 14,000 Twitter followers, Orthofer 3900, Librarian Lavender 2800; for most the numbers are much lower. Sixteen bloggers have a





Facebook account connected to the blog. Other networks that allow people to connect are, for instance, Google (Nina of *J'adore Happy Endings* has 725 friends through Google Friend Connect, many of them book bloggers themselves), Bloglovin (she has 166 followers there) and NetworkedBlogs (Susanne of *LibrarianLavender* has 623 followers there).

It is interesting to see that some fragments of the community of bloggers around Dutch literature seem to be quite connected and solid. On the blogs we often encountered comments from other bloggers who were included in our study. The quote from Simon Savidge for example, mentions Stu of *WinstonsDad*, who is in our database as well. Many bloggers also refer to each other in their blog rolls, the list of blogs that they are reading. A name that keeps popping up is Iris, mentioned above, of *Irisonbooks*. Iris is twenty-six years old, female, PhD-student in religious studies and history. She is Dutch but blogs in English. In 2011, she initiated the Dutch Literature Month in June, an initiative to read and discuss on her blog a number of Dutch books.<sup>26</sup> A number of her blogging friends joined the initiative. Iris is a popular blogger. She discusses books from a variety of genres: nineteenth- and twentieth- century history, gender and postcolonial literature. She started blogging in 2010 and has built up a large group of followers, 2500 on her website and 2200 on Twitter. There is a considerable number of responses to her blogs, varying from ten to fifteen. She has clearly acquired a position as a mediator in the literary landscape.

Whatever these numbers may mean, publishers at least seem convinced that many bloggers have influence. Many bloggers receive review copies. One writes: 'Almost all publishers of literary fiction [...] approach me to review their new releases.'<sup>27</sup> This leads many bloggers to formulate more or less elaborate review policies, stating for instance (Susanne) 'I only write 5 star reviews. [...] If I don't like a book I won't review it.'<sup>28</sup> Iris writes: 'If I did not like a book, I will not lie about it, and so I might post a negative review. However, I do try to note why the book did not work for me, and for whom it might work.'<sup>29</sup> Many also report that publishers have used quotations from their blogs. Mary Whipple, a very prolific reviewer: 'Yes, my reviews have been quoted on publisher and author sites. Portions of reviews were published as blurbs on the book jackets.'<sup>30</sup>

## CASE STUDIES

In the remainder of this article, we will show how some of the CODL-texts were discussed by our reviewers. In this study we did not encounter English-language reviews for the five books that date from before 1850,<sup>31</sup> nor for Herman Heijermans' *Op hoop van zegen* [*The Good Hope*]. However, Heijermans was discussed by Branko Collin, who liked his *Joeps wonderlijke avonturen* [Jack's Wondrous Adventures].<sup>32</sup> For the other books we have one or more reviews. Willem Elsschot's *Kaas* [*Cheese*] is discussed by Ad Blankestijn (see below), who describes it as 'a gentle, humorous story of small-time ambi-





tion faced with too grand an opportunity, told with brisk efficiency'.<sup>33</sup> Four reviewers discussed W.F. Hermans' *De donkere kamer van Damokles* [*The Dark Room of Damocles*]. Fleur of *Fleur in her world* notes that 'it's a book to make you think, and go on thinking for some time after you've put it down'. Lisa Hill is one of those that discuss Hella Haasse's *Oeroeg* [*The Black Lake*] and judges that 'it captures the pain and bewilderment of a cross-cultural friendship that cannot survive the war of independence'.<sup>34</sup> Annie M.G. Schmidt's *Minoes* [*The Cat Who Came In off the Roof*] is praised by many: 'I am very grateful to Annie M.G. Schmidt for writing this book and I wish she was still here to write lots more.' And: 'This is a tried and true Dutch classic that stands up to the test of time. I loved the unique friendships and the heartwarming story.'<sup>35</sup> Dimitri Verhulst's *De helaasheid der dingen* [*The Misfortunates*] is discussed twice. Tom Cunliffe is shocked by 'the level of debauchery' in the 'fairly cultured European nation' of Belgium but also writes 'the author frequently launches off into lyrical prose which adds a layer of unexpected beauty onto this terrible world'.<sup>36</sup>

For two of the CODL-texts we will discuss how our reviewers discussed them: Multatuli's *Max Havelaar* and Louis Couperus' *De Stille Kracht* [*The Hidden Force*].

