



On the Water

H.M. van den Brink , Paul Vincent (Translator)

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A "powerful tale of romantic regret" (The Seattle Post-Intelligencer), *On the Water* tells the poignant story of Anton and David, two oarsmen trained by a mysterious German coach in the golden Amsterdam summer of 1939. Anton stands on the banks of his beloved river years later, on the wintry eve of Holland's liberation, and mourns a lost world. David, his Jewish teammate and quiet obsession from that magical summer, has disappeared, and the boathouse is now derelict and deserted. Spare, lyrical, and nuanced, *On the Water* is quietly enormous, capturing a moment so precise and exact it is as if caught in amber -- a rowing club in Amsterdam and two of its competitors from very different backgrounds, set against the backdrop of the oncoming war. The menace of tragedy to come is subtly woven into the story of the two boys whose only concerns are practices, races, and themselves. In the end, all that is left for Anton is the memory of his supreme happiness that summer.

On the Water Details

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Jacquelin says

While this story is subtle and provocative, I think it just wasn't my taste. I was expecting sweeping views of Amsterdam on the brink of war as told through the eyes of a young man who is blossoming as an athlete in part of an elite rowing crew. So I was disappointed to find that I didn't feel grounded in the place or time or in the characters.

I felt like I was looking at his character's world through a lens no bigger than a straw. In first person narration, I like to be very involved with the character's POV. This character held the readers at arm's length, never really letting us in. As a result I wasn't engaged with the characters (and there were only a few characters in the book) and I didn't care what happened to them.

This is a relatively short read - novella length and it is well written. If you like rowing and don't mind feeling a bit lost, you'll likely find this more enjoyable than I did.

Madie says

Read in English

Gert Kruitbosch says

Intrigerende vriendschap tussen twee mannen, wat gebeurt er op het einde?
Niet altijd even soepel lopende zinnen. Het boek pakt wel

Anton Segers says

Zo zinnelijk als H.M. van den Brink over roeien spreekt, je krijgt er ongelooflijk veel zin in.
Een mooie ode aan sport als verbinding met de ander, de kracht van de jeugd en zijn dromen...
En een tragisch beeld van de tijd en de realiteit die alles kapot slaan.
Soms wat vaag, deze suggestieve schrijfstijl, maar poëtisch, met een universele weerklank.

Gwen Thompson says

Beautifully written, mesmerizing, haunting account of friendship across the tracks developed through rowing during the tense lead-up to World War II in the Netherlands--right up until a type of ending that I never find satisfying.

Tonny says

Prachtige novelle die gevoel en de meest kleine details met elkaar vermengt. Ook al heb ik zelden geroeid, zeker niet op het water, heb je tijdens het lezen van het boek af en toe het gevoel alsof je samen met de hoofdrolspelers in de boot zit. Als wielrenner kon ik me heel goed identificeren met de pijn die je als roeier kan lijden, de trance waarin je verzeilt kunt raken en het oppermachtige gevoel dat je kunt krijgen van een lichaam die in topvorm lijkt te komen. Dit is "De Renner" voor de roeiers. En dan nog dat prachtige extra stukje: de oorlog die amper benoemt wordt maar die langzaam een donkere schaduw over de hoofdrolspelers slaat.

Matthijs Leest says

Plus: mooi, dromerig en vooral als een lang gedicht, een ode aan roeien (op 'de rivier') geschreven. Aan het einde komt er ook iets van spanning bij kijken, als de chronologie (begin en einde van de vrijwel nergens expliciet vermelde oorlog) interessanter wordt. Ook wel mooi: het broeierige in de relatie tussen Anton en David; wat betekent David nu precies voor hem?

Minder: vrij lang is er vrijwel geen sprake van enige spanning, of het nu gaat om de thuissituatie, de relatie met David en zijn coach, de roeiwedstrijden of de oorlog. Vrijwel niets wordt uitgediept, behalve dan de onzekerheid van Anton, die op mij lange tijd vooral overkwam als valse bescheidenheid.

Margreeth Wallast says

Poëtisch en gelaagdheid in deze 'coming of age' novelle. De moeite waard.

Femke Van Hemert says

Gewoon in het Nederlands hoor, 'Over het water', maar die titel kenden ze hier niet.

Joe White says

On The Water
H.M. Van den Brink
finished 8/23/13 review written 8/29/13

Observations : The writer must have been a crew member in both an 8 and a coxless pair. The descriptions of the physical aspects of being in a boat both in race situations and in training situations are actually better than many of the blogs I've read, and generally exceed any of the historical accounts of rowing I've read. The writer used a stream of adjectives to impart a sense of presence in describing natural settings in detail, and in describing both the physical and mental forces that most rowers describe. His landscapes are populated with minute flowing details that mesh both light, sound, atmospheric elements, and physical responses.

