

Tommy Wieringa

BY PATRICK SMITH

Best-selling Dutch novelist Tommy Wieringa (VEERing-ha) has written a dozen novels, four of which have been translated into English. Wieringa and Sam Garrett, a highly sought-after translator of Dutch, have worked together since 2005. “He’s one of the best translators working from Dutch to English, quite well-known for that and highly sought-after,” Wieringa tells *Bookmarks* from a train en route from Belgium to Germany. “A writer is lucky when Sam finds time to translate one’s work. It always comes out better in translation.” In fact, Garrett is the only translator into English Wieringa has ever had, one of the keys to the success of their partnership. “Time makes a successful relationship. Sam’s very precise, and he knows the dynamics of my sentences. He makes me a better writer.”

Notwithstanding Wieringa’s self-effacing remarks, the words and ideas are the author’s own. He’s a fiercely talented writer, with a deep humanity focused on migration, memory, and the power of language. The characters, flawed and yet optimistic, are his, too: the underachieving child of a former porn star and a megalomaniacal artist; the mute, paraplegic teenager befriended by his town’s iconoclastic, visionary hellion; a groundbreaking virologist who feels his own biological clock ticking; a policeman at loose ends in an isolated town on the Russian steppe.

Wieringa, now 49, grew up in Aruba. A young romantic, Wieringa wondered about the world outside his small island. “I had an interesting childhood in that sense, because I grew up very close to where Gabriel Garcia Márquez grew up near Cartagena, Colombia. Aruba is a barren island just off the coast of Venezuela, and there’s a little hill of about 110 metres, and if you stand on top of that, you can see the mainland of Venezuela, in a direct line with Colombia. It was the product of a silly imagination, but I could imagine that I grew up not so far from where Garcia Márquez grew up. It’s a stimulating idea.”

He moved to the Netherlands at age 10 and studied history and journalism as a young man. His wanderings led to jobs in sales and magazine editing, but the writer in him never forgot his travels or the importance of geography. “When I was a kid at school, I saw these large maps at the back of the class with red arrows and blue arrows pointing in all directions, mostly in Europe. Migrational waves, a single arrow representing thousands of people leaving one place for another over hundreds of years. And I thought, *What were they fleeing from?* It tickled my imagination,” Wieringa says. “These arrows are on the maps when you visit the Ellis Island Museum in New York City. For instance, you see how people from Naples, or Odessa, or Amsterdam, or Rotterdam—in fact, people from all over Europe—came to the United States.

“In a biological sense, in these migratory movements—wildebeests, for instance, on the African savanna—a few will be eaten by crocodiles or lions. But as a whole, the group will survive. The same thing happens to humans at borders between countries. Come with thousands, a few will be caught. But you can’t stop them all, not even with a wall. Each of those arrows on the map is associated with hardship.”

Wieringa’s prose style, like the author himself, is thoughtful and straightforward. And like the author, his characters know their literature. Forced to leave his childhood home when a storm threatens the already vulnerable coast of England where he lives, *Little Caesar’s* Ludwig Unger takes along Herman Melville, Jerzy Kosinski, Bertrand Russell. In Wieringa’s newest novel, *These Are the Names* (reviewed on page 25), Wieringa’s protagonist Pontus Beg absorbs the teachings of the Torah with fanatical eagerness.

Wieringa’s literary influences are wide-ranging, but two American writers—John Fante and James Salter—made a particular impression. “My interest in American literature began with Fante, whom I admire enormously. Such vibrant writing,” Wieringa says, referring to the writer associated with the “dirty realism” in such novels as *Ask the Dust* (1939), one of four novels featuring his protagonist Arturo Bandini, and *Full of Life* (1952). “I only met Fante in my dreams. He told me, *You should stop playing rugby, you’re too old.* He really said that in two or three of my dreams. Most writers don’t know how to use their fists and their bodies, but he did. Novelists tend to be all head and no physique.

“I never had the pleasure of meeting Fante, but when [James Salter’s last novel] *All That Is* came out in 2013, I went to Bridgehampton to interview him. So I had the pleasure of meeting him a couple of years before his death.”

Like Fante and Salter, Wieringa is a meticulous stylist, a keen observer of human nature given equally to flights of fancy and gritty realism, his fiction an intriguing combination of the visceral and the intellectual, the fleeting here-and-now and the vast palace of memory. In *These Are the Names*, Pontus Beg, recalling his dead mother, comes to understand the transience of memory: “The first thing he forgot after she died was her scent. Then it was her voice. And soon enough after that, he could no longer summon up her looks and expressions. Words had moved in to take their place. ... The words had replaced her.”

“The only thing I think I really am is memory,” Wieringa muses after a long pause in the conversation when asked to describe his creative process. “The Dutch author Cees Nooteboom wrote, ‘Memory is like a dog that lies down where it pleases.’ I like that.”

