

Chronicler of the seamy side

Café De Raaf Is Still Closed

J.M.H. BERCKMANS

In this collection of stories Berckmans shows the most unsavoury and corrupt side of reality. Violence is not an issue, murder and manslaughter are simply omnipresent. The unstable characters bear their existential emptiness without illusions, self-deceiving optimism is alien to them. Because these people experience their inner world as a universe, the outside world leaves them completely cold and they opt resolutely for an isolated life.

Where possible, the characters in the stories are managing to survive in their perilous position. They usually do that silently and reproachfully. Because the characters go through life disturbed, frustrated, antisocial, without conscience or feeling, not much can be expected of human interaction. The rest is resentment, bitterness and reproach, in solitude.

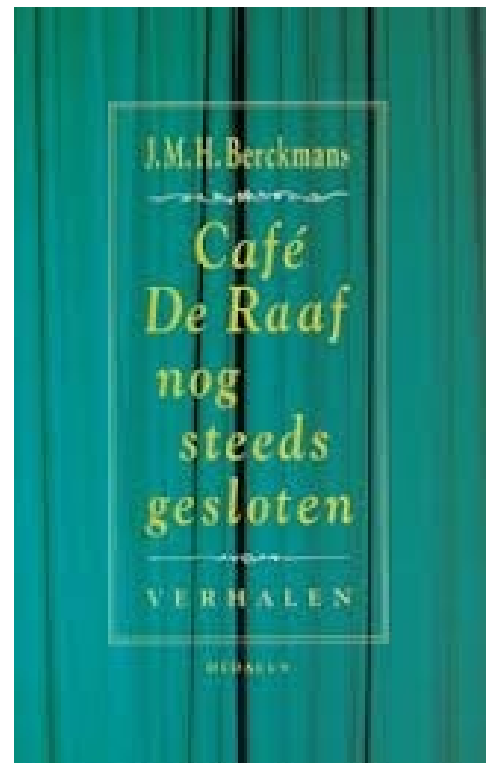
Evoking complete hopelessness without slipping into pathos or protective irony is far from easy. But Berckmans manages it.

ONS ERFDEEL

Every sentence of Berckmans is filled with the buzz of rock 'n roll. The cyclical sentences are like refrains, in the tempo of the prose there are echos of hectic bass runs and the surprising use of words is reminiscent of angry guitar riffs. The language is economical, the sentences are short and pithy. Things are described minutely; narrative elements alternate with shopping lists giving summaries.

The web of words Berckmans weaves around his readers' emotions is awesomely distant. In his linguistic arsenal the words he uses, often with defiant repetition, convey meaning as no others.

DE STANDAARD



AUTHOR



Despite being a writer-hermit, **J.M.H. Berckmans** (1953–2008) had a rock & roll lifestyle. He was an uncompromising chronicler of the margins of society, penning stories and books full of fear, paranoia, alcohol and decay, in a linguistic idiom strongly influenced by Bukowski, Beckett, De Sade and Céline. The 'ambassador of despair', as he was known, was a cult author who captured Antwerp's seamier side. Berckmans is sometimes described as the master of the short story: his raw, overwrought prose lends itself exceptionally well to shorter texts.

ORIGINAL TITLE Café De Raaf nog steeds gesloten (1990, Dedalus, 190 pp.)

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