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Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature, Volume 58, Number
3, 2020, pp. 38-44 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bkb.2020.0060>



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Bart Moeyaert as Writer, Author, Performer, and Public Figure: “That’s Also What Literature Can Be”

by VANESSA JOOSEN

Though only in his mid-fifties, Bart Moeyaert began his writing career over forty years ago, when at age thirteen, he addressed a diary to an imaginary friend called Judith. Caught and ridiculed by one of his brothers, Moeyaert turned the diary into his first novel, which he published at nineteen. In the course of almost four decades as a published author, Moeyaert’s views and writing practices have inevitably evolved. These developments can be attributed to personal experiences from living

through adolescence, young adulthood, and middle age, which include his increased independence from his family, influential encounters, and the development of his career as an author and teacher. As a writer, he had the chance to experiment with new genres, topics, and writing styles, gradually growing into Belgium’s most acclaimed children’s author and gaining international fame.

In this article, I will highlight four crucial experiences that transformed Bart Moeyaert’s views on children’s literature and had an impact on his subsequent books: the influence of Aidan Chambers and his distinction between author and writer; the experience of writing primers with specific, target-audience restraints; the pleasure of performing for a dual audience; and his mandate as Antwerp’s city poet, which provoked a reflection on the writer as a public figure. What these experiences have in common is that they produced a tension between Moeyaert’s personal and artistic desires on the one hand and considerations for

his readership and broader social needs on the other. As such, this article seeks to contribute to a better understanding of Moeyaert’s developing poetics and diverse oeuvre, and to consider how an author’s growing age and concomitant experiences can influence their views and work.

Author or Writer?

Moeyaert wrote his first novels, *Duet met valse noten* (*Duet with False Notes*; 1983) and *Terug naar af* (*Back to Square One*; 1986), in his teens and early twenties—a time when he was still close in age to the audience of the



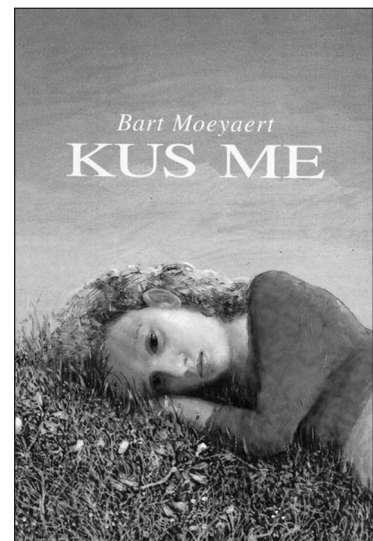
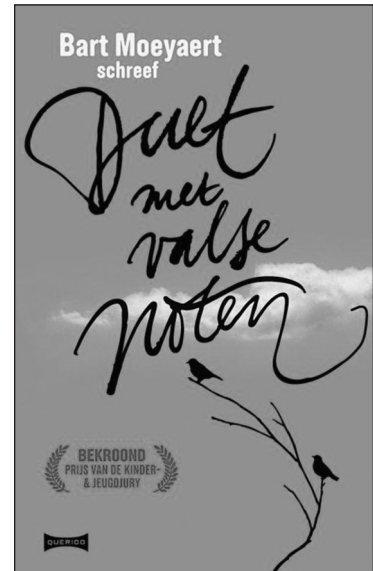
books. The novels are both set in school and draw on Moeyaert's intimate knowledge of adolescence. *Terug naar af* even features an alter ego with the same initials (Matthias Brandt) who, like the author himself, is made to repeat his final year in secondary school. Despite this obvious autobiographical input, Moeyaert wanted the story to be more, and when the book met with some criticism, he felt frustrated that many readers did not pick up on the symbolism in the story: "Apparently it is not expected of an adolescent novel that you would construct another level under the narrative" (qtd. in Lambrechts).¹ The desire to construct this additional layer coincided with an incisive experience that Moeyaert often foregrounds in his development as an author: his reading of Aidan Chambers's *Dance on My Grave*.

In 1987, Moeyaert dedicated the thesis of his degree in education to Chambers's works and visited him to discuss views on literature. In an interview a decade later, Moeyaert contrasted Chambers's views with those of his publisher at Altiora/Averbode (Verbeke). His publisher spurred him to keep his young audience in mind when writing—Moeyaert's youth had, after all, been a key factor in the success of his best-selling debut. Chambers made a distinction, inspired by Roland Barthes, between "authors" and "writers" (Chambers 14). Whereas writers are led by their audience, authors are led by their own artistic views and their stories' needs.

