



Writing when Young: Bart Moeyaert as a Young Adult Author

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Abstract

Duet met valse noten (1983) started as a diary when Bart Moeyaert was twelve years old. After it was disclosed by an older brother, Moeyaert rewrote it during his teenage years as a novel about first love. This article studies the genesis and early reception of Moeyaert's novel to reflect on young authors who fictionalize real-life experiences and desires. On the one hand, they are credited for being experts on youth and said to have a particular appeal to young audiences for that reason. On the other hand, when texts by young authors are published, they are often edited and mediated by adult professionals. For some scholars, such adult intervention compromises the authenticity of the young author's voice, while others argue that having your work revised is an inherent part of being published. The genesis of *Duet met valse noten* displays a complex interaction involving several actors, including young voices. The deletion of controversial passages (a toilet scene, the longing for cigarettes and sexual scenes) illustrates this complexity: the decision to adapt them was only in part governed by adults, and while the young Moeyaert was dissatisfied with some revisions, they also contributed to his aesthetics as a poetic rather than explicit writer.

Keywords: young author, adolescent literature, genetic studies, age studies

Samenvatting

Duet met valse noten (1983) begon als een dagboek toen Bart Moeyaert twaalf jaar oud was. Nadat het ontdekt was door een oudere broer herschreef Moeyaert het tot een

roman over een eerste liefde. Dit artikel behandelt de genese en vroege receptie van Moeyaerts debuut en reflecteert aan de hand daarvan op jonge auteurs die ervaringen en verlangens uit het echte leven als stof gebruiken van fictieve verhalen. Enerzijds worden zij vaak als experts over de jeugd gewaardeerd en wordt aan hen een bijzondere aantrekkingskracht bij jonge lezers toegeschreven omdat ze zelf nog jong zijn. Anderzijds, wanneer teksten van jonge auteurs uitgegeven worden, dan worden die vaak geredigeerd en gemedieerd door volwassenen uit het boekenvak. Voor sommige onderzoekers betekent zulke volwassen inmenging dat de authenticiteit van de stem van de jonge auteur verloren gaat. Anderen beweren dat elke auteur te maken krijgt met opmerkingen van de redactie – dat is nu eenmaal eigen aan het uitgegeven worden. De genese van *Duet met valse noten* verraadt een complexe interactie waarbij meerdere actoren betrokken waren, waaronder ook jonge mensen. Het schrappen van controversiële passages (een scène op het toilet, de zin in sigaretten en enkele seksueel getinte scènes) illustreert die complexiteit: de beslissing om ze aan te passen was slechts gedeeltelijk ingegeven door volwassenen, en hoewel de jonge Moeyaert niet tevreden was met sommige wijzigingen, droegen ze wel bij tot zijn ontwikkeling tot een poëtisch eerder dan een expliciet schrijver.

Trefwoorden: jonge auteur, adolescentenliteratuur, genetische literatuurwetenschap, leeftijdstudies

Introduction

While terms like ‘women’s literature’ and ‘Dutch literature’ refer primarily to books written *by* women and Dutch-speaking authors respectively, ‘children’s literature’ calls to mind the age of its audience rather than its makers. With its typical ‘asymmetrical’ communicative situation, the producers of books for young readers are assumed to be adults (Nikolajeva 2005, 2). In reality, authors and illustrators of children’s literature occupy a wide range of ages and life stages. While most texts written by children and adolescents never move beyond the private sphere, occasionally a young author does rise to fame. In *The Child Writer from Austen to Woolf* (2005), Christine Alexander and Juliet McMaster argue that their texts should be more central to children’s literature studies: ‘In the vast mass of writings about children,’ they contend, ‘there should be a place for what children have to tell us of themselves’ (Alexander and McMaster 2005, 1). It is implied in this statement that young authors usually write about their own life stage and rely on experiences and events from their own lives as material for their literary works. Indeed, some of the most widely read

books by young authors are diaries, such as Anne Frank's and Zlata Filipović's,¹ while various other young authors fictionalize events and desires from daily life.