The year of publication of the books below given in parentheses is the work’s English translation.



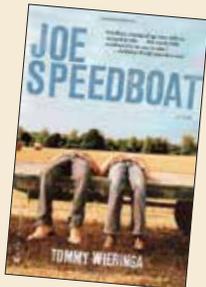
Joe Speedboat (2009)

Wieringa's first novel to be translated into English, *Joe Speedboat*, won the Ferdinand Bordewijk Prize in 2006 and established the author as the enfant terrible of Dutch letters.

"She burned a candle for me every day and actually thinks that helped," Frankie Hermans thinks as he recuperates in bed after a 7-month coma during which he turned 14. "In class they think *they're* the ones who did it, with their praying. Even the hypocrite Quincy Hansen joined in on it ... as though I'd ever be caught dead in *his* prayers. Not that I can get out of bed or anything. I couldn't if I tried." An accident has rendered Frankie unable to speak and paralyzed, save for his right arm.

He awakes to a new topic of conversation in town: a restless, visionary, serial bomb maker and general reprobate who, despite being just 15, has the temerity to call himself Joe Speedboat. Joe becomes a legend in the small, isolated town of Lomark, where the Hermans family operates a scrap yard, teaching Frankie the art of arm wrestling, the ethereal beauty of flight, and the general messiness of life.

Frankie learns about the world vicariously through Joe and their burgeoning interest in alcohol and sex, and the two share a love for the radiant P. J. "A lot has happened, and finally I have come to understand the profound truth of the things-aren't-what-they-used-to-be men on their bench by the river: things are, indeed, not what they used to be," Frankie ruminates in an epilogue. "Even the dismay at that fact isn't what it used to be. You learn to live with



such findings, like bleached bones." Despite life's challenges, Frankie's life turns out as well as he might have hoped.

"Expertly translated from the Dutch by Sam Garrett, Tommy Wieringa's novel offers a rewarding journey into the unfamiliar. It is also witty, thoughtful and surprisingly tender as Frankie comes to realise that he has got a life to live that is still well worth the living." INDEPENDENT [UK], 8/25/09

Little Caesar (2011)

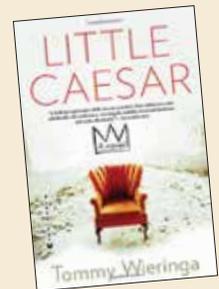
Here, Wieringa "shows his quality as a literary craftsman, with a wonderful sense of style and tone, as we follow Ludwig—mostly in flashbacks after he returns to the British coastal town where he grew up—trying to cope with his difficult relationship with his mother and his quest to find his father in the Southern American jungle." (*The Millions*, 3/13/13). Wieringa based the characters on American artist Jeff Koons and Italian porn star and politician Ilona Staller; the two had a son, Ludwig.

Although his mother believed he was destined for greatness—a concert pianist, perhaps—Ludwig Unger spends his evenings playing lounge tunes in a hotel in Suffolk, England, and reminiscing on his eventful, tragicomic life. As a young man, Ludwig discovered that his mother, Marthe, once an aspiring singer, had been known as "the Grace Kelly of porn." The revelation of his mother's sexuality is a millstone on Ludwig's conscience, as he denies himself the opportunity of a healthy relationship with Sarah, an environmentalist, and follows Marthe to Vienna and Prague on a filmmaking excursion and, eventually, on one last trip to his mother's native Holland.

Later, Ludwig travels to Panama and finds his feckless and perverse father, an artist who abandoned the family years before—hence Ludwig's nickname, "Little Caesar," Cleopatra's unwanted son with Julius Caesar. In Wieringa's homage to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Ludwig's father now lives a Kurtzian existence in the Panamanian jungle. Despite the cruel wounds, some of them self-inflicted, that Ludwig has suffered, he still believes that the past was behind him and "everything was beginning."

A Beautiful Young Wife (2016)

Edward Landauer, a talented virologist who has made major breakthroughs in AIDS and avian flu, falls in love with the eponymous beautiful wife of the title. Some 15 years Edward's junior, Ruth Walta arrives in Edward's life at just the right time. The two begin their relationship (as these things go) with love in their hearts. In time, the marriage suffers death by a thousand cuts, mostly about old grievances, the demands they place on each other, and the inexorable, sometimes imperceptible, erosion of one's individuality.



