



Ad van Iterson

Ad van Iterson: 'Sociology and literature feed each other'

By Loek Kusiak

He is a sociologist and assistant professor at the Maastricht University School of Business and Economics (SBE). He teaches students how people can best work together in organisations. However, Ad van Iterson feels like a writer first of all. His chosen field and Maastricht origins are often sources of inspiration and the cradle for stories with an historical character – like those he brings to us in '*Neem me mee*' (Take Me Along)*, a novel about his youth.

Ad van Iterson relates how his sister-in-law, who worked for Philips, was precipitously fired. "Like people at the time of the industrial revolution were reduced to a hand. Although in the last 100 years, more has been invested in people, thankfully, so they can lead richer lives." This example can be applied to organisational theory, the subject that he teaches at the university. Van Iterson: "A purely sociological subject. Which people can you put together in an organisation or team? How do you get them to work together as well as possible? To the theory I add a touch of basic ethics. You can't just walk all over people. I want to give students a critical view." For students, Van Iterson considers his subject to be in part truck system, in part field preaching."

"It's quite new to look at organisations from a humanistic perspective. For example, what can a novel like Willem Elsschot's '*Kaas*' teach us about organisations? It's interesting to allow the bridge to literature into our department."

Pottery factories

At the beginning of the conversation he said, almost guiltily, and perhaps in amazement about himself: "I am a working class boy from the Limmel neighborhood in Maastricht, now with a plush job and my own room at the university, having contacts all over the place. It's a slightly mixed feeling, when you have achieved more than many other people from your youth." He didn't grow up with literature. At school, required literature didn't grab him. He preferred to lose himself in popular science books like 'The Book of Power and Speed'. "It wasn't until I was 18 that I came to literature through a side door, through the works of Jack Kerouac and Herman Hesse."

The sociology student Van Iterson left behind the "dogmatic, Marxist" Nijmegen, which had no charm for him, and went to the University of Amsterdam, where, under the supervision of Norbert Elias, he was schooled in the cultural historical side of sociology. He also worked at the student paper, *Propria Cures*. After Amsterdam he returned to Maastricht. He did his postgraduate research on the history of the first pottery factories and on child labour in this city. This theme was also the subject of Van Iterson's third novel, '*De Citoyenne*' (The Citizen).

Red thread

"The red thread in my working life is that sociology, writing, and literary ambitions cross and recross, feeding and influencing each other. I spend most of my time writing. I see myself in people who in spite

of or simply beyond their paid jobs see themselves as real writers. Slauerhoff was a ship's doctor, Bordewijk an attorney, Pierre Kemp, the Maastricht poet, worked in an office. He wrote his poetry on the commuter train."

Van Iterson feels himself to be 100% a Maastricht writer, strongly influenced by the local language, the typical spirit or sound of the city. "I really don't work with fantasy. I'd rather place my characters in the context of real experience. Close to the experiences and descriptions of ordinary people, sociological stories. That's what I like. But now I'm working, with equal enthusiasm, on a piece about gossip on the workroom floor. This will be a chapter in a manual about organisational culture."

Youth without stress

He made his debut when he was 34 ("abundantly late") with a collection of stories. For the last 10 years he has had a regular column in the daily newspaper, *De Limburger*. Now he is 58 and, according to one recent review, his work is "in the calm of the literary storm a small but fine oeuvre."

It concerns three collections of stories, and his fourth novel, '*Neem me mee*' (Take Me Along), appeared last winter. In this 'autobiographical novel' Ad van Iterson returns to his youth in Limmel, changing from melancholy to wit. He looks with admiration on his father, who worked above ground at the state mine, Maurits in Geleen. He goes along with him on many adventures. His father died young, of a heart attack at 55, some days after his 25th anniversary at the mine. Ad van Iterson was then 13. His mother, always the pillar of the family, became senile in her old age and spent her last years in the psychiatric wing of the hospital.

"This is the best that I have written so far. Colleagues, friends, and recent reviews do agree. It is an ode to my parents and a book about getting older. A plea for experiencing youth without stress. I still experience things as a teenager. Often full of surprise. That is also one of the blessings of having children."

His next writing project? "Maybe a novel that takes place in the academic world, the travels, and conferences."

* '*Neem me mee*', Ad van Iterson, 170 pages, edited by Nieuw Amsterdam