



MARTYRS

Author: Johan de Boose

An epic about war, idealism and revenge, about blind belief and misunderstood frustration

During the war, three people and their families become one another's partner in adversity even though they never meet. A Flemish soldier on the Eastern Front, a Soviet Russian infantryman and a woman in occupied Leningrad. They find themselves in the labyrinth of blind idealism and end up in the bear pit of so-called civilisation. In the meantime, the all-knowing 20th century gives its heartless commentary. *Martyrs* tells the story of Flanders and the Eastern Front seen from various unexpected and tragic perspectives. The story begins somewhere well into the twentieth century, just before the first holocaust. All dreams, all illusions are shattered. It is a human tragedy, a divine farce. Johan de Boose has already been living in Russia for some time and for this novel talked to the last witnesses from the Eastern Front, in both Flanders and Russia. He visited all the places described in the novel.

Interview with the author:

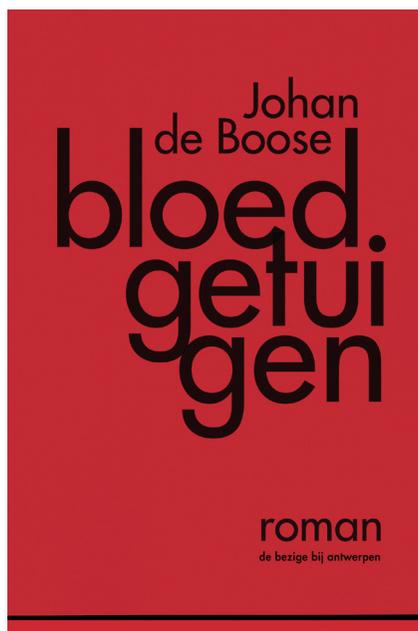
How did *Martyrs* come about? Why did you want to write this book?

*I write to understand something. The first step is amazement, curiosity. Then I take the plunge. In the case of the novel *Martyrs* I wanted to understand the context of the Flemish collaboration and the Eastern Front during World War II. Alongside that I wanted to understand the context of the opponent, the Russian soldier in Stalin's Soviet Union. A third fascination emerged, that with the victims of the siege of Leningrad, which lasted three years.*

It immediately became clear to me that I should place these three situations alongside one another with understanding for all standpoints. Finally, I tuned my ear to History itself, that heartless whore that knows about everything but is willing to undo nothing. Four lines, in other words, developing in parallel. In music this is known as polyphony. Alternatively, you can see it as a kind of diorama: As if, as the reader, you have a view of the various elements of the Eastern Front story, elements that remain invisible to the characters.

For many years now you have a passionate traveller. What role have your voyages played in the creation of this book?

I've visited all the places I describe, in Belgium, France, Germany, Poland, the Baltic States, Ukraine, Russia - even Siberia - and Israel. I've talked to eye witnesses, family members, descendants, scientists, artists, all people closely related to that area with their own opinions of the history of World War II. I chronicled their evidence. They offered me their hospitality. I don't believe in writers who set a story in a village near Saint Petersburg when they have never left their study. You have to have felt the genius loci, the physical proximity of the ghosts of history; you have to have smelt history, not only in the form of printing ink.



Johan de Boose is a doctor in Slavic Studies. He was worked for theatre, television and radio. He is currently a fulltime author. His most recent publications are the novel *Noem het middernacht* [*Call it Midnight*] (2007), *De poppenspeler en de duivelin* [*The Puppeteer and the She Devil*], *Reis naar de schimmen van Kroatië* [*Voyage to the Shades of Croatia*] (2009) and the collection of poems *Geheimen van Grzimek* [*Grzimek's Secrets*] (2010).

