

THE HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN AWARDS 2022

Dossier on author **Tonke Dragt**

Candidate for the **2022 Author's Award**

Nominated by The National IBBY Section of The Netherlands



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NOTE:

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Life and Work of Tonke Dragt: A Short Biography

Antonia Johanna Dragt, or Tonke Dragt, was born on the 12th of November 1930 in Batavia (now Jakarta) in Indonesia (then known as the Dutch East Indies). She was the eldest daughter of an employee of a Dutch insurance company. She spent much of her childhood there, including three years in a Japanese internment camp (1942-1945). She was detained with her mother, two sisters, and 10.000 other women and children, while her father was held as a prisoner of war in another camp. She started writing while being held in the camp and drew pictures in the sand since paper was scarce. She wrote her stories on toilet paper and in her old math notebook. Three years after the war, they were reunited with her father via the Red Cross. She and her family moved to the Netherlands. In the beginning, she didn't like living in the Netherlands. In an interview in the Guardian, Tonke Dragt recalls 'It was cold, it was flat, and it was full of houses and people. It was just after the war and we were considered strangers'.



Tonke finished her HBS-exams (secondary education) in the Netherlands and she got admitted to the Academy of Visual Arts in The Hague, pursuing a career as a full-time artist. Her parents encouraged her to make sure she would be able to provide for herself, which made her focus on a career as an art teacher. After her graduation, she worked as a drawing teacher. She found classroom management hard, but telling stories seemed to be a successful way of getting her classes quiet. At night, after a long working day, she did most of her writing and illustrating. She illustrated books from E. Nesbit, Alan Garner, Rosemary Sutcliff and others. Some of her stories were sold to magazines, but initially it was hard to get a publisher for her books since realism was the norm in those days, while Tonke Dragt wrote mainly fantasy and science fiction. She was inspired by Tolkien's Middle Earth and by her childhood in Batavia. In several interviews, she mentioned how many of her stories' setting is based upon the Indonesian jungle. Eventually, she found a publisher, and she debuted in 1961 with *Verhalen van de tweelingbroers* (*The Goldsmith and the Master Thief*). Her second book, *De brief voor de koning* (*The Letter for the King*), was published in 1962 and became a bestseller.

In 1976 she was awarded the Dutch State Prize for Children's and Youth Literature for her collected works. In 2001 Tonke Dragt was knighted (Ridder in de Orde van de Nederlandse Leeuw). In 2004 Tonke Dragt was awarded the 'Griffel der Griffels' ("The Best of Slate Pencils", an award for the best Dutch children's book of the past fifty years) for *Letter for the King*. Her work as an artist remained crucial in her life.

She illustrated most of her own books, made colorful and intricate collages, and designed miniature dollhouses. Constructing and creating new unknown worlds is a critical element in both her writing as her artwork. Tonke Dragt remained unmarried and has no children. "I would have liked to have children, but I suspect I would have written fewer books if I would have been a mother."

In recent years several of Tonke Dragt's books have been translated in English. In 2020 a Netflix series based upon *The Letter for the King* has been released. Despite her age (Tonke Dragt turned 90 in November 2020) she still writes. A new book will be published shortly in cooperation with her friend and well-known children's book author Rindert Kromhout.



Tonke Dragt's Contribution to Literature for Young People

An important message

Genuinely understanding one another is quite difficult, according to Tonke Dragt. 'What intrigues me is that even with the best intentions from all sides, one can still misunderstand each other.' Therefore, in her work, she explores what lies beneath the spoken word, conventions, and social standards. How hard is it to follow one's own standards instead of what society asks of you? Tonke Dragt is known as authentic and self-willed, as are her characters. In *The Letter for the King*, the main character Tiuri takes matters into his own hands by breaking the rules and leaving the chapel where he is supposed to stay all night. In *Torenhoog en Mijlenbreed* [Sky-high and Miles Wide] main character Edu ignores orders from his superiors because he feels he has to. Through her stories, Tonke Dragt encourages young people to be as authentic and assess their situation themselves instead of leaning on others.

Different genres

Dragt's writings are difficult to categorize, but several different genres can be distinguished: Fairy tales, sagas and adventures, and science fiction or futuristic tales. *The Goldsmith and the Master Thief*, *De blauwe maan* [The Blue Moon], and *Water is gevaarlijk* [Water is Dangerous] can be considered fairy tales. *Brief voor de koning* (*The Letter for the King*), *Geheimen van het wilde woud* (*The Secrets of the Wild Wood*), and *De Zevensprong* (*The Song of Seven*) are sagas or adventures. *Torenhoog en Mijlenbreed* [Sky-high and Miles Wide], *De robot van de rommelmarkt* [The Robot from the flea market], and *Ogen van Tijgers* [Eyes of Tigers] are science-fiction or futuristic tales.

Nature and science

Nature plays a vital role in her work. The atmosphere Dragt knew from the Indonesian jungles from her childhood, but also the flower bulbs she planted in her garden once she lived in The Hague were an inspiration. Living in harmony with nature and respecting the environment was a theme in Tonke Dragt's work before it became more fashionable to address ecological topics in youth literature. But the forests in Dragt stories seem to serve another purpose as well. The jungle is a place where a person learns who he really is. Far away from the civilized world, one is thrown back onto himself.

It seems a contradictory how Dragt combines nature and an endless fantasy with her fascination for science. "In the ferocious spider webs of my imagination, I need science as my compass," she once said. To Tonke Dragt, imagination and science go well together since what is not scientifically researched yet leaves room for thought experiments. By creating imaginary worlds, juggling with different time zones, exploring the possibility of doppelgangers and telepathy, she travels in her stories to places unknown.

Tonke Dragt created room for psychological development and awareness of the main characters through the use of alienated worlds. Her characters are not bothered by everyday worries like school, pestering parents, problems with boyfriends, or the inconvenience of puberty. They experience a certain freedom, which allows them to strive for something greater. In the Dutch newspaper, *De Volkskrant* is mentioned how “Dragt’s characters are always in the pursuit of something important, they are engaged in some quest, and at the end of the story something significant has changed for them.” Newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* acknowledges how Dragt’s characters need to take complicated moral decisions; something Dragt encourages her students and her readers to do as well.

A unique route to a big audience

When realism was fashionable, Tonke Dragt took to science fiction. Critics expressed their doubts about the size of her books. Where her stories not too long for a young audience? Where the topics in her books not too philosophical or abstract for young people? Tonke Dragt practiced the willfulness she preached in her books and persistently wrote what she would enjoy reading herself. She never wrote for a designated audience, and yet her unique style remained appealing to young readers for several decades already. With the recent English translations of some of her books and an adaptation of *The Letter for the King* for Netflix, Tonke Dragt reached an even bigger audience.

Admired for being somewhat quirky

Critic and children’s book author Miep Diekmann was one of the first who reviewed Tonke Dragt’s work. “*The Goldsmith and the Master Thief* are mainly characterized by its originality, its strong expressive assets, and a fascinating style of narration,” she wrote in newspaper *De Haagse Courant* in 1961. Miep Diekmann was also a member of the jury of the Children’s Books Prize 1963, a prize that was awarded to *The Letter for the King*. In the Jury Report, the jury praises “This epic story with extraordinary qualities: the enormous imagination and the exquisite details in which this classic-literary theme is drafted. Also, natural wisdom and a simple but concise psychological description of the characters and their interrelations. Finally, the lucid and lively narrative, which displays all of these qualities.”

When Tonke Dragt was awarded the Nienke van Hichtumprijs for *Torenhoog en mijlenbreed* [Sky-high and Miles Wide], Miep Diekmann wrote: “Children who wouldn’t think of touching a book, now devoured Tonke Dragt’s books. Young people who detest reading are just as fascinated by her stories as the infamous bookworms. Tonke Dragt prepares young adults for literature.”

Literary critic Lieke van Duin wrote in 1992 in newspaper *Trouw* how “Tonke Dragt’s books become more and more complex, which is why more and more adults appreciate her work.

With her book *Aan de andere kant van de deur* [At the Other Side of the Door], the distinction between literature for adults and children almost disappears (...) her way of associating and combining requires a mature way of thinking.”

When Tonke Dragt was awarded the Dutch state prize for children’s literature, Minister Van Doorn (Ministry of Culture) said in his speech: “I get the idea you are an outsider, or to put it differently, you are an extraordinary and unique author (...) in your writing you show young readers on their way to maturity, the importance of their sentiments. You educate them on how to keep their sense of the mysterious and the unknown, even when they enter the reality of adulthood. You contribute, I think and hope, to the happiness of many, and maybe even to a better world. Who knows!”

Tonke Dragt remains modest in the rare interviews she gives. “I had no idea what Netflix is,” she said in newspaper *Trouw* in 2019. “And now I have to stay alive at least until I have watched *The Letter for the King* on Netflix. I am quite proud, you see. Netflix invests an awful lot of money in this production, but apart from that, they are filming in New Zealand, where the Tolkien movies were filmed.”

In an interview for the magazine *Libelle*, she mentions how she does not really know who she is. “I might not even find out before I die. Every human being is trying to find himself. My characters have to experience that same quest as well. Some aspects of who you are, are aroused by certain experiences you have. That is how I started writing.”

About her vivid imagination, she said in an interview with *The Guardian*: “There is a place on the other side of every door. And as long as the door is closed, you do not know what is on the other side. It is where I find my stories: the other side of the door.”

Tonke Dragt thinks she has to write her best book yet. “It is still somewhere in my brain. It helps if you always have a story you will never write. I like that idea. I already know what the final sentence of that book will be: ‘Ripples in the water disturb the reflection.’”

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Appreciative essays about Tonke Dragt

Words are just as Powerful as Imagination

The Magic World of Tonke Dragt

By Joke Linders

'In words one can express one's feelings,' concludes shield-bearer Tiuri at the end of *The Secrets of the Wild Wood* (*Geheimen van het wilde woud*, 1963). The opposite - words that disguise what occupies the mind - is equally true. This paradox belongs to Tonke Dragt as the two sides of a door are inseparable. In her qualities as author she is the very expert in both revealing and concealing the many sides of the human being, fascinated as she is by different worlds, times and spaces where nothing is fixed and everything moves, floats and changes all the time. 'Panta rhei'.

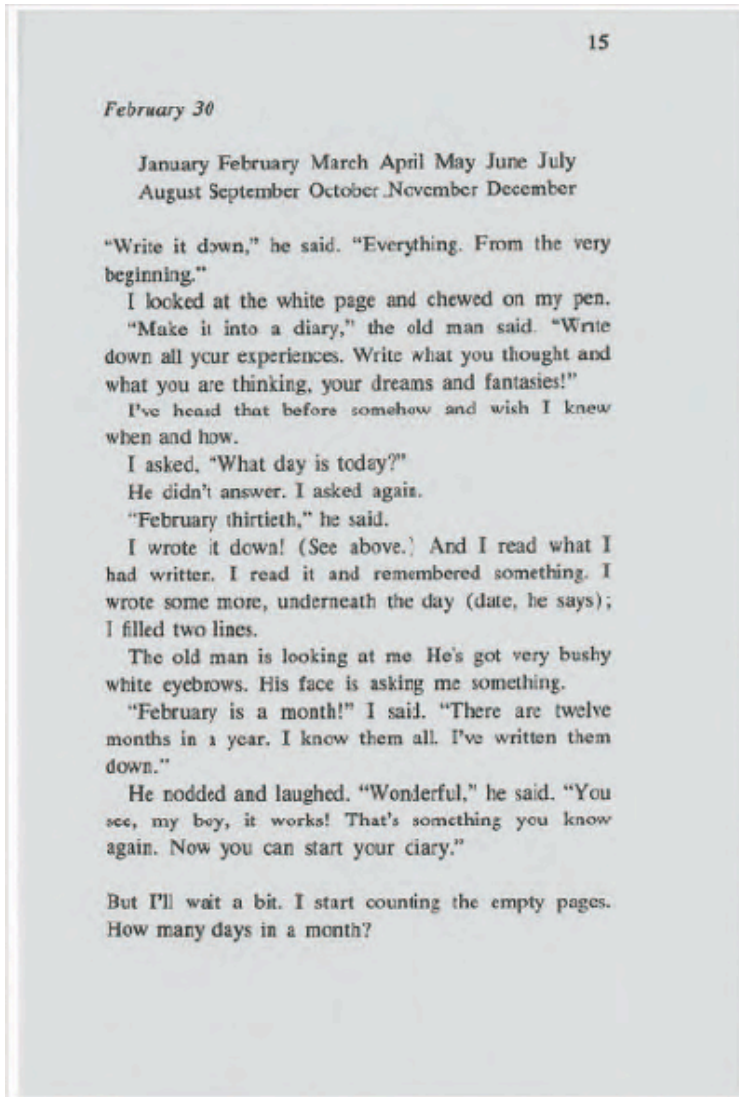
The oeuvre of Tonke Dragt is teeming with mirrors, stairs, doors, mountain passes and gates leading to unknown grounds where charms, skills and dreams help both the hero of the story and the reader to discover new dimensions and aspects of 'the self'. In this way 'the unknown' is a source for enrichment and deeper understanding.

As no other Dutch artist for children, adolescents and adults Tonke Dragt, born in Batavia in 1930, likes exploring the boundaries of space and time. In 2004 this capacity yielded her the Slate of the Slates on behalf of *Letter for the King* (*De brief voor de koning*, 1962), a once-and-only award selected from half a century of Slate winners. Impressive sales and a great number of literary awards show how happy publishers, librarians, educational institutes, booksellers and readers are with an author who serves readers who have just discovered the wonder of language and those who are already fully addicted. Even adolescents and adults feel comforted and inspired by reading *Letter for the King* or *The other side of the door* (*Aan de andere kant van de deur*, 1992).