DUTCH FICTION IN TRANSLATION

THE TWINS | TESSA DE LOO (2001)

THE VIRTUOSO | MARGRIET DE MOOR (2000)

A HEART OF STONE | RENATE DORRESTEIN (2001)

SILENT EXTRAS | ARNON GRUNBERG (2001)

THE DINNER | HERMAN KOCH (2009)

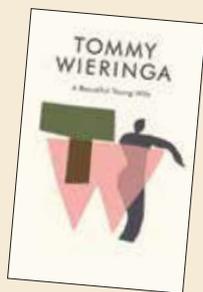
THE DISCOVERY OF HEAVEN | HARRY MULISCH (1992)

RITUALS | CEES NOOTEBOOM (1983)

PARENTS WORRY | GERARD REVE (1991)

OUTSIDER IN AMSTERDAM | JANWILLEM VAN DE WETTERING (1975; 14-BOOK SERIES FEATURING ADJUTANT-DETECTIVE HENK GRIJPSTRA)

“What was habituation if not death’s gate?” Wieringa sardonically muses. The author’s most compressed work to date drills straight to the core of yearning and human foible: Edward’s focus on his career; Ruth’s passive-aggressive questioning of the ethics of her husband’s research and the food he eats. Their mutual agreement, in the throes of a failing relationship, to have a child seems like the cruelest—and most ill-advised—cut of all, with the increasing likely outcome that Edward’s career will not



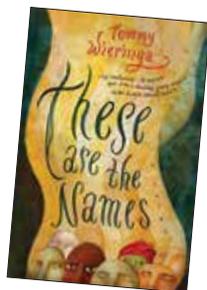
survive the relationship intact. It’s not the first time such a story has been written, but one of Wieringa’s many talents is taking the old tropes and imbuing them with uncanny timeliness.

“Absolute narrative authority is a rare commodity, hard to unwrap and (I would argue) near impossible to teach. ... Meanwhile, the evocations of sex, bodies, appetites and desires are reminiscent of Updike at his very best: driving back from hospital with your baby and feeling ‘as frightened and indomitable as a teenage couple in a stolen car’; those early, shocking days of new parenthood with its ‘happiness delicate as gold wire.’” *GUARDIAN* [UK], 7/31/16 ■



These Are the Names (2016)

THE STORY: “Pontus Beg had not become the old man he’d imagined. Something was missing—a great deal, in fact,” Wieringa writes. “He was fifty-three, still too young to really be considered old, but he could see the writing on the wall.” Beg, a policeman, remains on the steppes of East Asia in the fictional city of Michailopol despite his restlessness, pondering the human condition and logging the occasional crime in a world where corruption makes his efforts all but futile (and yet, somehow, easier). While investigating the murder of a rabbi, one of two Jews in the region, Beg discovers his own Jewish roots. When a band of immigrants seeking new lives survive a cruel ploy to send them onto the inhospitable steppes to die, Beg and the unwitting nomads are set on a collision course that could end in death or redemption. Melville House. 240 pages. \$24.99. ISBN: 9781612195650



Guardian (UK)



“Wieringa’s novel treads restlessly between genres, from middle-aged Bildungsroman and urban comedy to dark fairytale and Confucian parable, sometimes stepping into the haunted territory of myth. ... From Beg’s childless housekeeper, praying for a baby among plastic flowers and gold icons, to the prostitute punning on the last supper (‘Take this body, it’s how I earn my bread’), the book raises difficult sacred questions.”

PHOEBE TAPLIN

Irish Times



“Not only is Pontus Beg a remarkable study of a man in flux, searching for meaning and hopeful of finding answers in his past, but the story also looks at the nightmare experience of a group of refugees. ... Wieringa balances the public and the private in a parallel quest for survival that is both spiritual, as it

is for Beg, and deadly savage, as it becomes for the refugees.”

EILEEN BATTERSBY

Jewish Chronicle



“The novel is about borders—the border between the town and the steppe, a wilderness that stretches for hundreds of miles; the border between civilisation and barbarism, between past and present. But, as the novel becomes increasingly complex, almost hallucinatory, you begin to wonder if there is any border at all.” DAVID HERMAN

Salty Popcorn



“Loosely apocalyptic in style, the book is not only a comment on what it means to be displaced, but the importance of finding one’s self when the destination is unclear and the itinerary uncertain. Wieringa is a gifted writer and perhaps a modern day Joseph Conrad.” FIONA FYFE

Publishers Marketplace



“Wieringa, whose longtime collaboration with translator Sam Garrett pays off again with deft, muscular prose perfectly suited to the author’s harrowing vision, strips lives bare and drills to their essence.”

CRITICAL SUMMARY

The winner of Holland’s Libris Prize (the “Dutch Booker”) in 2013, *These Are the Names* should be Wieringa’s breakout book in America. With his longtime translator, Sam Garrett, the author interweaves two much different threads—the growing desperation of a group of mistreated migrants and a man of some authority questioning his purpose—with an ending whose humanity speaks to the author’s range and his ability to focus with nuance on both the individual and the big picture, particularly the immigrant experience. Critics cite the mastery of Garrett’s translation, and Garrett and Wieringa make a formidable team. Less widely mentioned, in America at least, is that Wieringa has won major awards in his native Dutch for prose that rings like crystal in any language. “This is an astonishing book,” concludes the *Jewish Chronicle*. ■