HOW I BECAME A WRITER

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I decided to become a writer when, at the age of fourteen, I started to read my parents' daily newspaper. Its main attraction was a very personal column by a woman who called herself Saartje Burgerhart. Saartje Burgerhart is in fact the name of the main character of a Dutch novel *Historie van mejuffrouw Sara Burgerhart*, written in 1782 by two female authors, Betje Wolff and Aagje Deken. The story of Saartje Burgerhart is very Dutch, very calvinistic, very moralistic. It basically comes down to this: Saartje escapes from her hypocritical family to a series of adventures that could have ended very badly - but no, all turns out well because in the end she is rescued, typically, by a rightminded and honest husband. For although we can be frivolous, and will venture out into the world every now and then, in our heart of hearts we are a boringly decent people in Holland, God-fearing and aware of our neighbours, as for centuries we have been ruled by the spirits of Luther and Calvin. We are respectful people. Our press and our literature are quite respectful, too. Righteousness is the word that comes to the mind immediately. How laudable. How very tedious.

Just as in the book, the newspaperwoman who called herself Saartje Burgerhart went about in a wanton and disorderly way, opposing set values and making fun of things that were considered serious matters. But that was only one of the reasons why, as an adolescent, I liked her so much. The other reason was that she managed to make things look so simple. Whichever problem she tackled, be it nuclear warfare, pollution of the environment or the new spring fashion, she would always find ways to bring it close to our own homes and our own lives. She changed the proportions of her subjects to make them fit into our narrow minds, she shifted the perspective around until we felt that she was talking about us as individuals, instead of about abstract matters of great importance. One of her favourite ways of doing this was by presenting us with the views or reactions of her grandchildren. She used to litter her columns with members of her family. Behind her writing one could always hear the clatter of dishes being washed, quarreling little voices, and all the other homely sounds that big cosy households produce.

Of course, it took me half my life to discover that she simply was a genius and writing wasn't easy at all - but at the time Saartje Burgerhart lured me into believing it was. I still owe her a debt of gratitude for that.

Saartje Burgerhart, who is still active as a writer, was interviewed recently. She told her interviewer that of all current columnists, she likes my work best. I was highly flattered. There is never the patter of children's feet in my work, but apparently I managed to fulfill my adolescent aspirations anyhow. When I was fourteen I didn't merely want to be a writer, I decided bluntly that I wanted to be a Saartje Burgerhart. As if it were a profession.

I understood that I had to distinguish myself in journalism before any editor would invite me to write inspiring columns. So I became a journalist. I worked as a reporter for a general interest-magazine called *Panorama*, which can best be compared with the American magazine *Life*. I travelled around the world. From the slums of Calcutta to the riots in Uganda. For like a lot of young journalists, I was more of a missionary. Injustice was my theme. I had high hopes that my writing would help change the world. It's my firm belief that all media people ought to hope for the same. It's rather difficult to maintain this belief when one gets older, but it's vital to set out with it. Because injustice, like no other theme, enables us to see that there is more than just one reality. For instance, the universe of a poor person does not resemble the universe of a rich one. Which reality are we going to report? Which one do we choose?

One of the things that makes journalism an interesting occupation is that we can work our way through all those layers and levels of reality. We come to understand that some of them can co-exist although they can never be reconciled. It's our job to show the similarities and differences and explain what is at stake. And for whom? My mentor at *Panorama* used to tell me: journalism is like writing a letter to your mother. That's all there is to it. Like Saartje Burgerhart's columns, this seems a simple assignment. What it comes down to is dealing with reality. And of course, the most real reality is usually the most hidden one, the one that we are not supposed to know about.

Consequently, the reality in which I spent most of my time as a reporter was not very pleasant: it was full of lepers, victims, the destitute, the poor, the down-trodden. In order to escape from this, I began to write fiction. Writing fiction means that you can leave reality behind you, or at least recreate it, rearrange it, make happen what you want to happen instead of being tied to depressing or boring facts. Yet, writing novels is in a way dealing with reality.

