

ADDING CLARITY ESTHER JANSMA INTERVIEWED BY KATE FOLEY



“My work as an archaeologist adds clarity ... in the same way poetry adds clarity”

The Dutch poet Esther Jansma holds a chair in Dendrochronology at Utrecht University and works as a project leader at Dutch Heritage. So far she has published eight volumes of poetry of which the last, entitled *Eerst* (First), appeared in 2010. In 2008 a selection of her poetry appeared in the UK (*What It Is*, Bloodaxe Books; translated by Francis R Jones). In the Netherlands her work has received many awards, among which are the prestigious VSB Poetry Prize (1997), the Jan Campert Prize (2006) and the A. Roland Holst Award (2006).

KF: Not only are you a well-known poet, you're also a distinguished archaeological scientist. How do the perspectives of archaeology and science find their way into your poetry?

EJ: As an archaeologist I study the growth rings in wood, using these to establish the exact year in which trees were cut down. It gives me an immense pleasure to be able to say with certainty that the docks of a Roman harbour or the embankments of a waterway were built with oak cut down in, let's say, the spring of AD 100. Such a scientific result produces pictures in my head of Roman soldiers shivering in the Dutch swamps in April. Such a result also tells me that the people of the past were real. My natural tendency is to view history as a huge and very vague cloud of events that we cannot reach and that we can only perceive through the stories that remain. My work as an archaeologist adds clarity and makes the past more tangible. In the same way poetry adds clarity. After I have written a poem I understand something that I could not grasp before.

KF: Can you tell us something about your career in poetry? When did you begin to write, to think of yourself as a poet, to publish? Were there poetic mentors or influences – Dutch or other – who played a part?

EJ: Like almost everybody else I started writing as a teenager. I wrote prose of a horrible outdated nineteenth-century kind, focusing on the theme of 'gaining insight' and using a lot of adjectives. When I was around seventeen years old I tried my hand at poetry, and found that this suited me much better than prose. In poetry, my impression was that I could use simple language and be much less pretentious. I am not very aware of aesthetic influences during those early years. The Dutch poet Ed Leeflang taught me during several conversations that I should stick with what is physically possible. Stones do not fly, chairs are not tables. I followed this rule for quite a while. Meanwhile I tried to like poetic heroes like Pablo Neruda, but I did not succeed. Some poems of Rutger Kopland had a huge impact on me, but I never tried to write like him. When I am writing, I like impatience, some rudeness, some silliness, and even clichés. The big impact on my poetry occurred after I had published my first two books. I was studying in the United States and while there I read the collected poems by Mark Strand. His work changed the way I look at poetry. His poems move from the mundane to the metaphysical, they are very lyrical, and the pleasure of writing is everywhere in his texts.

KF: As you so rightly say in your poem, “potatoes have gravity too” but in the context of such every day images you often open up much wider vistas of memory, time and loss, which may also be deeply personal. You’re a “collector / of odds and ends, moments / cracks in things...” How do you work?

EJ: There is no fixed way in which I work. The only constant is lack of time, so I am focused on results. I never rework texts that I have discarded, because the few times I tried, this did not result in anything good. So, I just sit down, give myself the order to write, and see what happens. If there are some good lines, I know that the next day or so I have something to go back to. And if not, oh well, maybe next time. I prefer to write when nobody notices and while telling myself that what I am doing – it is nothing important. In this way I feel unburdened and free. Right now those moments are scarce.

KF: You’ve been very sympathetically translated into English but there are always difficulties in the process. Can there also sometimes be new insights and enrichment?

EJ: I found the process of being translated a somewhat painful one. To me it feels as if I have to let go of the rhythm I used, the network of sounds that constitutes the original poem. It is much more pleasant to be the translator oneself. With Wiljan van den Akker I worked on many poems by Mark Strand, and this year a second book of our translations will appear in the Netherlands. Translating poetry is much harder than writing a poem, because as a translator you have to be faithful to the original. As a poet I can bluntly kill my own words and lines.

KF: In the UK poetry is rather a minority taste. What about Holland? Is the poetry scene alive and well? Is it supported by the public and the arts establishment? How much should/does that support matter?

EJ: We have a system of subsidies in the Netherlands that is unique in the world. This system implies that poets can receive financial support while writing a volume. The effect in my opinion is both positive and negative. On the upside: many volumes appear and the poetry scene is quite lively. On the downside: a lot of mediocre poetry is published and our poets are a bit spoiled. Personally I don’t believe that subsidies are needed for poetry. If I write 10 poems a year, I will have a volume out every three to five years. A full-time job does not prevent me from publishing, that much is sure. Of course the current economy and the political state of mind in the Netherlands does not agree well with this kind of subsidy system. So I guess things will change soon.

KF: Do you think gender plays any part in your poetry?

EJ: For a long time my readers considered the ‘I’ in my poems to be female, because that is what I am. I have just published a small volume of essays in which I make fun of this assumption. So yes, for me gender does play a role. I want poems by women poets to be read in a serious manner, which to me means: without taking gender into account. I am sure it will not happen during my lifetime.

KF: Here in England the perception – backed by some research – is that women poets aren’t offered the same advantages as men (e.g. in terms of publications, readings, editorships, reviews). Is this true of Holland? Have you ever experienced being ‘labelled’ as a woman poet to your disadvantage?

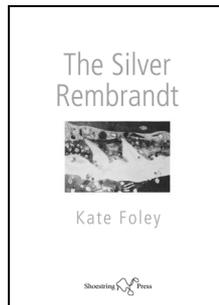
EJ: To be a woman poet has its advantages and disadvantages. An advantage is that while you are young you get kind reviews and are invited to read in exotic places. So in a sense it is relatively easy as a young female poet to establish a name. A disadvantage is that as a woman poet you are assumed to write from a small and personal perspective. A male writer using his autobiography is considered to express emotions that touch on the metaphysical. A female writer doing exactly the same is viewed as expressing small day-to-day feelings that do not have a relationship to the human condition. I do not have the experience of having been labelled as a woman poet to my disadvantage. The disadvantage is much more subtle than that. It shows up in reviews stating that I should refrain from historical and philosophical themes, and praising me for the way in which I express the emotions of a child, woman

or mother. Of course when I do express those emotions in my work, I am patted on the head for being a real woman poet without anything important to say.

KF: Can you say anything about the way your poetry is evolving? Are you more “the poet I want to be” as described in your first collection? What do you hope for your poetry in the future?

EJ: I expect that in my poems I will gradually turn to fiction. In this manner the readers hopefully will be able to focus more on the poems themselves instead of on me as a person. The words in my poems are not necessarily mine. I invent characters who do the talking for me, and who may say things of which I personally disapprove. Maybe when all is said and done a poet actually is a kind of playwright.

KF: Thank you. You’ve given us a lot to think about.



Kate Foley is currently working on a project with Amsterdam Museum on its ‘Memory Palace’ of collections. When she gave up the day job, heading a team of archaeological scientists, she began to publish.

Her first collection was shortlisted for the Aldeburgh best first collection prize and her fifth is due out in 2012. She is an editor for the magazine *Versal*.



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