### *Max Havelaar*

*Max Havelaar* is one of the most important novels written in Dutch, published in 1861. It tells the story of its protagonist Max Havelaar, an alter ego of the author, as a colonial administrator in the Dutch East Indies. Havelaar tries to make his superiors act against the abuses of power that produce suffering among the indigenous people, but he is fired instead. The book tries to elicit indignation amongst the Dutch public about the system of colonial administration. *Max Havelaar* has been discussed by five very different bloggers in our collection: Jeannette Lambert, M.A. Orthofer, Ad Blankestijn, Iris and Tim Patrick.

Tim Patrick used his blog, *The Well-Read Man*, to keep track of a project he set up for himself. During the project, Tim Patrick becomes a well-read man by reading and reviewing fifty classical or otherwise important texts. *Max Havelaar* is one of them. Patrick formulates the reason he chose *Max Havelaar* for his list of fifty books as follows:

I included *Max Havelaar* in the project after narrowing down a list of several thousand books to just the fifty that I would read. I tried to create a sample that represented the entire set of thousands of books, and *Max Havelaar* helped to bring international balance to the collection.

Patrick opens his short review with a blunt statement: 'You've never heard of *Max Havelaar*. [...] There are some good reasons for that. [...] The third,





and most important, is that it deals with some European drama from over a century ago.' Patrick's view of his audience is clearly that it does not have a very sophisticated literary taste. Later in his review he writes: '*Max Havelaar* is the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the nineteenth-century Netherlands.' And: 'While Multatuli does tend to simplify the entire argument, *Max Havelaar* is nonetheless an influential and important book that had a significant impact on world affairs.'<sup>37</sup>

Jeannette Lambert's discussion of the book is much more personal than Tim Patrick's. Lambert is a jazz vocalist and poet, and one of the founders of a website called [www.imho-reviews.com](http://www.imho-reviews.com). The IMHO acronym is here resolved as 'In My Hysterical (and not the usual 'humble') Opinion'. The website contains reviews from a number of different commentators. Lambert wrote 105 posts on this website, varying from reviews of book to those of Jazz music. The site is no longer maintained: 'It was a project a friend and I started before reviews became so common directly on book selling websites like Amazon themselves. [...] As the format and technology changed, we stopped writing and moved on to pursue other activities.'<sup>38</sup> She now maintains a Pinterest board for translated Dutch literature.<sup>39</sup> Some of the Dutch books she read because of her background: 'I feel obliged to read all books relating to World War II in Indonesia, as part of my identity crisis.'<sup>40</sup> She often mentions her Indo father in her reviews on Dutch books. 'Identity' is a frequently used keyword on the site. In the interview she mentions that she now gets recommendations from Facebook groups for Dutch books targeted at people of Indo descent.

Her *Max Havelaar* review is appreciative of the historical accuracy of the book:

I was also happy to get such sharp insight into the workings of the Dutch East Indies, as so many of the Indo-related novels I have been reading seem to assume we know all about it. Max Havelaar behaves so exactly as my Indo father often does that I felt I learned a lot about my family as well. No wonder everyone in Holland has to read this book in school!<sup>41</sup>

M.A. Orthofer is the creator of the website [www.complete-review.com](http://www.complete-review.com). Started in 1999, the site is quite large; it contains reviews of almost 3500 books from all over the world.<sup>42</sup> Orthofer has 3700 followers on Twitter. In 2013, the list price of the copies he received was \$ 7600, which shows that publishers expect him to have some influence on the reading public. Orthofer has described in a short book the history of his site and his opinions of reviewing.<sup>43</sup> His original aim was to provide information about books and link this to reviews elsewhere, but he found that many books went unreviewed and therefore decided to create his own reviews. He argues that, while over the last years print coverage for new books has declined rapidly, the diversity and accessibility of online reviews make up for the loss.