At first I wasn't succesful at all. It took me ten years to get a first novel published. In retrospect I find it difficult to understand how I could go on believing in myself as a writer. The problem is even worse: until this very moment I find it hard to maintain my self-confidence as a writer. One of the things that is truly hateful about this profession is that you have to rely on yourself so much. You have to trust in the claim that you really have something worthwhile to say.

You have to have some sort of belief in yourself, but a belief in a somewhat higher cause can be helpful. In my case, some time during all this activity, I suddenly realised that injustice was not a thing that only took place in Calcutta or Uganda, but that I myself was very much part of one of the saddest and most injust predicaments of all ages: the fact that women are not allowed to lead the same lives as men. Since it helps to write about things that truly move you or make you feel indignant, before I knew it, I was invited to write a weekly column for our

equivalent of *Time* magazine and a monthly one for *Opzij*, the Dutch version of *Ms.* I have been doing so for years now and I still stick to Saartje Burgerhart's recipe: the struggle between the sexes can be made personal and even understandable by simply locating it in the arena of our everyday life. And of course, I get a lot of angry letters from my readers for doing so. That's how I became the journalist that I am now. But also, as a novelist, I profited from the understanding that the reality of women is different from the reality of men. Put very bluntly: the oppressed have another outlook on life than the oppressor. And likewise the jailed versus the jailer. Women versus men. I don't want to have anything to do with a reality that gives most advantages to the half of mankind to which I don't belong. Going along with it would mean collaboration. Therefore I'd rather leave it behind me and enter my own reality.

I sometimes believe that female writers are very fortunate in this sense. There is so much that is unknown or simply not yet told about women's reality. It's all laid out for us. Some male writers are beginning to notice this as well. They understand how refreshing a female point of view can be, what it can do to boring old reality. A writer like John Irving succeeds very well in identifying with women; he writes nothing but bestsellers.

Now I'm not implying that everybody should aspire to do the same. I don't think women are necessarily better writers. I only want to point out the advantage of a point of view that is contrary to the general one. The advantage of the eye that can see what most eyes can't. An eye like that is very useful to a writer.

Of course, such a scrutinizing eye is bound to see unusual things. One day mine spotted the list of writers that had over the years been awarded the P.C. Hooft prize, our most prestigious literary prize, which is given every other year by the Dutch government. During its existence it has been given 35 times. To 31 male and 4 female writers. Only four. I started to look up other important literary awards in the Netherlands. They all revealed the same pattern: for every seven male laureates there was just one female. Needless to say, this is not in proportion with the actual numbers of male and female writers.

There was definitely something wrong here - and together with the poet Elly de Waard, the writer Anja Meulenbelt and the publisher Caroline van Tuyll I decided we should not just leave it at that. If the juries of the established literary prizes did not acknowledge or recognize the value of work by female writers, it was about time for a new literary award: a twin sister of the P.C. Hooft, as prestigious and as big (10,000 guilders), specifically for the female voice in literature.

Our prize was born at Elly's kitchen table where the four of us shared a meal one night. To our amazement, when we announced it, the kitchen table was as big an issue as the prize itself. Journalists wrote enormously funny pieces about this table (a respectable oak one, by the

way), stressing how much we succeeded in proving that a woman's place was in the kitchen. Later on, people began to take our enterprise more seriously. Oh, what is the use of an award like that, they would say, and what the hell is a female voice?

We told them the same story over and over again.

In Holland, there are seven male literary critics to every single female reviewer - a thing that need not surprise us in a society where men in general have more of a say than women. Accordingly, it's mainly men who assess male and female writing. So what is wrong with that? Are they all biased, are they all sexist, are they all deaf and blind, are they all oppressors of women? Of course not. It is commonly known that reviewers claim all the time that they do not care about the gender of the writer as long as the writing is of quality. And quality, naturally, does not have a gender. Or so they say. I, for one, claim this to be complete nonsense. Worse: a lie.

Hemingway once proclaimed what the real stuff is, out of which literature is made. Fucking whores and puking in the streets, he said. Why is *being* a whore or *cleaning up* someone else's vomit not the real stuff? Because until this very day, male activities, even the not so nice ones, are deemed to be of more interest than female activities. It's not so easy to escape from notions like that. They colour our whole perception of life. They dictate what we feel is of importance and what is not. Being only mortals, literary critics are afflicted with this, as we all are. So when they talk about 'quality', they are actually talking about their own set of values, under the influence of which they canonize literature and mould literary tradition.