This is reflected in *Dance on My Grave*, which Moeyaert describes as "[a] beautiful story about a friendship, if not to say, love, between two boys. But also a formal masterpiece full of flashbacks, repetitions, changes in narrative perspective, and so forth. A magnificent literary kaleidoscope that taught me: ah, that's also what literature can be" (qtd. in Verbeke).² Moeyaert developed the novels *Suzanne Dantine* (1989) and *Kus me* (*Kiss Me*; 1991) along the lines that Chambers taught him. "Forget about the earlier books," he would say about *Suzanne Dantine* in 1991. "With this last book I have really started as an author" (qtd. in Maartense).³

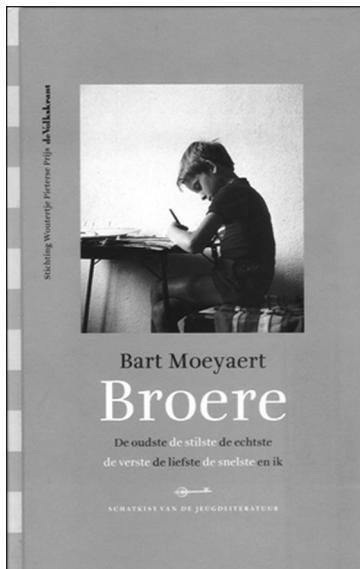
Structure is key to this novel: it features various flashbacks and a rising tension that reaches an unsettling climax. Moreover, the autobiographical input in the book takes a new form. The story is no longer informed by a straightforward personal experience, but by a more abstract idea: the fact that people can be "wolves" toward each other (Maartense). Whereas in *Terug naar af*, some readers might have missed the symbolism and focused only on the more superficial layers of the story, in *Suzanne Dantine*, they have to read between the lines and piece passages together if they want to make sense of the narrative at all.

Somewhat paradoxically, equally formative in this period was Moeyaert's experience of writing primers at the request of the Dutch publisher Zwijsen: *Een klap is geen kus* (*A Slap Is Not a Kiss*; 1989) and *Mijn tuin uit* (*Get Out of My Back Yard*; 1989). Children who learn to read in Dutch are taught phonetic reading skills. Primers are developed according to reading levels, with guidelines for word and sentence



length and combinations of syllables and consonants. The primers gave Moeyaert the chance to further explore memories of youth, this time from childhood, which he found particularly satisfying. Additionally, the limits typically set by primers seem to have helped him grow as a writer, particularly in “the craft of writing” (Moeyaert qtd. in Vandierendonck). The restraints imposed by readers developing their literacy trained him in the poetic writing that would become a hallmark of his style (Lannoy 5). As Jen De Groeve describes it: “Bart Moeyaert doesn’t do descriptions, he lets language speak, evokes images through rhythm, tune, and sound” (41).⁴ Primers helped him find this musical, elliptic voice.

Moreover, whereas his earlier novels were all focused on teenage experiences, the primers introduced him to the pleasure of going back in time—to a time, in fact, that was less troubled and complicated for Moeyaert than his plagued adolescence. Childhood memories narrated in short, sparse language also characterize *Broere* (translated as *Brothers*; 2000), which centers on his experiences as the youngest of seven brothers and is one of his most acclaimed books. Whereas in primers such as *Een klap is geen kus* and *Mijn tuin uit*, Moeyaert explored the fears and then the comfort of childhood, *Broere* is characterized by a more humorous tone that is ironic and lighthearted at the same time. This is a voice that Moeyaert had always possessed but really started using in his writing only after he began performing on stage.



The Author as Performer

In the course of his career, Moeyaert has developed into a particularly versatile author of children’s books, adolescent fiction, novellas for adults, poetry, picturebooks, song lyrics, drama, and television scripts. In the 1990s, he also made his debut as a performer. Together with children’s author Joke van Leeuwen, he toured with a program called *Geletterde mensen (Literate People)*, performing their texts and songs live on stage. Although Moeyaert had always received letters from his readers and visited schools since his debut, the close and direct contact with an audience during the performances was a new experience—especially since that audience was so diverse in age. On the one hand, it taught him that children and adults can enjoy the same literary experience, strengthening his belief that children as readers should not be underestimated: “During our show, eight-year-old children usually laugh about the same things as grandmothers of, say, 63 years old” (qtd. in GHG).⁵ This experience gave him the opportunity to cultivate his sense of humor. Until then, Moeyaert was mainly perceived as a rather serious writer, who was good at creating tension and approaching difficult topics in a sensitive manner.

