

We All

Want Heaven

Heartbreaking choices in times of war

'We All Want Heaven is a beautifully written book about the thin line between good and bad, about love, friendship and growing up in times of war.'

Flemish book magazine De Leeswelp

'After a while the story grabs you by the throat and won't let you go.'

Dutch newspaper

Noordhollands Dagblad

'A classic tragedy of fate for which Shakespeare would not have been ashamed.'

Dutch newspaper De Volkskrant

'A monumental book. A book like this is only written once in a decade, at the most.'

Dutch newspaper Dagblad van het Noorden

author

Els Beerten

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original title

Allemaal willen we de hemel

rights

Querido

about

love and friendship, war

pages

498 pp.

pages

15+

prizes

Flemish Book Lion 2009

Golden Owl Young Readers prize

Golden Frame

Nienke van Hichtum Award

copies

over 10.000 copies sold

translation

sample translation available

1943. It's the height of the Second World War. A hard battle is being waged against the Russians on the eastern front. The Germans suffer huge losses and urgently require reinforcements. Younger and younger men – naïve and idealistic as they are – hear the call and set off for the frontline, full of notions of heroism. Ward is one of those who choose the 'wrong' side and he goes off with the Germans to fight against the Bolshevik troops. His best friend Jef Claessen ends up on the 'right' side, but it's certainly not out of any definite conviction. He's actually a coward, who becomes a

war hero entirely by chance. When Ward returns to Flanders after the war, the onetime friends find that they are now diametrically opposed.

We All Want Heaven is not purely a historical depiction of the horrors of war on the frontline. Author Els Beerten also paints a convincing picture of everyday life in the trenches and elsewhere through the fortunes of the Claessen family and various other characters, who are connected by family ties, friendship or fate. Four first-person narrators relate the story: brothers Jef and Remi Claessen, their sister Renée and their friend Ward Dusoleil. In her detailed and believable psychological portraits, Beerten maps out their hopes, dreams and desires. Will they have to wait until the war is over to start living their own lives? All of the main characters find their own answer to this question, with consequences that are sometimes emotionally touching, and sometimes shocking.

The author shuttles back and forth between war and post-war history, between present and past, between soldiers and ordinary villagers. This complex, but unobtrusive structure increases the impact of the events in her moving and subtle portrayal of the darkest pages of our history. The central issue is the consequences and validity of heartbreaking decisions and moral dilemmas. All of the characters follow their instincts and act in good faith. But what happens when the course you have chosen turns out to be the wrong one? The author discussed this theme in an interview in *Leesgoed* (2008): 'I bring myself and the reader into an agony of doubt, and that was indeed my intention.'

The novel is written in rich and vivid language, full of traditional wisdom and images that remain with the reader. The Dutch-language press has praised *We All Want Heaven* as a new 'classic for young readers', but this book can hold its own as a crossover novel for adults too.

Els Beerten (1959) worked for some time at a magazine for children and young people before she started teaching Dutch and English at a secondary school. Her debut *Scènes* (1987) was followed by a wide range of children's books. Her oeuvre includes books for the very youngest readers and more substantial teen reads. *Lopen voor je leven* (Run for your life, 2003) won the Gouden Zoen (Golden Kiss award, 2004), the Kleine Cervantes prize (2005) and the first prize from the Flemish Children and Young People's Jury (2005). She won the Boekenleeuw (Book Lion) for *We All Want Heaven*, as well as The Golden Owl Readers' Prize, the Golden Frame, the Nienke van Hichtum Award and the prestigious Flemish Culture Award for Youth Literature.

Important themes in Els Beerten's work are the search for security and confidence and the importance of being honest to yourself and to others.

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Els Beerten - We all want to be heroes

My books are always about heroes. Small time heroes who reach for the sky but won't ever get there without doing something about it; heroes who fight their fears, often with desperate courage, to discover at the end that it wasn't that terrible after all.

But what if it was 'that terrible'?

To find out, I wanted to create someone who sets out full of good intentions, only to realise on the way that they are not only heading towards inevitable destruction themselves, but that they are also taking everyone else down with them. I wanted to know how anyone could live with that. And how good those intentions ultimately were.

My setting was the second world war – a period of extreme choices and decisions often motivated by the desire to be a hero. It was a reckless idea, I didn't know anything about the war years. But my parents were good at telling stories, they'd help me. However, they were children during the war, and had experienced it as one big adventure. This was possible because my grandparents didn't want to have anything to do with that filthy war.

My question gnawed away at me. Why in god's name, against all good sense, against the wishes of their most beloved, would anyone get involved in that filthy war, and on the side of the occupying forces at that? What could have motivated them?

Ordinary people making big decisions, those were the ones I wanted to journey with. People as ordinary as my grandparents, who had everything and nothing, who, like my father, lived in one of the smallest houses in the world. It was the happiest house in the world. My grandmother baked flans, wore floral dresses, sang songs and made up stories, while my grandfather worked at night in the mine and during the day on his plot of land. In my mother's house, all the children played musical instruments. My grandfather set the tone: he played the bugle, and encouraged his sons to play with him. Together they built a brass band hall. When he died they gave him the most beautiful concert ever.

I gave my characters lives full of longings and drove them to tough decisions, decisions which were unfamiliar to me, with an extent I couldn't have imagined. My main desire as a writer was to accompany them along their way, right to the very end.