

Martijn Benders: the poet with a talent for provoking

In March of 2020 Dutch poet Martijn Benders was supposed to go on his honeymoon. Then the pandemic hit, and all of his plans got cancelled. Corona took over his whole identity, he sunk into a spiral of panic and fear, until one day, after taking 5mapB — a research chemical — he snapped out of it. The whole experience resulted in *Ginneninne*, Benders' tenth poetry collection, written as an act of catharsis.

The collection, published in October 2020, consists of six epic poems where Benders attempts to “to capture the grim in Christmas-like impressions”. All of the poems are allegories, and while they touch on political themes, Benders insists the poems are void of any political message. The poems are intended as visionary still lifes of the past, Benders explains, nothing more. “The function of poetry is not to provide the public with political sermons. I don't write poetry because I want to change people's worldview.”



Martijn Benders



The first poem Benders ever wrote was in 1987, when he was sixteen, to impress a girl. The poem was not good, he says laughing, and the girl did not understand what it said. But it sparked something in him. During that time, his relationship with his parents was very bad. At sixteen he left his parental home in Mierlo and moved to Eindhoven. For the next eight years he lived in various squatter's houses. It was during his time as a squatter that Benders came into contact with the books of Carlos Castaneda. Benders recounts that name with reverence. Castaneda wrote about the Yaqui shamans, who combined knowledge of poetry with knowledge of other worlds and of magic.

In 1994 Benders won his first prize, the *Meervaart Literatuurprijs* for a standalone poem called "Mongools Zilver". In 1995 he got sick of the nomadic and insecure lifestyle that came with squatting. He moved to the small Dutch village of Helmond. There, he isolated himself from the world to focus on yoga, meditation and liberating himself from the cosmos. He lived off of welfare and wrote poetry. In 2002 and 2003 he won two more prizes for his poems. Under the impression that he should choose between his passion for magic and his passion for writing, he decided to dedicate all of his time to writing.

After a few years of isolation, Benders felt himself going somewhat crazy. He decided to become socially active again, engaging with various artist-initiatives and being more active online. There, on the internet, he met a Turkish woman. They started dating and eventually got married and settled in Istanbul. It was there that Benders first started writing poetry-collections, and his second collection, *Karavanserai*, was nominated for the prestigious Dutch C. Buddingh'-prize.

During his time in Istanbul, Benders met Kamiel Choi, a Dutch poet and literary reviewer. “Even then he was an outsider,” Choi recalls. “He was reading a lot of foreign literature, and you could see it in his work. It was different from what was out there, he wasn't trying to follow what everyone else was doing.” Choi adds that there is a lot of nepotism in the Dutch

poetry scene. Benders had different convictions than the mainstream poet-cliques, which can make success difficult, especially since Benders is “not one to mince his words. Not then and not now.”

Poet and reviewer Alexis de Roode agrees with Choi. “You immediately notice that he’s an original thinker. When I first met him I knew right away there would be a collection from him I would like to read.”

Marc van der Holst, an expert in Dutch studies, describes Benders as a troublemaker with a big mouth — but only on the internet. “In real life he’s lovable. He’s very caring. And he’s a hugger, it’s quite funny when we hug, since I disappear in his arms.” De Roode describes Benders in real life as a calm, friendly man with a Boeddha-like demeanor.

In 2014 Benders got divorced from his wife. He moved back to the Netherlands, but because this was during the financial crisis, he had no money. He started drinking. He got addicted to benzodiazepine. Then, one night, he was lying in his bed when a black moth flew into his face. In Carlos Castadena’s books, moths carry the golden dust of eternity on their wings. This dust is knowledge. For Benders it felt like some of that dust landed on him, waking him up and clearing his mind. He immediately quit the benzodiazepines and over the course of the next months he quit drinking too.

During this whole time, Benders had always kept writing. But following his revelation, he realised that his passions for magic and writing did not have to be separate at all. He embarked on a path wherein he tried to combine magic with his writing. Magic, for Benders, is everything that broadens the consciousness and helps liberate the mind. He explains that he stopped writing for other people, and that instead, poetry became a carrier for something supernatural.

That intersection of magic and poetry was announced to the world in *Ginneninne’s* afterword. There, Benders declares that from now on, he goes through life as a language-sage, not as a poet. He explains that being a poet is a societal role, and the function poets fulfill nowadays is reminiscent of a court-jester or a bard. Language-sages see language as a means of travelling to different realities, not as merely a tool for relaying information. They use plant-teachers to enrich their mind, and for them language is a living thing that can connect us to nature.

How do others regard this transition? Choi explains that the established order doesn’t always know whether to take Benders seriously. On the one hand his work is really good, but on the other hand he is known to pull stunts to try and shake up the status quo. Some people can get petty because of stunts like that. De Roode elaborates that many from the Dutch poetry-world don’t trust Benders or have felt attacked by him in the past. But both De Roode and Choi insist, “Friend and foe agree that Benders is incredibly talented.”

These days, Benders lives in Noordwijkerhout with his second wife, Veronique Hogervorst. When asked how *Ginneninne* has been received so far, he states he is still waiting for the first reviews. The corners of his mouth tugging up, Benders contends that a poetry



collection should contain as many sensations as a tab of LSD, and that *Ginneninne* is based on that conviction. With a wink, he announces, “Piet Gerbrandy [a Dutch reviewer] at least has let me know he won’t be consuming the LSD tab I sent along with the book.”