

### **Doodgewoon: Translating Age-Appropriate Material in Dutch Children's Literature**

With over twenty-five publications in the past decade alone, Bette Westera is one of the Netherlands' most prolific contemporary authors of children's literature. Her picture books have been translated into over a dozen languages, large and small – Spanish, French, Slovenian, Basque; the list goes on – but they have never been translated for Anglophone literary systems. In spite of efforts from institutions like the Dutch Foundation for Literature, Westera's crowning achievement *Doodgewoon* (literal translation: "Dead Normal") was rejected by major US publishers. Although it won the prestigious *Gouden Griffel* award for Dutch children's book of the year in 2015, *Doodgewoon's* themes of death and mortality would have been incompatible with reigning ideologies in the United States that determine the industry norms for "acceptable" children's literature (Touy, 1995; Oittinen, 2000). I have translated a selection of poems from this collection with the norms of the American market in mind in order to explore what a successful pitch to a US publisher might require. My target-oriented translation choices were informed not only by the aforementioned norms but also by the form of poetry and the genre of children's literature, with specific consideration of the interplay between text and image in picture books. Please see the Appendix with the translated poems to complement the following discussion of translation choices.

Billed as a collaboration with illustrator Sylvia Weve, *Doodgewoon* responds to phenomena surrounding death with pictures and poems. Westera muses on their mutual prerogative to answer "difficult questions" through literary art in these verses from *Was de aarde vroeger plat* ("Was the earth ever flat", 2018; my translation):

There are questions  
that ask for answers  
There are others  
that ask  
for rhymes  
a poem  
a painting...

The difficult questions addressed by the poems and paintings in *Doodgewoon* include "what causes death?", "what happens after you die?", and "how do I handle my grief?" As explored by Anne Scott MacLeod in *American Childhood*, death is an absolute taboo in American children's literature (1996, p.179). In the Netherlands, however, the inclusion of such themes is in keeping with a long tradition of engaging young readers with heavy topics. Other winners of the *Gouden Griffel* include

*Oorlogswinter* by Jan Terlouw (1972) and *Kleine Sophie en Lange Wapper* by Els Pelgrom (1984); In the former, a boy in Nazi-occupied Holland faces firing squads and the effects of national socialism, and in the latter Sophie's late-stage leukaemia provides for colourful hallucinations as she and her toys embark upon adventures that lead to her allegorical death. Both are marketed to children aged eight and up, but even *Nijntje* (our beloved "Miffy") buries her Grandmother in one of the classic picture books intended for even younger audiences (Bruna, 1996).

While all of the above examples *were* translated into English and continue to be available on the American market, *Doodgewoon* has not enjoyed the same honour. Riitta Oittinen explains that publishers are governed by ideological norms that dictate "choices of subject matter and form: only certain books dealing with certain subject matter *in a certain form* are chosen for translation" (2006, p.40; emphasis mine). Although above examples deal with taboo subject matter, they seem to have done so in an acceptable form to American publishers. *Oorlogswinter* will have earned its rights to translation by slotting into the subgenre of post-war novels, *Kleine Sophie's* dark narrative softened through the novel's power of allegory, and Miffy, of course, sheltered by its canonical status. Westera and Weve, by contrast, use the form of a children's picture book to present a collection of illustrated poems "for young and old" (from the back cover, my translation) – intended for a dual readership of children and adults. While there is always a dual audience to consider in children's literature because adults write, publish, sell, and purchase the products, the model of a picture book that deals with adult topics for all ages does not exist in the American polysystem (Alvstad, 2010; Even-Zohar, 1990).

American publishers, schools, and public libraries are rife with the censorship of homegrown literature, let alone literature in translation, for reasons that range from the control of sacrilegious themes to a collective impulse to dictate age-appropriate material (MacLeod, 1996). Oittinen also cites Susan Stan's research on the USA, which posits, "editors tend to choose books that will travel easily and that conform to American poetics, cultures and values" (2006, p.40). In other words, censorship in the United States is pre-empted by barring books like *Doodgewoon* from the polysystem altogether. There are, however, methods to overcome this "preliminary norm" of text selection policy in target systems (Toury, 1995, p.58). Zohar Shavit observes, "if the model of the original text does not exist in the target system, the text is changed by deleting or by adding such elements as will adjust it to the integrating model of the target system" (2006, p.28). In light of this, I reluctantly conceded that deletion and addition would be necessary tactics for producing an "acceptable" translation of *Doodgewoon* (Toury, 1995).

