

HANS VAN DEN BRINK: **ON THE WATER** 2001 (Over Het Water: 1998)

" The river taught me the meaning of movement and taught me that movement is life. Does that sound exaggerated ? Perhaps it is . But that's what I feel , and I can't help it "

On the Water is an intensely told tale of adolescent passion, narrated by Anton, a shy, uncomfortable outsider who harbors a yearning for a different kind of life that becomes symbolized in the river and in rowing.

The story revels in descriptions of the physical exertion and emotional connection as it recreates pre-war Amsterdam.

Telling the story in flashbacks, Anton now stands alone on a wintry evening facing a derelict and abandoned boathouse, recalling the long, hot summer of 1939 and mourning a lost world.

A "powerful tale of romantic regret"

" I always remained terrified of not belonging where I most loved to be. "

On the Water tells the poignant story of Anton and David, two oarsmen trained by a mysterious German coach in the golden Amsterdam summer of 1939. Anton stands on the banks of his beloved river years later, on the wintry eve of Holland's liberation, and mourns a lost world. David, his Jewish teammate and quiet obsession from that magical summer, has disappeared, and the boathouse is now derelict and deserted. Spare, lyrical, and nuanced, *On the Water* is quietly enormous, capturing a moment so precise and exact it is as if caught in amber -- a rowing club in Amsterdam and two of its competitors from very different backgrounds, set against the backdrop of the oncoming war. The menace of tragedy to come is subtly woven into the story of the two boys whose only concerns are practices, races, and themselves. In the end, all that is left for Anton is the memory of his supreme happiness that summer.

Anton lived in a new neighborhood near the Amstel river in Amsterdam in the 1930's. From his early childhood onwards, the river attracts him and when he is about 14 years' old he becomes a member of the rowing club on the other side of the Amstel. Anton is an outsider: the other members are from higher social classes, his father works in the public transport branch. He is also an outsider in other aspects: he observes the others and doubts himself.

But then one day the eccentric Dr. Schneiderhahn chooses Anton and David for the coxless two. In Anton's view David is his very opposite . He is self-confident and outgoing.

Slowly but surely the two boys become a perfect team. In the summer of 1939 they started competition rowing and they won one race after another. It becomes more and more apparent that they have a chance to participate in the 1940 Olympics in Finland.

At the end of the year they promise each other to go on as a team the following year .

Anton, who narrates the story, is from a working class family. David, the other oarsmen in this two man boat with Anton, is an affluent & self-assured athletic young man. The story in beautifully worded images describes the two young men as they become bonded together closer and closer through grueling practice sessions and training to later go on to winning many local races. Anton's description of his obsessive desire to please and do everything perfect for David is almost like a love story and indeed very homoerotic at times.

This story is told five years later by Anton as he revisits the now abandoned boathouse. You can tell he is deeply emotional in his remembrances of a time that he describes as "the best summer of his life." With World War II now exploding all around him as he remembers, you can feel his tragic loss of youth and happier times. The horror of the Holocaust against the Jews is sublimated into the feelings of loss and destruction. It is never stated but the assumption is that both David and Prof. Schneiderhahn were Jewish and both have "disappeared" into the Nazi genocide. This has left Anton alone and desolated by the loss of friend, love and identity.

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