The Flemish Bart Moeyaert belongs to the second category. Few authors who made their debut at a young age have risen to his level of fame. In 2019, he was bestowed with the prestigious Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award for his oeuvre, which now comprises of almost forty books in various genres and forms.² Moeyaert's debut, *Duet met valse noten* or *Duet with false notes*, has been a steady seller in the Dutch-speaking countries since it first appeared in 1983. It was printed in its nineteenth edition in 2018. Moeyaert started writing this novel as a diary at the age of twelve and thirteen in 1977, had the manuscript accepted when he was seventeen and published when he was nineteen. This article offers some methodological considerations and recurrent observations in studying young authors' works as life writing. In particular, I address the tension that arises between young authors' writing as an unmediated rendition of their own life experiences, desires and creativity on the one hand, and the intervention by adult professionals for the children's literature market on the other hand. The article then considers in more detail how this tension applies to the writing and publication processes of *Duet met valse noten*. The research that I present relies on a combination of methods. It includes a genetic study of some of the notebooks and typescripts that preceded the publication of *Duet met valse noten*, and that were made accessible by the author. I match this genetic approach with a narrative analysis of the published novel, and supplement these with a study of the book's early reception as well as with interviews that I conducted in October 2019 with three people who were closely involved in the genesis of the book: the author Bart Moeyaert; Els Beerten, who reviewed the manuscript of *Duet met valse noten* and acted as one of the first editors of Moeyaert's work, and Norbert Vranckx, his first publisher. By bringing together findings that were gathered in this combination of methods, the article aims to contribute to a better understanding of how young authors' life writing is mediated in the course of its genesis and publication process.

An intimate knowledge of youth

Moeyaert's debut was closely tied to his personal life and the youth culture of the late seventies, even if many parts of the novel are invented. The narrative of *Duet met valse noten* is set in a secondary school and peppered with references to specific places in Belgium and to popular culture, including a local fast-food chain and songs by Barbra Streisand, Donna Summer and ABBA. In addition, the book radiates an aura of authenticity because of its detailed exploration of teenage life, from the careful steps

of first love and the heartfelt pain of break up to the gossip and pranks of a high-school classroom. Young authors' writings are often credited for giving a less mediated rendition of youthful experiences than adults remembering childhood or re-creating it in fiction from either their own memories or their interaction with children. A recurrent motive for studying young authors' writing is that children and adolescents are believed to be the best experts on childhood and youth; another is that they 'seem to know just what their readers are feeling' (Eccleshare 2015, n.p.). In the reception of his early work, Moeyaert's young age was often explicitly mentioned, not just as an oddity, but also as a reason for his success with young readers. According to reviewer Tilly Stuckens, for instance, *Terug naar af* (1986, Back to square one), Moeyaert's second novel, appealed to young readers thanks to the author's intimate knowledge of their life stage:

First and foremost for fourteen-year-olds, who will recognize Matthias and his surroundings without effort. But also for adults, for this 'diary' from someone who has barely grown out of adolescence can teach them something about the young people they have to share a house or a school with and who are so hard to understand. (Stuckens 1983: n.p.)³

Moeyaert seems to have been aware of his expert status. In the first interview that Moeyaert ever gave, journalist Luc Lammens shared some of his criticism of *Duet met valse noten*. The young author refuted it on the basis of his real-life expertise on youth. Lammens remarks, for example, that he finds it childish and unlikely that teenagers over the age of fourteen would still exchange short messages in class. Moeyaert retorts: 'I still remember that we would pass such notes in third grade' (cited in Lammens 1984, 3).⁴ In another interview, Moeyaert responds to the criticism that very little happens in the novel: 'Every day, every chapter, something occurs. Perhaps little that is sensational, but as a teenager it does seem important and interesting' (Ternier 1984, n.p.).⁵ When Lammens complains that he finds the word 'Cola' on the cover a cheap form of product placement, Moeyaert concedes that at the time of the interview, he associates the drink with a lack of sophistication, but that it is true to his younger self that inspired the book: 'In those days, when I was fifteen, I was also a Coke drinker and I also belonged to that age of trying to find out what you want and playing along with your peers' (cited in Lammens 1984, 3).⁶ The young readers (aged thirteen to fifteen) who awarded Moeyaert the annual prize of the Flemish children's jury affirmed the realism of his writing: 'The story deals with today's youth,' they argue in

their report, 'what happens is close and realistic. The author can sympathize' (jury cited in *Brugsch Handelsblad* 1984, n.p.).⁷

Teenage culture is also typically dynamic, and if adult authors want to write about it in detail in a way that young readers will find credible, they need to keep up. This is one of the reasons why the acclaimed British author Aidan Chambers stopped writing Young Adult fiction:

It would be impossible now to write a youth novel set in the present day without social media, and the digital forms of communication, entertainment, opinion, and fact-finding being part of the story. I do not use the social media (in fact I thoroughly detest it). And because I always write about current life, I wouldn't be able to write a youth novel that includes modern youth daily experience.⁸