The secret of her writing is not easy to detect as Dragt combines the epic with the lyric, the visual with the scientific, the fairy-tale with the chivalry, the moral with adventure. Depending on her focus of interest her stories are set somewhere in history, in a realistic present or an unknown future. Where possible she will reinforce anecdotes with philosophical reflections and tie poetry with the eerie. Her narrative shows an equally clever mixture of descriptions, dialogues, letters and diary notes.

The explanation for this centepedal authorship lies in her power to catch the realistic and the fantastic at the same time. Supported by her unusual imagination she processes everything that life has offered her: the years of her youth she spent in a Japanese war camp captivated by anxiety and danger, lacking the companion of the opposite sex; the books she grew up with; the cats that keep walking into her life; her experiences as a teacher of fine arts; her memories of people and landscapes; the periods she reflects on in her oeuvre and all the scientific, philosophical and emotional knowledge she collected through the years. ‘The very source of an

artist is her memory’, Dragt tends to say. ‘Without memory no recollection, without recollections we are nobody, nothing at all.’



With her stories and pictures she guides her readers along obvious but essential questions as ‘Where will this end? Is this right or wrong? Will it be fixed? Who is the bad genius? Where can the answers be found? She knows the effects of cliffhangers, retardations, asides or forebodings in dreams. The tension in *The Twin Brothers’ Stories*¹ (*Verhalen van de tweelingbroers*, 1961), *Letter for the King*, *The Secrets of the Wild Wood* or even *The Folk Dance*² (*De Zevensprong*, 1967) is greatly enhanced by fairy tale ingredients such as colors,

[A page from *The Towers of February* \(William Morrow and Company, New York, 1975\)](#)

numbers, nursery songs, archetypes and metaphores. Blue for magic and secrecy, white for innocence, red for danger and love. Woods are usually impenetrable, mountains impossible to

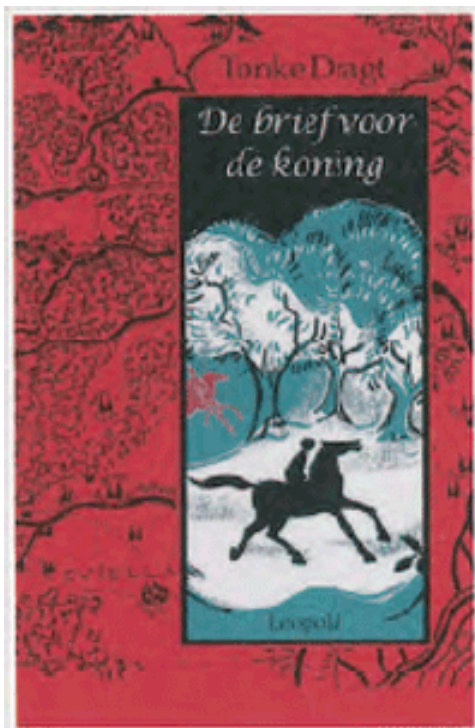
¹ Published in English as *The Goldsmith and the Masterthief* (2020).

² Published in English as *The Song of Seven* (2016).

climb while planets far away offer new perspectives. These familiar elements invite the reader to surrender themselves to Dragts outspoken imagination.

Two in one

In nearly all her books Janus, the God with the two faces, comes sooner or later to the surface. Sometimes in twinbrothers and twinsisters, sometimes hidden in dilemma's, reflections, contradictions, duplications or distortions in time and space. Aunt Willemijn, a leading character in *The Folk Dance*, already stated it: in each human being lives more than one person. For that reason many a character in the books of Tonke Dragt have an alter ego or doppelgänger. This obsession for hidden meanings, complex personalities or the other side of the medal is part of her life. It was in the books she read as a child, in the circumstances of her adolescence, in the various cultural contradictions she experienced. The Dutch down-to-earth mentality versus the silent powers of Indonesia; the atheism of her father against the piety of her free thinking remonstrant mother; the exotic rituals of the Islamitic servants as distinct from the stiff upper lip of the British rulers.



Cover of *De brief voor de koning*.

Illustrations by Tonke Dragt.

Till this very day this doubling and redoubling is an essential part of her life. The all-embracing motive of the doppelgänger offers excellent opportunities to investigate universal themes as good and bad, life and death, war and peace. In doing so she can avoid the issues of the day and still reflect the spirit of the time.

This two-in-one approach also dominates her daily life. Apart from the gigantic doll's house through which she devises her stories, Tonke Dragt needs two apartments. One for storing everything that has to be saved because of her work, and one for the sake of sleeping and dining.

In *The Twin Brother's Stories* is demonstrated how even her plots reflect the topics she investigates. As the two brothers become older and wiser and go

through many more adventures the narrative follows that pattern. Every new scene offers new views on our complex world, while perfect look-alikes are a natural cause for the game of double-crossing that people have been playing since the beginning of times.

Even as an artist Tonke Dragts herself is a kind of Janus. She expresses herself just as easy in language as in images. From her very childhood on she was always busy drawing, painting, making pictures and collages. Long before 'double talents' were seen as something very special she used to illustrate her own stories. A rather natural thing, she stated more than once, as writing and drawing spring from the same source. For practical reasons she chose to be educated as a teacher of fine arts and worked as such till 1980. From then on she concentrated more on her writing skills but kept enlightening her stories with her own visual images.

Like her talent and her mind the oeuvre of Tonke Dragt holds two different parts. The novels referring to a vague past date mainly from the years she started publishing (1956-1969). In combining action with fairy tale, narrative art with rivalry, adventure with moral lessons, they fit in the same range as many a story of colleagues like Paul Biegel, Jean Dulieu, Harriet Laurey, Leonie Kooiker of Daan Zonderland. The only exception is that 'the other worlds' of Dragt are never populated by dwarfs, trolls or fairies. She prefers protagonists who are at the same time childish and mature, while her children in spite of their ages see themselves confronted with adult dilemmas and tasks.

Comments or Observations?

Without being contemporary all her novels reflect the period of time they were written in. As was the idea in the sixties and seventies of the last century her personages are willing to break the rules if necessary; they are constantly seeking new grounds to fulfil their dreams. This is just as true for Tiuri in *Letter for the King* as for the main characters in *The Folk Dance* or *The other side of the door* (*De andere kant van de deur*, 1992) who criticise the establishment. This longing for freedom and emancipation in religion, politics and social patterns is often explained as a reaction to the dullness of the post-war reconstruction in the Low Countries.

Tower-high and Miles-wide (*Torenhoog en mijlenbreed*, 1969) the first of the more rational novels of Tonke Dragt in which imagination is fed by facts and scientific astonishment, can be seen as a bridge to the more complex novels later in her career. In this book the struggle between tradition and renewal is crystallized by the Institute of General Welfare that tries to keep the people in ignorance, even the scientist. In doing so *Tower-high and Miles-wide* integrate with the later *Tigers' Eyes* (*Ogen van tijgers* 1982), often seen as a reaction upon the utopian ideas of Cobra-artist Constant Nieuwenhuys. His New Babylon is a place without hunger, pain or slavery; instead the homo ludens pulls at the strings. *Tigers' Eyes* shares that view but shows at the same time that even art and creativity can't ban struggle and tyranny completely.



Cover of *Dichtbij ver van hier*.
Collage / artwork by Tonke Dragt.

Towers of February (*De torens van februari*, 1973) stresses the importance of memory. If people and society start forgetting about the past, we are lost. To turn the tide Tom, the hero of the story, has to take big risks. Only in doing so he will be able to find out who he is and where he comes from. The story is placed on the shores between horizon, sea and dunes at a moment in time - 29 februari - when one can switch between one world and the other. For Tom as for his creator the urge for crossing borders and taking responsibility is truly a matter of saving one's life. Through this concept Dragt evokes a rather more fantastic or psychedelic world than colleagues like Miep Diekmann, An Rutgers van der Loeff, Karel Eykman or Jan Terlouw.

At the end of *Towers of February* Dragt claims that the book was not written by her, a form of mystification often used by artists inviting the reader to accomplish the story. Even forty years after the book was published she keeps receiving reactions: answers, requests for information and suggestions for the word that reveals the mystery behind the story. The use of a diary as part of the plot entitled her to think and feel from a fourteen year old boy who is very much in love. To focus her brains during the writing she listed her feelings and thoughts in a separate booklet lefthanded and backwards. This kind of experiment, related to the technical site of her mind, reveals a third entity of her authorship, next to imagination and transpiration.

Workmanship

In raising big universal questions for young people Tonke Dragt certainly was one of the first authors in the Netherlands. Long before Anton Quintana or Els Pelgrom presented their philosophical quests in *De bavianenkoning* (the individual versus the mass) or *Kleine Sofie en Lange Wapper* (what has life to offer) she experimented with narrative structures and references to the great stories from other cultures. She finds her inspiration equally in the Greek myths as in the Bible or the stories of King Arthur and the Round Table. Shakespeare is just as important to her as the traditional stories from Arabia, India or Norway. In her work there is a constant dialogue between literature, music, visual arts and scientific reasoning.



Bathroom. From *Dichtbij ver van hier*.
Collage / artwork by Tonke Dragt.

Her way of telling is both old fashioned and postmodern at the same time. In using set formulas as 'Once upon a time' or 'Far far away on an island' she allows the narrator to have an important role in explaining, indicating or warning what the reader can expect. *Letter for the King* for instance starts with 'This is a story from the time knights were all over the place.' In *The Twin Brothers' Stories* numerical aspects are combined with subtitles, graphic effects and a device borrowed from H.C. Andersen: 'So! Now we start. When we reach the end of our story we will know more than in the beginning... And to make things even more complicated that story finishes with lots of clues for what might happen after or even outside the story. This urge for making things more complicated than they are is almost postmodern as is

her longing to explain how a text came about or which choices she made.

The profusion of references in Tonke Dragts oeuvre follows her way of thinking and sensing. She never has to seek for associations, they come naturally from the personages she creates or the conflicts in her stories. Only for *At the other side of the door* (the first part of the still unaccomplished *Oceans of time*) she consciously used an idea from the German poet Christian Morgenstern, as his power for creating mysterious worlds fully coincides with her own expectations and spinnings. In following Morgenstern, Christian the gallows-child became the first and most important person to Otto, the main character of *The Other Side of the Door*. As most of her characters Christian and Otto assume the world by using the craft of language and imagination, the two gifts of the gods that enable people to live their lives.

By subtle entwining of imagination and experiences, both from her childhood as later in her life, Tonke Dragt explores the various dimensions of her theme: the search for universal truth and true love. All protagonists in her oeuvre – Tiuri, the blue Buccaneer, master Frans, knight Ristridin, planet researcher Edu Jansen or Otto – want to know who they really are. As they are seen by the outside world or as they feel themselves. This scanning of feelings, sublimated in the telepathic potential of the people of Venus, is an important aid in grasping one's 'real' or 'true' identity. This searching has little to do with religion. As a matter of fact Tonke Dragt



Januarian Embassy (Januaraanse ambassade)
(from: *Dichtbij ver van hier.*) Collage / artwork
by Tonke Dragt.

dreads all religious institutions as they often turn into fundamentalism, whether they are Islamic, Christian or Judaic. As soon as one pretends to own the truth, things can go awfully wrong.

For that reason Tonke Dragt herself chooses for plurality, the art of being as the Taoists practise, the road of life on which one can meet so many different people and things. The male and the female, the earthly and the heavenly, light and darkness, yin and yang, fantasy and reality, pretence and substance, boys who turn out to be girls and girls who pretend to be boys, scoundrels who behave like heroes and vice versa, strange figures on Venus – all dressed in green – who communicate without words, a frightening and at the same time challenging system

through which one can understand the other without using words.

This use of imagination has turned her into a so called religious atheist. This 'contradictio in terminis' expresses in an excellent way what and who she is, an onlooker in heart and soul. Someone, who makes her own choices and belongs to nobody at all, no group of people, church, fashion or mainstream. It is the same attitude we recognise from her characters. For each of them counts what the Flemish poet and novelist sings in his *Panta Rhei*:

*Become who thou art.
Dare asking what no one ever did.
Only s/he who crosses his own lines
wont' get lost at the border.
Nothing is perfect, nothing the final end.
Rigidity leads only to delusion.
What ever was, flows into what shall be.
Panta Rhei.*

This essay was published in the magazine *The Low Countries* (no. 18, 2010).

Source: https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_low001201001_01/_low001201001_01_0026.php.

Tonke Dragt interview: 'I was born a fairytale teller'

Michelle Pauli (*The Guardian*, 19 September 2015)

Why has it taken so long for *The Letter for the King* to be translated? The million-selling Dutch children's author reflects on her eventful life.

There is a place on the other side of every door. And as long as the door is closed, you do not know what is on the other side. Where do I find my stories? It is there that I find them: the other side of the door," says Tonke Dragt. Physically fragile and very private, the 84-year-old children's author rarely goes far from the sheltered accommodation in The Hague where she now lives, and it is even rarer for her to agree to any kind of media attention. She perches on the edge of her bed to be interviewed, wrapped in a wildly patterned cerise kaftan like a delicate, exotic bird, and flicks easily between Dutch and English for a couple of hours before getting weary.

Although a star in her own country, she is virtually unknown in the UK. But that's slowly changing with last year's English translation, the first ever, of her 1962 adventure story *The Letter for the King* (*De Brief Voor de Koning*) and, this month, the appearance of its sequel, *The Secrets of the Wild Wood*. *The Letter for the King* is a Dutch classic, winning the country's children's book of the year award in 1963 and, in 2004, the "Griffel der Griffels" for best children's novel of the past 50 years. Translated into many languages, it has sold over a million copies worldwide.