Louise Bernikov wrote in *The World Split Open:*

> What is commonly called literary history, is actually a record of choices. Which writers have survived their time and which have not, depends upon who noticed them and who chose to record the notice. Both what has become part of the approved of body of literary work and what hasn't, is the result of this process of selection - and has therefore been submitted to the power of those who select. This power to select has in Europe and the United States always belonged to white men. They are the isolated class that has written the register that has become known as Literature, and that has been clearly influenced by the opinions white men hold about non-whites and non-men. The outcome of male power defining culture and 'common taste', is that work by female writers has been kept out of literary history.

In other words, the dominant culture sets the rules, and this has important consequences for everybody not belonging to the dominant culture. In actual fact, this situation can very well be compared to the process of colonialism. Colonialism doesn't consist only of exploiting people, it also implies imposing on them a foreign educational system, a

foreign governmental system, wiping out everything that is native to them. Look at what the American settlers did to the native inhabitants of this country, look at what happened to the aborigines in Australia: they were all declared a lower form of life by the newly established, dominant culture that felt superior to them.

Women are very much in the same position: as a group we are socially, economically and culturally of less importance than men are. In order to please them and in order to be taken seriously by them, we have to imitate the dominant culture just as the colonized people have to. Just keep in mind that until this very moment, it is still considered a compliment when critics say of a piece of writing: she writes like a man. He writes like a woman means something quite different.

It is in this light that we should view the female voice that I mentioned before: as the vernacular language, the native tongue, the accent or dialect of a colonized group. We all know that the Inuit people have sixty words to describe snow, or that people in rural areas have many expressions that have to do with agriculture. It is difficult for outsiders to understand and value the meaning of all these details and nuances. It may very well be just as difficult to understand and value the meaning of female vernacular, that serves to describe specifically female experiences or activities. It's not nice when people misunderstand you. Or when people make you feel like a fool because of your dialect. I know myself how easily one can make embarrassing mistakes: in America I should say: pass me the eraser, please - but I'm used to the British English and will say: give me the rubber, please, instead. In addition, it is just amazing how accents lead to automatic assumptions: when you hear someone speaking with an East coast accent or with a Southern drawl, you instantly create a series of pictures in your mind. Only people who speak "properly" escape all these connotations and prejudices. So indeed, in order not to be misjudged all the time, the female voice has molded itself over the years and the centuries, to conform to the ways of the dominant culture. And I think we were helped along a bit in this process - for it is a fact of life that the vernacular language of the colonized usually gets eradicated. Because it's easier to control people when they are alienated from their own ways of expressing themselves. That diminishes the risk of their getting together and plotting. And besides, they were only speaking a heathen tongue to begin with. For their own good, in order to get a job, to be taken seriously, they'd better speak Our Language and speak it properly.

Women have always been brought up to please other people, to live up to other people's standards rather than their own. Speaking out is not one of our innate talents. So we let our language be taken from us. And with it the possibility to express our own wisdom, our local knowledge. Dialect and local knowledge go together. When I'm abroad and have lost my way and want someone to give me directions, and happen upon a group of inhabitants of this area who are talking amongst themselves, I will choose the one with the strongest accent for assistance, naturally

assuming that he or she spent their entire life there and would have the best knowledge of the locality. Local knowledge is something that comes to mind immediately when we think of dialects.

I'll give you a good example of how the Dutch poet Micky Walvis voiced a bit of local knowledge, namely knowledge about women's lives and female experiences. In a poem about a highly unsatisfactory sexual encounter she states: I felt like a teabag dipped in tepid water. Using this very line as their main argument, the critics slaughtered her as "a very unaccomplished poet". What happened in reality was that they didn't understand her dialect. I think her line is wonderful: it uses an image out of the realm of women, the household, to express a feeling that unfortunately is well known to many women: having a lover who only thinks of his own pleasure. I think Mickey Walvis is a fine example of a writer with not only a clear voice of her own, but also with a distinct female one.