Chambers turned to adult fiction and essays instead. In the early eighties, when Bart Moeyaert made his debut, Flemish authors in general were said to have lost touch with youth. Critic Eric Hulsens declared in 1976 that 'The average Flemish children's author is 52, teacher, and unconscious' (cited in Vercammen 2002, 350).⁹ In the Netherlands, a progressive trend had led to the so-called 'emancipation' of children's literature in the seventies, with books that addressed social themes and taboos and tried to appeal to young readers by taking them seriously (Ros 2016; Van den Bossche 2016). Flemish children's literature was considered to be lagging behind because of a strong Catholic hold on children's publishing (Ghesquière et al. 2014, 47-50; Vranckx 2014, 175). Editor Els Beerten had Eric Hulsens' provocative quote in mind when she received the manuscript of *Duet met valse noten* for review in 1982. Beerten, a 22-year-old Master in Literary Studies and student of drama at the time, occasionally reviewed anonymous manuscripts for Altiora and Norbert Vranckx, the publisher, had invited her opinion. Thinking of the middle-aged teachers whose works she usually read, she was taken aback by the fresh voice that she found in Moeyaert's manuscript. 'This fifty-year-old author sure is hip,'¹⁰ she remembers thinking: 'I was already thrown off my feet on the first page. My confusion only grew as I read on. No half-witted preaching, no whining about don't do this and make sure you do that' (Beerten 2008, n.p.).¹¹ To Beerten, the young characters in the book felt authentic and 'alive.' She recommended it for publication and only later learned the young age of the author.

The young author as craftsman and collaborator

Since young authors are believed to be drawing directly from their own life experiences, their writing is often associated with intuition and spontaneity rather than craft and labour (Livingston 1984). Some readers of Anne Frank's diary, for example, have been shocked to find out that she rewrote sections of her diary to prepare it for publication.¹² Genetic criticism, by contrast, typically draws attention to the hard work and skill that is invested in plotting, characterisation and style (Van Hulle 2007, 13, 32). Moreover, research on writing processes also reveals that literary works are often not just solitary endeavours, but that the production of a book involves several actors, including editors, publishers, and proof readers, who sometimes steer the course of the writing process in substantial ways.

Methodological issues that genetic researchers may encounter include preservation, access and privacy, especially when studying contemporary authors. As Dirk Van Hulle points out, while the construction of buildings are public, writing processes are typically private, and studying them may feel like an intrusion in an author's personal sphere (2007, 11). Authors regularly destroy notes and drafts for this reason, or because they do not deem them important enough to retain once the work has been finished. Not all the genetic material for *Duet met valse noten* has been preserved. In what follows, I will sometimes refer to a copy-edited manuscript, for example, that several actors have mentioned but that is no longer extant. For the nature of this document, as well as various other aspects of the genesis, we have to rely on early interviews with Moeyaert and on the memories of Moeyaert, Beerten and Vranckx, all of whom stated that they do not remember the exact chronology of the writing and publishing process and find it hard to reconstruct who took which decisions. There were also some contradictions in their testimonies. For example, Moeyaert credits Els Beerten with having edited his manuscript in close collaboration and given him invaluable advice in letters. He said this both in an early interview that appeared a year after *Duet's* publication (Pareit 1984) and in our interview in October 2019. Beerten only remembers this kind of collaboration with regard to his second book, *Terug naar af*, and believes that her input in the success of *Duet met valse noten* was limited to her encouraging comments on the manuscript and her speech during the book launch. Based on the material that was retained, it is not possible to establish whose account is more reliable.

Privacy is another issue when studying the writing process of young authors, especially when they find inspiration in their own lives (Alexander 2005, 79-80). The genesis of *Duet met valse noten* starts with a painful anecdote, when one of Moeyaert's

older brothers stole the diary in which the twelve-year-old author had invented the fictional addressee and love interest that would lead to the character of Liselot. As a consequence, Moeyaert abandoned the diary form and rewrote the material as a novel (Bosteels 1984, n.p.). Life writing that was too directly linked to his own person proved to be a genre that the teenage author no longer wanted to pursue, as it exposed his desires and made him vulnerable to criticism that was deeply personal. The earliest drafts for *Duet met valse noten* include this diary and other passages that the author still prefers not to share. Moreover, some aspects of the collaboration that preceded the publication are sensitive because they bring to the fore disagreements and power struggles. After deliberating with Moeyaert, Beerten and Vranckx, we agreed that I would not include the name of the now deceased ‘first editor’ of *Duet* in this article, even if it can be retrieved from other sources.

Moeyaert has acknowledged on various occasions that the first editor of his manuscript had a considerable influence on the language and structure of the book (see, amongst others, Lammens 1984; Pareit 1984). As stated before, young authors are often cherished as experts on childhood or adolescence who can render what it means to be young more directly and authentically than adults revisiting or reconstructing childhood. It is debatable whether adult interference in the publication process would disqualify children’s writing as such. In young children’s works, for example, critics disagree whether spelling mistakes should be corrected or not (Watson 2000, 53). On the one hand, such errors can come across as authentic and cute, but on the other hand, spelling mistakes can expose child writers’ shortcomings in a belittling way and can mostly serve to give adults a sense of superiority. Revisions can also go a lot further than spelling, and adults may also steer the plot and style of young authors’ writing. Marija Todorova criticizes this practice in the case of the adolescent war diarist Zlata Filipović, claiming that her young voice was ‘repressed’ by adults, while Elizabeth Wesseling (2019, 6-7) points out that adult authors also have their work edited when getting published. Paradoxically, the adult editor’s input in the genetic process of young authors’ works sometimes involves giving them a better understanding of how to write for young readers. After all, the field of children’s literature is heavily mediated by adults (teachers, librarians, reviewers, parents) and young authors – like any other author – have to appeal to them too if they want to make a successful entry on the book market.