It does indeed begin on the other side of the door. Set in the middle ages, it's a coming-of-age tale that opens with 16-year-old Tiuri, who has been confined to a chapel for a night of prayer before being made a knight in the morning, hearing urgent knocking and a plea from behind a door. Although he has been given strict instructions not to leave the chapel, on pain of losing his knighthood, his conscience does not allow him to ignore the appeal of someone who may need help. He anxiously opens the door to a mysterious stranger, who hands him a sealed letter and gives him a secret quest that takes him across mountains, through forests and rivers, hunted and waylaid, all the way to a mythical kingdom and into adulthood. *The Secrets of the Wild Wood* continues the story of (now Sir) Tiuri and his friend Piak as they tackle another perilous mission. Oh, and growing up and falling in love along the way.

Dragt, who still receives letters from children signed from Tiuri and Piak, is modest about the enduring appeal of the book. "It's crazy," she says, wonderingly. "It's a very old book, in many senses. It's not bound in time and place, it's a fantasy that takes place in the middle ages. It's an archetypal sort of story, a very simple sort of story."

It's been described as a spiritual tale, despite Dragt firmly stating that she is "not a believer, not a Christian". It is certainly a moral tale with honour – and the power of truth, justice and friendship – at its heart. It is also action-packed. As with many of Dragt's stories, the cliffhanger chapter endings in the book were born from oral storytelling. When she worked as an art teacher in The Hague in the 1950s, her pupils were "very tiresome and talkative". She discovered that she had the power to make them fall silent by inventing stories as they drew their pictures – and promising that if they stayed quiet she would tell them the end of the story. "And that was the beginning of my career as a writer," she smiles.

"Once I told the story of how a boy opened a door to a plea of help. I made up his name on the spur of the moment and gave him a letter but without having the slightest idea of what was in the letter or how it would end. It was the last day of term and all the children listened to it open-mouthed. Then, in the holidays, I began to write it down and it was *The Letter for the King*."

The book was her second to be published – followed by many others, most notably the science fiction story *Torenhoog en Mijlenbreed* and the contemporary *De Zevensprong*, all illustrated by Dragt herself – and she quickly achieved a level of success that enabled her to give up teaching and write full-time.

But she had been telling stories for many years before that. Born in Jakarta in Indonesia (then the Dutch East Indies) in 1930, she was the eldest daughter of a Dutch government employee; in 1942, she was interned for three years, until the age of 15, in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp.

"I discovered that I could write stories in a concentration camp where there was nothing," she says. "I wrote stories there for my friends, full of heroes who were prisoners who could escape. That was the first time I made my own stories. There were no books there. I also tried to draw – in the sand, on the walls ... there was no paper."

Dragt, her two sisters and their mother were in a camp of 10,000 women and children, while their father was a POW in another camp; he eventually found them after the armistice using a Red Cross list: "For three years after the war, we didn't know if he was alive or dead," she recalls. "All the white people had to be in camps – you were the enemy. And it was safer, later on, in a camp than outside. Though there was not enough food in the camps. I was very hungry. Hunger was everywhere."

She was not "very" scared, she says, which she then qualifies with memories of the "crazy, moonsick" camp commander who, when there was a full moon, would order all the prisoners to get up in the middle of the night and stand outside for hours.

“We had what they call ‘concentration camp syndrome’ [a type of post-traumatic stress disorder] after the war but they didn’t really know what it was then – everyone had been in camps during the war and years later people talked about how bad it was but, to begin with, everyone was just glad that the war was over and people didn’t want to look back.”

After a second spell in Indonesia, her family moved back to the Netherlands for good when she was 18, where she attended the Royal Academy of Art, training to be an artist and a teacher. She illustrated books by authors including E Nesbit, Alan Garner and Rosemary Sutcliff, then started selling her own stories to magazines. Her work is often inspired by her childhood in Indonesia – the woods in *The Secrets of the Wild Wood* are based on her memories of the tropical forests of her youth. “I didn’t like Holland at all in the beginning – it was cold, it was flat and it was full of houses and people. It was just after the war and we were strange,” she explains.

The neat two-room apartment in a care home complex in The Hague, the city she has made her own since leaving Indonesia in her late teens, is apparently a far cry from her own, more chaotic, home, in which she lived alone for most of her adult life. It had been crammed to the rafters with treasured possessions but now she is, at least, surrounded by books, her own artwork – she specialises in collage – and doll’s houses that she painstakingly fills with extremely surreal tableaux. It becomes clear that Dragt has always lived her life as an outsider in one sense or another – first in Indonesia, then in The Hague, where she was “not really Dutch”, and then, later still, in her choice of literary genre – fantasy – which was seen as “exotic”.

“In Holland it was very difficult for me to get a publisher – they wanted realism, realism, realism! Fantasy wasn’t in – they were seen as crazy books, full of crazy knights with crazy names,” she says. She has long admired the English fantasy tradition, to the extent that when she first read Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (after she had written *The Letter for the King*), she was unable to write for six months for fear of being influenced by him.

“I tried once to write a very realistic story, so I wrote a story about a class of children who went somewhere on a bus and within two chapters they were flying in the air – it’s the way my mind works! I’m a fairytale teller,” she says firmly. “I was born like that and I cannot do anything else.”

That *The Letter to the King* and its sequel feel so very “English” in so many ways makes it all the more surprising that it has taken over half a century for there to be an English translation, even given the UK’s infamously low levels of interest in fiction from non-English-speaking countries (a meagre 1-2% of children’s fiction available in the UK is in translation). The books’ translator, Laura Watkinson, who took the initiative in suggesting Tonke Dragt as ripe for the UK to Pushkin Press, says: “I’ve always been puzzled about the English-speaking market’s relatively low levels

of acceptance for children's books in translation, even after the long-term success of such translated classics as *The Moomins* and *Pippi Longstocking*, for example. It's almost as if people think those books must originally have been written in English, as they didn't seem to have paved the way for many more great children's books to be translated, with the occasional exception over the years. I couldn't understand, in particular, why *The Letter for the King* had never made it into English, even with so many champions. It fits so well with the English children's canon too."

For Adam Freudenheim, the publisher of Pushkin, which specialises in translated fiction, the appeal is straightforward. "The plot is extremely gripping and the short chapters make the book very easy to read and read aloud – I read most of *The Letter for the King* out loud to my two older kids, who adored it and begged me to read more every night. I knew then that I was on to something," he says. In fact, Freudenheim's son Max, then eight, was so desperate to know what happened next that "he crept into our bedroom at four in the morning, quietly stole away with the bound proof and proceeded to read the last 150 pages or so himself before we woke up."

There is also now to be a TV series in the UK – after *The Letter for the King* was acquired by a production company, which is developing the book for the BBC.

No longer the outsider, Dragt was awarded the State Prize for Youth Literature in 1976 and was herself knighted in 2001. What does it all mean to her? She smiles. "Success means being able to write the books that you want to write – the ones that some people will love and others hate but nobody will feel indifferent about."

Source: *The Guardian*, 19 September 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/sep/19/tonke-dragt-interview-i-was-born-a-fairytale-teller-letter-for-the-king>

See original article for accompanying pictures and drawings by Tonke Dragt.

List of Awards and Other Distinctions

- 2007 **Japanese Child Welfare and Culture Award** for the Japanese translation of *The letter for the King*
- 2005 **Victorine Hefting Award**
[An award for women in The Hague who have contributed to the cultural emancipation of women]
- 2004 **Griffel der Griffels** for *De brief voor de koning*.
[The best of Golden Slate Pencils, an award for the best Dutch book of the past fifty years]



Tonke Dragt receives the Griffel der Griffels Award from Princess Laurentien.

- 1995 **Buxtehuder Bulle** for the German translation of *Torenhoog en mijlen breed*
[An Award for youth literature given by the city of Buxtehude]
- 1990 **Vlag en Wimpel** (text) *Het geheim van de klokkenmaker, of De tijd zal het leren, of De tijd zal je leren*
[The 'Vlag en Wimpel' (Flag and Streamer) is an honourable mention for the Golden Slate Pencil award.]

1976 **State Prize for Children's Literature**

[In 1964 the Staatsprijs voor kinder- en jeugdliteratuur (State Prize for Children's and Youth Literature) was awarded for the first time. Since then the prize has been awarded every three years for the total work of a Dutch author. Since 1988, the award is called Theo Thijssen-prijs.]

1971 **Nienke van Hichtum-prijs** for *Torenhooch en mijlen breed*

[The Nienke van Hichtum-prijs is a biennial Dutch literary award for children's literature awarded by the Jan Campert-Stichting. The award is named after children's author Nienke van Hichtum and was first awarded in 1964.]

1963 **Kinderboek van het Jaar** *De brief voor de koning*

[Children's book of the Year, the predecessor of the Gouden Griffel (Golden Slate Pencil)]

Excerpts from the jury report of the State Prize for Children's Literature (Theo Thijssen-prijs 1976:

"In her 1963 book *The Letter to the King*, the main character Tiuri breaks the rule and leaves the chapel, in which he has to stay all night in preparation for his knighthood, because there is an urgent knock on the door. Whatever the consequences, he must proceed with what comes to him so urgently.

And in her book *Torenhooch en mijlen breed*, it is Edu, who ignores the instructions from superiors and lands in the forests of Venus to penetrate to what intrigues him ineradicably.

The urge to find out about things, to discover, to get to the core of existence - and how different it is for every human being to discover oneself - is the basic theme, laid down in a wide variety of forms in the oeuvre of Tonke Dragt. In each subsequent book it comes to the fore more succinctly, the adventure of the leap into the dark, more and more direct, so that the clear development can be discerned of an author in search of her highly personal form. In *De Zevensprong* the confusion of the endless up and down stairs in the old house, in her most recent book *De torens van februari* it is the split between the outside and the inside world, this world and other worlds, and the struggle of a person who seeks to unite them despite the experience of being able to live in only one at a time, with nothing more than diary entries as a grip - like dreams that seem so unreal during the day and are experienced so real at night.

The clever construction with which Tonke Dragt gives shape to her theme, the epic atmosphere and the tension of her stories - fairytale, knight novel, magical imagination, science fiction - make her books pre-eminently attractive to the youth of that age when the urge to discover and to question emerges.

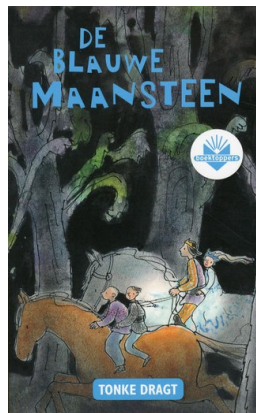
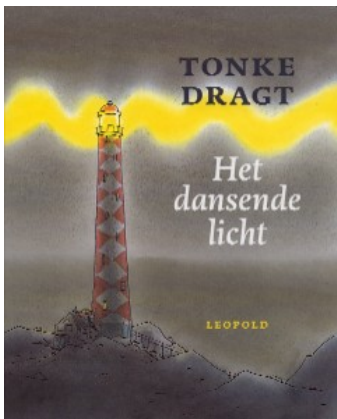
(...)

It is in the light of these considerations, expressed here in words that are not intended to hide things, that the jury decided by a large majority to recommend that the Minister awards the 1976 State Prize for Children's and Youth Literature to the writer who makes such an important contribution to the inner growth of youth with her oeuvre: Tonke Dragt.”

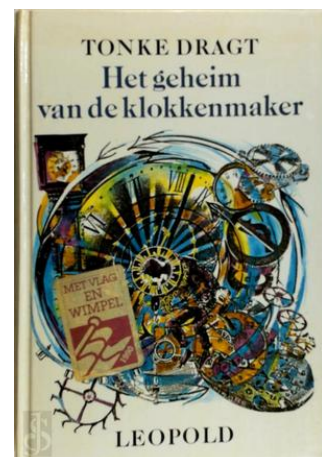
Source: <https://literatuurmuseum.nl/literatuurprijzen/theo-thijssen-prijs/1976-tonke-dragt>

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- 2017 **Als de sterren zingen** / [When the stars are singing], Amsterdam: Leopold. 10+
- 2010 **Overzee** / [Overseas], Amsterdam: Leopold. 4+
- 2009 **Dichtbij ver van hier** / [Nearby far from here], Amsterdam: Leopold. 14+
- 2007 **Wat niemand weet** / [What nobody knows], Amsterdam: Stichting CPNB. 5+
- 2005 **De blauwe maansteen** / [The blue moonstone], Amsterdam: Leopold (4th edition 2013)
9+
- 2005 **Het dansende licht** / [The dancing light], Amsterdam: Leopold. 10+



- 2004 **De zilveren bekers van Talamoera** / [The silver goblets of Talamoera], Tilburg: Zwijzen. 10+
- 2001 **De robot van de rommelmarkt & Route Z** / [The robot from the flea market & Route Z], Amsterdam: Leopold. 12+
- 2000 **De robot van de rommelmarkt** / [The robot from the flea market], Tilburg: Zwijzen. 11+
- 1992 **Aan de andere kant van de deur** / [On the other side of the door], Amsterdam: Leopold (3rd edition 2005). 14+
- 1989 **Het geheim van de klokkenmaker, of De tijd zal het leren, of De tijd zal je leren** / [The clockmaker's secret, or Time will tell, or Time will teach you], Amsterdam: Leopold (2nd edition 1990). 10+



