

Beauty: a blessing or a curse?

Handsome Jo

KRISTIEN DE WOLF

Jo Stormvogel is a striking figure. He grows up in a large Catholic family in postwar Flanders. As a young man he attracts the attention of a monk, who takes him on outings and abuses the boy's trust with sexually transgressive behaviour.

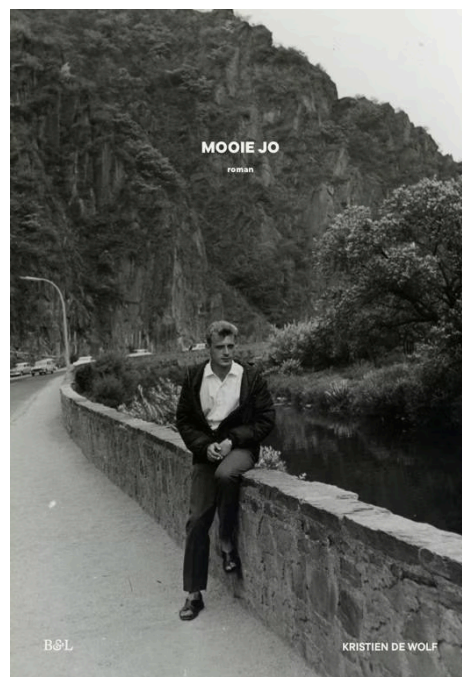
On reaching adulthood, Jo enters a monastic order, in the hope of being sent to Africa as a missionary. But in the monastery the priest in charge takes a liking to the handsome Jo and has no intention of letting his most beautiful pupil leave. A platonic love affair develops between the two of them, and it continues even after Jo, embittered, leaves the order and moves to the big city. He throws himself into the vibrant nightlife of the 1970s and meets Felix, with whom he will share his life, with all its ups and downs, for thirty years.

Jo and Felix know that neither is the other's great love in life, yet they continue to help and support each other in good and especially less good times. After living through the wild and broad-minded 1970s, in the 1980s Felix and Jo lose several friends to AIDS. Economically, too, they are forced on several occasions to leave everything behind and reinvent themselves. The optimistic Felix seems to manage this better than worrier Jo, who struggles with depression and alcoholism.

'Beautiful Jo' tells Jo's life story, embedded in a broader portrait of the baby boom generation. A biographical book, it is loosely based on an uncle of author Kristien De Wolf. Skilful changes of perspective enable it to offer a rich psychological portrait of an unusual couple in the colourful decades after the Second World War. Stylistically strong, the book focuses on atmosphere and aesthetics. Themes such as polyamory, bisexuality and asexuality are introduced obliquely, and they enrich Jo as a character. With his powerful allure, the impulsive protagonist seems born lucky, but ultimately he proves no match for the adversity inflicted on him by time.

Credible portrait of an era, packaged in magnificent language. *****

HEBBAN



AUTHOR



Kristien De Wolf (b. 1969) is an author of short stories and novels, curator of literary festivals and careers adviser. She lives and works in Flanders and Spain by turns. Recurring themes in her work are character development, fulfilling or not fulfilling your destiny, and the intensity of loss. De Wolf manages to portray different ways of life with great empathy and in a rich writing style. © An Van Lysebetten

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