Issues of adherence to the prevailing norms of children’s literature occur regularly with young writers, and this is especially true for adolescent authors. David Rees (1984, 127-130), for example, criticized *The Outsiders* (1967), written by fifteen-year-old S.E. Hinton, for condoning the immoral attitudes of the characters. *Duet met valse noten*

never raised such concerns – in fact, the minister of education Daniël Coens was even present at the book launch. Indeed, there is little disturbing to find in the love story between Liselot and Lander, even if its publisher Norbert Vranckx stresses the conservative context in which it appeared. The TOP series that featured *Duet met valse noten* was aimed at twelve to fourteen-year-old readers. Even though secular staff, including Vranckx and the first editor, had been hired, the Catholic publishing house Altiora-Averbode was still led by clergymen in the early eighties. In that context, even a first kiss had to be debated.¹³ As the genetic analysis and the interviews reveal, there was more than a first kiss to be found in the typescript that seventeen-year-old Bart Moeyaert sent to the publisher.

Toilets, cigarettes and sex

The published novel opens with a passage in which Lander cycles to school and sees two girls colliding on their bikes. A comparable chaotic traffic scene appears in the notebook and the typescript, but there it is preceded by a more unusual opener:

It was shortly before eight. I was in my usual spot practicing maths. The loo. A drowned cigarette was lying in it and the water was ochre. I pushed as I was reciting my arithmetical rule, and it splashed all the way up to my bottom, when it fell. I looked down – that was that – and slammed my book shut.¹⁴ (typescript)

The opening lines of a book form a prime place, and the mediated nature of children's literature amplifies this importance. Aidan Chambers remembers that his publisher at the Bodley Head, Margaret Clark, asked him to remove the line 'Literature is crap' from the first page of his adolescent novel *Breaktime*. In the published book, the controversial statement only appears later. The reasoning behind Clark's request was that adult mediators, such as booksellers and librarians, will often only read the beginning of a book in order to assess its suitability for young readers. Moeyaert's toilet opening scene was entirely removed before publication, but one would jump to conclusions to think that this was a straightforward case of an adult censoring an adolescent author. First of all, what happened after *Duet met valse noten* landed on the publisher's desk is not entirely clear. Vranckx reportedly took it home and left it with a babysitter and her friend as he and his wife went out. When the couple came home a few hours later, they found the two fourteen-year-old girls engrossed in the manuscript, despite the fact that they were not avid readers (Vranckx 2014 176; Interview 2019). Intrigued by the girls' enthusiastic response, Vranckx then passed the

manuscript on to the ‘first editor,’ an author in his forties with rich editing and teaching experience. Such pairings with an experienced writer are frequent in the history of child authors. One of the most famous examples is *The Far-Distant Oxus* (1937) by the two British teenagers Katharine Hull and Pamela Whitlock. They published their first book under the guidance of Arthur Ransome, whose *Swallows and Amazons* had been a source of inspiration (Watson 2000, 51). By all accounts, we know that Moeyaert’s first editor commented on the manuscript substantially, but it is not quite clear on what aspects exactly and to what effect. Still in doubt whether to publish it or not, Norbert Vranckx passed on the manuscript to Els Beerten. She recalls receiving a copy full of red lines and corrections. She did not find the suggested revisions convincing, however, started to look beneath them, and discovered a novel that she found compelling and lively. She recommended that this text should be retained without the revisions, but it is unclear what the publisher did with that feedback. The corrected version can no longer be obtained, and Vranckx and Beerten do not remember the exact nature of the revisions. For the ‘first editor,’ they were substantial enough to claim in hindsight that he, and not Bart Moeyaert, was the ‘true’ author of *Duet met valse noten*.¹⁵ In doing so, he tapped in to what Wesseling (2019, 6) calls a recurrent ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ that questions whether young authors can actually be credited for the merits of their work. In the case of bestsellers, Juliet McMaster attributes such scepticism to envy: ‘adult culture is jealous of success, and resists competition from children’ (2005, 53). Given the immediate success of *Duet met valse noten*, this is how most actors involved in the genetic process have interpreted the first editor’s claim to the authorship of what had by then become a bestselling and award-winning debut.