- 1982 **Ogen van tijgers** / [Eyes of Tigers], Amsterdam: Leopold (10th edition 2020). 14+
- 1980 **De blauwe maan. Deel 8: Vergeet-mij-niet** / [The blue moon. Part 8: Forget-me-not], Zutphen: Thieme. 9+
- 1979 **De blauwe maan. Deel 7: De koning van de onderwereld** / [The blue moon. Part 7: the king from the underworld], Zutphen: Thieme. 9+
- 1979 **De blauwe maan. Deel 6: Magoggeltje** / [The blue moon. Part 6: Magoggeltje], Zutphen: Thieme. 9+
- 1979 **Het gevaarlijke venster en andere verhalen** / [The dangerous window and other stories], The Hague: Leopold (4th edition 2007). 10+
- 1977 **Water is gevaarlijk** / [Water is dangerous], The Hague: Leopold. 10+
- 1973 **De torens van februari** / [The towers of February], The Hague: Leopold (9th edition 2014). 14+
- 1972 **De blauwe maan. Deel 5** / [The blue moon. Part 5], Zutphen: Thieme. 8+
- 1971 **De blauwe maan. Deel 4** / [The blue moon. Part 4], Zutphen: Thieme. 8+
- 1970 **De blauwe maan. Deel 3** / [The blue moon. Part 3], Zutphen: Thieme. 7+
- 1969 **De blauwe maan. Deel 2** / [The blue moon. Part 2], Zutphen: Thieme. 7+
- 1969 **Torenhoog en mijlen breed** / [Sky-high and miles wide], The Hague, Leopold (14th edition 2018). 13+



- 1968 **De blauwe maan. Deel 1** / [The blue moon. Part 1], Zutphen: Thieme. 6+
- 1967 **De trapeze: een reeks originele verhalen en gedichten voor de lagere school** / [The trapeze: a series of original stories and poems for primary school children], Groningen: Noordhoff. 11+

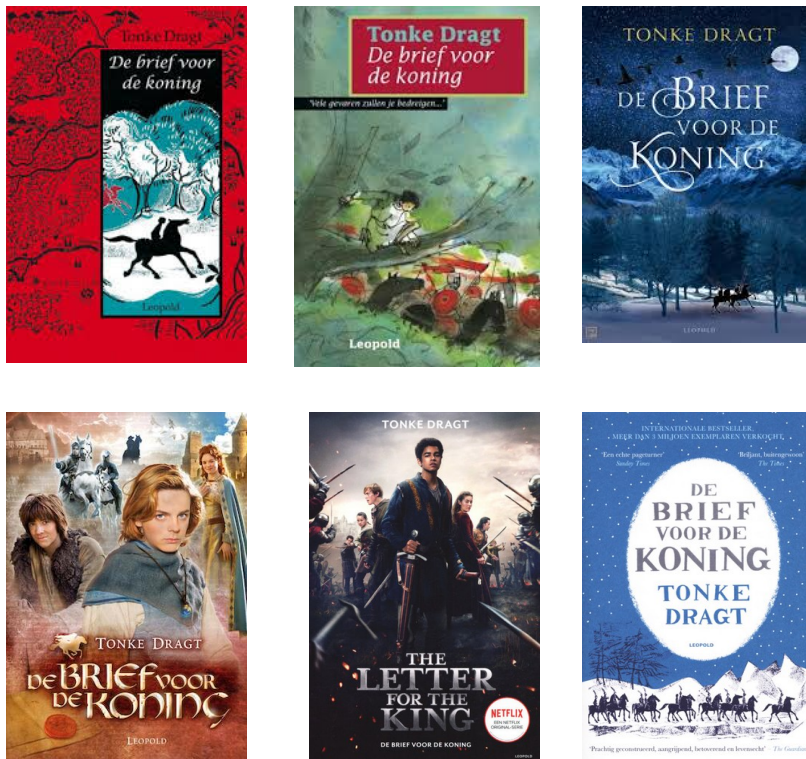
1966 **De Zevensprong** / [A Song of Seven], The Hague: Leopold (37th edition in 2018). 10+



1965 **Geheimen van het Wilde Woud** / [Secrets from the Wild Wood], The Hague: Leopold (40th edition in 2020). 11+

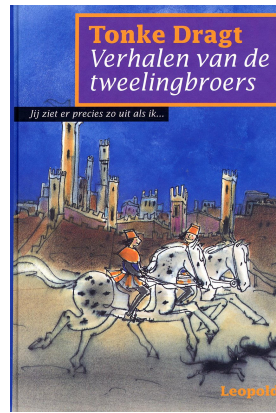
1964 **De blauwe boekanier: een zeerooversverhaal** / [The blue buccaneer: a pirate's story], The Hague: Stichting CPNB (3rd edition in 1996). 10+

1962 **De brief voor de koning** / [The letter for the king], The Hague: Leopold (56th edition in 2020). 10+



Several editions from *De brief voor de koning*, with on the 2nd row to the left the film edition from 2008 and in the middle the Netflix edition from 2020.

1961 **Verhalen van de tweelingbroers** / [The Goldsmith and the Masterthief] (renamed to *De goudsmid en de meesterdief* in the 15th edition in 2018), The Hague: Leopold. 10+

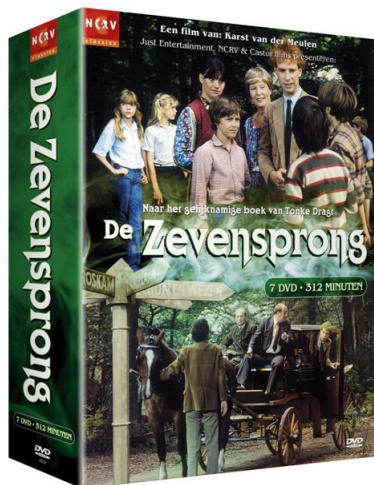


Adaptations

1982 **De Zevensprong** (TV series, directed by Karst van der Meulen)

2008 **De brief voor de koning** (Film, directed by Pieter Verhoeff)

2020 **The Letter for the King** (Netflix Series, written by William Davies, directed by Felix Thompson, Alex Holmes, Charles Martin)



Translations

Tonke Dragt's books have been translated to 32 languages:

AFRIKAANS

Dragt, Tonke. (*De brief voor de koning*). Afrikaans / translated from Dutch by Daniel Hugo. Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis, since May 2020, will be published March 2021. Translated from *De brief voor de koning*. The Hague: Leopold, 1962.

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Dragt, Tonke. *Avonture van die tweelingbroers* Afrikaans / translated from Dutch by Pieter W. Grobbelaar. Kaapstad etc.: Human & Rousseau, 1969. Translated from *Verhalen van de tweelingbroers*. The Hague: Leopold, 1961.

ALBANIAN

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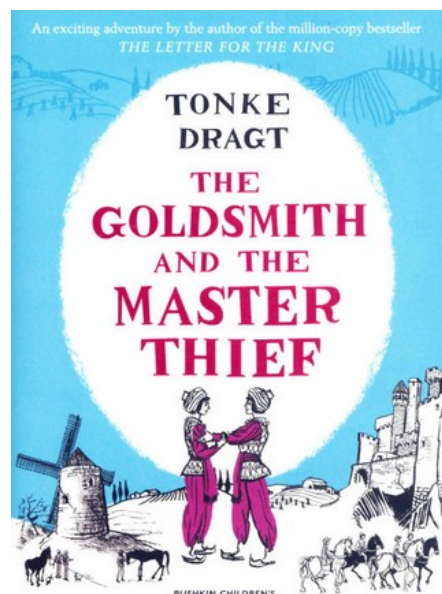
Ten of the Most Important Titles

In order of appearance

1. **Verhalen van de tweelingbroers** [The Goldsmith and the Master Thief]

Laurenzo and Giacomo are identical twins, as alike as two drops of water. No one can tell them apart (which comes in very handy for playing tricks on their teachers). And no one can split them up. But when tragedy strikes their carefree young lives, they must make their own way in the world. As each brother chooses his own path – hardworking Laurenzo to make beautiful objects from gold and silver, and fearless Giacomo to travel, explore and become an unlikely thief – it is the start of a series of incredible escapades that will test them to their limits.

Along the way they will face terrible danger, solve cunning riddles, become prisoners in a castle, sail across the ocean, fall in and out of love, stay at an enchanted inn, help save a priceless pearl, even become kings by mistake. They must use all their talents, wiles and wisdom to survive. Are you ready to join them?³



In some respects, twin brothers could hardly be more different than Giacomo and Laurenzo. One of them is a goldsmith and loves his work. The other is a clever adventurer with a casual attitude towards the law. However, they look so much alike that they are frequently mistaken for each other, which leads to some strange and amusing situations. The two brothers help and support each other time and again throughout twelve stories in which love and loyalty always defeat evil. Tonke Dragt's debut was originally published as *Verhalen van de tweelingbroers* (Tales of the Twin Brothers). The book is almost sixty years old and so timeless that children still enjoy it today. A fairy-tale classic with a medieval atmosphere, with lots of excitement, humour and emotion.⁴

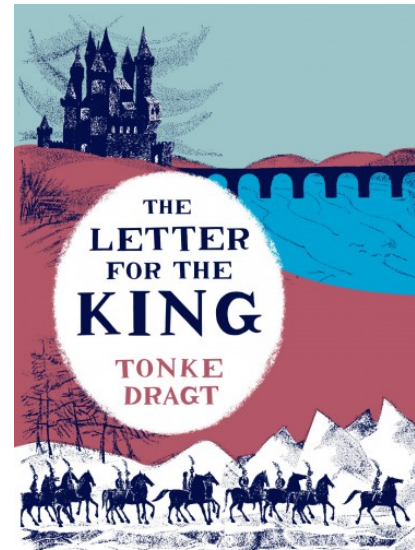
³ Source: Pushkin Press: <https://pushkinpress.com/books/the-goldsmith-and-the-master-thief/>

⁴ Source: Dutch Foundation for Literature: <http://www.letterenfonds.nl/en/book/1346/the-goldsmith-and-the-master-thief>

2. De brief voor de koning [The Letter for the King]

It is nighttime, long ago. Five young men are keeping vigil by a 'pale flame' in a chapel. They are allowed to neither speak, nor react to any noise from outside. They must set their minds to the task ahead of them. Tomorrow they are to be knighted. But then... A knock at the door. A voice from out of the darkness: 'Open up in Gods name!'

De brief voor de koning is a book you find hard to put down. Unusually gripping, the mystery is narrated in a language rich in metaphors but with not one word wasted. Sixteen-year-old Tiuri opens the door of the chapel and discovers, in the conviction that he will now never become a knight, what real chivalry is. He has to deliver a letter to the neighbouring kingdom, on the other side of the 'Mighty Mountains'. Many a danger awaits him. *De brief voor de koning* is an initiation novel, in which Tiuri grows from vulnerable youth to manhood.



On his journey, Tiuri meets a host of people who are not quite what they seem. It appears that Good and Evil cannot always be clearly distinguished from one another. Only a very few figures correspond with the image they present of themselves. On his way through the forest Tiuri meets Marius, the 'Fool of the Forest'. This character is Dragt's version of the 'noble savage', simple in spirit, but nonetheless wise. Marius lives in perfect harmony with nature. The message is clear, but Dragt is no moralist. She wastes no time in announcing with pomp and ceremony that here, finally, is a good person. Apart from all the things Tiuri discovers about himself and the world in which he lives, he finds out what true friendship means. He meets the shepherd boy, Piak. Dragt has created two large-as-life young men, complete with petty quarrels and the odd twinge of jealousy when Tiuri even falls in love for the first time. Everything in this rich book serves to support the plot. In addition to the expressive language, it is the close-knit construction that makes *De brief voor de Koning* so breathtaking.⁵

A Sunday Times, Times and Metro Book of the Year

A fast-moving, wonderful old-style adventure... cinematic in its visual detail... a European classic... far loftier than Harry Potter and beautifully presented in this most attractive edition

- Eileen Battersby, *Irish Times*

⁵ Written by Judith Eiselin. Source: Dutch Foundation for Literature (<http://www.letterenfonds.nl/en/book/281/the-letter-for-the-king>)

Gripping from its opening moment onwards, this award-winning book doesn't miss a beat from its thrilling beginning to its satisfying ending.

- Julia Eccleshare

The plot is central, and extremely gripping, but the writing also delivers lovely detail and evocative description.

- Guardian Children's Books

The Letter for the King will get pulses racing... Pushkin Press deserves every praise for publishing this beautifully translated, well-presented and captivating book.

- Amanda Craig, The Times

A fantasy about a 16-year-old medieval squire who finds danger, true friendship and first love on a mission to deliver a letter that can save a kingdom. The award-winning translator Laura Watkinson conveys its rich symbolism, vividness and economy of style.

- Nicolette Jones, Sunday Times

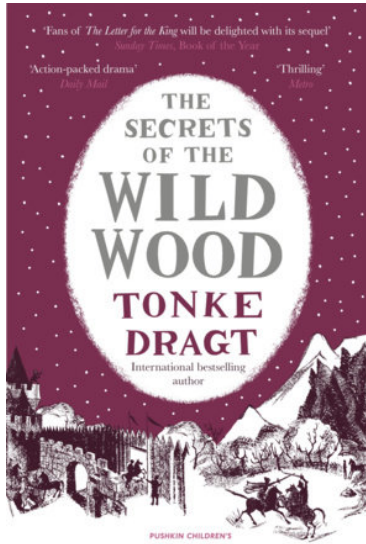
A classic quest narrative... a thoughtful and endearing hero, whose loyalty and nobility - qualities much ignored today - sustain him throughout. Dragt's illustrations are mystical and timeless.

