

The prison, the world

Gallows Bait

ROGER VAN DE VELDE

'People who never have anything to do with the law courts, because they lead irreproachable lives, because they steer adroitly through difficult waters, or simply because they're lucky, sometimes have a mistaken impression of prison.' That is how Roger Van de Velde introduces his stories in the prologue to 'Gallows Bait' (1966). In sixteen short stories he then shines a kaleidoscopic light on a time spent in prison, where as a journalist he ended up after forging prescriptions for Palfium, a painkiller to which he was addicted.

With his familiar lightness of touch and sense of humour, Van de Velde portrays characters like the innocent convict Hellemans, the drag queen Zita and the lazy Michelangelo, who manages to get himself served breakfast in bed like a prince. Nor do the prison staff escape Van de Velde's keen eye. He scrutinizes, for example, a prison guard who comes close to despair when faced with having to retire and go back to his bad marriage in the 'free world'. And there's a hilarious and at the same time trenchant story about a lovesick court psychiatrist. It is greatly to the author's credit that the book is free of any trace of rancour. With a sense of the grotesque, he manages to describe comical situations that reveal all the many layers of a character. The longing for warmth and human contact is a theme that runs through all the stories.

Van de Velde has no need of frills. His weapon is the human spirit that never succumbs to resignation.

DE NIEUWE STEM

'Gallows Bait' is Van de Velde's literary debut, and on publication it was highly praised. The government was less happy with it, however. Van de Velde was censored; his writings were no longer allowed to leave the prison. Thanks to his wife, who smuggled out tiny rolls of paper in cigarette cartons, his next book, 'Crackling Skulls' (1969), was also able to reach the wider world.

The king of the short story

DIMITRI VERHULST

Roger
Van de Velde
Galgenaas



PELCKMANS

AUTHOR



Roger Van de Velde (1925-1970) was a virtuoso word artist and an extraordinarily sharp observer of people and events. After a long medical ordeal, he became addicted to the painkiller Palfium. Convicted of forging prescriptions, he found himself in prison and in psychiatric institutions. In those distressing circumstances he wrote lucid, sober prose. With his crystal-clear prose, Van de Velde influenced many Flemish authors. He is praised for his deeply felt sympathy for people on the margins of society and for the laconic humour with which he describes human shortcomings. Photo (c)Collectie StadAntwerpen, Letterenhuis

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