



passa porta seminar 2016

NEED & NECESSITY

## Report on the discussions of the second group of “new voices”

by Patrick Lennon

Writers: [Frederik Willem Daem](#), [Karen Köhler](#), [Katja Petrowskaja](#), [Wytse Versteeg](#),  
[Rebekka de Wit](#), [Ida Hegazi Høyer](#)

Moderator: [Saskia Pieterse](#)

### Session 1

Wednesday 23 March 2016

The session opens with a reading of Andrey Kurkov’s keynote ‘[Which weapon should the writer choose?](#)’ and an introduction by Saskia on the theme of Need & Necessity. Saskia wonders whether the terms shouldn’t have been given in the plural since the needs and necessities of writers are different for all. Tomorrow the focus will be on the writer’s material needs, relation to social media, etc., but today the focus will be on the relation between the writer and society (politics, etc.). Saskia raises the question as to what is necessary to make an intervention in the public sphere. Kurkov’s thought-provoking keynote raised the issue of the visible or invisible authors, among other things.

Katja disagrees with Kurkov’s distinction between **visible and invisible writers**, claiming that we will see in a hundred years who is visible; she gives the example of *War and Peace*. For Katja, finding a way to react is almost a matter of metabolism. Invisible writers

can also find the words for what happened, while some don't have a gift for writing about certain things. For instance, a writer can publish 70 poems about the war in Ukraine in a single year, while other writers might keep quiet for twenty years.

Saskia notes that literature complicates the issue of visibility and invisibility.

Karen evokes the issue of being in the limelight and the **difficulty of responding to the image the media created of the writer**. All of a sudden you have to have an opinion of things. But there are people who know, who have opinions.

Frederik suggests that forming an opinion takes time. Not reacting can itself be a reaction. It's fashionable to have an opinion about everything – migration, the attacks in Paris, etc. – but if you don't want to put labels on things, you yourself are going to be labelled.

Rebekka gives the example of a play about a great-grandmother that was put on in Chile, where her parents lived for ten years under the dictatorship. The play was of course about the dictatorship. Rebekka evokes the idea that it is not necessary to talk explicitly about politics. For her, political engagement has become something marginalized.

As a writer, you are still a product, Wytse believes, and this makes it difficult to connect to events in ways that are not influenced by other things. It is important to separate what you are doing: telling a story, or only trying to attract attention. It is also important that there is room in literature for complicated stories. Good writing is about listening.

Karen evokes the world of **social media and the speed of reaction**. Everything moves so fast, but the writer's brain does not necessarily move that fast. Karen mentions the importance of weighing one's words. She has an opinion, but it's not loud and fast. Not everyone has Kurkov's skills. He managed to switch from fiction to another genre.

Non-fiction, Katja argues, is a lot more fictional than we think.

Frederik expresses the fear of fictionalizing himself when he writes non-fiction, the fear that with non-fiction you are the character.

Wytske agrees that non-fiction is indeed very fictional. Even when writing non-fiction you are using your own memories, etc. – even when just writing a story – Wytske evokes the writer's split personality.

Katja picks up the issue of authenticity, claiming that she can't use other people's stories because she wants to keep them there in life. Using other people's lives is something she finds difficult.

According to Wytske, there is indeed an ethical issue involved in this, while Karen believes that exploiting the lives of others is not right. Karen underlines how reading Karl Ove Knausgård's books feels very voyeuristic.

Katja offers a counter-example, as it were, claiming that a character in her book that was read as a symbol of death was in fact a real person she encountered.

Frederik brings up the issue of **reality shows**. We love to watch; we know it's staged up to a certain point, but there is a certain attraction to it. He feels some people should be protected from their own decisions.

Katja claims that when you watch something disgusting, you feel your life is better. The need to share is not very artistic, not very creative but it is an act of trust, of belief.

## **Session 2**

Thursday 24 March 2016

Saskia raises the issue of **the ethics of writing** and asks whether there exists an **ethical relation to the reader**.

For Wytske, reviewers often claim there is something political in her books, but she's not so sure. Reviewers tend to read her work as a metaphor for her view on society.

Frederik asks what 'political' actually means. He wonders whether the genre of the political novel exists. He gives an example of a political novel, Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission*, which raises the question of what would happen if France became an Islamic country.

For Karen, writing is like a black box. The writer tries to make conscious decisions, but what comes out is pretty much a stream of consciousness. And if we look at it like that, everything is political. We outsource our ability to make decisions. There are specialists for that. We think we are not political because we outsource the decision-making to politicians.

Ida shares this feeling about the black box, claims that she doesn't know what she's writing until she's done. She also believes that it's important not to try to be political. If we write what we think, what we feel, it will reflect what is to be found in society.

Wytske raises the issue of **diversity**, or rather the **homogeneity of voices in literature**, arguing that a Turkish-Dutch writer will immediately be categorized as such. Which voices, she asks, get reflected in literature?

Karen notes that at the Boekenbal in the Netherlands there were so many white people, she could count the writers from other backgrounds on one hand.

Ida evokes her own experience, claiming she does not wake up in the morning thinking about how it feels being a second-generation immigrant. In the beginning people wanted her to be 'the' Egyptian writer. She claims they are searching for the big immigrant novel.