- Philip Womack, Literary Review

A cracker Spectator. A true page-turner.

- Sunday Times

3. Geheimen van het wilde woud [The Secrets of the Wild Wood]



From the back flap of the English translation:

“One of the King’s most trusted knights has vanished in the snow, so young Sir Tiuri and his best friend Piak must journey into the shadowy heart of the forest to find him.

The Wild Wood is a place of mysteries, rumours and whispered tales. A place of lost cities, ancient curses, robbers, princesses and Men in green. As the darkness surrounds him and reports grow of secret plots and ruthless enemies, Tiuri finds himself alone and fighting for survival – caught in a world where good and evil wear the same face, and the wrong move could cost him his life.”

Review by Ferelith Hordon on Books for Keeps. The Children’s Book Magazine Online:

The story continues – Tiuri has been knighted and he carries proudly the pure white shield proclaiming his allegiance to King Unauwen. But all is not well. One of the King’s knights has gone missing; what has happened to him and what secrets are hidden in the Wild Wood? Accompanied by his squire, Piak, Tiuri sets out on the quest to find Sir Ristridin. On the way he will meet great kindness but also deception and evil. He will find his loyalties tested and learn that fighting for what seems right is not always simple and can involve difficult choices. He will also learn that victory comes at a price.

The success of *The Letter for the King* in which Tiuri’s adventures begin will ensure there are eager readers keen to follow the story. Nor will they be disappointed. Though in many ways very different from the current crop of action packed thrillers aimed at a young audience, the author draws the reader in and does not let go. Filled with the chivalry of an Arthurian age, *Dragt* also presents the reader with questions and ideas about such chivalry adding a reflective element to the adventure. However, the conviction that right will prevail is not in doubt. Laura Watkinson’s translation never flags, and though not a slim volume, the prose would be accessible to quite young able readers.⁶

Sunday Times and *Daily Telegraph* Book of the Year

'The plot is central, and extremely gripping, but the writing also delivers lovely detail and evocative description' **Guardian Children's Books**

'An absolute pleasure... immensely enjoyable... vivid and intelligent' **newbooks**

⁶ Source: <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/214/childrens-books/reviews/the-secrets-of-the-wild-wood>.

4. De Zevensprong [The Song of Seven]

From the back flap of the original book:

What if a made-up adventure takes over your life?

Frans van der Steg is a schoolteacher. He tells his students adventures that he supposedly experienced himself. The children don't believe a word, but they listen anxiously. One day Frans cannot come up with anything. That's why he says he's waiting for a letter with an assignment. And in the evening, with a bolt of lightning and a thunderclap, that letter comes blowing in!
Is it a joke from the children?

From the back flap of the English translation:

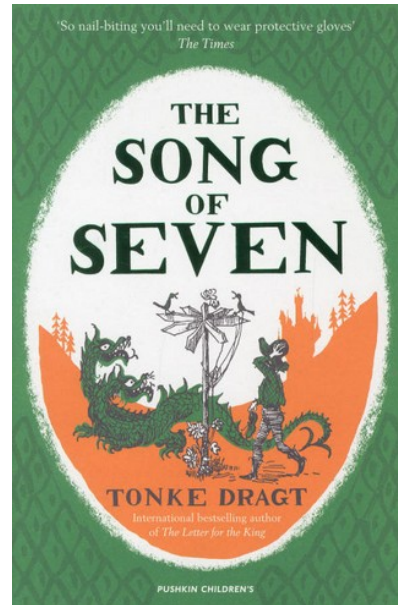
Deep in the woods, a young boy is kept prisoner by his uncle. He cannot meet other children, or have any friends. He holds the key to a secret.

Meanwhile, in a quiet village, Frans the schoolteacher invents stories of perilous deeds, shipwrecks, desert islands, and haunted castles to entertain his pupils. Then one stormy evening, a letter blows onto his doormat, summoning him to a meeting. Suddenly, Frans is on a real-life mission, one in which he will encounter magicians, secret passages, conspiracies, hidden treasure and a sealed parchment which predicts the future.

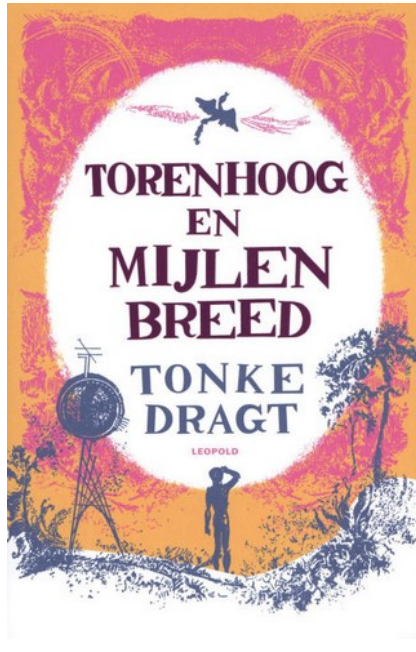
He will learn the secret of the Seven Ways.

He will find seven allies.

And he will make a fearsome enemy. The adventure has begun...



5. Torenhoog en mijlen breed [Sky-high and miles wide]



An exciting science-fiction novel about the first human colony on Venus

Science fiction from 1969 – does it still stand up? Anyone reading *Sky-high and miles wide* would have to conclude that it does. True, Tonke Dragt didn't foresee the invention of the smartphone, but her book remains convincingly futuristic. Dragt tells the story of Edu, a young planetary researcher on his second expedition to Venus, where a human colony lives under a dome of super-plexiglass.

Edu is drawn to the planet's mysterious, dangerous forests, but they are out of bounds to researchers. Defying the rules, he discovers intelligent beings, the Afroini, who can read thoughts.

Dragt describes the forests beautifully. There are none left on earth by Edu's day, but on Venus they are still unspoilt and fantastical: 'Scaly trunks leading up to huge serrated leaves, pink, orange, yellow... And between them suddenly trees that were darker, from purple to black; they looked as if they were made of smoke, with feathered crowns.'

Although the book is undoubtedly science fiction, full of high-tech airships and robots, it addresses real dilemmas, about daring to go off the beaten track, or about man's relationship with nature. In part two, *Eyes of Tigers*, the story continues with a different main character. As an introduction to the two books, Dragt wrote *The Robot of the Flea Market and Route Z*.

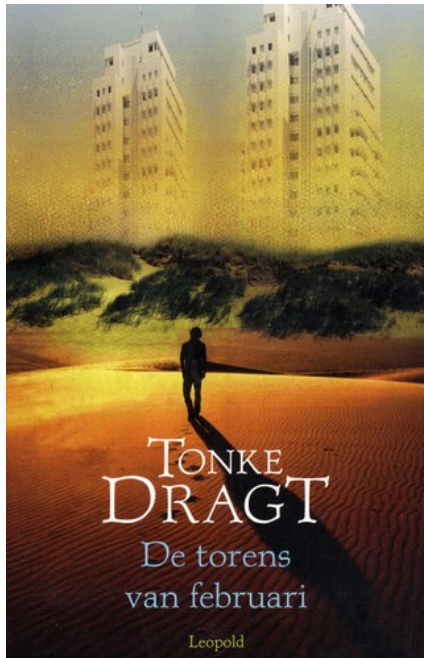
"Lively storytelling that is both meticulous and inventive, [...] with a balanced composition, and precision in both style and wording."

- Jury report Nienke van Hichtum Award

6. De torens van februari [The Towers of February]

In 2004, Tonke Dragt won an award for the best children's book of the previous five decades: *De brief voor de koning* (The Letter for the King, 1962). However, she received most fan mail for *De torens van februari* (The Towers of February, 1973), the incomparable sciencefiction story that according to Dragt herself is perhaps her 'best' book.

The book's large number of fans were probably won over by its classic diary form. Dragt pretends, most convincingly, that she is only the bearer of a found manuscript, which she has presented in a readable form and provided with footnotes. This clever, carefully employed literary technique increases the illusion of authenticity, confusing and intriguing the reader and creating a sense of 'this-really-might-all-be-true'. The exciting literary thought-experiment upon which the story hinges is the idea that other worlds might exist: mirrored worlds whose different time dimensions intersect every leap year between 29 February and 1 April, creating a moment when it is possible to step from one world into another, as long as the right word, which Dragt keeps secret, is spoken.



Fourteen-year-old Tom Wit succeeds in doing this, following the old scholar Thomas Alva. However, the consequence is a loss of memory. And so when he arrives in 'world X' at the beginning of this astonishing story, Tom doesn't know who or where he is. In the vivid, familiar language of a diary, Tom provides an evocative four-part account of his quest to find his identity, the actual theme of the book, supplemented by notes added by Alva, newspaper clippings about his disappearance and a letter to his brother. Helped by the diary entries that he wrote in our world, in mirror writing that he first has to decipher, Tom, who feels incomplete, manages to rediscover his past, together with Alva. Does Tom then decide to leave 'world X', where the failings of our society appear not to exist? Or does he choose for the here and now of 'world X' and for Téja, his great love? Although Dragt presents her speculations in a postscript, these questions remain

unanswered. Because 'the correct answer' and 'the truth' don't exist – as anyone who reads the wonderful, philosophical *De torens van februari* will wholeheartedly agree.⁷

⁷ Written by Mirjam Noorduijn. Source: Dutch Foundation for Literature (<http://www.letterenfonds.nl/en/book/619/the-towers-of-february>).

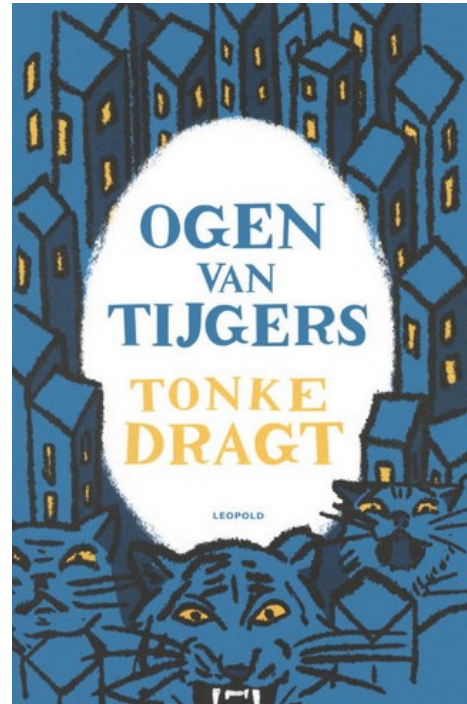
7. Ogen van tijgers [Eyes of Tigers]

The future through the eyes of Tonke Dragt.

What if you don't feel at home in a world where everyone knows everything about you - maybe even your thoughts?

Jock Martijn is an artist and former planetary researcher. He lives on Earth among the tall buildings, where there is no nature left and the tigers are extinct.

The government has complete control and knows everything about its citizens. There are screens and police officers everywhere in this totalitarian system — and can Jock trust his own house robot? When Jock meets a mysterious new student, his life takes a surprising turn, even more so when he discovers that they can both read minds.



Ogen van tijgers was published thirteen years after *Torenhoog en mijlen breed* and features some of the same characters, but can be read either as a sequel or as a standalone book. This is a brilliantly composed novel sketching a future that shows some fascinating similarities with the world we live in now. Dragt considers this novel as her best book.⁸

“These are books that do not reveal their secrets in one go, so you can read them over and over again and discover something different every time.”

- Leesfeest

“*Ogen van Tijgers* is my favourite book ever. I’ve read it more than thirty times.”

- Paulien Cornelisse, Dutch comedian and TV presenter

⁸ Source: Dutch Foundation for Literature (<http://www.letterenfonds.nl/en/book/1345/eyes-of-tigers>).

8. Het geheim van de klokkenmaker, of De tijd zal het leren, of De tijd zal je leren / [The clockmaker's secret, or Time will tell, or Time will teach you]



A history student lives in the house of a clockmaker, who is working on an “End-of-All-Clocks”, in which time itself is captured. In this old science fiction practice one can move to the past and the future. The student decides to travel one day further, because then he will have had a dreaded exam. After he flew in on Wednesday he bumps into his professor. The exam turns out to be postponed, the unprepared student drops and hurries back to Tuesday. Only a few minutes seem to have passed. With prior knowledge of the questions, he wants to take his exam “again”, when it “really” has become Wednesday. Anyone who fiddles with time creates chaos. Which Wednesday is the real one and which student? They are intriguing thoughts and the reader's brain is running at full speed.⁹

You could say: if you travel to the future nothing can happen. But the irony of this story is that a journey to the future also changes the present. The student says, "How can you change something that hasn't happened yet?" He wants to travel to the future to see if he can avert a disaster: fail an exam. But from the moment he is actually in the future, there are two times, two realities, two students. Jan A., as he is called, travels to the future, but at the same time leaves himself behind.

(...)

This booklet is a frame story. Foreplay, interlude and afterplay are situated in [a] library: 'the library on the other side of the door', located in the 'Januarian Embassy'. There, two children are read the story of the student who travels through time. Tonke Dragt: "The Januarian Embassy is an embassy without any country. I need two books to explain why, those books will be called Seas of Time. The Embassy is on the other side of the door. When you open a door at some point, you always think that you will get where you expected to go. Why can't it be that you arrive somewhere else than you thought when opening a door? This story assumes: if you open a door in the right way and at the right time, with a certain mental attitude, you may not be able to enter your own hallway from your own bedroom, but into the hallway of a completely different house. The Januarian Embassy."¹⁰

⁹ Excerpts from a review by Bregje Boonstra, “Reizen door de tijd” [Travel through time] in *NRC Handelsblad* (5 January 1990).

