

The trials of literary translation, Dutch to English (part two)



Facts of publishing life in the UK...

Six years ago I had no conception of the barriers facing current non-English fiction in the English-speaking world. I hesitate to guess how many works of fiction are published in English annually – there must be thousands, contributed by UK, US, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, South African, Irish, West Indian and other authors. Amidst this broad stream of literature, translated authors have a difficult time getting attention.

First to confront me with the facts of publishing life was Laura Susijn. Two of Maarten's early novels, [Een vlucht regenwulpen](#) (1978) and *De aansprekers* (1979), had appeared in English translation in the 1980s under the name Martin Hart (Martin Hart, *A Flight of Curlews*, trans J.W. Arriëns, London: Allison & Busby, 1986; *Bearers of Bad Tidings*, trans J.W. Arriëns, London, Allison & Busby, 1983). The critical response had been gratifying, but they did not sell well. Susijn, who had been trying to find a publisher for *Het woeden* for years, wrote to me in 2001 that this novel, dating from 1993, was no longer 'fresh' and 'current', qualities important to UK publishing houses. It might find its way into print, she said, but probably only in the wake of the successful publication of another of Maarten's books. She was therefore hoping that he would publish something that might serve as the vehicle for a breakthrough in English.



In 2002 she thought she had found it in Maarten's quirky mystery novel [De zonnwijzer](#). Arcadia

Books in London, a small publishing house that had scored a significant success with Tessa de Loo's translated novel [The Twins](#) (*De tweeling*), were hoping to do the same with Maarten's novel. I translated it for Arcadia, but not without misgiving. Although the novel is ingenious, and has several well-drawn characters, it does not conform to the crime-mystery genre. The focus is neither on a crime nor on its solution, but on the effect on the protagonist's life of her friend's death and the wording of her will. We are well into the novel before we learn that a crime may have been committed. And while we do find out in the end who the murderer is, the denouement seems just a bit contrived. An intriguing book, yes, but not, in my view, as compelling as *Het woeden der gehele wereld*.

[The Sundial](#) appeared in 2004. A year later I spoke in person with Gary Pulsifer and Daniela de Groote, the principals of Arcadia Books. Sales of *The Sundial* had been disappointingly modest, they said, something they explained by referring to the heavy competition offered by the many novels published in the UK. To make an impact, a publicity campaign with a hook was necessary. Absent such a campaign, a new author – and in the UK that is effectively what Maarten was – had little chance of success.

...and in the US and Canada

If the UK market is unpromising for translated fiction, the US market is even more so. I was blissfully unaware of this when I set out on my new hobby. Indeed, I decided, with little reflection, to translate the novel into North American English. I have a good command of Canadian as well as US usage, while my grasp of UK usage is far less secure, particularly when it comes to idiom and slang. Besides, I thought that the main readership for the translation would be in North America. When it is published in the US and Canada, I reasoned, other English-language jurisdictions would surely follow.

Again: how wrong I was!

Dit is deel twee in een serie. [Deel een](#) stond maandag op het weblog, het [laatste deel](#) volgt vrijdag.