

Hugo Brandt Corstius (1935-2014)

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Being one of the probably very few Dutch subscribers to *Word Ways* magazine (in fact, Karen and Jerry have informed me that I am now the captain of an almost abandoned ship, being the sole remaining Dutch subscriber), I feel that the reader of *Word Ways* should be notified that Dutch author, mathematician and master of word play Hugo Brandt Corstius, sadly passed away at the age of 78 on February 28th 2014. Furthermore, I feel that you should know more about him than you might know already.

What you might suspect is that Brandt Corstius (as his surname was) has been a keen reader of *Word Ways* for many years, but you might not know that he (under the name Battus, one of his many pseudonyms) has compiled the bible of Dutch word play *Opderlandse taal- & letterkunde* (1981) [1] with its two successors *OPPERLANS! Taal- & letterkunde* (2002) [2] and *OPPERLANS WOORDENBOEK* (2007) [3]. It is my humble opinion that these three books should be in your collection of word play books (although not cheap), even though maybe 99 percent of the content is incomprehensible for maybe 99 percent of you (probably not capable of grasping the many subtleties of the Dutch language to start with, let alone able to appreciate the word play involved). But the sheer look of the books and the special layout make them worth a purchase. A must-have for you all is Battus' book *SYMMYS* (whereby the last S of course is depicted as the mirror reflection of the first S) from 1991 (!), which contains exactly 2500 palindromes from all over the world, so better understood by the *Word Ways* reader [4]. More about these books later in this article.

Brandt Corstius studied Mathematics, but shifted towards computer-based analysis (a new field at the time) and wrote his thesis *Exercises in Computational Linguistics* (1970). Already as a student (1957) he started writing articles for *Propria Cures* (a Dutch magazine founded in 1870 which has been a forum for free-thinkers from its first issue) and that was the beginning of a life-long career of writing very sharp (sometimes too sharp according to his many enemies), very witty (according to his equally many - if not more - fans and followers) but always original and cunning articles, columns and reviews, using his analytic and mathematical mind but also with a never-absent love for the correct and innovative

use of the Dutch language. Writing those columns for many newspapers and magazines made him a public figure (although he used at least 25 pseudonyms), loved but also hated. I will not bore you with details of petty Dutch polemics in the seventies but I will give you only one example of the controversial nature of his writings. As it happened, in 1984 Brandt Corstius was awarded the prestigious P.C. Hooftprize for literature, but the responsible Minister of Culture refused to present the prize to HBC. The committee was then made into an independent foundation and four years later he was awarded with the P.C. Hooftprize after all.

More of interest to you might be that HBC always has been fully and unconditionally appreciated by everyone (friend or foe) because of his groundbreaking work on Dutch word play. What Martin Gardner did to raise my interest in recreational mathematics when I became a math student in 1972 (I have folded many a hexa-hexa-flexagon in my younger years and so have many of my pupils since - in both meanings of the word - I became a math teacher), Brandt Corstius did to raise my interest in recreational linguistics around the same time. I always have been interested in both math and language, but sometimes (especially when there are no computers to help you find specific book titles or know about *International Puzzle Parties* or *Gatherings for Gardner* or *Word Ways* to name but a few of my occupations) you need somebody to lead you to the light. In this case the constant flow of word play articles (amongst many articles on math, politics, art and computers) was overwhelming and would have been more than enough to satisfy my appetite. But I would never have thought that Brandt Corstius would go as far as to collect all these word play beauties (and many more) in a book, let alone of that size (203 pages) and quality! To give you an idea of the wealth of word play to be found in [1] I will try and translate and or explain (if I don't know the official English term) for you the different categories HBC used (and sometimes even coined himself).

Of course the well-known palindromes, charades, Tom Swifties, transposals, lipograms (as you might not know, apart from the English translation *A Void* - and a Spanish, an Italian, a German, a Japanese, a Turkish and other translations [!]) - there is also a Dutch translation [5] of the e-lipogram *La Disparation* by Georges Perec [6]), eponyms, word ladders, pangrams, word pyramids, spoonerisms, homonyms, collective nouns with a twist ("a handful of fingers", "a church of hypocrites", but the other hundred or so are not translatable that easily), chronograms, epigrams, rebuses ("M A Z T", in Dutch pronounced as "Em-a-zet-thee", meaning "Emma makes tea"), oxymorons, acronyms, acrostic verses, anagrams and alliterations.