¹⁰ Excerpts from a review by Rindert Kromhout, “De twee werkelijkheden van Tonke Dragt” [The two realities of Tonke Dragt] in *De Tijd* (29 September 1989).

9. Aan de andere kant van de deur (Zeeën van tijd: deel 1) [On the other side of the door. Seas of Time: part 1]

“Seas of time” seems to become one big, playful, science-fiction-like exercise in the flexible thinking about space and time, about possible other worlds and realities, there is an imaginative window on landscapes from philosophy, literature, logic and (natural) science, Einstein with his theory of relativity is a constantly present background figure, but fairytale motifs and especially science-fiction themes emerge, such as by Isaac Asimov, CS Lewis and Clifford D. Simak. Tonke Dragt associates from Batman to quantum mechanics and from “Für Elise” to Santa Claus. She helps the reader through this maze of references by means of footnotes and a bibliography, but even then there are unnamed associations to be recognized, such as Escher effects (spiral staircases, of which you cannot determine whether they go down or above) and aspects from "The never ending story" by Michael Ende. (...) Themes from earlier work by Tonke Dragt return: the voyage of discovery through the unknown and the confrontation of the protagonist with himself, among other things through mirror motifs as symbols for the growth towards maturity and its own identity. And while Tonke Dragt in the past mainly wrote books that were either set in the past or in the future, “Seas of time” seems to be a synthesis thereof, in which past, present and future merge through time machines, but also through concentration and coincidence and in which the dimension of time acquires a space-like quality.

(...)

The book can be read at different levels. Children will read it at the single story level, where the book is an adventure novel full of secrets and not a thought experiment about what could happen if a door didn't lead to what you expect behind it. That story is about Otto, who is good at everything at school, except gymnastics. He is bullied and does not know how to defend himself against it. Once a week he helps out in Mr. and Mrs. Monday's junk and stationery store, who are like a second mother and father to him. There he mysteriously comes across a second-hand booklet with stories about what is going on “on the other side of the door”. The first story is about two sisters, Clara and Elise, who, while playing, end up through the door of their room in a huge, castle-like building, a timeless maze of spiral staircases, rooms, halls, attics, cellars



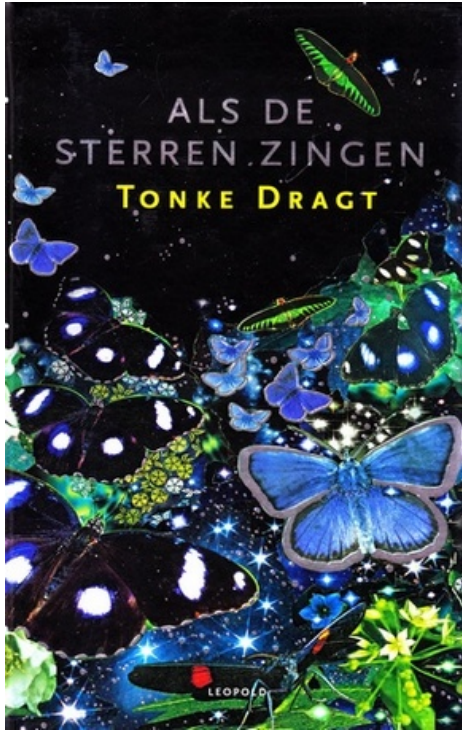
and an infinitely large library, in a hilly landscape where the seasons sometimes change hourly and where north is sometimes south.

"For Otto" is printed at the front of the booklet and Otto takes it very personally. Not long after, he himself ends up in that enigmatic building, even through the door of his bedroom. It turns out to be an Embassy of a non-existent country: the Januarian Embassy. The time in the embassy does not synchronize with the time in Otto's everyday reality: he sometimes experiences long adventures in the Embassy, but when he returns to normal reality, hardly a few seconds have passed there. The clocks in the Embassy are ticking, but their hands are deprived. Hence one has "seas of time". The doors of the Embassy (visible and invisible) must always remain open, because everyone must be able to apply for asylum there. Otto meets Clara from the story, who has been given asylum there "forever", and Christian, who cannot read letters but can read thoughts. He befriends them. But there are more asylum seekers, such as the blue Marsjan, from the planet Mars, a robot woman and Mr. A. The librarian, double of Mr. Monday, is a central figure, who is also an archivist and secretary to the Ambassador. Who this Ambassador is remains a great mystery throughout the story, for Otto and therefore also for the reader. (...)

In short: "Seas of time" is not only brain gymnastics, but also an enigmatic adventure that will stick in your mind.¹¹

¹¹ Excerpts from a review by Lieke van Duin, "Waar noord soms zuid is..." [Where North is sometimes South] in *Trouw* (21 October 1992).

10 Als de sterren zingen [When the stars are singing]



Als de sterren zingen is a collection of 27 stories, written between 1956 and 2005. Five of these stories were never published before. The collection is divided into five categories: fairy tales, sagas and adventures, riddle-stories, futuristic/ science fiction and night stories. In short in-between anecdotes, Tonke Dragt clarifies more about the origin of the stories.

Apart from this rich collection that provides an excellent overview of Tonke Dragt's work, this book offers an abundance of attractive illustrations and collages, all made by Tonke Dragt herself. It shows how she has experimented with many different styles and how versatile her work is. The main themes of her work are all represented in this publication: the yearning for adventure and far away horizons, the loyalty and devotion of medieval knights, telepathy and mysterious worlds.

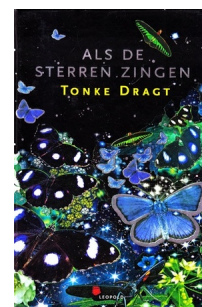
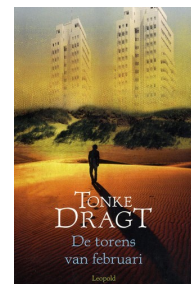
Tonke Dragt is known for the severe tone of voice in her books, but in this book, the reader will discover her great sense of humor. Some of her less known fairy tales are very witty. In one of the fairy tales *Het bos van Petunia* [The Petunia Forest], Princess Petunia needs to find a husband, although she is not keen on marrying. One of the candidates is a wizard. Petunia fancies him, but she is insecure and gives him unreasonable assignments to fulfill. The wizard feels betrayed, and he magically grows a forest of large petunia's from which the princess cannot escape. Eventually, as in most fairy tales, all is forgiven and forgotten, and the wizard and princess marry after all. In *Een visum voor Bureaucratië* [A Visa for Bureaucracy] a visa collector only needs one more visa, namely for the country Bureaucracy. When he goes to the Embassy of Bureaucracy to obtain the final visa for his collection, he's repeatedly sent from pillar to post. It makes the reader wonder if the country Bureaucracy really exists.

Als de sterren zingen displays Tonke Dragt's passion for storytelling once again, and gives the reader more insight in her personal history.¹²

¹² This summary draws heavily on the following source: Pjotr Van Lenteren, "Fijne selectie hoogtepunten uit het werk van Tonke Dragt is een waardevolle aanwinst" in *De Volkskrant* (30 December 2017).

Books Sent to the Jury

1. **Verhalen van de tweelingbroers** / [The Goldsmith and the Masterthief], The Hague: Leopold, 1961 (renamed to *De goudsmid en de meesterdief* in the 15th edition in 2018).
2. **De brief voor de koning** / [The letter for the king], The Hague: Leopold, 1962 (56th edition in 2020).
3. **De zevensprong** / [A Song of Seven], The Hague: Leopold, 1966 (37th edition in 2018).
4. **De torens van februari** / [The towers of February], The Hague: Leopold, 1973 (9th edition 2014).
5. **Als de sterren zingen** / [When the stars are singing], Amsterdam: Leopold, 2017.



Selection of reviews of the books sent to the jury

1. Verhalen van de tweelingbroers / The Goldsmith and the Master Thief

[Review by Meghan Cox Gurdon, *The Wall Street Journal* \(26 June 2020\):](#)

“In Bainu, the beautiful capital city of Babina, there once lived a poor cobbler and his wife.” The fairy-tale cadences that begin Tonke Dragt’s fantasy adventure “The Goldsmith and the Master Thief” (Pushkin, 408 pages, \$19.95) signal that we are entering a happy realm of make-believe. And so we are! In this wonderful book, first published in 1961 in Dutch and now in English via Laura Watkinson’s jaunty translation, readers follow the careers of the twin boys born to that cobbler and his wife. Lorenzo and Giacomo are excellent fellows: witty, good-hearted and clever. They’re also identical, as “alike as two drops of water,” a circumstance that engenders tricks, japes and all manner of misunderstanding.

Through 12 connected tales set in a place that resembles Renaissance Italy—Ms. Dragt’s drawings are as delightful as her storytelling—we see the brothers’ fortunes unfold according to their natures. Steady, hard-working Lorenzo resolves to become a master craftsman. Restless, swashbuckling Giacomo finds his métier only on the penultimate page.

What makes “The Goldsmith and the Master Thief” a joy is its lively spirit; what makes it refreshing is the clarity of its moral sensibility. The characters may stumble and fall, but they quickly right themselves and affirm the values of honesty and loyalty. Giacomo, for instance, starts out by apprenticing with a notorious highwayman named Jannos but then finds, once he is trained, that in good conscience he can’t ply such a trade. Even Jannos wearies of his wicked work, and in one brilliant chapter the brothers uncover his outlandish and melodramatic scheme for making reparations. There’s nothing sticky or moralistic here, just great storytelling that happens also to be principled. This is a terrific family read-aloud, ideal for a mix of ages between 4 and 12.

Source: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/childrens-books-desperate-journeys-comical-adventures-11593182791>

[Amanda Craig in “The best new children’s books for Christmas” in *New Statesman* \(11 December 2019\):](#)

Tonke Dragt’s *The Goldsmith and the Master Thief* (Pushkin, £12.99, 9+) is like a fairy tale you dream of but have never found. Identical twin brothers choose different futures in a series of misadventures told with zest and just the right amount of moral judgement, as the honest goldsmith gets mistaken for his thieving brother and vice versa.

Source: <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2019/12/best-new-children-s-books-christmas>

2. De brief voor de koning / The Letter for the King

[Review by Philip Womack, *The Guardian* \(27 December 2013\):](#)

The Letter for the King by Tonke Dragt – review

Philip Womack on a captivating fantasy world of faith and chivalry

Tonke Dragt's *The Letter for the King* has sold more than a million copies throughout the world. First published in 1962 in the Netherlands, this tale of a teenager's knightly quest has now been translated into English by Laura Watkinson.

A deep sense of Christian faith pervades the book, though it is set in a fantasy feudal world of three kingdoms – two beautiful, idealised and well ordered, and one that threatens the peace and plenty of the other two. The hero, a 16-year-old squire named Tiuri, often thinks of his journey as a pilgrimage. He begins his quest in ragged clothes, with no weapons, money or horse: at one point he even takes on the robes of a monk as a disguise. It is important to understand this aspect of the novel, because the challenges Tiuri encounters have a spiritual quality to them: the whole is a test of his virtue as well as his valour.

At the beginning, Tiuri is sitting vigil in a church with his friends – the night-long prayer and fast before he gains knighthood. His thoughts wander: "Sometimes he found that he wasn't thinking about anything at all," writes Dragt, expertly evoking a slightly bored, embarrassed teenager's state of mind. He looks at the others, wondering if they aren't concentrating either. They must not leave the chapel until dawn.

So what is Tiuri to do when a mysterious man taps on the door and asks for help with "a matter of life and death"? He reluctantly accepts, and is given a mission to deliver a letter to the Black Knight with the White Shield. It contains information of the utmost importance – he can do it, and be back by dawn to explain himself. But the Black Knight is slain: so Tiuri must complete the Black Knight's task himself and take the letter to the neighbouring King, travelling through forests, down rivers, over mountains. Things beyond his knowledge are at stake.

The book is beautifully constructed, and has passages of urgent writing that take their inspiration from fairytales as well as the Arthurian legend. Tiuri is chased by various groups of knights; dogged by rumour; captured more than once; and hindered more than he is helped. What is perhaps most interesting about his predicament is that he must not tell anyone about the letter: a situation that captures that bewildering sense of a teenager's interaction with the adult world. You burn with things of the utmost importance, but your growing self is constricted by things you don't quite understand.

There are one or two problems with the book. Tiuri's trials tend towards the bureaucratic – how he can tell his parents he's not coming home; how he can cross a river without paying a toll. There are a couple of supernatural elements (a hostile pond and a glowing ring), but they seem almost incidental, and Slither, the man set on Tiuri's trail to kill him, makes only rare appearances, which means that a sense of true menace never really develops.

Tiuri's spiritual travails are translated and enlarged into reality. He must undergo these trials in order to become not just a knight, but an adult, with the qualities of honour, courage and resilience. At the end of the book, a jester tells Tiuri a story about a man who chased a rainbow: "he realised that what mattered was not the rainbow itself but the search". And Tiuri's search is gripping, delightful and true.

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/dec/27/letter-for-king-tonke-dragt-review>

[Review by Simon Usborne, *Independent* \(29 October 2014\):](#)

Tonke Dragt's *The Letter for the King* has finally been translated into English ... 50 years on

The coming-of-age tale about a boy and his mission to save a mythical kingdom was written in 1962 by an eccentric Dutchwoman and has sold a million copies. Will it, ponders Simon Usborne, herald a new publishing era?

Simon Usborne

A burglary confirmed Adam Freudenheim's suspicion that he was in possession of something valuable. The publisher and his wife, Victoria, had been asleep at a seaside cottage in Scotland when, at first light, an intruder crept unnoticed into their bedroom and removed a sheaf of paper from a drawer. It contained the last chapters of *De brief voor de Koning* ("The Letter for the King"), a coming-of-age adventure about a boy and his mission to save a mythical kingdom.