The same is true for Emily Dickinson. Just look at her amazing images. At the end of the afternoon the workers in the field "seam the hem of the day". Our lives are "like a cup, discarded of the housewife, quaint or broken; a newer Sevres pleases, old ones crack". The wind is "kneading" the long grass. For someone who never baked a bread or a cake in his life, it may be impossible to see the beauty *and accuracy* of an image like that. Metaphors that a man could never have thought of, simply because what they reflect is not part of his everyday life, and is easily not recognized or valued by men. The female voice that utters them is laughed at and called silly or unaccomplished.

Emily Dickinson has often been regarded as a somewhat halfwitted lady and a disturbed and limited poet. In my American literature anthology by Charles Birrell, she is still defined as someone of generally low quality, with just a few good poems to her name. The fact that so many people in spite of Birrell seem to appreciate Dickinson's work nowadays, and Virginia Woolf's, and Gertrude Stein's and Jane Austen's, and in the Netherland Anna Blaman's or Carry van Bruggen's, is mainly due to the fact that the women's movement re-discovered these forgotten writers and gave them their proper place in literary annals. Which only shows again that quality is not the only criterion of fame; it is rather a matter of how many people choose to discover the beauty of a writer and how much they publish, and where they publish, about their finds. But before you think that in my definition "the female voice" speaks only of household matters, maybe including some bits about child care and growing health food in the garden, I must add something.

I do think that it is of the utmost importance that we read more about the everyday reality of women's traditional lives, and about all their activities that have always been hidden and kept away because they weren't supposed to provide any drama or hold much interest. If these matters have been written about at all, it has been in a condescending, derogatory and ridiculing way. But my own life, for instance, doesn't consist only of sewing and baking, I'm not confined to kitchen and cellar.

(The world would be in an even poorer state if all women were). There is another side to the female voice - and that's the part that speaks up or cries out about the things that ladies aren't supposed to mention: like Mickey Walvis or Erica Jong, who write about sexuality, about their own sexuality. We needn't be surprised that in doing so they draw up a picture of female needs and emotions that is very different from the image that has been presented by writers like Henry Miller and D.H. Lawrence. Jong and Walvis speak from personal knowledge, whereas Miller and Lawrence in this respect are only tourists on foreign ground, behaving very much like colonists.

The female voice in literature is the kind of writing that does away with stereotypes and lies about women. In its style, in its imagery and in its contents, it reflects female experiences and the female imagination. When you assume that books like that can't be of interest to a general readership, just keep in mind that throughout the history of printing we have been offered books with a male point of view - and they have found their way to a mixed audience. But currently women find that some of these books are insulting or plainly boring, and they are fed up with them. They want to read about themselves for a change. And I'm sure that men who truly love women and are interested in them (and most men claim they do and are), will also enjoy reading a work with a female voice.

Which brings us to the next question: is there a connection between biology and writing? Do only women possess this female voice - do all women possess it? Of course not! The female voice has little to do with gender and a lot with choice. There are female writers who rather go along with the ways of the dominant culture. And just as we can't include all women, we can't exclude all men either. I've already mentioned John Irving. He is an outstanding example of a male writer who comes very close to having a female voice. Look at what he writes about: about the terrible impact of sexual violence on women, about the need for free abortion, and about distinct feminist issues. And look at his characters in literature: you seldom come across such nice men and such credible women. The men we encounter in Irving's books find being a parent the most important thing in their life. They don't go fucking whores and puking in the streets, they play with their children endlessly. They are very much like the nice men you sometimes meet in real life. And Irving's women are equally real. They pursue careers and they have dreams and passions, they are enterprising and full of zest. Irving's case just proves that men, after all, *can* write interestingly and entertainingly, if only they choose to do so.

So when we launched the exciting news of our newly established Anna Bijns prize, we told the press that male writers who were able to write just like women would also be taken into consideration as possible candidates for our award.

This really sent people into a tizzy. We ourselves couldn't have made our own point more clearly, we ourselves couldn't have come up

with better proof of the different ways in which male and female writers are being judged. All those critics who always claim that they don't make a distinction between genders, all those writers who claim to represent both male and female points of view, in fact the whole literary world, stumbled over us, shouting: but who *wants* to write like a woman?