Katja argues that the need to confront the language is a very immigrant thing. Language is, as an immigrant, not something you wake up not thinking about in the morning. You see different connections between the words. It's a very fashionable topic. People are amazed at how good these immigrants master their new language.

Saskia continues on the issue of diversity in literature, stressing that one type of writer tends to show up more than others. Do the writers think about diversity in the novel itself, she asks, or does that feel too PC?

Karen raises the issue of **modern slavery**, giving the example of an online questionnaire on consumer habits that reveals how many slaves you have working for you. For Karen, we have lost this consciousness that there is slavery.

Saskia gives the example of a Dutch TV producer who wanted to make a slave-free chocolate bar, but failed. There is so much slave labour involved that it was impossible for him to guarantee a slavery-free chocolate bar.

After discussing consumer capitalism, Saskia suggests talking about **the author as a product**.

If you want your books to be read, Wytske claims, you have to deal with this in some way. Because people are interested in the writer, and so writers have to choose what they want to share.

Ida says she finds it extremely difficult. Part of her thinks it's prostitution. Readers always want to establish a link between the work and the life. But sometimes as a writer you lose control over what you say. Why did I say that?

For Frederik, it sometimes feels like a routine, sometimes not. Then he can feel like a prostitute. You are lured into answering questions that have nothing to do with your work. The interviewers objectify the writer, give the writer a label.

Katja asks the other writers whether they have sometimes enjoyed **the interview process**? It sounds, she says, as though all journalists are stupid, while her experience appears to be more positive. Maybe it's a matter of character, or perhaps a question of trust, she suggests.

Wytske claims that talking to readers is very different. She trusts readers. They have a different stance towards your book, not like the reviewers.

Karen evokes the traces that you leave as a writer in interviews and the fact that the information is often wrong. She also expresses frustration and annoyance at having to correct the information.

Saskia wonders whether it would be a good idea if publishers did something to help writers that are starting out.

Katja claims that despite the wrong information that is circulating – citing her own case involving information given in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* – writers can get so much more than what they are losing.

Frederik is not sure that he agrees. In his view, it's all about writing that book. He cares little about the talks, about winning a prize, etc. For him, it's not a conversation.

Karen underlines that readers can give you back a lot, having spent hours of their lives reading what the writers have written.

In relation to **the marketing circus**, Wytske points out that it is about being seen, which, in her view, is the opposite of writing.

Katja draws attention to **the contradiction between writing something intimate and then talking about it publicly**. She suddenly found her on the public stage and she just loved it.

For Ida, the book's fate is out of her hands. Let it be. Writing the book should be enough. You shouldn't have to justify, explain or promote it. Her editor advised her not to think too much about the questions, but just to prepare what she wanted to say.

Saskia remarks that many books are about characters who have trouble sleeping, trouble remembering, etc. They seem to be immersed in **a state of permanent now-ness**. How, Saskia wonders, do writers respond to this in literature?

For Ida, it's a kind of anti-reality, while Wytske believes there is a distinction between real life and social media.

Katja tells the story of an old friend of her mother's from school who was ninety-three and found her on Facebook: it was a mystical experience. It was her mother's neighbour when her mother was six. The wonders of Facebook.

Wytske questions the notion of a continuous now-ness. For her, it may be the very opposite: it's **difficult to find the now**. Immediacy is increasingly difficult to find.

Ida claims that she escaped from the whole social media and that her books probably reflect this.

Instead of a permanent present, Frederik evokes the notion of **a constant past**. Watching a video on YouTube showing a glacier the size of Manhattan falling into the water, he thought it was a very recent event, but then realized that it was in fact eight years old. In that sense, everything is always already past.

Our concentration span is shortening, Karen suggests, and although it is a great gift to be able to do research on the Internet, she wonders whether the information is reliable. The lack of trust might lead writers to create utopias.

Frederik evokes the inability of the world to be bored, and Wytske adds that you need boredom as a writer. To reach maturity, Katja believes, you have to go through this kind of silence, doing nothing, being lost.

## **Session 3**

Thursday 24 March 2016

The session begins with a reading of Cécile Wajsbrot's keynote '[The Day After](#)'.

The group discusses the public event planned for the evening but does not feel like getting up on stage and making a statement or saying something about Tuesday's events (the terrorist attacks at Brussels Airport and at the Maalbeek metro station).

**Is it problematic merely to respond on an emotional level? Or is it the writer's responsibility to respond politically?**

Karen raises the question of whether to react as a person or as a writer.

The group discusses Wajsbrot's keynote. Frederik contrasts the empty streets of Paris in the keynote to the rather busy streets of Brussels after the attacks, while Karen evokes her appreciation of Wajsbrot using words to overcome something.

Karen evokes the intrusion of reality into narrative: what we perceive now will enter our language. You can't unlive this. Frederik adds that he doesn't feel the urge to discuss the events, but you can't undo the fact that it happened.

Ida evokes how difficult it is, suddenly being a writer and having people ask you for your opinion.

Karen agrees. Writers are considered to be the specialists with words, and are asked for statements in situations when it's difficult to say anything.

Ida suggests that the intellectual had a lot more power in the past. She believes writers today are quite powerless. She also believes that writers have the right to react as private people.