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Het litteken van de dood : de biografie van Jan Wolkers

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Summary

‘No one has stuck closer to the truth than I have. My life and my work are one.’ That was what Jan Wolkers, sculptor-painter-writer, told me in the fall of 2006 when I visited his home on the island of Texel. He was 81 years old. One of the most famous and admired artists in the Netherlands, a man whose work in literature and the visual arts had already had an enormous impact on Dutch society. We had just agreed that I would write his biography, and to that end would be given free access to his personal archives.

I had listened to his words carefully. Wolkers said ‘the truth’, not ‘reality’. An artist uses lies to tell the truth – and that is how he masters his profession. Wolkers was all-too aware of the distinction between the two. ‘The truth is not the same as reality,’ he wrote. ‘God makes reality, we create illusions.’

What *was* Wolkers’ truth? If you were to place the events in the lives of his fictional alter egos in chronological order, you would be holding an imagined autobiography as thick as the Gutenberg Bible. What would happen if I were to compare those fictional details with the material I found in his archives, in diaries and letters, in interviews with him and in the accounts and recollections of those closest to him? It is along the cutting edge of Wolkers’ two lives, the factual and the fictive, that this biography moves.

Jan Wolkers the artist was born from death. While his eldest brother Gerrit, who he admired and with whom he had shared the same bed for years, lay dying in the summer of 1944 – in the very thick of the Second World War – Jan made a drawing in which he forced the sun to stand still on paper. That was his way of trying to safeguard his brother from death. ‘Final possibilities,’ he wrote, as a kind of incantation above that drawing of the sun. It was his first real work of art.

He was a marked man. Due to an accident as a baby with a croup kettle – boiling hot steam was blown into his crib – he bore a scar on his left temple. His father saw it as the brand of Cain. He himself saw it as a stigma of his guilt and wickedness, but also as the brandmark of his unique talent. It was the scar of death, the theme that would dominate all his work.

Jan was born in Oegstgeest, a village just outside Leiden, on October 26, 1925. He was the third child in a large, staunchly Dutch Reformed family. His father, a rigid, devout man, ran a grocery shop specialized in colonial wares. Business dwindled during the Great Depression of the 1930s, however, and the shop was closed. Jan's mother was ashamed of their poverty. Jan escaped the oppressive atmosphere at home by wandering through the surrounding woods and polders, and by drawing and painting what he saw there.

When his father told him – on the occasion of the death of the family's calico cat – that animals had no soul and therefore would not go to heaven, Jan's faith faltered. After the war broke out – from the window of his attic bedroom, Jan saw the German paratroopers jumping from the planes – he refused to go to church anymore. Jan decided that he wanted to become an artist, to design a world contrary to his father's dark, Calvinistic one. To shape his own Heaven and Earth.

Once the Netherlands was liberated, Jan attended the art academies in The Hague and Amsterdam, where he studied sculpture. His talent was recognized by his teachers. He received commissions even as a young artist, attended workshops with Giacomo Manzù in Salzburg in the summer of 1954, and in 1957 won a scholarship to spend six months studying with Ossip Zadkine in Paris. As model for many of his statues (e.g., *Mother & Child*), he used his wife Maria de Roo, daughter of a wealthy family from Zeeland Province, and their children (e.g., *Boy with Rooster*). The family lived in Jan's studio-annex-apartment on Zomerdijkstraat in Amsterdam.

The life of the family was marked by tragedy as well. Wolkers married and had children too early. Erik Peter was born within a year after he and Maria first met in 1947. When Wolkers' two-year-old daughter, Eva, died in 1951 after a horrible accident – when her mother left her alone for a moment while bathing her in the sink, the little girl opened the scalding hot tap – the marriage disintegrated. Nothing could put it together again, not even the birth of their son Jeroen Sebastiaan, the child who was meant to set things right.

In 1956, Wolkers met Annemarie Nauta, a nineteen-year-old, red-haired beauty from Leeuwarden, and fell madly in love with her. He divorced Maria and devoted himself obsessively to his new wife. She unleashed the beast and the writer in him. In 1957 he made his literary debut as poet, two years later as a writer of prose with the short story 'Het tillenbeest', which appeared like a bolt from the literary blue.