But also aeiouy-lipograms (because we consider the “y” to be a consonant but also a vowel and the Dutch language even has a seventh vowel, which is “ij”), calculator words (“73083734” upside down reads “hELEBoEL”, meaning “a lot” in Dutch), prose where all words start with the same letter or even letters, a poem of let’s say 13 lines of 13 letters where the first and last line can also be read on both diagonals, words with all seven (!) vowels (in alphabetical order or not) and all letters different (easy in Dutch because we can concatenate words without hyphens such as “exvakkbondsjuryzwijgplicht”, meaning the “vow (plicht) of silence (zwijg) of the former (ex) jury (jury) of the trade union (vakbond)”), lipo-palindromes, palindrome-ambigram (“pedalepad”, meaning “path of pedal”), double diminutives (the diminutive of “pal”, meaning “click” is “palletje” and the diminutive of “pallet”, meaning “pallet” is also “palletje”), syllable cascades (“lekkerkerkerkerkerkerkerkerker”, from right to left meaning “the dungeon (kerker) in the bow window (erker) in the church (kerk) in the city of (er) Lekkerkerk” - here’s another nice concatenation I’ve gotten you into), letter cascades (“slechtstschrijvende”, nine consonants in a row, meaning “writing worst”, a world record?), the 100 Dutch two-letter words (!), prose (meaningful in Dutch) where all the words are both Dutch and English (or Dutch and French, or Dutch and German) with mostly different meanings (“Die immense slang wilde in die adder happen, trots vet gift van hem droop”, meaning “That giant snake would like to bite that adder, although greasy poison oozed off him”), fake names for Hitler (in fake-Bulgarian “Slarottimof”, in Dutch pronounced “Sla-rot-die-mof”, meaning “Kill that Kraut”), words where the two syllables have opposite meanings (“volledig”, meaning “completely”, consisting of two syllables “vol” and “ledig”, meaning “full” and “empty” and even better the name “Anita”, in Dutch pronounced as “Ah-neat-ah”, meaning “A” and “not-A”, the perfect example of this type of words), anagram-synonyms (“aalscholver” and “schollebaar” represent the same bird, i.e. the “cormorant”), bookkeeper-words with as many doublets of letters as possible (again easy in Dutch, an example with seven doublets of which six are consecutive would be “voorraaddoospullen”, meaning “things (spullen) you keep in a supply (voorraad) box (doos)”) and many many more.

On top of it all, he managed to compile an even bigger successor *OPPERLANS! Taal- & letterkunde* (2002), a book like a brick and five centimetres thick, boasting a staggering 26 times 26 or 676 pages (with pages running from aa to zz) and apart from being more methodically (almost mathematically) ordered, it contained at least three times as much word play as [1] and will surely last me (or anybody for that matter) a life-time. Although Battus at the time thought to have written the definitive book on Dutch word play (and rightly so, even surpassing all books on word play I know of, including many American - this feels like swearing in church,

but if you see the book you will understand my boldness) and that with its publication he surely must have thought to be able to close this humongous chapter, not more than five years later (2007) he outdid himself (again) with the production of *OPPERLANS WOORDENBOEK* [3]. Meant as index to [2], its 204 pages contain exactly $100 \times 100 = 10,000$ entries where all the words of [2] and many new findings (each time stating what type of word play is involved) (re)appear, but now in alphabetical order. It is much more than a mere index, this is a book with its own merit.

As said earlier, for the non-Dutch the most accessible of his word play books is *SYMMYS*, published in 1991 (no coincidence), all pages of the entire book of course centred, including the frontispiece and the colophon, with 100 pages each containing $5 \times 5 = 25$ palindromes (“Retrowörter” in German!) from roughly 30 languages (my estimation) such as Finnish, Latin, Esperanto, French, Rumanian, Greek, Russian and of course Dutch (“Klote, die zeden in Ede, zei de tolk”, in Dutch meaning “Bollocks to those customs in Ede, said the interpreter”, of course no offense meant to the lovely people of the equally lovely city of Ede).

For me, Brandt Corstius will live on as one of the most original and clever people of the last century, and he will always be an inspiration to many of his readers and certainly to me. Let the last words for this article be the words his son Jelle (well-known TV-maker) twittered after his father passed away : “Pa, ‘k loop tot poolkap”, meaning “Dad, I am walking towards polar cap”.

- [1] *Opperlandse taal- & letterkunde* (1981) by Battus, ISBN 90 214 5132 8
- [2] *OPPERLANS! Taal- & letterkunde* (2002) by Battus, ISBN 90 214 5433 5
- [3] *OPPERLANS WOORDENBOEK* (2007) by Battus, ISBN 978 90 214 5318 7
- [4] *SYMMYS* (1991) by Battus, ISBN 90 214 5359 2
- [5] *'t Manco* (2009) by Georges Perec, ISBN 978 90 295 6766 4
- [6] *La Disparation* (1969) by Georges Perec, ISBN 978 20 707 1523 7