For months last year, Freudenheim had been receiving pages as quickly as his translator could produce them. The urgency was partly commercial. The book had already sold more than a million copies since it held rapt the first of generations of Dutch children in 1962. Yet, despite a pile of awards and fans in 15 languages, it had not yet been translated into English. Freudenheim hoped that the new edition would spearhead the children's list he had just launched at Pushkin Press.

But there were domestic pressures, too. "I was reading it to my kids and I'd get to the end and they'd say, 'We want more!'" he recalls. "I'd tell them, 'I'm sorry, I don't have any more,' and I would have to get back in touch with the translator."

Max and Susanna, then aged eight and nine, were captivated by the fate of Tiuri, a 16-year-old boy and son of a revered knight. Interrupted as he waits inside a chapel that he has been instructed not to leave under any circumstances before he is to be made a knight himself the next morning, Tiuri is compelled to break the rules by an urgent knock at the door. The future of the medieval realm depends on the safe delivery of the book's titular letter, he learns. But he must not read it. The mission serves as a moral test as Tiuri starts a perilous journey towards adulthood.

In Scotland, Freudenheim finally had the last of the book's 500 pages. He would only become aware of the theft and its perpetrator the next evening, when Max seemed to be impossibly familiar with the story's ending. Desperate for more, he had been unable to sleep and, sitting alone in his room soon after 4am, he wrestled with his own morals. As the sun came up, he decided to embark, on tiptoes, on a rule-breaking mission.

"As a father it doesn't get much better than that," a forgiving Freudenheim says. "And as a publisher it was wonderful. I knew I was on to something good."

A year after its belated publication in English, *The Letter for the King* has hooked thousands more children and adults. Written more than 50 years ago by Tonke Dragt, an eccentric former prisoner of war, the book is next week being republished in a new, winter edition. Last week, it appeared on the shortlist for the Marsh Award for the best children's book in translation. Several critics named it among their books of 2013, comparing it to the works of Tolkien, Lewis and Rowling. There are now plans – secret for now – for a big-budget TV adaptation.

The book's own long journey from the once-imprisoned, yet rich, mind of Dragt, who still inhabits the mythical worlds she wrote and drew, reveals much about the author's enduring appeal, as well as our linguistic neglect of so much foreign fiction. Because in the Netherlands, where, in 2004, *The Letter for the King* won the "Griffel der Griffels" award for the best children's book of the previous 50 years, the story needs no introduction.

"Everyone I speak to who has grown up here says that it's their favourite book and can't believe it hadn't been translated," says Laura Watkinson, the translator who sent the story in chunks to an insatiable Freudenheim and his children, who are now 10 and nine. Watkinson had recommended the book in a meeting with Freudenheim after the publisher appealed for undiscovered children's fiction. "The name of the main character is not Dutch but there are now children here called Tiuri, it's huge," the translator adds from her home in Amsterdam.

Watkinson, who is now immersed in Dragt's 1965 sequel, *Geheimen van het Wilde Woud* ("Secrets of the Wild Woods"), had already produced a short excerpt in English and sent it to Freudenheim. "I was immediately captivated and knew right away we had to buy the rights to this book," he says.

(...)

Pushkin Press is careful not to market its works as translations but rather as great books. There is nothing on the front or back cover of the new edition of *The Letter for the King* to suggest its origins (you have to turn to the book's title page, after Dragt's map of her made-up realm, to find Watkinson's credit). "In a way, there is nothing Dutch about this book which is relevant to its international success," Freudenheim says. "It's not a Dutch medieval world, but an imaginary one. Most great books transcend their national setting and language and can speak to people anywhere."

Pushkin helped market *The Letter for the King* by leaving more than 100 copies on London Underground trains for people to discover. The books carried a letter for the reader, sealed with wax, with instructions to spread the word via mouth and social media. Tomorrow, *First News*, the weekly children's newspaper, is launching a Dragt-inspired letter-writing competition to encourage young readers to engage in an endangered art. The prize: the winner's height in books for his or her school's library.

Watkinson says it is those books that are more rooted in place and time which need to be translated as they are released, "so that there is still a freshness to them. Then they have the chance to become classics in English as well." Until that happens, she is looking for other pre-cooked classics. But her priority is Dragt's sequel, which, as with *The Letter for the King*, will take up to a year to translate (publication is expected next September). It gives a leading role to Lavinia, a girl who pops up in book one. "She's very adventurous and ahead of her time," Watkinson says.

Sometimes translators develop a relationship with the author but it wasn't possible for Watkinson; Dragt will be 84 next month and has struggled with illness in the care home where she now lives. Joukje Akveld, a Dutch journalist, was asked to write a biography of Dragt for children after a 2008 movie adaptation of *The Letter for the King* made it only more famous in the Netherlands. After several meetings with the writer, she published *ABC Dragt* last year.

"Tonke started as a school teacher and then got successful in writing quite soon, so she could live off her books," Akveld says. "But she really lives in those books as well. You can ask her

about the characters and she really knows them like family. If you like stories as much as she does, you almost don't need the real world."

It would be easy to trace Dragt's imagination to her upbringing in Jakarta, the former capital of the Dutch East Indies. Born Antonia Johanna Dragt in 1930, she was the eldest child of a Dutch government employee who became a prisoner of war under Japanese occupation. In 1942, the whole family was interned and a teenage Tonke would beg for scraps of paper on which to imagine new worlds. Writing offered escape, "but Tonke thinks that's bullshit", Akveld says, adding: "She's not a lady who shows the backside of her tongue, as we say here. She told me, well, some things you just can't explain."

The family settled in the Netherlands after the war, but Dragt never married or had children. Most of Akveld's interviews took place in a café near the author's former home in The Hague, but occasionally she was invited inside. "Tonke is someone who can't throw anything away," she recalls. "Everywhere, there were books and drawings. There were also dolls' houses. When she started a new book, she built a new little house herself so she could really know the way the doors opened, for example."

The Letter for the King was only Dragt's second book, after she published her first in 1961. More than 15 books followed, all written and illustrated originally by hand until 2007, when age and arthritis got in the way. Dragt was unable to respond to questions for this article, but Freudenheim says that he has pinned by his desk a postcard from her, expressing her delight about the new translation. "It's such a pleasant surprise for her that the book is getting this new lease of life after more than 50 years," he says.

Source: <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/tonke-dragt-s-letter-king-has-finally-been-translated-english-50-years-9826857.html>

3. De Zevensprong / The Song of Seven

[Review by Imogen Russell Williams, *The Guardian* \(24 December 2016\):](#)

The Song of Seven by Tonke Dragt review – a playful Dutch classic

A self-doubting teacher becomes a fantasy hero in a seductively spiralling story from the author of *Letter to the King*

Imogen Russell Williams

There are many reasons why *The Song of Seven* should not work as a book for children. The most significant is that it lacks a child protagonist; although there is a 10-year-old boy at the centre of the story, its hero is a young schoolteacher, Frans van der Steg. Add in a labyrinthine conspiracy, some metafictional comment on reality, identity and storytelling, a delayed central plot-strand and several matter-of-fact references to corporal punishment, and it seems certain that disaster will result. Yet, somehow, in a hurdy-gurdy way, it hangs together. It does not boast the breakneck pace of *The Letter for the King*, Tonke Dragt's world-renowned 1962 heroic fantasy, a big success for Pushkin when it was translated into English in 2013; rather, it draws the reader seductively along its spiralling paths.

Its author, now an elderly Dutch national treasure, wrote her first book at the age of 12, in a Japanese internment camp in Jakarta. She went on to study art at The Hague, and illustrated both her own work and that of others, including E Nesbit and Alan Garner. Her stories occupy a similar space to theirs, straddling the divide between mundane life and fantasy. Translator Laura Watkinson has faithfully served Dragt's work: the language of all three of her books published by Pushkin is beautifully lucid, with a clear sense of playfulness and urgency.

Initially at least, *The Song of Seven* operates in a more realistic context than Dragt's earlier books, which were set in a fictional medieval world governed by chivalric rules. Here, the action opens in a small village in the 60s, where a bored class waits hopefully for Mr Van der Steg to tell a hero tale of his other self, the legendary Frans the Red. Too tired to oblige them, he claims, falsely, that he is waiting for a response to an important letter. And once at home he finds that a mysterious letter is awaiting him; apparently, he will soon be taken to meet the writer, whose signature is flourishing but illegible. Sure enough, he finds himself swept away in an old-fashioned coach to a clearing in the woods, cryptically called Sevenways, though its signpost has only six arms.

In bewilderingly swift succession, Frans encounters the sullen Biker Boy and his alter ego Roberto; the magician Mr Thomtidom who lives in a bungalow behind a tent, behind the façade of a large house called “Appearance and Reality”; and Aunt Rosemary, a herbalist. From them, he learns of 10-year-old Geert-Jan, imprisoned by a wicked uncle in the mysterious House of Stairs until he finds the treasure described in the prophecies of the Sealed Parchment. To save Geert-Jan, and help him fulfil his quest, Frans must be initiated into the Conspiracy of Seven, become the boy’s tutor – and find and travel all the seven ways. But who are Greeneyes, Greensleeves and Greenhair? And how are the prophecies’ conditions to be met?

It’s strangely refreshing to see the action of a children’s story from the perspective of a harassed, sometimes self-doubting adult mentor, who feels guilty when he dodges a grammar lesson, rather than that of a child whose only concern is to evade grownup scrutiny and get on with the business of adventure. As the title suggests, music is a critical part of the book’s structure, with the eponymous song glimmering throughout the story like a thread of gold; the children at Frans’s school sing it, the chapter headings reflect the verses, and it ultimately proves the solution to all Geert-Jan’s – and Frans’s – problems. In fact, the book itself is like a song, or incantation; a wandering, winding ballad with occasional joyous percussion, to the spell of which the reader can’t help but succumb.

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/dec/24/the-song-of-seven-tonke-dragt-review>

Review by Evan Kleekamp, Words without Borders. The Online Magazine for International Literature (March 2018):

“The Song of Seven,” a Children’s Classic by Tonke Dragt, Considers the Joy and Perils of Fiction

In “The Song of Seven,” a classic of children’s literature by Dutch author Tonke Dragt, a schoolteacher woos his students with stories about his heroic alter ego. The division between the teacher and his adventuring alias disappears when a mysterious count summons enters the scene. Through the mishaps of her narrator and protagonist, Dragt explores the means and ends of storytelling.

Evan Kleekamp

I don’t have children. The youngest “children” I’ve taught were adults in their first years of college. I have, however, eluded the stress, responsibility, and possible heartbreak that raising

children entails by escaping into books—I'm no stranger to fantasy. When I started writing and editing for a living, experimental literature, with its promises of a cerebral experience, replaced the tall tales of my youth; the books I read as a child—such as Frank L. Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* series and Roald Dahl's *Fantastic Mr. Fox*—have become a fondly remembered part of an increasingly inaccessible past, a past that seems less real to me as time goes on.

That past was momentarily illuminated as I read Tonke Dragt's 1967 *The Song of Seven* (Pushkin Press, 2018). The tale follows Frans van der Steg, a twenty-four-year-old schoolteacher who woos his students with stories about his heroic alter ego Frans the Red. The division between the teacher and his adventuring alias disappears when a mysterious count summons Frans to a nearby castle. Frans, thrown into a quest to save an imprisoned young boy, watches his own reality begin to resemble the world in which his stories unfold: "Frans didn't ask any more questions. It seemed that he'd ended up in a part of the world where antique cannons were as easy to find as buttons and marbles—a place where magicians could use their powers to send a person to sleep and eccentric counts lived in castles filled with staircases and hidden treasures." Frans's journey resembles the lives of children likewise coming to terms with their relationship to the supposedly real world; it also offers adult readers like myself the opportunity to reconsider the frustrations we encountered during our own passage to adulthood.

The Song of Seven stands apart from contemporary children's stories because it comes from a different time and different place: English readers will receive a glimpse of a now bygone culture through Laura Watkinson's skilled translation. Watkinson brings the linguistic play present in the Dutch original into her English rendering. Our first introduction to the antagonist Gradus Gristenstein, for example, is limited to the sounds "Gr . . . Gr" because a handwritten letter obscures his name. As its title suggests, much of the lore within *The Song of Seven* is conveyed by sing-songy lyrics: "Do you know the Seven, the Seven, / Do you know the Seven Ways?" Like many tales meant for young people, the book presents a series of erudite lessons in the form of amusing exchanges. The wizard Thomtidon, for example, annoys Frans with his whimsical logic on several occasions, but as Frans admits, "With that kind of thinking, you could undermine our entire system of arithmetic." We're also reminded that Thomtidon, silly as the name sounds, is pronounced exactly as it is spelled—the book doesn't take itself too seriously.

At certain points in the narrative I wondered how parents would react. While the book's key moral concern with deceptive appearances has stood the test of time, the culture under which the text was produced has since changed values; in fact, part of what gives the *The Song of Seven* its fairytale mien are the bygone customs it conveys. One scene shows Frans entering a bar filled with smoking patrons; several show Frans referring to his landlady Miss Bakker as Aunt Wilhemina—she also cooks his meals; and yet another describes Wilhemina's sister, Miss Rosemary, as wrapped in a "colorful flowery scarf elegantly around her head" while a "snow-white curl had slipped out from under it." If I wasn't sure it would be appropriate to send the

book to friends with young children after the bar scene, I became concerned when the book repeatedly described Miss Rosemary through the clothes she wears and the color of her hair: “She’d taken off her coat and was wearing a grey silk dress with a large white lace collar. Her age was hard to guess; she was much younger than her sister Wilhemina, but her hair was as white as snow.” I leave it to other readers to decide if this classic European mythologizing constitutes a barrier for reading or cause for concern. The book, in the proper hands, could lend itself toward a study of stories we use to prepare children for society’s demands; others, namely children, will be able to ignore the historical minutia and absorb the fanfare undisturbed.

