

DEPARTEMENT CULTUUR, JEUGD & MEDIA

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Ultima 2016 Literature

Jeroen Olyslaegers

Recent years have been characterised by increasing polarisation: the fear of the other and the unknown unwittingly pits groups against each other. Society is looking for answers that are not always ready-made or on hand. In times like these, a writer or organisation can make a difference. By giving the individual behind 'the other' a voice and a face, by allowing different cultures and backgrounds to engage in a dialogue with each other and by looking at our own history and behaviour with a critical eye, without taking an absolute position.

In 2016 we could no longer ignore the fact that various writers committed themselves through words and deeds, and let their voice be heard loudly in a changing and unfortunately also polarising world. Among the different voices there was one that managed to stand out like the first among equals. We have been aware of this writer's commitment for many years now and it does seem to go hand in hand with his literary work. In 2016 the last part of his trilogy about a time when things went off the rails was published.

With 'Wil', Jeroen Olyslaegers has written a masterpiece. Everything falls into place here; it's the book that he had to write, his magnum opus. It's a compelling novel filled with cinematic language, in which the suggestiveness and ambiguity of words, facial expressions and gestures are rendered with extreme precision. The reflection on the occupation of Antwerp during WWII and how this led to a general political, social and emotional disruption still resonates today and can even be translated to the issues which current society feels confronted with. Olyslaegers reflects on the past and future, doesn't shy away from difficult moral questions but also recognises how the answers can never be black or white.

As a literary successor to Hugo Claus and Louis Paul Boon, he hints at both authors in his work and takes the words of Louis Paul Boon to heart: Jeroen Olyslaegers kicks people hard until they get a conscience, and he does this in both word and deed. 'Wil' is the pinnacle of a body of work that reads like a prominent and multifaceted chronicle of our time.