Addressing an intergenerational audience and adopting a lighthearted tone were combined in *Broere*. With the stories based on his childhood memories, Moeyaert said that he wanted “to find out if we can still imagine the emotions we had as children” (qtd. in Haex 15).⁶ Connecting with both child and adult readers was crucial in this endeavor, and the book would be his breakthrough with adult readers. To date, Moeyaert is widely read

by both young and adult readers. Moreover, humor has become a more pronounced feature of most of his books, even if it is often interwoven with serious themes and scenes. *De melkweg* (*The Milky Way*; 2011), for example, starts off with a joke that gets out of hand when three children make a bet about who will die first: the old woman or her dog that they see each day. *Tegenwoordig heet iedereen Sorry* (*Nowadays Everybody Is Called Sorry*; 2018) features a climactic scene in which the protagonist throws around a pot of tomato sauce in her mother's spick-and-span kitchen: it is both a tragic cry for attention and a hilarious surprise.

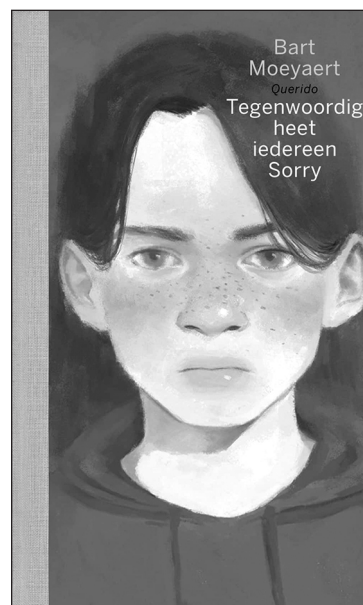
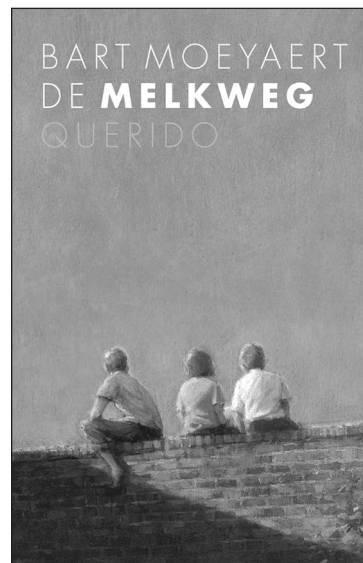
A possible consequence of the intense exposure to his audience as a performer is a shift in his views of his potential readership in the late 1990s. When journalist Marita Vermeulen remarked that *Het is de liefde die we niet begrijpen* (translated as *It's Love We Don't Understand*; 1999) is more transparent than his previous work, Moeyaert explained:

For a long time I put the bar very high, a story could be extremely literary. I thought it was enough if you had only two readers. I have slightly changed my mind. After all, a book is a form of communication and a conversation between three people is nice, but it's also a small conversation. Perhaps with a bit more clarity you can reach ten readers. (qtd. in Vermeulen 30)⁷

Moeyaert does not see this as a sudden, conscious effort, but rather as a general shift in his views on literature. It coincides with a broader change in Dutch children's literature, after debates about children's literature having alienated young readers (de Vries). That being said, *Het is de liefde die we niet begrijpen* still offers readers a complex story, with time gaps, suppressed communication, and almost mystical experiences. In his analysis of *Het is de liefde die we niet begrijpen*, Sander Bax still raises the question: "[W]hich reader is Moeyaert really addressing?" (73).⁸ He argues that Moeyaert's "compressed" style is likely to hold adolescent readers at a distance. So, although Moeyaert noted a shift in his own approach to readers, this was not acknowledged by all critics.

The Writer as Public Figure

A fourth influential experience was Moeyaert's mandate as Antwerp's city poet (2006-2008). The position of a poet laureate who was expected to comment on events and trends in the city seems to be particularly at odds with Chambers's idea of the author, who is led by artistic impulses rather than external expectations. Moreover, Moeyaert's audience was suddenly broadened to people who would not have engaged with his work under other circumstances. Suddenly, he had not ten, but thousands, of readers, including some highly critical and vocal ones. Two events were particularly painful: his reading of a poem at the funeral of a toddler and her African



babysitter who were killed by a racist teenager, and a reproach of cowardice when a false rumor was spread that Moeyaert had refrained from taking part in an anti-prejudice movement called *o110*.