From the comparison of the notebook and the typescript on the one hand, and the published novel on the other, it is obvious that various aspects and scenes of the book were changed in the editorial process, even though we have to reconstruct in hindsight who prompted them and for what reason. Moeyaert’s own attitude towards the publication history of his debut is ambivalent. He acknowledges that he learned a lot from the editorial process. For example, the first editor argued that the title *Duet met valse tonen* did not really apply,¹⁶ since the typescript only consisted of two parts; this spurred Moeyaert to rework the structure and have the voices of Liselot and Lander alternate with each chapter – a revision that he felt positive about. It was during this phase, he remembers, that he decided to delete the toilet scene, because he felt that it was no longer appropriate for what he wanted to achieve.¹⁷ It seems that this feeling had been influenced by other revisions that the editor suggested.

That being said, various other changes seemed unnecessary and even undesirable from his point of view. In an early interview with Luk Lammens shortly after the book's publication, he complains about some of those changes:

The 'cutter' [the first editor] found it more agreeable to give the aesthetics teacher whom I had described as a 'woman with walrus hips' simply 'broad hips' (Lammens 1984, n.p.; see also Moeyaert, 'Duet met valse noten voor gevorderden', n.p.)¹⁸

A genetic comparison reveals various similar changes. Whereas their teacher Gotje is described as a 'pracht van een wijf' [a hot sizzler] (Typescript, 3), this is subdued to the less derogatory 'pracht van een vrouw' [a gorgeous woman] (Moeyaert 1983, 6) in the published book. A passage about smoking was also rewritten in a didactic vein. In the notebook, when Lander's mum warns him never to start smoking, he explains that

I must surely be a pure case of ~~xxx~~ imitation and pretending to be older than you are, but there was nothing I wanted more. Inside myself I knew that smoking was, on the contrary, a case of childlike instinct, the 'sucking' ~~of~~^{at} mum's breasts is comparable to inhaling a cigarette ^{smoke}. No, although ~~Well, mum~~ I knew this I was resolved to test a pack of cigarettes myself. (Moeyaert, Notebook 11)¹⁹

In the typescript and the published manuscript, by contrast, Lander describes having been pressured into trying a cigarette by a group of fellow pupils: 'It did not taste good at all,'²⁰ he explains, 'And there I was, sucking away, enough to make me sick.' (Typescript 11; Moeyaert 1983, 20)²¹ The promise of a forbidden cigarette and the evocation of a baby sucking its mother's breast have been replaced with a cautionary description of a bad experience that Lander did not want in the first place. In the typescript, Lander explains that after this initial bad experience, he did buy a pack of cigarettes the week after – 'de lichtste' / 'the lightest ones' (11). In the published novel, it seems that Lander's first smoking experience has put him off for good. From this succession, it appears that Moeyaert had already toned down the appeal of cigarettes in the versions prior to adult intervention (the notebook and the typescript he sent to the publisher), and that this process was continued in the genetic stages with adult assistance that led up to the published book.

By contrast, sexual passages appear to have been a bone of contention that left the young Moeyaert dissatisfied. When Liselot and Lander kiss in a lift as it goes nine

floors up (Typescript 82), the editor spurred him to adapt it to a chaste hug (Moeyaert 1983, 87).²² Moreover, as Moeyaert explains in an early interview:

Originally they were making out on the couch. The editor thought their relationship was not mature enough to express it that way. The sexual passage was therefore removed. (Ternier 1984, 4)²³

Young authors, especially adolescents, can use their fiction to play out sexual fantasies. Fan fiction, for example, has made that very clear (Duggan 2017). Moeyaert proved willing to edit out some of the more sexually loaded scenes, but apparently for the editor the young author's concessions did not go far enough. The development of the hotel scene is worth following in this respect. At one point in the novel, Liselot and Lander travel together with their theatre group to various towns in Belgium, sleeping in hotels along the way. On the final morning, he pays her a visit in her hotel room. 'In the hotel in Blankenberge I had first planned to let them sleep together. But that did not seem essential to me, because it did not affect the rest of the story,' Moeyaert explains in 1984 (Ternier 1984, 4). Part of this decision was informed by one of his peers in the early stages of the writing process: 'I was in fourth grade when this scene was being developed and there was a friend in my class who apparently had some experience with bed scenes. I faced the problem of how to approach this. After all, they are together and have the chance if they want to' (Moeyaert in Pareit 1984, n.p.).²⁴ Although eventually he decided against Lander and Liselot having sex, some explicit content was retained in the typescript that he sent to the publisher. As Liselot and Lander are tickling each other in her bed, their physical contact reaches a new level. In the typescript, this is described as follows:

