

A gentile tutor in an Orthodox Jewish family

Mazel tov

MARGOT VANDERSTRAETEN

For six years student Margot Vanderstraeten tutors the Schneider children and helps them with their homework. Via the girl, Elzira, and boy, Jakov, Margot is gradually introduced to the closed Orthodox world of this Jewish family from Antwerp, whose religious laws and centuries-old traditions the Flemish tutor finds difficult to reconcile with present day: the nineties.

The Jewish family is caught between its traditions and modern life. The nineties are also the decennium of the Intifada and the Gulf War. Because the unwed Margot is living with her Iranian boyfriend, this creates mistrust in this family, devoted to Israel with heart and soul.

Margot's is an exceptional voice, illuminating a section of society rarely seen in a refreshingly frank manner.

DEBORAH FELDMAN

Little by little, respect, curiosity and humour – on both sides – win out over indignation and rejection. Years after the children graduate, Vanderstraeten visits them in Israel and New York.

'Mazel tov' is a compelling, thought-provoking story about children growing up in a Modern Orthodox sect, as seen through the eyes of a young woman who is not Jewish. It gives a unique glimpse of the unfamiliar world for both sides.

Vanderstraeten achieves that which makes a writer great: she shows how beautiful and difficult it is to be a human among humans. A must-read for everyone. *****

DE STANDAARD



AUTHOR



Margot Vanderstraeten (b. 1967) is a freelance journalist and author. Photo © Tom van Nuffel

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