I had only glanced at the cover and not read any reviews or previews of this book. The boating detail was so realistic that I assumed that this was a historical piece that might have been found and published from an actual person. I assumed that the oarsmen and settings were British, and when I couldn't reconcile the physical settings, I investigated and was surprised to find this to be a fiction piece.

As such here are my criticisms: I thought the narrator was too overly sensitive and too emotionally wrapped up in his rowing partner. The choice of a German coach appearing from some distant location, and only staying to coach from a hotel room seemed unusual. Particularly since the figure presented was described in terms that conjured an image of a "Sergeant Schultz" type physique. The man was the primary coach of a very successful pairs team, had selected them apparently at random, and was presenting innovative techniques. Yet he remained a shadowy background figure and disappeared at the end of the book as did all the other imagery. Just to be nitpicky, I wasn't aware that interval training and the use of bursts of short choppy strokes to start a race had been introduced to rowing before W2, and I thought was a 70's or 80's development.

The writing was captivating. As such, I felt that the author's technique of leaving a conclusion to the reader may have put too much onus on the reader to examine the many possible conclusions to this narrative. I have never read of the occupation of Amsterdam by the German war machine. I have to assume that a large Jewish population from Amsterdam might have ended up in concentration camps, and am not aware of any of the exfiltration routes that might have been used for survival. Most of the allied offensive bombing and invasion routes that I've read as historical accounts have occurred in France, Italy, and Germany. Amsterdam was blockaded, but I don't know if it was ever bombed directly. I don't think it was liberated until after the June D-Day 1944 landing in France, and since France wasn't secure until 1945, Holland may not have been either. That leaves 6 years of time between 1939 and 1945 for the author to have summarized, perhaps in an epilogue, whether the two boys survived and ever reunited. How soon after the war any normalcy of life may have returned to Amsterdam could have been elucidated or hinted at.

Apparently the boys had an intent to continue rowing, after they had almost won first place in what I gathered was a European championship event. Presumably such events were curtailed until well after the war. So an epilogue might have indicated that they did get to row again possibly within ten years of their success. They would both have still been under 30.

The author generates power in his presentation by presenting the narrative up to a point in time leaving only suggestions as to the future from the narrator's perspective. It does leave the reader feeling the ominous shadow of the future.

Jorien says

If you have ever rowed yourself, you will love this book.

It accurately describes the feeling of rowing. That particular feeling is so special, I have never been able to write it down.

But this author did manage to do so.

Just for that, 5 stars!

Sue says

More like a short story, this short novel describes the coming of age of a Dutch youth and the summer in 1939 that changed his life when he took up rowing with a local crew.

I've sat beside the water cheering on rowers for many years but never rowed myself. This book gave great descriptions into the psyche of a rower and the physical toil the body endures as well as the pleasures of being out on the water, rain, snow or sunshine.

The impending German occupation of the Netherlands and the bombing of Rotterdam make this a bittersweet novel whose unspoken allusions might be lost on most Americans, unfamiliar with Rotterdam's history. The protagonist's life changes when he stepped away from his family and explored his passion for a sport but the reader understands in the end that his life will only continue to change when historical events will change the character and his country in the very near future.

Anne Van says

A slender, very understated novel about a young man's memory of the summer of 1939 in Holland. He trains in pairs rowing with another young man, under the guidance of a foreign "Doktor" coach. He gains confidence in the physical and in his synchronicity with his partner. The present time of the narration is not mentioned, but seems to be during the war, with the demolition of that summer of grace, along with the demolition of the boathouse and his sense of his city.

Dottie says

A small group of Constant Reader folks read this one together and discussed it -- not an official discussion though and I'm pretty sure not archived. Very slender volume packing a powerful punch of a reading experience.

Pascale says

I expected this book to be right up my street, since it deals with friendship, training your body, and the love of water, but in the end it was a bit too subdued and allusive for me. The narrator is a diffident young man who is painfully aware of the unbridgeable gap between himself and his mates at the rowing club. Anton's father, who works in tramway maintenance, is the kind of guy who believes workers should be neither seen nor heard. Anton's biggest achievement in life may be when he forces his father to sign him up at the posh rowing club on the other side of the canal. Not that Anton is a social climber: he has a passion for the sport itself and has no intention to use it as leverage. In any case, once he has been singled out by a mysterious foreign coach to train with a wealthy Jewish boy, David, his world starts revolving exclusively around his partner and the competitions they enter. During the Summer of 1939, Schneiderhahn's rigorous methods enable the pair to land a number of trophies. Needless to say, the war disrupts everything, including the young men's burgeoning dream of training for the Olympic games. There's nothing wrong with the story, except that the characters of David and Schneiderhahn remain too hazy to be affecting or memorable.