Celebrities appeared on talk shows, calmly stating that the word female signifies weakness, whining, complaints, lack of interest. Writing like a female, lowering yourself, becoming a specimen of a lesser order - never.

Would anyone dare to talk in that same fashion about blacks? about Jews? Would they proudly appear in front of a camera or a microphone, boasting that, praise the Lord, they were better writers than any given black or Jew?

Maybe we wouldn't have caused such a fuss, maybe we wouldn't have stirred up all this embarrassing rage and fury, if we had limited our goals and told the press that we had established a prize for women only, a feminist trophy for our own writers. Had we done so, people might very well have patted us on the head: right (write) you (your) little things, go and play and have a good time amongst yourselves. But our aim with the Anna Bijns Foundation has from the beginning been not only to reward an individual, but also to make a public point about the so called gender-neutral quality-myths, that in effect victimize women. We wanted, by promoting women's writing, to draw attention to the fact that there are in literature, as everywhere else, double standards. We had never dreamed that we would achieve what we did: make some men shamelessly advertise their humiliating opinions about female writers and women in general.

Anna Bijns herself, to be sure, would have liked the fuss, for she was a woman who participated in and even initiated many a row in her time. We chose her as our patroness because she was the first independent female writer in Dutch literary history. Born in Antwerp in 1493, she chose neither the protection of marriage nor that of a convent life; she lived her life as her own woman, which in her day was a very uncommon thing to do. She earned her living as a schoolmistress until she died at the age of 82. She started her writing career almost a century before the patron of that other Dutch award, P.C. Hooft, picked up his pen. As far as we know, she is the first writer in our language who made worldly love her subject; her passionate love poems appeal to us to this very day. Furthermore, she became known for her written intervention in one of the most important issues of her time, Luther's reformation of the Catholic Church. Maybe to us it would have been more convenient if Anna Bijns had chosen the side of the heretics, but she was a devout Catholic and deadly opposed to Luther. What is more important is that she, as a woman in the sixteenth century, used her verbal venom to direct the public opinion of her society. She cried out against her enemies in a bold voice, even when as a result she was ostracised and isolated, both as a human being and as an artist. She was truly a fearless woman with convictions which she stood up for.

But it is not only Anna Bijns' militancy and her warlike spirit that appeal to me as a contemporary writer. There's more that I can identify with - and that's the reception of her work. Take, for instance, the way her love poems were received. How could she, being the virtuous old maid that she was, ever have written such passionate stuff? Did she just make it up? Why? Or did she speak from personal experience? In that case she was a bad woman!

Unfortunately, this double standard, this damned if you do damned if you don't attitude, still thrives nowadays. Take this example. My friend Hannes Meinkema and I found ourselves being criticized for our latest books. Why doesn't Meinkema make more jokes, exclaimed one reviewer, continuing in the same vein: Why does Dorrestein crack jokes all the time? Damned if you do and damned if you don't. Poking fun at everything is not very ladylike, but when you do behave like a lady you are considered to be dull. I think this is the very essence of the role that women have been supposed to play for so long: a woman is someone who whines, complains, etc., someone who is plain and boring - and yet we are supposed to behave like these boring creatures if we are real women. It's bad enough that this notion plays a part in how we are valued as individuals - it becomes even worse when we have to conclude that for some reason it is also the key argument for assessing us as professionals and as writers. Moreover, we always get dragged in as persons when the actual topic should be our books. One day, I was confronted by a journalist who asked me seriously if I didn't think I would sell even more if I had been a more beautiful woman? I tried not to take offense, for I happened to know of the trials and tribulations of one indeed stunningly good-looking female writer. She told me once that people would tell her over and over again: Well, of course it helps your sales that you are a very beautiful woman. To which she would reply, time and again: It helps my sales that I write beautiful *books*, thank you.

So you may understand that we thought it was about time the Anna Bijns Foundation came into being. We didn't want to hang about and theorize forever, we wanted to do something immediately. Our first priority was to raise money for the Anna Bijns Prize, ensuring that we could award it in the near future for the first time. Oddly enough, this coincided with a lot of controversy about the official P.C. Hooftprijs, a sort of national riot over a laureate-to-be. The result was that it became unsure whether the whole institution of the P.C. Hooftprijs would continue to exist. Imagine something like the Pulitzer or the Booker Prize disappearing. Consequently, the whole literary world was in a state. Everybody was filled with indignation. They screamed and hollered themselves blue in the face. Talk show after talk show, meeting after meeting: words! words! words!

