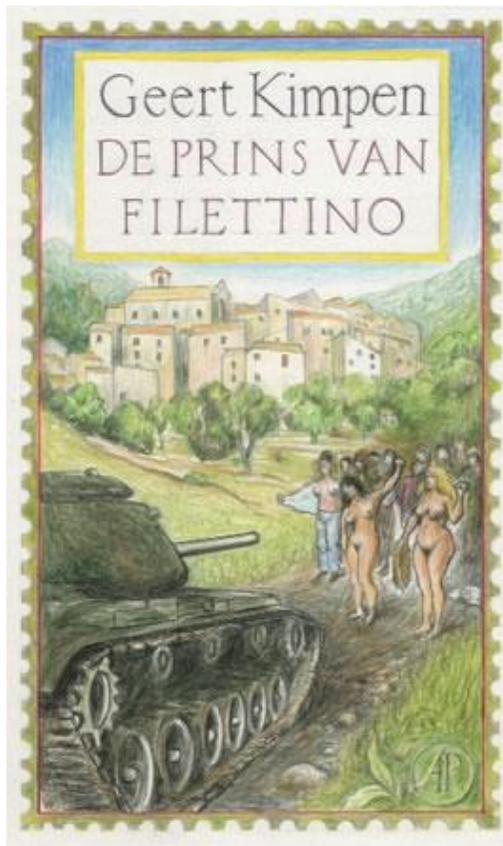


Review
Geert Kimpen
De prins van Filettino: A post-crash fantasy
Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2013. 162p.
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Reviewed by Michiel Horn



The financial crisis of 2007-08 is receding into history. It nevertheless continues to dominate the discussion of current economic and political events, not least because many people are still living with the consequences. Among these are the

massive additions to government debt needed to bail out the banking sector, the public austerity introduced to try to reduce government deficits, and the reduced public services and high unemployment that are part and parcel of that austerity (Krugman 2014).

Hardest hit by the crisis in public and private finance were the so-called PIIGS countries: Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece, and Spain. Geert Kimpen's novel *De prins van Filettino* (2013) is set in one of these hapless countries, Italy, providing the backdrop for a fantasy in which the people of a small village defy the national and international forces that are grinding them down.

Who is Geert Kimpen? The name was unknown to me when Laetitia Powell, the foreign rights editor at the *Arbeiderspers*, gave me a copy of this, his fourth novel, last summer and subsequently commissioned me to translate a fragment from it. According to his website (<http://www.geertkimpen.com/>), Kimpen was born in Antwerpen in 1965 and became interested in theatre when he was a teenager. At age 25 he moved to Amsterdam to attend the *Hogeschool voor de Kunsten Utrecht* and prepare for a career in theatre direction. He soon established his own company, *Belgisch Toneel Amsterdam*, and remained active in this field for years. However, he was also drawn to writing. His first novel was *De Kabbalist* (2007), which was inspired by his study of the Kabbalah, in which he now finds his spiritual home after being raised in Roman Catholicism. Two more novels followed, *De geheime Newton* ('The secret Newton'; 2008) and *Rachel, of het mysterie van de liefde* ('Rachel, or the mystery of love'; 2011), both suffused with a mysticism that Kimpen says he derived from the Kabbalah, before the appearance of *De prins van Filettino*. This fourth novel is a fantasy of sorts but one in which mysticism is scarcely in evidence. Rather the opposite: the novel is shot through with a worldly joie de vivre.

The context is provided by post-crash affairs in Italy, as the national government is seeking to effect savings in the public accounts. The protagonist is Luca (last names scarcely exist in this novel), the recently elected mayor of Filettino, a village with 554 inhabitants in the hill country seventy kilometres east of Rome. Faced with an order to merge his village with the nearby and larger Trevi nel Lazio, Luca rebels. He calls the inhabitants of Filettino together, sketches the current situation in all its misery, and says: "Basta!" He persuades his listeners to claim independence for their community and to abandon the euro in favour of a new currency, the fiorito. The novel is the story of Luca's and Filettino's quixotic quest.