Of the forty-six poems in the book, three are unfit for publication in the American market, in this form. *Op eigen kracht*, explains the suicide of a school-aged girl, *Vaas* offers the perspective of a

grandmother who is glad her abusive husband has died, and *Cheeta / Mama* portrays a family that believes they will be reborn as different animals. I recommend these poems be left out of an American translation due to their direct references to ideologically incompatible taboos like suicide and abuse, and to Christian taboos like reincarnation.

Selected from the remaining forty-three poems, my sampling required a combination of deletion and addition for this translation, in other words, “compensation” (Vinay and Darbelnet, 1995). For example, in “Always, above all” I replaced the reference to *Albert Heijn* with the more generic “grocery store”, considering there is no nation-wide equivalent to the popular Dutch chain in the United States. In the same stanza, Westera also writes (literal translation) “I miss you on the back of the bike,” which refers to the typical Dutch act of riding on the luggage rack of someone’s bicycle. The same practice does not exist in the United States, so I simplified the reference to “I miss you when I’m biking.” The same issue arises later in the poem when they (literally-translated) “go cycling on the dike.” Again, this reference is culture specific, so in keeping with my target-oriented strategy, I chose “play all of our old games” instead. This particular choice of “games” was informed by the rhyming scheme of the poem (“frames”): If I felt any sadness for making concessions to the content of the original, it was a consolation to find that compensation was also required by the poetic constraints of rhythm and rhyme.

Westera deliberately uses the form of poetry to approach “difficult questions” of mortality. Though death is not taboo in the Netherlands per se, the topic still demanded nuance: *Doodgewoon* is buoyed by a combination of rhythm and rhyme to offer respite from the melancholic subject matter and bring life to the topic of death. Poetic form is therefore just as essential as semantic content in my translation. To retain images of diving boards, canyons, beaches, and fries in “If you could never”, I rearranged the verses to make room for consistent meter and strong rhymes. To rhyme with “swim”, the literally translated line “sail without a life vest on” becomes “cast off your life vest at a whim”. While in some poems, the rhyming scheme is jovial and the content whimsical, in others like “Condolences”, the positioning of the rhyme gives greater impact to the tragic turn in content. In this poem, the rhyming words are *rug*, which means “back” as a noun, and *terug*, which means “back” as an adverb. In English, this is not a case of rhymes but of homonyms, which would fall flat in translation. In keeping with the motifs of a funerary reception, I chose to rhyme the second “back” (*terug*) with “no need to wear black”. Having also lost the word *condoleances* for the sake of meter, “Condolences” became the title of the poem in translation, whose Dutch original literally translates to the less catchy “funeral invitation”.

While bearing in mind rhyme and rhythm, I also translated alongside the accompanying drawings. Born as a collaboration between author and illustrator, the book is full of images that

often held the answers to translation problems. For example, the poem “Tabby Cat” is set among illustrations of dozens of animals, a selection of potential pets both tame and wild that goes beyond those mentioned in the poem. When I failed to rhyme all the Dutch examples, I turned to the drawing for inspiration. Thus, *papegaai en vis* (“parrot and fish”) became “slimy snake that slithers” to pseudo-rhyme with “tame iguana lizards”. Considering the inclusion of a snake in the drawings, this choice was cohesive. In other instances, however, the drawings posed cross-cultural problems. In the poem “Candle,” a young girl laments the death of her classmate, whose passing is commemorated with the burning a candle. While this might be permissible in the Netherlands, an open flame in the classroom is one illustrated detail that would not go unnoticed in America where fire drills are a highly regular part of the school routine. For this reason, I have translated the poem as “turn the light back on” as opposed to “light the candle again”, and recommend amending the drawing to feature a candle with an electronic bulb.