His earliest stories are set against the backdrop of his growing-up years. His first novel, *Kort Amerikaans*, published in 1963, instantly transformed Wolkers from an impoverished sculptor into a rich, successful writer. His debut was a roaring critical success. His talent as 'a born writer' was recognized immediately. In religious circles in particular, however, people were shocked by his exceptionally free and frank language. He was admired and denounced.

In the novels that followed, Wolkers took different periods of his life as the theme. In *Kort Amerikaans* it was adolescence during the war years, while in *Een roos van vles* it was his first marriage and the death of his daughter. For *Terug naar Oegstgeest* he literally went back to his native village, in order to reconstruct his early childhood.

In *Turkish Delight*, published in 1969, Wolkers described the collapse of his marriage to Annemarie Nauta, who left him after four years. To still his sorrow, in the period that followed he went to bed with hundreds of women. In the novel, Wolkers manipulates reality to his own ends. He has Olga – modeled after Annemarie – die of a brain tumor, a fate he had witnessed with another lady friend. But he also quoted verbatim from Annemarie's letters and – as I discovered in Jan Wolkers' personal archives – even covertly recorded conversations with her, to paraphrase them in his book.

Turkish Delight, that novel of love and death, was to be his most famous book. Particularly after director Paul Verhoeven adapted the novel to make a film seen by three-and-a-half million Dutch viewers, Wolkers' success in the 1970s was overwhelming. His novels *De walgvogel* and *De Kus* sold in unprecedented numbers. Not all the critics were taken with that. The praise for Wolkers' first books had been unanimous, but after *Turkish Delight* the pendulum swung the other way. *De Kus* received mostly bad reviews, which deeply enraged Wolkers. 'Cyanide for the critics!' he thundered. The pattern repeated itself until his final novel, *De onverbiddelijke tijd*, in 1984.

Four years earlier, in 1980, Wolkers had moved to the island of Texel with his wife Karina. They met in 1962, when he was 36 and she was 16.

His relationship with her was tempestuous as well. She was his muse and his first reader, but also 'partner in crime' to his sexual escapades. She seduced young girls so that he could watch and join in. All those erotic adventures were noted carefully in his diaries, parts of which he used in his novels. Sex was a powerful motor for his urge to write.

In 1981 Karina gave birth to twins, Bob and Tom. From that moment on, Wolkers' focus shifted pronouncedly to his young family. The big novels were done with. He turned to work with a shorter span: poems, essays, paintings and glass sculptures. In 1977 he had made his first monument in glass: the Auschwitz Monument in Amsterdam, commemorating the victims of the concentration camp. Broken plates of mirrored glass, reflecting heavens that could never again be viewed intact.

During a visit to New York in 1987, Wolkers' painting received a powerful new impulse. The city was experiencing a snowstorm, floating snowflakes were reflected in the windows of the skyscrapers. At home on Texel again, he began painting that: snowstorms in large and small brushstrokes. At first in white, later in all the colors of the island, the sky, the dunes and sea. He would spend the last twenty years of his life doing that, just as monomaniacally as Monet had his waterlilies.

In 2006 Wolkers painted his last large canvas. It was two meters by two meters, divided into four compartments and it was a bright cadmium yellow. The autumn color of the tulip tree, a tree grown from a cutting from the tulip tree once planted by Hermanus Boerhaave in the Oud-Poelgeest woods in Wolkers' native village. The painting comprised his alpha and omega: the memories of his youth and his obsession with death. 'Who catches the final, yellow leaf,' was a line from one of his poems.

Jan Wolkers died on October 19, 2007, at 1.30 a.m. Five days earlier, the doctors had delivered a diagnosis of liver failure – and he knew he was going to die. On the evening of October 15, Karina brought him a slice of bread with jam. 'It's enough,' he said to her. Those were his last words; after that he fell into a sleep from which he never awoke.

'A crow caws that it is finished,' Wolkers once wrote. 'I shut my mouth and hold my breath / I'm over here, and there is Death.'

When it came to using intimate and personal material, Wolkers could be ruthless. The dark treasures from his archives demonstrate that. He wrote, painted and sculpted to achieve the deepest self-insight, and to lend meaning to existence. In his memory, he returned again and again to the scene of the calamity. He wanted to look fear in the eye and ward off death to his dying breath. No one came closer to the truth than he did.