Press quotes:

*'In his monumental novel **Martyrs**, Johan de Boose also empathises with the politically incorrect victims of history. Seldom does a Flemish novel have so much epic ambition'* *De Standaard*

*'With his third novel, **Martyrs**, Johan de Boose has written a tome with everything it takes to make a modern classic'* *Gazet van Antwerpen*

'In Johan de Boose's impressive novel, the 20th century is a slut. Johan de Boose has written a packed, intellectual, macabre novel that demands so much patience and effort of the reader that it often gets too much. But it's worth all the hard work' *NRC Handelsblad*

■ 704 pages

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Johan de Boose

Martyrs [Bloedgetuigen]

Prologue

Sample translation

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Prologue to the Floozy's Essays on Climax Orgasm

How sweet of you to come and congratulate me. That has never happened before. Except at my birth, long ago. Since then people have mostly cursed me: what an era, what a purgative era! But now... It seems people are glad I am old and that I will kick the bucket soon. As if they would like to blow me out along with those hundred candles on my cake, without sympathy or scruples, ha-ha. Deep down I feel as if I am present at my own funeral. Finally it is over! It does not stop me from enjoying myself immensely, though. No regrets, ha-ha, no self-pity! What did you expect? After all, I have done nothing wrong-- nothing for which humanity did not later admit having been responsible. It has always been a game for me. I do not suffer from a chafing conscience. *Conscience is but a word that cowards use.* I am not a nervous Nellie who shits his pants when you tap his shoulder unexpectedly: my soul may be a fucked-over pussy, but it is nevertheless flawless, much to the envy of some.

Honestly: I have no conscience whatsoever. It would be a fine thing if one who knows everything also had a conscience, ha-ha.

You have to forgive me this one thing: I am talkative. "Eloquent," some would say. Mind you, I do have something to say, because I always had a front-row seat. When you were still far removed from where history was written, or while you were still in the cabbage patch, and even—if you will allow me—as you were already decomposing (that goes for the least deplorable among you), I was always present in the front row for the main show, for the climax orgasm, for History!

Ha-ha, climax orgasm, at my age.

Allow me to take you into my confidence on my almost-deathbed and let us pretend you are a little shrink, asking me in the background to open up without sparing myself. Would I please go back as far as possible in my memory, maybe back to my very first birthday party? Is that conceivable? And even further, ha-ha? Fortunately I have a perfect memory, so why would it not be conceivable? Who knows, perhaps such a lengthy psychotherapeutic session could lead us to the ultimate knot in my existence, which could then be untangled. There is no point to it, just as there is no point to anything under the sun. It will not breathe new life into any dead man; however, do not let that put a damper on the fun, because that is how that Jewish doctor from Vienna conceived it during my existence, before he fled with a laughably swollen cancer mouth from one of my greatest heroes--also an Austrian—to the city of Shakespeare and Churchill, to die there. Such futility: fleeing from death straight into the arms of death! I was thirty-nine at the time, and damn, was it ever an ill-fated age!

As far as you are concerned, however, simply allow yourself to be led by a lust for sensation. I have enough in store. There is something for everyone. And bear in mind that I never lie--it is my only fault. Ha-ha. What kind of adventures will I drag you on, while you dissect my soul? I do not have a crystal ball, but one thing is certain: I do have a Diogenes lantern. I enjoy walking around the city holding a burning candle, and when people ask me what I am searching, I answer: "I search people." Ha-ha. You have been forewarned. I doctor and I jerry-rig, I muse and I dig. Because even though there is no point, I sure like to understand why everything is as it is. And now that my final hour has arrived, I'm willing to re-examine how and why everything is as it is, where it began and where it went wrong, how predictable or how unique things are, how they turn out differently than what humanity had

imagined, ha-ha, and how completely futile existence is, because in the end everything gets screwed over by time. The cartography of a complete collapse. Are you looking forward to it as much as I am?

But beware. I might, with my shameless chatter, drag you to places that are not on your wish list. I have a magic key in my pocket, as it were; one that fits the most hermetically closed doors. The only thing I care about is why certain doors are kept so meticulously locked. What is there to fear? Well, I will tell you: nobody, not even you, wants to see the brothel behind those doors, aha. Ha-ha.

There, I said it: fear. Did you hear it echo? After all, in hindsight it has been the main inhabitant of my world. A fine inhabitant, forever shitting his pants. Fortunately or unfortunately, during my existence many mortals managed to make a symbol of fear. With varying results. The line between the tragic hero and the comic hero is a thin one, believe me. I know all about it.