O, Lander, stop, stop! All of a sudden she resisted strongly and in one movement my hand had landed under her nightgown. We both fell silent. I felt her skin and didn't dare to move. My hand lay just beneath her breasts. Liselot looked at me and I could read various emotions in her face: fear, shyness and longing. My hand I moved finger by finger and then pulled away. My fingertips seemed to hold a tingling. I sank down beside her. (Typescript 88)²⁵

In the first edition of the published novel, this scene is rewritten in three ways: the toucher and touched bodies are reversed, what gets touched is more vague, and the involuntary nature of the incident is highlighted:

without wanting it, her hand slipped under my pyjamas. We both fell silent. I felt her fingers on my skin and didn't dare to move. Liselot looked at me, her face filled with a thousand emotions. Then she moved finger by finger and pulled her hand back. She sank down beside me. (Moeyaert 1983, 92)²⁶

In an interview from 1984 Moeyaert expressed his annoyance with how this scene had turned out. The word 'member' [geslacht] had apparently been replaced with 'skin' [huid] without his knowledge or consent in the printing stage (Pareit 1984). When he complained about this amendment in a radio interview, Father Thomas Gilbert Secuianu, CEO of Altiora, grew concerned about the reputation of his publishing house, which wanted to appeal to contemporary youth with the TOP series. 'Skin' was replaced with 'member' once again, which then became 'piemel' [peter, willie] in a later edition.

Conclusion

The toilet and cigarette scenes and the treatment of sexual content show that the issue of adult intervention in young authors' works is not always black and white. Some of the controversial passages had already been adapted in the genetic stages before any adult intervention, that is in the revision process that took place between the notebook and the first typescript. Moreover, whereas Moeyaert felt that his voice was suppressed in some aspects of the publication process, he felt positively inspired in others (such as the revision of the structure). In Wesseling's view, young authors, like adult ones, can benefit from the expertise of an adult who knows the market. The fact that Moeyaert's debut appeared with Altiora – a publisher with Catholic roots that had recently started taking a more secular and slightly more daring course – is likely to have been a factor in the success of *Duet met valse noten*. The combination of the youthful perspective of the author with the more conservative take of an editor who polished off potentially offensive aspects of the book may have further contributed to its acceptability and success with adult mediators and a broad audience. In the speech that Els Beerten presented during the book launch, she even explicitly mentions that 'not a single fake attempt could be noted to break taboos.'²⁷ Suggestion rather than explicitness also became Moeyaert's hallmark in later books. The context is important to consider here as well. The seventies had witnessed a wave of so-called 'problem novels,' especially from the Netherlands and from the competing Flemish publishing house Lannoo. While these were important for broadening the scope of youth literature's themes, by the early eighties, problem novels were also being associated

with superficiality and cheap sensationalism (Baudoin 1983; Van den Hoven 1994). In early interviews, it is clear that various journalists and Moeyaert himself were eager to dissociate *Duet met valse noten* from the genre of the problem novel. 'There are already enough problem books,'²⁸ is the title of an interview led by Lieve Ternier (1984) and a quotation from the young author.

Moreover, not only adults had an impact on the revision of *Duet met valse noten*. One might argue that the most powerful influence on the development of the book came from Moeyaert's older brother, who showed him the danger of life writing that was too direct and personal an expression of his own desires. If the diary had continued in that private mode, it is unlikely that Moeyaert would have sent it to a publisher. Moeyaert consulted his peers during the writing process, for instance in determining whether an explicit sex scene was desirable. Later in the publication process, the adult mediators also invited youthful voices to give their opinions and their views were taken into account. Publisher Norbert Vranckx stresses that his fourteen-year-old babysitters' enthusiasm made him pay particular attention to the manuscript. Moreover, in the debate about 'adult' interventions in young author's writing, a dualism between childhood and adulthood appears that obscures the continuous nature of age and the life course. After the collaboration with the middle-aged first editor had gone awry, Vranckx matched Moeyaert with Beerten, who was only a few years his senior but had gained literary expertise through her studies and reviewing work. According to Beerten, she and Moeyaert felt connected in their youth while the first editor appeared as 'ancient'. It was the beginning of a supportive relationship that also continued for the subsequent books that Moeyaert published with *Altiora / Averbode*, and when Beerten later started publishing herself, Moeyaert supported her in turn with advice. Beerten too grew out to be one of Flanders' most respected and beloved authors of adolescent fiction.

Studying the genesis of *Duet met valse noten* shows that generalising statements on young authors and their adult mediators may belie the complexity of this collaboration. This also becomes clear from an interview with *Libelle* where Moeyaert is contemplating his second book and expresses his longing for more freedom than he experienced with his debut. At that same time, his testimony shows that he has internalized some of the editorial techniques that were applied in the genesis of *Duet met valse noten*. Whereas in the interview with *Tmuzet* – the first that Moeyaert ever gave – the young author calls his first editor somewhat derisively 'de schrapper' [the cutter] (Lammens 1984, n.p.), in *Libelle* he says: 'I cut much more, now that I am working on a second book' (cited in Bosteels 1984; see also Vansintjan 1984 for a similar quote).²⁹ It seems that Moeyaert had become a cutter in his own right.

