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Willy Linthout's *Years of the elephant*: a graphic novel as drama and therapy

On May 9, 2004, Sam Linthout, a 21-year-old inhabitant of Lokeren, near Antwerp, committed suicide. His death devastated his parents and friends, but it would surely have escaped wider notice except for one thing: his father, Willy Linthout, was and is one of Belgium's best-known graphic artists. Since 1983 he has been the artistic half of the highly popular *Urbanus* comic strip; he has also worked on other comics, as artist and as script writer. Some time after his son's death, he decided to capture his own reactions to it in a remarkable series of comic books, *Het Jaar van de Olifant*.¹ The work will appear as a graphic novel in an English translation, *Years of the Elephant*, later in 2009.

In the ordinary course of events I would never have heard of this publication. I have never had the slightest interest in Belgian comic books other than those by Hergé (Georges-Prosper Rémi), the creator of Tintin. Aside from reading them (and volumes in the Astérix series, by René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo) to my children years ago, comic books are definitely not my usual reading.

That is not to say that I'm totally unaware of shifting trends in the field, notably the tendency of comic books to grow longer and the content to become more intellectually engaging. My sons have read the likes of Art Spiegelman's two-volume *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, and the *Watchmen* series of comic books, produced by writer Alan Moore, artist

Dave Gibbons, and colourist John Higgins. I have recently dipped into them, if only to familiarize myself with the genre.

Spiegelman's work, which took thirteen years to complete, recounts the struggle of Spiegelman's father, a Polish Jew, to survive the Nazi war against the Jews.² The author's articulation of the Holocaust is the main theme of the two volumes. The novel depicts the Holocaust both through the perspectives of a survivor and the perspectives of those who did not experience it directly, but are connected to it, like Spiegelman himself. Also by Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers* is a rather surreal response to 9/11.³ Another well-known autobiographical comic book is *Persepolis*, followed by *Persepolis 2*, by the Iranian writer Marjane Satrapi,⁴ who details her life in pre- and post-revolution Iran.

The *Watchmen* series, published as a single volume in 2005,⁵ is an entirely different kettle of fish. It is set in an alternate universe, one in which superheroes helped the United States win the war in Vietnam, only to be retired or taken into government employment afterwards. The Cold War is becoming hotter, and the prospect of nuclear war looms. To quote from the *Wikipedia* article on the subject: "The story focuses on the personal development and struggles of the protagonists as an investigation into the murder of a government-sponsored superhero pulls them out of retirement

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and eventually leads them to confront a plot to stave off nuclear war by killing millions of people.”⁶ Another volume written by Moore, *V for Vendetta*, this one illustrated by David Lloyd, is described on its cover as “a frightening and powerful story of the loss of freedom and identity in a totalitarian world, ... the chronicle of a world of despair and oppressive tyranny.”⁷

For someone who remembers reading *Archie* back in the 1950s, this newer work is heavy stuff. It is certainly not my literature of choice. Furthermore, it is unlikely I would ever have seen Willy Linthout's work if Stephen Robson of Fanfare UK, a British publisher of comic books, had not asked me whether I would translate *Het Jaar van de Olifant*. When Robson gave me an opportunity to read the first of eight chapters – each chapter has twenty pages, with six (sometimes five) frames per page – I was intrigued by the story's beginning and agreed to do the translation. I have not regretted it. The story of Karel Germonprez and his attempts to come to terms with the suicide of his 21-year-old son Wannes (Johannes) proved to be thoroughly engaging, a dramatic delight with fascinating plot developments.

The tale has a surreal quality at times. Karel imagines some of the things that happen to him and around him, and it isn't always easy to separate his imaginings from what is actually happening. But the main thrust of the story is clear. People at his workplace are superficially empathetic, but his boss is a blowhard who is self-absorbed to a high degree. This makes it impossible for him to give his employee any support. Psychotherapy has limited effectiveness, relying as it ultimately does

on medications that are intended to make Karel feel better but that also make him gain weight and loosen his grip on reality. He is subject to occasional fits of anger that he represses but whose repression make him feel worse. He writes poetry, which gives him some relief. However, a reader who lost her own son to suicide berates him because his poetry is too positive. He tries joining a support group but, unlike his wife Simone, finds it a waste of time. His relations with Simone deteriorate, as each is effectively isolated from the other. In a telling detail, his wife's *face* is never shown. She always speaks off-screen; at most we see her feet or her leg.

Karel does get some support from his brother Roger, whom he hasn't seen much in the recent past but who now makes an effort to get together with Karel more often. But the most interesting relationship that develops during the story is with his dead son. The taped outline where the body landed – Wannes jumped from the roof of the apartment building in which the Germonprez family lived – comes to assume great importance to Karel. At one point he uses force to prevent its removal. And he fancies that Wannes is able to establish contact with him through the CPAP machine that Karel starts using after he has been diagnosed with sleep apnea. (This machine, with its breathing tube, is the source of the title of the comic. When Karel demonstrates it to Simone, she says: “You look like an elephant.”) The machine conveys messages in Morse code that the distressed father takes to be from his dead son, messages that offer him some comfort.

