

Gripping personal story of family secrets

Friend of the Family

HELEEN DEBRUYNE

Heleen Debruyne was inspired to write 'Friend of the Family' after reading her grandparents' letters and diaries. While pregnant with her first child, she immersed herself in an unsavoury family story that had been glossed over. She discovered how and why her father was deliberately entrusted to a friend of the family called Albert, Bertie to his friends, a rich homosexual. It was said that mothers didn't dare leave their children alone with him, yet Heleen's grandmother placed her son in his care. The child was made to sit next to Bertie at dinner parties, went to stay with him, and during family holidays the two shared a room.

Although her father later spoke indulgently about the man, Debruyne regards what he did as inexcusable. She blames her grandmother more than she blames Albert, but her conclusion is firm: 'My father was part of a deal. A child in exchange for a standard of living that was too comfortable even for a well-paid civil servant.'

Heleen Debruyne writes fluidly and boldly about the dark side of her Flemish family history. Nowhere in this outstanding memoir does she lose sight of the reader.

DE VOLKSKRANT

Debruyne intersperses the story with essayistic passages in which she contemplates motherly love and shifting beliefs about sexuality, love and intimacy. She examines social conditions immediately after the Second World War, the church and abuses within that institution, feminism, and changing ideas about pregnancy and motherhood. At the same time, her account and all the reflections it inspires prompt her to investigate her own uncertainties as she prepares to become a mother.



AUTHOR



Heleen Debruyne (b. 1988) is a radio producer with Klara and writes about art and culture for deBuren, Humo and De Morgen. She made her debut in 2016 with 'The Opportunists' (De plantrekkers), a tragicomic novel about the lies people tell themselves. Together with Anais Van Ertvelde she produces Dirty Sheets (Vuile lakens), a podcast about sex, the body and everything you're not supposed to talk about in polite company. In 2017 they published a book of the same name, in which they shatter the illusion of sexual freedom. *Photo © Carmen De Vos*

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