Without children of my own to consider, I can only speculate where and how others might react. But, as a somewhat experienced reader, I understand fantasy as a genre concerned with the means and devices of storytelling. *The Song of Seven* follows this trend by positioning Frans as both the hero and narrator in his own tale. For adult readers, this gesture and its implications may seem obvious: a story is always first and foremost a fiction. Whether or not this statement can be applied to children—thousands if not millions of which await letters from a magical school called Hogwarts each year—remains unknowable. But maybe times have changed and these children have new hopes, dreams, fantasies, and obsessions. The conventions of yesteryear stand out against the stark background of the present when we consider that Dragt was born in a time when Jakarta was called The Dutch East Indies and spent three years in a Japanese prison camp during the Second World War. If the literary phenomenon that united an international audience less than a decade ago seems to be losing hold, I can only imagine the lesser-known stories of which we’ve already lost sight. What does it mean to suddenly have access to these stories and the worlds, real and fictional, they contain? And how are we—as readers charged with passing information between generations—to acquaint young people with these texts and the contexts from which they originate?

Source: <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/book-review/the-song-of-seven-a-childrens-classic-by-tonke-dragt-considers-the-joy>

4. De torens van februari / [The Towers of February]

[Review by Hilde Umans op Pluizuit, a Belgian website for reviews of children's book \(June 2015\)](#)

Fourteen-year-old Tom has lost his memory and on the advice of the old man he meets, he starts writing a diary in search of himself, of his forgotten past. Some things evoke vague memories such as the two towers, the sea, the beach ...

The main character written in the I-form makes a voyage of discovery in a strange world where everything is new, or is it? The importance of his diary is central: what he experienced, what he thinks and has thought, what he dreamed, fantasized. The whole book is structured like a diary. It turns out that during the leap years there is contact with other worlds. It is important that a certain word is spoken at a certain time in order to "travel" between these worlds. The old man Tom meets at the beginning of the story / diary is the tower keeper of the two special towers. We also meet Teja with whom Tom falls in love. His constant doubts, the uncertainty about who he is and where he comes from, are important elements.

It is a smoothly written, exciting story, originally constructed in diary form in 4 parts, where the old man as narrator sometimes takes over parts of the diary. In the fourth part you will find a number of diary excerpts, newspaper clippings, and postscripts of the author in the third and fifth editions. This book was first published in 1973 and is now in an 8th edition.

Source: <https://pluizuit.be/boek/de-torens-van-februari/>

[Review by Judith Eiselin, "Op weg naar een plaats zonder tijd" \[On the way to a place without time\], NRC Handelsblad \(31 December 1999\):](#)

On the way to a place without time

Tonke Dragt sees an opportunity to let her readers end up in a mirror world or in a place where time does not exist. Her books create confusion, with riddles and knights.

Judith Eiselin

"Do you know The Word? Or are you asleep yet? " My twin sister whispered in the middle of the night. We were eleven. I was startled from my slumber and said yes, but I didn't know. With The Word you can travel to another world, the world of Tonke Dragt. One of the worlds of Tonke Dragt. The Word can be found in *De Torens van Februari* (1973). It can be read between the lines, because you are not allowed to write The Word. You can only know. "Say it then, what is it

then," said my sister. And I thought: soon I will make up something, and then it will be right, and then I will end up there. In a mirror image world, without twin sister, without memory, without rabbit. Tonke Dragt taught me how to hope and fear something at the same time.

It is now eighteen years later and I have reread *The Towers of February* at least four times. I am not alone in picking up the book over and over again. Every four years, in the leap year, Dragt receives letters. Of children and adults who ask for *The Word*, or who think they have seen the main character Tom Wit. Somewhere on the beach, with his right shoe on his left foot and vice versa, babbling, lost his memory. Only on the last day of February in a leap year *The Word* works, with which Tom travels to another world. People and animals live there as here, but it is more beautiful, cleaner, quieter. It is not utopia, because hatred and fear also exist there.

Tonke Dragt is related to writers such as Tolkien, Borges and C.S. Lewis. She wrote books that take place in a self-invented, medieval-like past; books about the future, when the entire surface of the earth is one big city and man diverts to other planets, and books about worlds where no time exists. Dragt calls her genre "Fantastiek", the Flemish word for fantasy. The genre is so rare in Dutch literature that there is no word for it. (...)

Schizophrenia

The Towers of February is, as Dragt gladly puts it, "a book that teases the reader." She likes to insist that she found and edited Tom White's diary. She doesn't know more than it says. According to *The ABC of Children's Literature* (ed. Joke Linders) the book is about schizophrenia. "The other world only exists in his head"; but you are selling yourself short if you believe that. The beauty, and the teasing thing about the book is that you cannot find out exactly what is going on with Tom and where he is.

All of Tonke Dragt's books more or less have that sense of teasing, because the writer has a preference for riddles and mystifications. She reinforces the mystery with pieces from newspapers, torn letters, excerpts from poetry (for example by Paul van Ostaijen and Christian Morgenstern) and children's songs. She deliberately frustrates the reader in his expectations. Reading Dragt is tracking without knowing exactly what you are looking for.

Since her debut in 1961, *De Tweelingbroers*, Tonke Dragt has been fascinated by mirror images. "Every person consists of more people, as he sees himself, as others see him and as he really is," is her adage. Most of her figures have alter egos around. Mirrors are an entrance to another world, just like doors, stairs, time machines and magic spells. The mirror image lives in *De Tweelingbroers*. The identical Lorenzo and Giacomo go their own and each other's way. Each chapter is a self-contained story, in the tradition of Grimm and Andersen and *1001 Nights*. They are delightful stories, full of enigmatic knights, untouchable ladies, silver cups, master thieves. And the inevitable changes of personality, of course.

The twins live in Bainoe, on the edge of the wide open plain of Babina. That plain originated in a Japanese camp. Tonke Dragt was born in 1930 in Batavia. At twelve she ended up with her mother and two younger sisters in camp Tjideng. Together with a friend she made 'The hunt for the Rope-colored', a crook's story inspired by Jules Verne. They wrote and drew on any scrap of paper they could find. In addition to wide distances, it contained many elaborate meals. Meals have since disappeared from her work, the distance has remained. Throughout her life, Dragt wrote about endless spaces. The communication in her books is often cross-border and cannot be restricted. People (and 'Afroini', the green shining inhabitants of Venus) talk through their thoughts, or write each other in mirror or another secret code.

Homesickness

Dragt comes from a literature-loving family. There was a family newspaper and a family library set up by her sister. You could only become a member if you wrote a book yourself. One of Tonke's contributions, "There is a cross in Bainoe, a sad drama", can be admired in the Literary Museum in The Hague. In 1946 the family left Indonesia, to return there in 1948 during the police actions. She was homesick all her life. The longing for Indonesia resounds in her books, without explicitly referring to the archipelago. In the future story Torenhoog en Mijlenbreed (1969) she writes almost lyrically about the tropical-like forests on Venus. They are full of color, from magical light, from irregularly shaped growths to the sky.

The telepathic Afroini of Venus, who live in the forests, live in unprecedented freedom. In their world there is no lie and deception, they do not pretend to be different from what they are. They cannot. They read each other's thoughts, but also those of animals and people. Dragt leaves no doubt that that makes them more intelligent than humans. Most people fear the Afroini, but they don't abuse their power. One of the few other characters of Tonke Dragt who is exactly who he seems is "De Fool van de Boshut", Marius, from the knight tales The letter for the king (1962) and The secrets of the wild forest (1965). He is Dragt's take on the noble savage. Marius is generally regarded as retarded. Anyone who doesn't bother to listen to him thinks he's wowing. But in his hoax lies the truth. Marius speaks the language of nature and, like the Afroini, lives in complete harmony with its environment. Dragt loves the deviant characters from her books, who are not like other people. She describes the Fool tenderly. She does not become woe, rather she sings the praise of maladjustment.

(...)

Source: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/1999/12/31/op-weg-naar-een-plaats-zonder-tijd-7476596-a991111>

5. Als de sterren zingen [When the stars are singing]

[Review by Pjotr van Lenteren, “Fijne selectie hoogtepunten uit het werk van Tonke Dragt is een waardevolle aanwinst” \[A fine selection of highlights from the work of Tonke Dragt is a valuable asset\], *De Volkskrant* \(30 December 2017\):](#)

A fine selection of highlights from the work of Tonke Dragt is a valuable asset

From this fine selection of highlights from her work and previously unpublished stories, supplemented with anecdotes about its creation, an ever combative Tonke Dragt emerges.

Pjotr van Lenteren

Als de sterren zingen is most probably the last book by Tonke Dragt (1930). And what a book. Hard to believe: 87 years and then publishing another 432 pages with a fine selection of partly unpublished and partly unobtainable stories, supplemented with some highlights from better-known titles.

What a work it must have been to collect this, to order it and to reread it critically. In addition, the writer has provided a short, personal explanation for almost every story. These anecdotes about the genesis of her oeuvre in particular make this lovingly tended publication a valuable asset.

There are people who blame Tonke Dragt for lacking humor. It is true that her books are generally very serious. But no humor? Only someone who does not know all of her work can say that. Some of her lesser-known fairytales, in particular, have a peppery, witty undertone.

Such as the cruelly humorous story about Princess Petunia, who makes increasingly impossible demands on the wizard who wants to marry her. Finally, the mage decides he has better things to do and locks her in a forest of giant petunias. Or the kafkaesque “A visa for Bureaucratia”, in which a man who has almost all visas in the world, also wants that one thing in his passport. But does Bureaucratia really exist?

In anecdotes in between, she tells about her forced departure from her native Indonesia and the chilly arrival in a wintry Netherlands. Tonke and her two younger sisters experience their first seasons here. This is precisely why their first tiny garden is so important and plants, from flowers to forests, play such an important supporting role in most of her stories.

She also tries to end an old misunderstanding about her debut. In 1956 three stories appeared in three different magazines at about the same time. The story that appeared in the then authoritative children's magazine *KrisKras* is mentioned in almost every newspaper article her first. But her own drawings were not added and her name was spelled Dregt. That is why this book starts with a different debut.

Whether it is true, or important, hardly matters: this is the still belligerent writer of *The Letter to the King*, *Secrets of the Wild Wood* and *The Song of Seven*. She can't help but mystify. Dragt has always opposed a biography; there is only one way she can tell her life and that is this: through her work.

But above all, the way in which she brings together her most beautiful stories expresses her enormous love for telling. The stories have become her friends and family. She speaks several times about ideas that she could not get 'under roof', such as the slightly melancholy “*Als de sterren zingen*”, with which the collection ends, but conceived by a young Dragt when she was 17. Seventy years ago under a crushing starry sky near the equator.

Those stories now also have a place. It's finished. Although with Tonke Dragt you can never be completely sure.

Source: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/fijne-selectie-hoogtepunten-uit-het-werk-van-tonke-dragt-is-een-waardevolle-aanwinst~b2f8e6c0/>

[Review by Annemarie Terhell, “'Nieuwe' verhaalbundel Tonke Dragt bevat al haar grote thema's” \['New' story collection Tonke Dragt contains all her major themes\] in *Trouw* \(4 February 2018\).](#)

'New' story collection Tonke Dragt contains all her major themes.

This bundle of 26 stories is a delight for Dragt fans.

Annemarie Terhell

Tonke Dragt, at 87, is one of the last great post-war children's book writers. Given her advanced age, there is no longer a new book, but as often as possible publishing house Leopold comes with an addition to her oeuvre. For example, *Wanneer de sterren zingen*, a collection of twenty-six stories, was recently released - a wonderful addition. The thick book is decorated with drawings by the writer herself. She tells the genesis of some of the stories.

You can read *Wanneer de sterren zingen* as an introduction to her work, in which fairytales, legends, riddles, science fiction and science form a common thread. It is even more interesting for the loyal Dragt fan, for whom it is a sport to look for cross connections. For example, you may discover that the stories "The Dangerous Window" (1970) and "The Cold House" (1979) may well be the ultimate Dragt diptych.

It contains all the major themes from her books: the longing for adventure and strange distances from *De blauwe boekanier*; the courtly knightly world from *The Letter for the King*, in which loyalty is central; the intricate staircase from *The Song of Seven*, symbol of mystery; mind reading from *Torenhoog en mijlen breed*; to the parallel realities from *Aan de andere kant van de deur*. But also the triangular relationship that plays a role in so many books. Knight Marwen has a boat built, sets sail and falls madly in love with Arda, an enchanting Circe-like appearance on an icy island. At the decisive moment, he decides to return to his pregnant wife Iduna, but it doesn't turn out all right. Life after that great love is melancholy and gloomy.

Disruption

You can read in it a reference to Dragt's own life, but also to the division that marked the writer as a Dutch East Indies child. In 1946 the boat took her from Batavia to the Netherlands, which she experienced as cold and distant. The lost paradise of her childhood continued to return in stories and drawings; she made frantic efforts to connect those worlds. The boundary between appearance and reality is, as always with Tonke Dragt, highly subjective and unimportant. What really matters is imagination.

Source: <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/nieuwe-verhaalbundel-tonke-dragt-bevat-al-haar-grote-thema-s~baf38a51/>