In the end, Karel regains the equilibrium that he had largely lost for at least a year. He tells his

obnoxious boss to go to hell, he strengthens his friendship with Roger, he makes overtures towards reconciliation with Simone, and with the aid of Wannes he comes to terms with the meaning, or better said the absence of meaning, of human life:

Jack, where are we going? Does life have any meaning? ... Is there any hope left?
 Can you tell me Jack, ... Is there anything up there?
 Is there any future? ...
 Nothing? ... There's nothing? That's impossible!
 That's terrible!
Nothing ... Is there really nothing? ...
 You're right! Nothing isn't good, nothing isn't bad
 ... Nothing is nothing ... And has there never been anything? ...
 Yes, there has! You were real ... I am real ... The memories are real too ...
 I'll carry on with what still exists! ... But what does still exist? **Simone!**⁸

The end is very moving: we see the artist put the last touches on the last page of the comic, leave his study, and go to bed and put on the CPAP machine that Willy Linthout also uses. His final words: "Slaap lekker, sleep tight, Sam."⁹

When I began translating, I did not know the devastating event that had overtaken the Linthout household: the death of an only son. It did not take long, however, before I googled Willy Linthout and found out what had happened to trigger *Years of the Elephant*.¹⁰ I also became aware of an interview with Linthout that Bart Croonenborghs carried out for Broken Frontier, a comics website, in May 2008. The document was no longer available online when I looked for it in April 2009,

but I was able to get a copy of the interview from Croonenborghs himself. Some of it has to do with comics and Linthout's views about the subject. Most of it, however, concentrates on *Years of the Elephant*.

Asked what process he went through before writing the series, Linthout's answered that it took him two years before he tackled the subject. He had come to the view that he wanted to write about his own experiences. "So supported by my brother – who helped write the script – I started on *Years of the Elephant*. You need to really believe in a project and you need a person to bounce ideas with [sic], so this process took me two years."¹¹ Later he added that the project came "much more from the heart" than comics such as *Urbanus*: "It is a very emotional process."¹²

The choice of using his own pencil drawings and not to have them inked was deliberate: "To me it's become really special to do it in pencil because these are my drawings. When Steven de Rie, the inker of *Urbanus*, inks my pencils ... they're not completely mine anymore. And I sure wasn't going to ink my own pencils. Sam's life didn't get the chance to go all the way, it stayed unfinished, so the same goes for my pencils."¹³

Linthout confirmed that, except for Karel's boss, the incidents and characters in *Years of the Elephant* are real. "I lived through it all or I wouldn't feel I had the right to put this story on paper. I just put down my own life. There wasn't much sense in making it any other way."¹⁴ The idea of having the CPAP machine serve as a means of communication between Karel and Wannes came to Linthout in the

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middle of the night, while he was using his own CPAP machine. The treatment of Simone was also rooted in Linthout's experience. "That's ... why you never really see Karel's wife. All those things formed a gap between my wife and me. When you go through such an experience, you don't see the other person anymore. Your only concern is yourself. I wanted to show that feeling of isolation."¹⁵

After discussing several more similarities between his own experiences in the months after Sam's suicide and Karel's experiences after Wannes's death, Linthout went on to say: "The first part is almost completely fantasy, though. I really wanted to show that, when something of this magnitude happens to you, your whole world turns upside down. You go crazy and most of the time you don't even realize it. Another big part of it is that other people don't really understand you. They say that you can talk about it, that you can take your time to get over it. BUT don't take too long, after six months is enough or otherwise you're a boring old fart."¹⁶

He found that a support group did not work for him, but it did for his wife. "I would say that every method is okay as long as it helps ... What helped for me was individual therapy and making *Years of the Elephant*. I guess I'm lucky I can make comics. It doesn't really end, though, there will always be some pain left. But the comic has already helped me enormously in coming to terms with it."¹⁷

Beyond this, he expressed the hope that the graphic novel, which is about to appear in a trade edition, will help other people who have had a similar shattering experience. He told Croonenborghs an

anecdote demonstrating that the comic has already had that effect. "And I have other examples like this one. And at that moment I think to myself: 'Dammit, my comics really accomplish something.' And that is what is most important."¹⁸ Linthout the artist and suffering father has become Linthout the therapist. And he is donating the profits from *Years of the Elephant* to an organization that supports the families of deceased children.

NOTES

¹ Willy Linthout, *Het Jaar van de Olifant* (Antwerpen: Bries 2007-8).

² Art Spiegelman, *Maus*, 2 vols (New York: Pantheon Books 1986, 1991).

³ Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004).

⁴ Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* (New York: Pantheon 2003, 2004).

⁵ Ian Moore, Dave Gibbons, John Higgins, *Absolute Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 2005).

⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watchmen>

⁷ Alan Moore and David Lloyd, *V for Vendetta* (New York: DC Comics 1990).

⁸ Willy Linthout, *Years of the Elephant* (tbp 2009), 157-8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁰ <http://lambiek.net/artists/l/linthout.htm>

¹¹Broken Frontier [Bart Croonenborghs], "Interview Willy Linthout, 26 May 2008," 1-2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.