

The end of the world has already happened

Bodies

PETER VERHELST

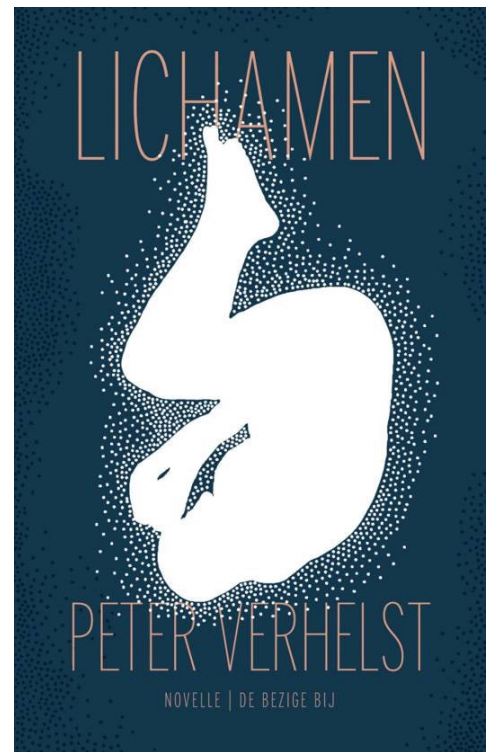
A man leaves on a voyage of discovery to forbidden territory. He leaves behind his wife and his house and wanders around between deserted tower blocks that have no identity, abandoned corpses and nature run rampant: a bear, butterflies, a magpie, mosses, algae and climbing plants. He roams a post-apocalyptic no man's land, in which nature seems to have defeated humankind. The radioactive region is reminiscent of Tarkovsky's 'Stalker', or scenes from the HBO series 'Chernobyl'. Mould and decay have set in, but the bodies the man comes upon are neither alive nor decomposing. No external causes can be found for their condition.

A sledgehammer blow that hits you full on, knocks you off balance and fills you with tears at the realization of loss and mortality.

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'Bodies' reads like a meeting between personal and global trauma, perhaps the result of climate change. Verhelst's work resonates with that of ecologist-philosopher Timothy Morton, who regards animals, plants and things as equal in value to people, and advocates revising how we perceive them. Yet this novella is not a book about the climate in the traditional sense. Verhelst does not apportion blame. In this universe it's too late for that. Instead the beauty of his language makes us feel what loss, finitude and loneliness mean. He forces the reader to reflect upon all that we are in danger of losing.

More than a dystopian tale, 'Bodies' is an ode to language, the imagination and the telling of stories. Anyone prepared to go along with Verhelst's universe, a place bursting with images, becomes his fellow architect and, by deploying their own life, memories and deprivations, will inevitably create a different book.



AUTHOR



Peter Verhelst (b. 1962) is a novelist, scriptwriter, myth and theatre maker, poet and picture book author all in one. As a child he wanted to become a painter, but decided to write from a live model instead. His work has been praised for its powerful images, the sensuality and richness of its language and the author's unbridled imagination. In 2018 he won the Sybren Poet Prize for Literature, a prize for authors with an experimental literary oeuvre. In 2021 he was awarded the Constantijn Huygens Prize for his oeuvre which the jury described as 'breathtaking'.

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TRANSLATION RIGHTS Marijke Nagtegaal - m.nagtegaal@debezigebij.nl

TRANSLATION GRANTS Marieke Roels - marieke@flandersliterature.be, Elise Vanoosthuyse - elise@flandersliterature.be, Yannick Geens - yannick@flandersliterature.be