

FICTION

An exceptional woman's untameable desire for freedom

The Wonders

JEROEN OLYSLAEGERS

In the late nineteenth century, Amandine and her twin brother Ambrose grow up in a wealthy Antwerp banking family. Their eccentric Aunt Bella — a woman with little regard for convention — ignites their fascination with the occult. Even after Bella's death, Amandine continues to sense her presence, and together with Ambrose she organizes séances, in the hope of making contact with another world. When Amandine reaches adulthood, she is given in marriage to an ambitious banker who makes his fortune in the colonial rubber industry. While she is expected to conform to the role of wife and mother, her brother Ambrose increasingly lapses into a bohemian existence replete with scandals.

Oyslaegers once again explores a universal theme with a keen sense of drama. ****

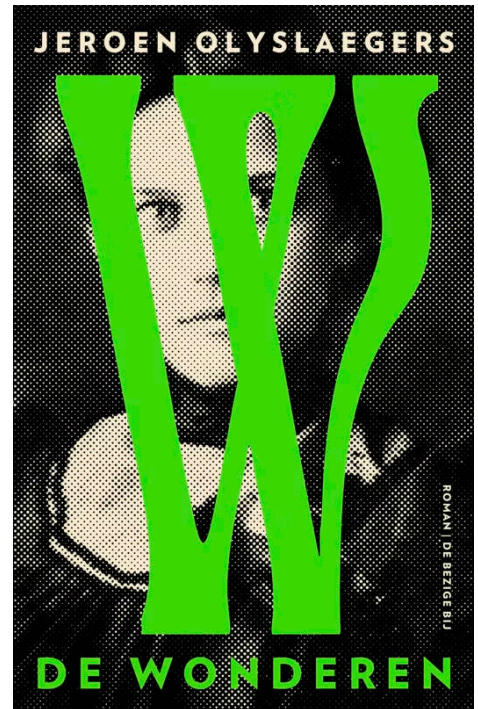
DE STANDAARD

The gap grows between Amandine's longing for autonomy and the suffocating social expectations placed upon her. Her life inside the genteel confines of an upper-middle-class home contrasts sharply with the bustling streets of Antwerp, where social tensions simmer. While the aristocracy enriches itself at the expense of the Belgian colonies and the workers demand the vote, Amandine seeks her freedom in an affair and in the supernatural. But even there – on what are called the freethinking margins – an independent woman is all too often dismissed as hysterical or neurotic.

Beautiful scenes with an eye for historical detail. ****

KNACK

Her family forces her to toe the line, until the revelation of the horrifying reality behind Antwerp's wealth opens her eyes once and for all: barbaric practices in Congo form the foundations for all that crude profiteering. Years later, with the First World War raging outside and living in the villa she inherited from Aunt Bella, Amandine looks back. At last, she records her story: the account of a woman who refuses to look away, and of an era that is at once dazzling and devastating.



AUTHOR



Jeroen Olyslaegers (b. 1967) writes columns, plays and prose. He is known for his social engagement both in and out of literary circles and in 2014 he was awarded the Ark Prize for Free Speech for this. His novels are lauded for their stylistic control, expressive style and narrative strength, in which the evocative power and ambiguity of words, expressions and gestures receive particular attention. His work also stands out for its punchy dialogue in a cinematic, explosive style. He views Louis Paul Boon as his spiritual father. Photo © Koen Broos

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