In the category ‘Dutch Literature’ one can find reviews on books from thirty-nine different authors, varying from Dutch classics like Multatuli and Couperus to contemporary authors like Charles den Tex and Arnon Grunberg. Not unlike Tim Patrick, Orthofer writes about Multatuli that ‘his reputation doesn’t exactly precede him in the Anglo-Saxon world’.<sup>44</sup> His *Max Havelaar* review of more than 2100 words is unusually long for an online review. Orthofer concludes: ‘*Max Havelaar* is a book of its times that has (somewhat surprisingly) nevertheless transcended them. The parts perhaps now outshine the whole, but it is still well worthwhile.’<sup>45</sup>

Iris is the blogger mentioned before who initiated Dutch Literature Month. She also provides on her site a brief list of translated Dutch literature. During Dutch Literature month she reviewed *Max Havelaar*, ‘because of its importance in Dutch colonial history’. Iris says she ‘was prepared to find it boring, and slow, and very detailed but not all that interesting.’ ‘But I think I underestimated this novel.’<sup>46</sup> As shown by the thirteen responses, her review caused some of her followers and peer-bloggers to read the book and write about it. One of them is Emma, French, who responds:

I read this one too during this month of Dutch literature. I thought it was insightful. He was ahead of his time. As far as I know, there is no equivalent in French literature (at least not with the same fame) and there were probably many similar things to say about French colonization in Algeria, Indochina or Africa. I also think it’s important to have read this book to fully understand Hella S. Haasse. I made the mistake to read one of her books before reading Multatuli and I would have enjoyed her book a lot more if I had read *Max Havelaar* first.<sup>47</sup>

There is one other blogger in our study who wrote a review of *Max Havelaar*: Ad Blankestijn, who lives and works in Japan. Under the motto ‘Art makes life, makes interest, makes importance,’ Blankestijn writes about literature and other arts on his blog *Splendid Labyrinths*. His review of *Max Havelaar* (‘a book that will not shut up, even today’) describes extensively the political circumstances behind the novel.<sup>48</sup> This blog is clearly not a diary. The novel is mentioned in another place on his blog as well: Blankestijn provides a list of ten important Dutch books that are available in translation. His comment there: ‘the passionate novel that harshly woke up Dutch society in the nineteenth century.’<sup>49</sup>

These five reviewers are very different in their motivations for reading and writing: the well-read man mostly working on his own development; Jeannette Lambert working through her identity crisis; Orthofer, perhaps the most careful reviewer, for whom the review site itself is probably the main motivation; Iris for whom reading is perhaps mostly a social event, and Ad Blankestijn for whom the book is an occasion for teaching. The most influential bloggers are





Iris and Orthofer. But for all of them, the fact that they chose to read *Max Havelaar* shows that the book still has canonical status; Iris says that she ‘was prepared to find it boring, and slow’ but she acknowledges the power of the work. When they conclude, as Blankestijn does, that ‘*Max Havelaar* is a book that will not shut up, even today,’ they do reconfirm that canonical status. The fact that they are recognizable persons may lend extra credibility to their voices. As Orthofer writes:

As sources of predominantly personal opinion, the reviews written in the first person, the majority of review-focused book blogs seem to offer something that much print review coverage does not: readers sharing what are entirely their own, often visceral, reactions to books [...] [T]hese reactions often exude a fundamental honesty and the kind of intimate reaction that appears to appeal to readers. [...] [B]ook blogs, where reviews by (usually) one person are collected in one location, can establish identities – and find followers, of a sort – fairly easily.<sup>50</sup>