Finally, I call for an intersemiotic translation of the cover, a suggestion inspired by the German edition of *Doodgewoon*, translated by Rolf Erdorf (Jakobson, 1959). Featuring a drawing of a young girl with a melancholic expression and angel wings, the original cover is confrontational and has no pretensions of masking the content within. Erdorf skirted the issue by retitling the collection *Überall & Nirgends* (“Everywhere & Nowhere”), filling the cover with the more whimsical title against a dark blue background and stylized pink ampersand. For a book whose illustrations are held in just as high regard as the accompanying poems, such a departure is notable enough to have been necessarily dictated by the norms of the target culture. The German cover is appealing and says conveniently little about the topic of the book, directing adult shoppers to read the blurb on the back where they will be reassured that, although this is a book about death, it is “(...) *also* a celebration of life and happiness” (Westera, 2016; emphasis and translation mine). Such a marketing strategy would make all the difference in the United States, so I followed suit by removing the word “dead” from the title, naming the collection after the poem “Always, Above All”, and recommending a neutral cover design with reassurances on the back.

While the changes I suggest for the translation of *Doodgewoon* seem extreme when described as above, what remains is the bulk and beauty of a collection to which I have stayed true. Although it is easy to condemn censorship – and I am quick to do so myself – the observed conditions of the polysystems we reckon with as writers and translators cannot be ignored, even if we disagree with the norms under which the systems operate. I believe in the message of *Doodgewoon*: Each new poem gently introduces a novel perspective on life, death, or grief, with the intention of bringing the reader, young or old, closer to an understanding of mortality. The inevitable ceases to be so frightening, and for readers in the throes of grief, mournful feelings are validated

and welcomed as “normal”. If books like *Doodgewoon* are otherwise to be pre-emptively censored in the American market by rejecting their translation altogether, then a nuanced amount of deletion to make way for acceptable, meaningful content is justified. To embrace the taboo of death in children’s literature with poems and drawings is a triumph of emotional didacticism, and this book can be an invaluable resource. The strength of the taboo in America is even more reason to ease its publication into the system by means of my suggestions.

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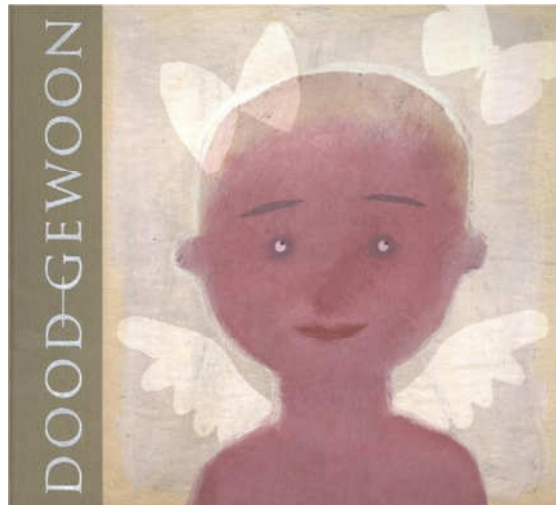
Westera, B., (2018). *Was de aarde vroeger plat*. Haarlem: Gottmer.

## **APPENDIX**

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<b>Condolences</b>	<i>page 9</i>
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## Dutch

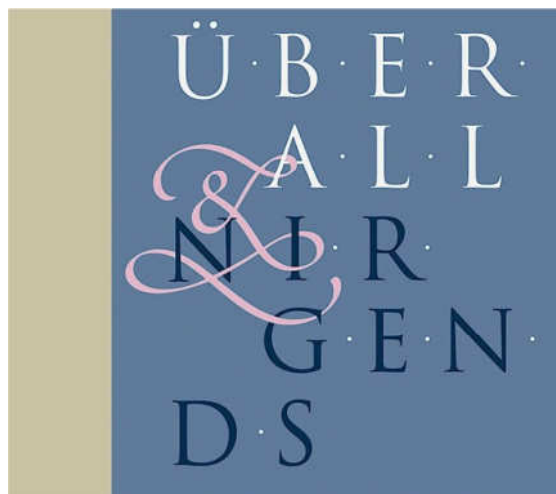
Doodgewoon



Westera, B., (2014). *Doodgewoon*. Haarlem: Gottmer.

## German

Überall & Nirgends



Westera, B., (2016). *Überall & Nirgends*. Translated from Dutch by R. Erdorf. München: Susanna Rieder Verlag.

## English

[My translation]

**Always, Above All**

I envision the cover of the English translation taking after the German cover pictured above for reasons outlined in the commentary.



### **Als je nou eens**

Als je nou eens niet kon sterven,  
zou je dan op zwemles gaan?  
Van de hoge duiplank duiken?  
Zeilen zonder zwemvest aan?  
Op de hoogste bergen klimmen?  
Op de smalste richels staan?  
Langs de diepste kloven lopen?  
Was daar dan nog wel wat aan?