I have called the book a fantasy, but its main premise is actually based on fact. In the late summer of 2011 the BBC reported that the real Italian village of Filettino, led by its real mayor Luca Sellari, was claiming independence as well as the right to issue its own currency, the fiorito (Willey 2011). Hearing of this event

inspired Kimpen to write his novel, in which he himself becomes a character, the writer from the Netherlands who hears about Filettino's actions and, having sent an email to Sellari without receiving a response, decides to drive down with his wife and daughter to find out for himself what is happening (for a video report on Kimpen's adventure see De Vries 2014).

Although the novel has a factual basis, Kimpen makes clear that he has written a fictional account of what happened in Filettino and leaves the reader in no doubt about it. He concludes the novel with this exchange:

"Nice to meet you," Luca said.

"Nice to meet you," said the writer, and they shook hands while the writer's wife took a photo.

"Now it comes back to me," Luca said, "that email. Sorry, but so much has happened in the past few days."

"Yes, I wrote you a couple of days ago. But I got no answer. So I came without notice."

"Don't kid me," Luca laughed. "You not only wrote that email, but also my reaction to it. And you'll even write how you'll react to my words right now."

"And if I am written into it myself," smiled the writer.

"However that may be, for now my part is ended," Luca said to the writer, who looked at him in surprise. "I was the prince who had a dream that *you* made your own."

The writer nodded: "Yes," he said, having finally met the man who had given him new hope. "Thanks for allowing me to dream, for allowing me to be you just for a little while."

"Or you there," the prince winked, and he pointed at you. "Yes, you who are now reading this story. Because at this moment I exist only in your thoughts. I've told you everything I had to say. Don't let my weakness be a reason for you to do nothing. We're all human. We all make mistakes. Those who never try to do anything won't make mistakes, true, but they won't make any difference either. You can do more than you think. And if you won't do it for yourself, then do it for your children. It's high time. Now it's up to you."

"Come on, Luca, let's dance," Alessia shouted exuberantly, and she pulled him away. And then the Prince of Filettino walked out of the story without looking back even once.

(Kimpen 2013, 294; English translation by the reviewer)

This passage not only ends the novel, it also contains its moral: we must do something in the face of a largely unregulated global financial industry and its effects on the finances of nations, especially the austerity it imposes on ordinary people who had no share in causing the crash. We must do something even if we

are likely to fail, for we *are* likely to fail. It is clear that Luca is up against forces that are far stronger than those available to a small Italian village. A moral victory is all that can be expected. That, and the realization that little can be expected from those who hold power, and that if we ourselves were to become powerful we would very probably behave in the same way as those who already are. And yet: there is a startling confrontation between the forces of the state, represented by three tanks and an air force helicopter, and the citizens of Filettino, that ends with a victory for the latter when, led by Alessia and Faustina, they strip to the buff in defiance of the government forces.

Before we reach this point, Kimpen tells us a rollicking tale. The lusty and uninhibited Luca plays the central role, but a number of other well-drawn characters also appear, among them Alessia, who hopes to marry Luca, and her older friend Faustina, who is not loath to share her bed with the mayor. There is Bernardo, a caretaker who gains promotion to state secretary in the new principality but makes off with the million-plus euros that have been collected to form the reserve for the newly-issued fioritos. Sergio, a journalist, explains the ins and outs of the financial system to Luca. The local priest comes up with an idea for an industry that will bolster Filettino's economy. The Italian premier (unnamed) makes an appearance as he attempts to deflect Luca from his course.

The plot has many twists and turns, including several deaths (this is not just a comedy). Since I hope you'll read the book for yourself, I won't spoil your fun by revealing the plot. Suffice it to say that the novel's conclusion contains an element of hope: the tanks withdraw, and the Italian premier resigns. Back in the real world, there was no escape for Filettino. Having had, *pace* Andy Warhol, its fifteen minutes of fame, the village passed from the news, still part of Italy. But the dream of some sort of special solution remains alive in that country, as a *Guardian* story in March of this year reveals (Davies 2014). A small group of activists in Sardinia, fed up with the way Italy is being run, wants to secede from the country and join Switzerland! Material for another novel by Kimpen? Probably not, but who knows?

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About the reviewer

Born in Baarn, in the Netherlands, Michiel Horn came to Victoria, B.C., in 1952. He has a Ph.D. from the University of Toronto and has taught Canadian History at York University since 1968. He is the author of many books, scholarly articles, and reviews; recently he has also become a literary translator, Dutch to English. In 2002 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.