### *The Hidden Force*

*De Stille Kracht* (1900) is an important novel by Louis Couperus first translated into English by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos as *The Hidden Force* (1921). A colonial administrator is brought to his demise by the limitations of his rational approach in dealing with indigenous resentment as well as by the troubles in his own home. The book is often seen as a prediction of the ultimate failure of the colonial system. In our study, we came across seven blogs that discussed works by Louis Couperus, four of them about *The Hidden Force*. Two of them are part of a joint discussion in ‘Dutch Literature Month’: both Lizzy Siddal and Iris (see above) posted a blog in which the two discuss elements of the book. It is quite interesting to see how they interact: the blogs are a report of a conversation, either online or in real life, in which they talk about expectations and reading experiences. The other two who discuss the book are Ad Blankestijn (‘Couperus sniffed out the decay and final doom of the Dutch empire in the East Indies’) and Orthofer (‘Couperus has a fine touch in taking what seems absurd and making a believable figure with it’).<sup>51</sup> Here we focus on the discussion between Lizzy Siddal and Iris.

Lizzy Siddal is a pseudonym of someone in her fifties. She discusses Dutch books on her blog as she did Dutch as a subsidiary subject during her studies in German. The two women have different reasons for choosing this novel. In their first exchange of thoughts, published on Lizzy Siddal’s blog,<sup>52</sup> Lizzy says: ‘This harks back to my student past – 2 years of studying Dutch language and literature. If asked which were my favorite Dutch novels, I would reply *The Darkroom of Damocles* and *The Hidden Force*.’ Iris chose the book because it is most famous for its depiction of the Dutch colonial system.





In discussing how they evaluated the book, they come to speak about the differences in translation. They see the number of Malay words in the original and in the more modern English translation as an important factor. In the English translation, also available in the Gutenberg Project, most of these are translated, which made it easier to read than a more recent translation. The second exchange of thoughts has a more profound tone<sup>53</sup> as they ask themselves whether *The Hidden Force* is a timeless classic.

Iris answers as follows:

*The Hidden Force* treads a fine line on several counts. On the one hand it can be viewed as a timeless classic that gives voice to themes of oppression and resistance in the form of a story about a man's career and his wife's love life. It is also very much a turn-of-the-century novel that both appeals to nineteenth-century literature and foreshadows developments in the twentieth century, as you mentioned earlier. And it is a novel of its time in its use of some colonial motifs and its prose and style. All are elements I appreciated for what they were, though they never led to me loving the book.

Lizzy replies:

Well said. I agree with all of that. I would like to add though that it's very much a slow burning book that benefits from this kind of in-depth analysis. I think it also retains its relevance in today's climate of Western intervention. I suspect that's why there's a new film on the way.<sup>54</sup>

This online discussion, while certainly not a common case, vividly illustrates Iris' network. It also illustrates the point made earlier: all of the bloggers are to some extent persons who relate on a personal level to their readers. Unlike the usual literary critic, most bloggers have their own platforms from which they speak about books as well as about other aspects of their lives. Bloggers are friends rather than authorities. While being counseled about books by like-minded friends has been deplored by many as limiting one's development,<sup>55</sup> listening to these friends, as we see here, doesn't necessarily mean a menu of easy reading.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this contribution, we have investigated a number of non-traditional online book reviewers and discussed some of the characteristics of the sites and their creators. Our study was confined to people writing in English about (translated) Dutch works. We saw that with respect to sex and age they are a diverse group. Some of them have a professional, educational or other link to





the literary field, but others have not. They are usually well-educated. About one-third have a special relationship with Dutch, Dutch-language areas or Dutch history. Some of them form, to some extent, a coherent group. While we have by no means identified all online writers discussing Dutch literature in English, this is not as yet a very large group. Although the number of people reached by the blogs is hard to quantify, it is clear some of them have large audiences, either on the blogs themselves or through mailing lists, Twitter feeds, Facebook or other social media channels.

