

A twenty-first-century fable of civilization

The Man I Became

PETER VERHELST

'The Man I Became' is an account written by an ape. Along with masses of fellow apes, he is plucked from a state of nature and, after a tough sea journey to the New World, subjected to a rigorous programme of civilization.

As part of the drill designed to turn them into fully-fledged humans, the apes are first served up ideas about the purpose and use of underpants, or of knives and forks. Next they are initiated into the techniques of walking upright, chatting and smiling. Those who do well in the ultimate test – a cocktail party in the company of other species en route to civilization – are allowed to call themselves residents of Dreamland and are given mobile phones.

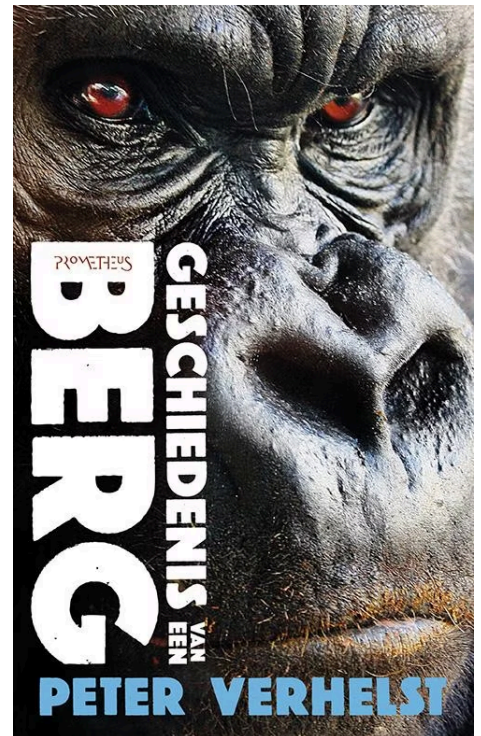
A haunting, apocalyptic novella, supremely and deliberately difficult to pin down

THE GUARDIAN

Dreamland is an amusement park on a mountain whose theme is civilization. The drilled animals entertain people by staging a spectacle about the history of the world and the results of evolution. Until, that is, the boundary between nature and civilization begins to blur: the main character starts to detect excesses of greed and corruption around him, while he himself is torn by inner conflicts between training and instinct, reason and desire. Civilization on the mountain starts to move ineluctably towards a spectacular apocalypse.

While it entertains us with the strangeness of anthropomorphism, it is profoundly engaged with the strangeness of being human

THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT



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'. Photo © Chris Ward

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