The direct artistic outcome of this troubled period was the poetry collection *Gedichten voor gelukkige mensen (Poems for Happy People; 2008)*, which hinges around the opposition of inside and outside (Van Coillie 89). What does the poet keep to himself? What does he share with the outside world? The poem “Kies” (“Choose”) does not just seem to be addressed to the citizens of Antwerp who were getting ready to cast their political votes, but also to the poet himself. In “Kies,” Moeyaert evokes the image of the pencil that is used to cast a paper vote and make a decision but is also a tool for drawing and drafting. With the pencil, he demands the right to think in a nuanced way, with hesitation when he finds it appropriate. In addition, *Iemands lief (Someone’s Love; 2011)* is seen as Moeyaert’s personal way of dealing with the difficult experience of being in the eye of several storms. It is a tale about a soldier who sells his soul to the devil and finds out that he has lost several years of his life.

A broader impact was Moeyaert’s realization of the writer’s power as a public figure and the duty that entails: “A writer who fully respects himself is completely responsible for what’s on the page” (Moeyaert, “Bestaan” 136).⁹ This responsibility, however, does not come at the expense of nuance and dialogue. Moeyaert’s later work is in fact distinctly polyphonic (even often including music), challenging easy moral judgments and straightforward certainties. This becomes particularly clear in a trilogy (2003-2015) in which he rewrote episodes from *Genesis*, playfully challenging the certitudes that the Bible claims to offer. The experience of being Antwerp’s city poet did strengthen Moeyaert to take on further public roles on his own terms, true to his artistic needs and his personality rather than to the audience’s expectations. He curated the Flemish and Dutch presence as host literatures at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2016 to great satisfaction, including his own.



Conclusion

When Moeyaert won the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in 2019, he became a public figure like never before. He used that platform to draw attention to the power of literary education, stressing that teachers need to be or become readers themselves to be authentic role models for young readers. In literary education lies the key to bridge the gap between writer and author that was so important in the early phase of Moeyaert’s career. Children and adolescents who have been introduced to a wide range of stories and styles are more likely to find beauty in works that are not fully tailored to preconceived ideas of what the young can and want to read. Moreover, with his appeal to teachers, Moeyaert stresses that adults also need to read children’s books. As he has witnessed in his live performances, not only can adults and children enjoy the same stories, but stories and enjoying stories together can facilitate cross-generational communication and understanding. Several of his works stage intergenerational conflicts

without choosing sides. Rather than offering clear judgments about the acts and feelings of adults or children, Moeyaert asks readers to contemplate silences, to look for hints and nuances, and while doing so, to enjoy the rhythm and musicality of his language. Those who are open to such literary adventures will find many occasions in Moeyaert's rich oeuvre, which continues to grow and diversify as ever before.

Author's Note

This article was written as part of the research project Constructing Age for Young Readers (CAFYR). This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No. 804920).

Notes

1. All translations from Dutch in this article are my own. Original text: "Blijkbaar wordt het niet verwacht dat je in een jeugdroman onder het eigenlijke verhaal nog 'n ander niveau construeert."
2. "[E]en prachtig verhaal over een jongensvriendschap, om niet te zeggen een liefde. Maar ook technisch is het een meesterstuk vol flashbacks, herhalingen, wisselingen van vertelstandpunt en ga maar door. Een magistrale literaire caleidoscoop die me leerde: ah, zo kan literatuur ook zijn."
3. "Laat de eerdere boeken maar zitten.... Met dit laatste boek ben ik pas echt begonnen als auteur."
4. "Bart Moeyaert doet niet aan beschrijvingen, hij laat de taal spreken, roept beelden op in ritme, toon en klank."
5. "Kinderen van acht jaar moeten tijdens onze voorstelling meestal om hetzelfde lachen als oma's van pakweg 63 jaar."
6. "Ik wil uitvissen of we ons de emoties die we als kind hadden, nog kunnen voorstellen."
7. "Ik heb de lat heel lang heel hoog gelegd, een verhaal mocht extreem literair zijn. Ik vond dat het al genoeg was als je twee lezers had. Daar ben ik een beetje van teruggekomen. Een boek is uiteindelijk een vorm van communicatie en een gesprek met drie mensen is wel een mooi, maar toch ook een klein gesprek. Misschien kun je met net iets meer helderheid tien lezers bereiken."
8. "[M]et welke lezer gaat Moeyaert nu eigenlijk in gesprek?"
9. "Een schrijver die zichzelf respecteert is volledig verantwoordelijk voor wat er op de pagina staat."

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