There are a number of ways in which these reviewers differ from traditional critics. As noted, one of the attractions of their writing is their personal style.<sup>56</sup> They do not get their authority, such as it is, from a social institution (such as a large newspaper or a university). The reviewers with their own weblogs are in a sense small entrepreneurs, competing on their own for attention from readers. Though most are well-educated, their education was not necessarily oriented towards literature. This may explain why (for some) their interest is wider than the 'higher' literature to which traditional critics usually limit their attention.

Turning to the books under discussion, most of the attention goes to recent literature. However, *Max Havelaar* and *The Hidden Force* are more than a century old and are apparently interesting enough for our group of reviewers. Both books are set in the Dutch East Indies. Some reviewers chose them because of this, or out of a general historical or a family interest. Others were influenced by the status of these works as Dutch or, indeed, international classics. In selecting these titles, they are of course reconfirming that classic status. Even when they did not enjoy the books that much, they mention that they are glad or proud that they did read them.

All in all, the presence of responses on the blogs, the existence of networks of bloggers, the large numbers of followers over different channels (mail, Twitter, etc.), suggests online reviewers may already be, or are about to become, a force to reckon with. The more popular among them certainly have acquired some influence on the circulation of (Dutch) literature.

## NOTES

- 1 See the introduction to this volume.
- 2 J. Rosen, 'The People Formerly Known as the Audience', [http://archive.pressthink.org/2006/06/27/ppl\\_frmr.html](http://archive.pressthink.org/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html).
- 3 A. Keen, *The cult of the amateur: How today's internet is killing our culture* (New York, Doubleday/Currency, 2007).
- 4 O. Bendel, 'User-generated Nonsense. Literaturbesprechungen von Laien im Web 2.0', <http://www.heise.de/tp/artikel/30/30206/1.html>.
- 5 R. McDonald, *The death of the critic* (London, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007).





- 6 P. Boot, 'Towards a Genre Analysis of Online Book Discussion: socializing, participation and publication in the Dutch booksphere', in *Selected Papers of Internet Research IR 12.0*(2011). <http://spir.aoir.org/index.php/spir/article/view/18>.
- 7 A. Steiner, 'Personal Readings and Public Texts: Book Blogs and Online Writing about Literature', in *Culture unbound 2* (2010) 28, pp. 471-494.
- 8 For reasons of time, we were not able to do an exhaustive search for online English-language reviews of Dutch literature. We did not, for instance, inspect the Librarything or Shelfari sites.
- 9 We provide a link for the blog the first time that it is mentioned. Blog names are italicised.
- 10 <https://www.goodreads.com/>.
- 11 <http://www.tekstadventure.nl/branko/blog/>.
- 12 <http://irisonbooks.com/>.
- 13 <http://blogs.transparent.com/dutch/>.
- 14 <https://www.youtube.com/user/booksandquills>.
- 15 <http://www.ourbookreviewsonline.blogspot.nl>.
- 16 <https://www.goodreads.com/user/show/1457001-stephen>.
- 17 M.A. Orthofer, *The Complete Review. Eleven Years, 2500 Review* (aestheticsofresistance/press, 2010), <http://www.complete-review.com/main/CRbook.htm>.
- 18 <https://leeswammes.wordpress.com/about/>.
- 19 <http://rochester.edu/College/translation/threepersent/?id=7482>.
- 20 <https://au.linkedin.com/in/lisa-hill-4871a737>.
- 21 Interview.
- 22 <https://littledutchbook.wordpress.com/>. There are no indications at all as to who is writing this blog. It might be an institutional site.
- 23 Interview. Whipple reviewed on Amazon long before she had her own blog. She is a 'Hall of Fame' Amazon reviewer ([http://www.amazon.com/gp/pdp/profile/A319KYEIAZ-3SON/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_pdp](http://www.amazon.com/gp/pdp/profile/A319KYEIAZ-3SON/ref=cm_cr_dp_pdp)), whose reviews were voted as helpful more than 30.000 times.
- 24 <https://savidgereads.wordpress.com/2013/09/18/the-detour-gerbrand-bakker/>.
- 25 <http://jadorehappyendings.blogspot.nl/>.
- 26 There is also a German Literature Month, hosted by Lizzy Siddal (see below) and Caroline (no surname known) of *Beauty is a sleeping cat* <https://beautyisasleepingcat.wordpress.com/2015/12/01/final-giveaways-and-looking-back-on-german-literature-month-2015/>. And there is 'Paris in July', with the aim 'to celebrate our French experiences through reading, watching, listening to, observing, cooking and eating all things French.' See <http://bookbath.blogspot.nl/2011/05/paris-in-july-2011.html>. Theme-based readalongs are a common feature of the book blogosphere.
- 27 Interview.
- 28 <http://www.librarianlavender.com/search/label/Review%20Policy>.
- 29 <http://irisonbooks.com/review-policy/>.
- 30 Interview.
- 31 Hadewijch's *Liederen, Elckerlijc*, Joost van den Vondel's *Lucifer*, Betje Wolff and Aagje De-ken's *Sarah Burgerhart* and Hendrik Conscience's *De leeuw van Vlaanderen*.
- 32 <http://www.tekstadventure.nl/branko/blog/2007/11/joeps-wonderlijke-avonturen>.
- 33 <http://splendidlabyrinths.blogspot.jp/2013/04/cheese-1933-by-willem-elschot-book.html>.





