

“All memory is fiction”

Gaea Schoeters' second novel looks at doomed romance through the prism of world history

Rebecca Benoot

With her second novel, Flemish journalist and screenwriter Gaea Schoeters finds that fact and fiction have a way of influencing each other.

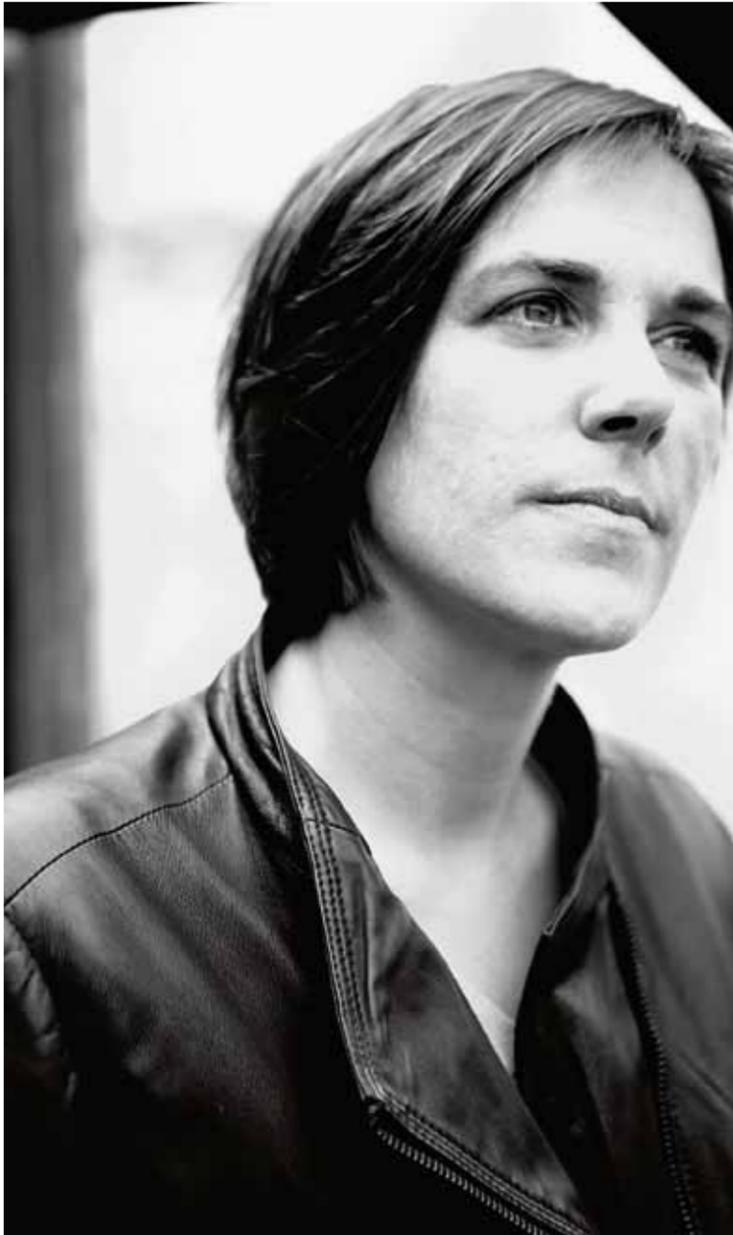
Gaea Schoeters is a busy woman: If she's not working as a journalist or screenwriter, she's writing books. The first appeared in 2009 after a seven-month road trip through Iran by motorcycle and was appropriately called *Meisjes, Moslims en Motoren* (Girls, Muslims and Motors).

It was followed in 2011 by her first novel, *Diggers*, a thriller set in Flanders Fields. In her second fictional endeavour, *De kunst van het vallen* (The Art of Falling), Schoeters shows us what happens when love, classical music and history collide.

What started out as a novella bathed in nostalgia – a sentiment all characters are afflicted by in one way or another – soon became much more than that. “My previous novel was 600-plus pages, so I intended to keep it short this time round,” Schoeters explains. “Love and loss were my initial subjects, but, because they are topics with a lot of wiggle room, I decided I could only write about them if the structure was very tight. So I went in search of a form that forced me to stick to the story.”

The narrator of *De kunst van het vallen* is a pianist who has an affair with the wife of a conductor. When the woman finally decides to leave her husband, things fall apart rapidly. Unable to play a single note after their break-up, the narrator, whose sex is undefined for the most part of the novel, meets Alex, a diver, at the local swimming pool.

After the narrator is encouraged by Alex to start playing again, Katharina, a Russian pianist who fled the Soviet Union, enters the



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for half the novel: The other half is reliant on the interpretation of the reader. Readers look for things to relate to in a novel, and these are different for everyone.”

Although frustrating at first, this offers the readers an interesting main character who stays fairly anonymous, giving us the chance to fill in the blanks.

wasn't sure which path to take or which images or metaphors to use, but gradually she discovered that, in all those historical facts and tales, there were links with her love story. Fact and fiction influenced each other.