Moreover, at that point, he no longer directly identifies with the teenagers that he considers his audience: ‘Then I wonder: is this really suited for fourteen to fifteen-year-olds?’ (cited in Bosteels 1984).³⁰ Only later, after the publication of *Terug naar af*, when Moeyaert had become acquainted with Aidan Chambers, did he learn to let go of those considerations with readership, relying again once more on his own judgment of where he wanted a story to go. This would mark a return to the kind of author that he felt to be when he had first started writing as an adolescent and had not even considered being published yet. As he explained in the Frank Kellendonk lecture ‘Bestaan kan iedereen’ (2012, Everyone can exist):

I had written a book when I was fourteen, fifteen, sixteen years old, and I had never considered an audience. When the book appeared, it turned out that the audience consisted of adolescents, but that did not imply that I had to write what people expected. My task was just like before, when I was fourteen, fifteen, sixteen: to stay true to my own views. (Moeyaert 2012, 142)³¹

In contrast to the considerations for a young audience in the composition stage, his preference for a style that suggests more than it spells out, would remain. When Moeyaert was awarded the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in 2019, the jury motivated their choice as follows: ‘Bart Moeyaert has a literary language that is compressed and musical, and a suggestively charged narrative technique.’ One could argue that the development of this technique started with his debut, and was partly driven by his own impulses, and partly by those who guided him. The genesis of *Duet met valse noten* is as much a polyphony as the novel itself, and one in which the mingling voices are hard to distinguish in hindsight. It is a process that contained some false tunes in its own right, but that led to a novel that proved to be immensely popular with teenagers of various generations and that was a crucial step in Bart Moeyaert’s development as one of Dutch children’s literature most prominent authors.

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About the Author

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Notes

¹ For more examples, see Douglas and Poletti (2016).

² Bart Moeyaert's website gives an overview of his works for children, adolescents and adults: <https://bartmoeyaert.com/werk>.

³ All the translations in this article are my own. Original tekst: 'In de eerste plaats voor veertienjarigen, die Matthias en zijn omgeving moeiteloos zullen herkennen. Maar ook voor volwassenen, die via dit

“dagboek” van iemand die nauwelijks de adolescentie is ontgroeid, iets kunnen leren over de moeilijk te begrijpen jonge mensen met wie ze thuis of op school moeten leven.’

⁴ ‘Ik weet nog dat we in de derdes dergelijke briefjes doorgaven.’

⁵ ‘Elke dag, elk hoofdstuk komt iets voor. Misschien weinig ophefmakends, maar als tiener lijkt het je toch belangrijk en boeiend.’

⁶ ‘In die tijd, toen ik vijftien was, was ik ook een cola-drinker en behoorde ik ook tot die leeftijd van zoeken wat je wil en meegaan met je leeftijdsgenoten.’

⁷ ‘Het verhaal handelt over de jeugd van nu: wat gebeurt is nabij en realistisch. De auteur kan zich inleven.’

⁸ Interview with Aidan Chambers on 17 January 2018.

⁹ ‘De gemiddelde Vlaamse jeugdauteur is 52, onderwijzer en bewusteloos.’

¹⁰ Interview with Els Beerten on 15 October 2019.

¹¹ ‘Ik was al meteen de kluts kwijt na de eerste bladzijde. Mijn verwarring werd gaandeweg alleen maar groter. Niks halfzacht gepreek, geen gezever over doe niet dit en vooral wel dat.’

¹² A fictional example of such a reaction is Jacob Todd’s in Aidan Chambers’ *Postcards from no man’s land*.

¹³ Interview with Norbert Vranckx, 16 October 2019.

