

Fiction review: Stefan Brijs' 'The Angel Maker'

Terry Hong, Special to The Chronicle

Tuesday, December 30, 2008

The angel maker

By stefan brijs, translated from the dutch by
hester velmans

Penguin books; 346 pages; \$15 paperback

Belgian-born Stefan Brijs' novel "The Angel Maker" seemingly has all the necessary elements to be a success with U.S. readers. It's already an international bestseller, with 80,000 copies sold in Holland alone, according to the pre-publication press material. It deals with the sort of multilayered, interwoven Big Topics that promise to keep readers engaged - from ethics to science to that ever-present battle of God versus man. And if that wasn't enough, it throws in the latest contemporary issues like autism, infertility, cloning and, of course, the most dysfunctional of families to satisfy anyone's sense of schadenfreude.

But something gets lost in the translation, perhaps literally: As rendered in English, anyway, "The Angel Maker" proves to be clunky and heavy, with characters that never seem to expand beyond the flat page.

At the center of a sizable cast is Dr. Victor Hoppe, a once-famous embryologist who returns unannounced to his native village of Wolfheim, a rather zealous Catholic community just beyond the tri-country border of Belgium, Holland and Germany. He arrives with three motherless infant sons, whom he immediately whisks into the family home, hardly ever to emerge again.

Take note: The number three looms large throughout the narrative, which, of course, is divided into three parts. Need more religious imagery? "Wolfheim" means "wolf's home," into which the sacrificial lamb returns.

The villagers lie in wait, their curiosity inflamed. When Hoppe saves an asthmatic toddler from choking and becomes a local hero, the villagers find medical excuses to arrive regularly on his doorstep. To service his growing number of patients, Hoppe hires a retired teacher to look after his three identical boys, named for archangels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael.

Initially shocked by the boys' disturbing appearance - cleft palates on oversize heads that exactly match Hoppe's visage - Charlotte Maenhout becomes the only other person with whom the boys



regularly interact. "They're a bit shy," understates Hoppe as he introduces the mini-mes, explaining his color-coded system of blue (Michael), yellow (Gabriel) and green (Raphael) to tell them apart.

Something is indeed rotten in the state of Denmark, or Belgium, more accurately. As Maenhout bonds with her charges, she becomes convinced that they're suffering under their father's care. Their matching carrot-colored hair falls out. They fail to grow. Their shriveled little bodies are mysteriously marked and damaged. She sees herself as the children's only advocate.

Hoping to socialize the boys, she invites the village children to a third birthday party that ends in near-tragedy. She attempts to take them for an outing - dressed as the Three Musketeers, because costumes are less disturbing to the public eye than the boys' own faces - to the tri-country junction, which proves life-threatening. Ironically, they're rescued by the local auto mechanic named Felix Glück, as in "happy luck." Alas, Maenhout's fate will be anything but happy or lucky.

Hoppe's own history of neglected abuse makes up the book's midsection. Shunned by a mother convinced that her newborn's cleft palate is proof of evil possession, Hoppe is deemed mentally retarded and sent to an orphanage run by abusive nuns, save for one who recognizes his prodigious intelligence. Eventually reclaimed by his guilt-ridden father, Hoppe briefly returns home, only to be shipped off again to a monastic boarding school.

By the time he reaches adulthood, Hoppe is completely malformed. He concludes that God is evil: He murdered his own son. In contrast, Jesus is good: He tried to save mankind, only to have his father betray him. Hoppe decides that becoming a doctor, as his late father was a doctor, is his only way to achieve goodness. His name isn't Victor for nothing!

As much as he lacks social skills, Hoppe's misguided medical brilliance convinces him he can help mankind by outsmarting God: "It is up to us to correct the mistakes which He in his haste has wrought."

Even if that means he has to make angels of his own.

The book should have been better. The gory spectacle of the ending alone should have left me shivering. But Ira Levin's "The Boys From Brazil" - even at 30-plus years old - or Kazuo Ishiguro's more recent "When We Were Orphans" offer more effective spine-chilling reads.

Terry Hong is media arts consultant at the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program and is co-author of "Eastern Standard Time: A Guide to Asian Influence on American Culture From Astro Boy to Zen Buddhism." E-mail her at books@sfchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/12/30/DDHM140GIB.DTL>

This article appeared on page **E - 2** of the San Francisco Chronicle

San Francisco Chronicle Sections

sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2...

3/16/2009

Fiction review: Stefan Brijs' 'The Angel...

© 2008 Hearst Communications Inc. | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Feedback](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Contact](#)