“Because the main characters are pianists,” she says, “the structure was actually handed to me, which

“History is also composed of stories, and it became my way of telling this story”

The second part of the novel recounts the events slightly differently, since “memories are always fiction, especially when they actually happened,” as Schoeters writes. Add a little amnesia to the mix, and the result is a novel about dealing with the past and coming to terms with the future.

Yet the core tale is alternated with chapters about historic events featuring an array of characters such as Mikhail Gorbachev, Yuri Gagarin, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Sergei Rachmaninoff. All characters symbolise something, creating several layers and adding an uncanny depth to the basic story, which is told over numerous short chapters.

“An affair that ends badly is a universal cliché,” Schoeters says, “which is why I didn't want to tell that story in too much detail. History was a way to look at the situation from a distance and describe those sentiments in a whole other, universal manner. History in a sense is also composed of stories, and, in this novel, it became my way of telling this story.”

When Schoeters started writing, she

is why the novel is constructed like a piece of classical music. The challenge was finding a piece that I could sculpt the novel on.”

The composition however, is sometimes a little too dominant, drawing our attention away from the devastatingly beautiful plot. Nonetheless, it is a bold choice to contrast a love affair, a personal piece of history, with world history. To quote *De kunst van het vallen* once again: “Those who want to experience life during a dictatorship should try an affair. Every telephone conversation, every text message is an irresponsible risk.”

Nonetheless, the serious and often tragic subjects are presented to us in such a playful way that you can't help but be captivated by these multiple realities.

De Kunst van het vallen is an ambitious novel full of mesmerising characters, anecdotes and history that mirror the simple yet poignant tale at the heart of the book. Filled with vivid imagery and powerful metaphors, it is a novel of ideas about time, coincidence and memory.

► www.gaeaschoeters.be

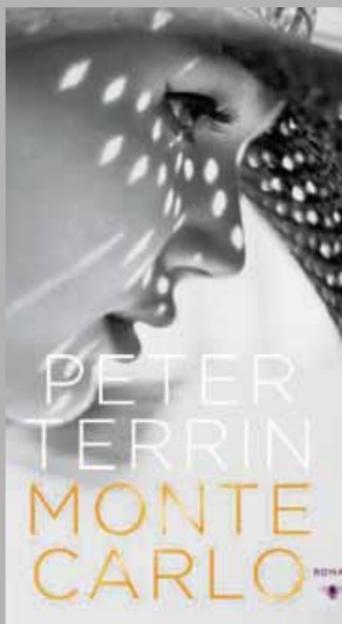
FRESH FICTION

Monte Carlo

Peter Terrin • De Bezige Bij

Peter Terrin follows up his award-winning novel *Post Mortem* with a story revolving around Formula 1 racing. Mechanic Jack saves the life of a young and voluptuous actress named DeeDee in Monte Carlo, where we follow his descent from adoration to self-preservation. Terrin's subtle and subdued storytelling turn this potentially sensational joyride into a work of art where no stone is left unturned and not a single word is superfluous. As he's pursued by inevitable tragedy, Jack and his escapades will linger.

★★★★



Dood water (Dead Water)

Toni Coppers • Manteau

Thriller author Toni Coppers was nominated for the Diamanten Kogel in 2010 for his third novel starring inspector Liese Meerhout, whose adventure will hit the small screen in 2015 on VTM. In *Dood water*, Albrecht Stuyt, a retired mission priest, has disappeared after facing charges of unholy relations with several young boys. Meerhout investigates. Stuyt's pipe is eventually found on the banks of the Scheldt next to the body of a former prostitute. Several days later he turns up strangled on the same location. *Dood water* is a classic police procedural, no more, no less.

★★★★

Sisterka

Marijke Libert • De Bezige Bij

Former journalist Marijke Libert's third book is literary non-fiction in which she tells the story of her 95-year-old great-uncle Ephrem. After a lifetime of silence on the matter, Ephrem decides to tell his relatives that, during the First World War, when he was a wounded soldier in a London hospital, he had an affair with a nurse, resulting in the possible birth of his only child. He broke all contact with Sisterka and led an uneventful and childless life in a Flemish village. Libert went in search of this mysterious figure, creating a tale where fact and fiction go hand in hand, in an attempt to clear up a lingering mystery that has haunted Ephrem all his life. ★★★★★

Het boek der ontwenning (The Book of Withdrawal)

Geert Colpaert • Van Halewijck

In a rehab facility, several alcoholics plod through the same old therapy sessions every day, until a new therapist arrives. They each start to blossom, discovering hidden talents and boosting their rehabilitation. At 58, VRT writer Geert Colpaert is finally debuting his first novel, a lovely work that illustrates how people are capable of fulfilling their potential, with a little encouragement and support. Simple and heart-warming, *Het boek* drifts on a pool of social commentary that makes you question the core of humanity and the capabilities of mankind. ★★★★★