And more lines turn out to be quite thin, if they even exist. If they do not exist, but someone absolutely insists that they do, then yes, I will have to cross them. Because I am what is bookishly called a sophist. For everything, o human, there is a theory; everything is explicable. Truth cannot be distinguished from lies. Whoever thinks differently makes a poignant mistake. This happens to be my biggest attribute, something I take pride in: I can take different standpoints at once. What am I saying? I mean opposing standpoints. At once? Of course at once--otherwise what would be the challenge? If you say that that wall is blue, I will defend it with the same passion with which I am simultaneously convinced it is yellow, and I am even willing to abide by it entirely, ha-ha, maybe even bet my life on it, because if we are playing a game, we must play it thoroughly.

You are thinking: what a slut. In a few hours you will think differently, though, when yellow walls are no longer the issue.

O humans, standard bearers of morality, there will come a time when you will think back longingly to my yellow wall. That climax orgasm intrigues you, does it not? Ha-ha, well, it intrigues me, too, to be honest, because it catapults us right into the heart of history, where *it* happens. A strange notion, by the way: history—the record of what happened. What mortal can be sure what happened? Nobody can. I alone know, at least as far as my part in it is concerned, and my sisters know all about the other parts. We first row observers, we know. Unfortunately, mortals view life as through a chink between two eternities of darkness. You see very little, believe me! Behold another attribute of the tragic hero. When people see him slip in a small pool of blood, everyone laughs: “Ha-ha, see him fall, the viper!”

You will have to get used to me, even though I display a tremendous coldness. Coldness bordering on indolence, another shrink word meaning: incapable of suffering.

Capable, however, ha-ha, of enjoying.

For instance, I thoroughly enjoy tickling Schu under his arms. Schu? You should meet Schu. He is the Egyptian ~~god~~ of the air. It is his job to hold the heavens up high above the earth, to prevent it from collapsing. So it can stay in balance. The world is the barely prevented catastrophe. Can you picture me tickling?

Tickling ~~god~~?

I fear neither ~~god~~ nor the devil, ha-ha. Some have been so bold as to call me ~~god~~. Fortunately I do not suffer from modesty. I originate in the All, or the All originates in me, ha-ha. If I am ~~god~~, so be it, ha-ha. I will speak as the Lord spoke on Mount Sinai, as the Lord spoke in the burning bush. Actually I do not give a rat's ass whether I created ~~god~~ or whether ~~god~~ created me. Strictly speaking, both hypotheses are possible. In the end times--when everything is packed up and ready to go—we will see where they send us.

You want to know who my sisters are? Some of those shrews resemble me, as far as I know. Shrews, yes, because they are all dead as door nails. And I am almost there, ha-ha. I wish I could take you along to visit their graves, so we could pass the time, as it were. But that is tricky. You see, when we die, nothing remains, absolutely nothing, not even earthly remains, and certainly no grave. Not only are we incapable of suffering, we cannot even be buried, ha-ha. Unless you look for us in books which tell what happened during our existence, how Schu did his utmost to keep his arms up, ha-ha.

I have an awful lot of sisters, without number, too many, way back to the big bang--four and a half billion, apparently. If they were all invited to a ball, the ballroom would have to be as big as the earth.

Are they all like me, floozies with no conscience? You bet. Once you are acquainted with me, you will not need that ball, believe me.

Back to that knot we were searching, since we wanted to come as close as possible to the definitive demystification of being. We have a deal. I am willing to cooperate. My almost-deathbed will be the shrink's couch. Just stick some wax in your ears if I get to be too much.

Have you guessed my identity yet?

I remain respectfully, and sign with a mysterious branch, being XX, the twentieth, the past century, the Twentieth Post Christum, the rear guard of the four-and-a-half-millionth millennium.

It is time, December 31. Shrink time. On-my-way-out time.

I hereby stick a finger in my throat and treat you to my soul.