¹⁴ My translation. Original text: ‘Het was iets voor achten. Ik zat op mijn gewoonlijke plaats mijn wiskunde te herhalen. Het toilet. Er lag een verzopen sigaret in en het water was oker. Ik duwde terwijl ik mijn rekenregel opdreunde, en het pletste tot aan mijn billen, toen het viel. Ik keek naar beneden – dat was dat – en sloeg mijn boek dicht.’ In the preceding notebook, the scene is written and revised as follows: ‘Het was iets voor ~~Su~~ achten. ~~Lander~~^{ik} zat ~~xxx~~ ^{zijn}^{mijn} wiskunde ~~xxx~~ te herhalen, op ~~xxx~~ ^{een}^{zijn} ^{m’n} ~~ongewone~~ plaats. Het toilet. Er lag een verzopen sigaret in, ~~xxx~~ ~~xxx~~ het water was oker. ~~Hij~~^{ik} duwde terwijl ~~hij~~^{ik} een rekenregel opdreunde. Het pletste ^{tot} tegen ~~zijn~~^{mijn} billen toen het viel, ~~en dat vond Lander~~ ~~Hij~~^{hi} keek naar beneden, ~~Dat~~ ^{- dat was dat -}, ~~Hij~~ ~~xxx~~ ~~xxx~~, ~~en~~^{en} ~~da~~^{acht} sloeg ~~zm’n~~ boek dicht. ~~Hij~~^{ik} veegde ~~zich~~^{me} rijkelijk af ~~en bekeek z’n~~ ~~xxx~~ ‘het zijne’, zoals ~~hij~~ ~~het~~ ~~noemde~~ ~~en~~ ~~trok~~ ~~alles~~ ~~terug~~ ~~door~~.’

¹⁵ Interview with Bart Moeyaert; interview with Els Beerten.

¹⁶ ‘Tonen’ means ‘tunes’ in Dutch; this was later changed to ‘noten’ (notes).

¹⁷ Interview with Bart Moeyaert.

¹⁸ ‘Zo vond “de schrapper” het aangenamer om de estheticalerares die ik had beschreven als “een vrouw met walrusheupen” gewoon “rijke heupen” te geven.’ The notebook and the typescript tell a slightly different story: there the aesthetics teacher is described as a woman with “wide hips” in both cases (Notebook 25; Typescript 27).

¹⁹ ‘Ik zou wel een zuiver voorbeeld ~~xxx~~ van naïperij en grootdoenerij zijn, maar er was niets dat ik liever wilde. In mezelf wist ik dat roken integendeel een voorbeeld van kinderlijk instinct was, het ‘zuigen’ ~~van~~^{aan} mama’s borsten kan je vergelijken met ~~een~~ sigaretten^{rook} inhaleren. Nee, alhoewel ~~Nu~~ ~~man~~ ik dit wist was ik steevast van plan een pakje sigaretten te testen.’

²⁰ ‘Het smaakte niks lekker.’

²¹ ‘En ik maar zuigen, om beroerd van te worden.’

²² In the most recent edition, it is reduced to only seven floors.

²³ ‘Oorspronkelijk lagen ze te vrijen op de bank. De uitgever vond hun relatie nog niet rijp genoeg om ze op de beschreven manier te uiten. Die vrijpassage ging er dus uit. In het hotel in Blankenberge had ik eerst gedacht ze samen te laten slapen. Maar dat leek me geen hoofdzaak, omdat het voor verdere verloop van het verhaal geen belang had.’

²⁴ ‘Ik zat in de vierde toen die scène aan bod kwam en er was een vriend in mijn klas die blijkbaar wel ervaring had met bedscènes. Ik had toen het probleem hoe ik dit zou aanhalen. Ze zijn immers samen en ze hebben de kans als ze willen.’

²⁵ “O, Lander, hou op, hou op!” Ze verweerde zich plotseling heftig en met één beweging was mijn hand onder haar nachtjapon verzeild geraakt. We verstomden allebei. Ik voelde haar huid en durfde

me niet te bewegen. Mijn hand lag net onder haar borsten. Liselot keek me aan, met een gezicht waarop ik verschillende gevoelens kon aflezen: schrik, verlegenheid en verlangen. Mijn hand verplaatste ik vinger voor vinger en trok het dan terug. In mijn vingertoppen leek er een tinteling te zitten. Ik zakte neer naast haar.'

²⁶ 'zonder dat we het wilden, glipte haar hand onder mijn pyjama. We verstomden allebei. Ik voelde haar vingers op mijn huid en durfde me niet te bewegen. Liselot keek me aan, met een gezicht vol van duizend gevoelens. Dan verplaatste ze vinger voor vinger en trok haar hand terug. Ze zakte neer naast mij.' (*Duet* 92)

²⁷ 'Er was geen enkele valse poging merkbaar om taboes te doorbreken'

²⁸ 'Er bestaan al genoeg probleemboeken.'

²⁹ 'Ik schrap veel meer, nu ik aan een tweede boek bezig ben.'

³⁰ 'Dan vraag ik me af: is dat nu eigenlijk wel geschikt voor 14 à 15-jarigen?'

³¹ 'Ik had een boek geschreven toen ik veertien, vijftien, zestien was, en ik had nooit aan een publiek gedacht. Toen het boek verscheen, bleek het publiek uit jongeren te bestaan, maar dat betekende niet dat ik bijgevolg moest schrijven wat mensen verwachtten. Mijn taak was net als vroeger, toen ik veertien, vijftien, zestien was: eigenzinnig blijven.'