Then it suddenly dawned on these good people that somewhere in the background there was this bunch of silly women, only four of them, who weren't talking so much, but acting instead and busying themselves with getting a new prize together that was as big as theirs. I will admit

that it was a triumphant moment for the four of us when one of the most prestigious reviewers exclaimed in Holland's most important weekly: "But what these girls are achieving with their Anna Bijns Prize, must also be feasible with the P.C. Hooftprijs!" Of course we are no girls, I'm the youngest of the lot and well over 30, and two of my colleagues are old enough to be grandmothers, but we let this one pass. And of course no one developed any private initiative to save the P.C. Hooft - but from then on, people viewed us differently. For the first time, some of them hailed our plan publicly. It was quite ironic to find how much that helped. When we stressed the need for this new award ourselves, we were laughed at - but the moment some distinguished men chose our side we suddenly achieved a different status, we were approved of, sometimes even admired. Oh well, the end justifies the means.

Two thousand people, men and women alike, came to enjoy our Concert Hall fundraising benefit performance in February. Dozens of female entertainers, singers, musicians performed for us without a fee, countless female writers made an appearance. The show lasted from 8 in the evening until 4 the next morning. One of the highlights was an auction of personal belongings of well-known writers. The socks that Anja used to wear when writing. The little briefcase in which Neeltje kept her unanswered fan mail for 20 years. The fountain pen with which Hermine wrote her first and widely acclaimed selection of stories. I parted with the first draft of my novel *Noorderzon* written in longhand. Fortunately the man who bought it solemnly promised me he would put it in his safe and never ever take a look at it.

So our party was an elegant and very successful affair. National television broadcast some of it. Next day, the papers ran page-long articles. All of a sudden, we had arrived and we were established. It even slipped people's minds how angry they had been about the fact that men had been asked to pay ten guilders more admission than women. And we sat there, surrounded by heaps of money, enough to award the Anna Bijns Prize quite a number of times over, and what amazed us most was that it had taken the four of us only half a year out of a lifetime to make the dream that started at Elly's kitchen table come true.

The independent jury that we appointed, announced the first winner of the Anna Bijns Prize, Josepha Mendels, the author of a big body of work with an unmistakable female voice. She is in her 80's now, and has never been properly rewarded for her immense contribution to literature. Now she is appearing on national television as a celebrity. We are very proud and happy to have helped her to gain the recognition that she has deserved for so long. Recently the Prize Ceremony took place and I was present at that, courtesy of the Dutch Minister of Culture who decided that of course he should pay for my travel expenses, this being a moment of such cultural importance.

Naturally success went to our heads, and we also found we had become rather addicted to scheming and dreaming. We said to one another that what hampers women in the world of literature, must also

hamper them in other creative fields. In the visual arts, for instance. Why not something for female sculptors and painters? So currently the Anna Bijns Foundation is busy opening a new branch: the Judith Lijster Foundation. Judith Lijster was a pupil of the famous Dutch painter Frans Hals. Centuries after they both died, it was discovered that a lot of paintings that had been signed by Hals were in reality done by Lijster. And although it was not uncommon in the Golden Age for pupils to do the work and teachers to get the honour, we feel it is an accurate metaphor for something more important: women's deprivation of recognition. The foundation will hopefully issue the Judith Lijster Prijs in the near future for the visual arts equivalent of the female writer. We're still struggling about what to call this equivalent - the female "form" or "shape" doesn't really have a nice ring. But we will solve that.

And, we now ask ourselves, why not move on to the field of music later, including both female composers and performers? Why not expand the Anna Bijns Foundation to the theatre? Or to photography and film? There's really no reason for not doing so. By the year 2000 the whole of the Netherlands must be covered in a network of foundations that promote, support and award achievements by people who don't want to conform to the conventions of the dominant culture - isn't that what art is all about in the first place? I sincerely hope that the rest of the world will follow our example.