

Marieke van der Pol, *Bride Flight*, trans. Colleen Higgins (UWAP, 2010).

Bride Flight is a Dutch bestseller which has already been made into a film in its homeland, and is its author's debut. The fact that the novel is not well-known outside the Netherlands is illustrative of the scant attention paid to European literature abroad; it should now find a wider market in this new translation by Colleen Higgins. It tells the story of three women – Ada, Marjorie and Esther – who in 1953 leave The Netherlands for New Zealand and their fiancés. Their journey forms part of the last great transcontinental air race, and their plane, with its cargo of brides, becomes known as the bride flight.

It is a flight in another sense, though, for each of the women has reasons for leaving home and a longing for escape: quiet, withdrawn Ada, for example, has lived a claustrophobic life under Protestant religious strictures which seems to be mirrored by references to the flat Dutch landscape. Jewish Esther has dreams of artistic creation (as a dress designer); Marjorie has a rebellious temperament at odds with her Catholic upbringing and work as a nurse. The longings and fears of the women as they set out for New Zealand are made clear for the reader. As the journey progresses we are introduced to Frank, a charismatic bachelor whose charms influence each of the women in different ways. It is Frank who is the lynchpin of the novel: the story starts with his funeral, which sees the three women reunited in the present day; his actions are also the dynamic which propels much of the action during the flight to New Zealand and in the years afterwards as the women build their new lives. Van der Pol is clever enough to keep some secrets back from the reader, however: it is only at Frank's funeral, at the end of the book, that all is revealed, both to the women and to the reader.

Bride Flight was conceived as a movie screenplay and this is apparent in the structure of the novel: locations and perspectives change quickly, in a cinematic manner, and there is a strong plot that aims to keep the reader guessing, by way of many twists and turns. In the manner of classic realism, events can be attributed to either chance, to character, or to both. The novel's style, too, works to make character and event clear, with little unnecessary embellishment; long sentences and clauses give a grace and flow.

Bride Flight is a novel that it would be very easy to either love or loathe, and there is a strong case either way, depending on the reader's position. The case for the prosecution might begin with the fact that the novel has all the conservative traits of 'women's fiction' (unfortunate as the naming of the genre is): rather too easy sympathy is created for the reader in Ada, Marjorie and Esther, and the overall message is nothing more than one about the power of friendship and the ability of life to surprise us. The characters are conventional at best, and sometimes clichés: brittle, glamorous Esther has inhabited the pages of countless novels before, and Frank is the kind of wayward charmer that has been toying with unsuspecting ingénues since Jane Austen. It's a little disappointing that, in the twenty-first century, a roguish male's actions are still the focus for the attention of the three women here. Stylistically, there is tendency to evoke easy or unnecessary sensuousness: learning of Frank's death, we are told that for the women 'it seems as if the breeze is carrying it with it the dizzying bouquet of a blood-red wine' (1).

Book reviews: *Bride Flight* by Marieke van der Pol. Nick Turner.

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This is typical in its cliché, impreciseness and overemphasis; only a few pages later, Esther is wearing a blouse ‘the colour of dark blood, of pinot noir’ (11). There is a bit too much obvious personification of the aeroplane, and a lot of narration of rather trivial activities. In short, the novel is a conventional work of which many abound: romantic fiction written with some grace but also some laziness, where the setting in time and place, and intricacies of the plot, provide the only interest.

But this interest, and other factors, need to be acknowledged. Ada, Marjorie and Esther are migrants in a time, just following the Second World War, when displacement and exile were becoming a new standard for human existence, so that although their stories do not have the overt political dimension of much postcolonial literature, this theme is present nonetheless. Politically there is a feminist interest too in that van der Pol is clearly interested in the barriers that prevent women from growth and success. It might be no coincidence that the title of the novel yokes the freedom of flight with the restrictions of marriage. And above all, the novel needs to be read for what it is: an entertaining story. It is likely to appeal to readers of women’s fiction and this comment is not meant to sound condescending, for as well as providing exactly the sort of entertainment that a book of this sort promises, it proposes that, in the face of the constrictions of life and the men that pepper it, sisterly solidarity remains a valuable option.

Nick Turner