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- 34 <http://anzlitlovers.com/2014/01/11/the-black-lake-by-hella-s-haasse-translated-by-ina-rilke/>.
- 35 <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1795353.Minoes>.
- 36 <http://acommonreader.org/2012/01/05/review-the-misfortunates-dimitri-verhulst/>.
- 37 <http://wellreadman.com/2011/10/19/review-max-havelaar/>.
- 38 Interview.
- 39 <https://www.pinterest.com/nettecollect/dutch-literature-in-english/>.
- 40 [http://www.imho-reviews.com/opinion/88\\_0\\_1\\_0\\_C/](http://www.imho-reviews.com/opinion/88_0_1_0_C/).
- 41 [http://www.imho-reviews.com/opinion/8\\_0\\_1\\_0\\_C/](http://www.imho-reviews.com/opinion/8_0_1_0_C/).
- 42 <http://www.complete-review.com/main/absite.html>.
- 43 M. A. Orthofer, *The Complete Review*.
- 44 <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/niederld/multatuli2.htm>.
- 45 <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/niederld/multatuli.htm>.
- 46 <http://irisonbooks.com/2011/06/12/max-havelaar-by-multatuli-eduard-douwes-dekker/>.
- 47 <https://bookaroundthecorner.wordpress.com/2011/06/27/max-havelaar-by-multatuli/#comments>.
- 48 <http://splendidlabyrinths.blogspot.nl/2014/03/max-havelaar-or-coffee-auctions-of.html>.
- 49 <http://splendidlabyrinths.blogspot.nl/2014/03/ten-masterworks-of-dutch-literature.html>.
- 50 Orthofer, *The Complete Review*, p. 85.
- 51 <http://splendidlabyrinths.blogspot.nl/2014/03/the-hidden-force-by-louis-couperus.html>,  
<http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/niederld/couperl3.htm>.
- 52 <https://lizzysiddal.wordpress.com/2012/06/18/the-hidden-force-louis-couperus-part-one-what-a-difference-the-translation-makes/>.
- 53 <http://irisonbooks.com/2012/06/19/the-hidden-force-by-louis-couperus-part-two-or-is-it-a-masterpiece/>.
- 54 At the time there were plans for the book to be made into a movie by Paul Verhoeven.
- 55 'But if we only listen to those who already share our proclivities and interests, will not the supposed critical democracy lead instead to a dangerous attenuation of taste and conservatism of judgment?' McDonald, *The death of the critic*, p. 12.
- 56 'Even though a book blog is about literature, the personalized tone is necessary to attract readers. A de-personalized blogger without passions leaves no impression, and tends to have few visitors.' Steiner, 'Personal Readings and Public Texts', p. 488.

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JUNE IS DUTCH LITERATURE MONTH!

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