Als je nou een niet kon sterven,  
Was vakantie dan nog fijn?  
Zou je je nog steeds verheugen  
Op dat reisje met de trein?  
Zou je van het strand genieten?  
Van de zee, de zonneschijn?  
Van de ijsjes, van de frieten?  
Zou je dan gelukkig zijn?

### **If you could never**

What if you could never die,  
would you still learn to swim?  
Dive off the highest diving board?  
Cast off your life vest at a whim?  
Or climb up to the tallest peak?  
Look down deep canyons from the rim?  
Would walking on a narrow ridge  
inspire that rush of life or limb?

What if you could never die,  
would holidays be worth it then?  
Would looking forward to the train  
give you that smile time and again?  
Would you still relish sunny days,  
sand on the beach, the sea, or when  
you eat ice cream and crispy fries,  
-- would you still be happy then?

## **Rouwkaart**

Wij willen geen bloemen,  
wij willen geen kaarten,  
wij willen geen brieven,  
en ook geen bezoek.

Wij willen geen knuffels,  
geen condoleances,  
geen drankjes, geen broodjes,  
geen koffie, geen koek.

Geen handen op schouders, geen steun in  
de rug.

Wij willen alleen maar ons zusje terug.

## **Condolences**

We don't want your flowers,  
we don't want your letters,  
we don't want your visits,  
your tears or your cards.

We don't want your hugs  
or expressions of grief.  
No coffee, no cookies,  
no deepest regards.

No hands on our shoulders, no need to  
wear black.

We just want our little sister back.

## **Kaarsje**

Niets  
is triester  
dan jouw tafel  
naast de mijne,  
net als toen.

Met je foto  
naast je schriften,  
met een kaarsje  
naast je stiften,

en de juf,  
die op een dag  
vergeet  
het kaarsje  
aan te doen.

## **Candle**

There's  
nothing worse  
than your desk  
next to mine.  
Now you're gone.

There's your photo,  
empty coat hook,  
and a candle  
by your notebook,

and the teacher  
who forgets,  
one day,  
to turn the light  
back on.

### **Poes Minoes**

Als jij dood bent, poes Minoes,  
dan nemen wij geen kitten,  
geen kat die uit jouw bakje eet  
en op jouw stoel gaat zitten.

Geen kater die jouw muizen vangt,  
geen papegaai, geen vissen,  
geen hamsters en geen cavia's,  
geen tamme hagedissen.

We nemen geen kanariepiet,  
geen goudvis en geen guppy.  
Als jij dood bent, poes Minoes,  
dan mogen we een puppy!

### **Tabby Cat**

When you're dead, my little Tabby  
We won't get another cat,  
No cat that eats out of your bowl  
Or curls up on your mat.

No cat that catches all your mice,  
No slimy snake that slithers  
No hamsters and no guinea pigs  
No tame iguana lizards.

We won't get a tweety bird  
No goldfish and no guppy.  
When you're dead, my Tabby cat,  
We get to have a puppy!

## **Altijd overal**

Ik mis je achter op de fiets,  
ik mis je in de trein.  
Ik mis je bij de H&M  
en bij de Albert Heijn.

Ik mis je onder rekenen,  
ik mis je onder lezen.  
Ik mis je in de winter,  
bij het voeren van de mezen.

Ik mis je als ik jarig ben  
en als de oma's komen.  
Ik mis je als ik wakker lig,  
ik mis je in mijn dromen.

Ik mis je zonder woorden,  
elke dag en elke nacht.  
Ik mis je als ik grapjes maak  
en niemand om me lacht.

Ik mis je in de kamer,  
als ik naar je foto kijk.  
Ik mis je als we - ik en papa -  
fietsen op de dijk.

Ik mis je op vakantie,  
in ons huisje op de hei  
en als we door de regen lopen  
zonder jou erbij

Ik mis je elke dag opnieuw  
wanneer ik wakker word.  
Ik mis je schoenen in de gang,  
je beker naast je bord.

Ik mis jouw tandenborstel  
naast de mijne in het glas.  
Ik mis je voeten op de trap.  
Ik mis je blauwe jas.

## **Always, above all**

I miss you when I'm biking,  
I miss you on the train,  
I miss you in the grocery store  
like shopping in the rain.

I miss you during math,  
I miss you while I read,  
I miss you in the winter  
feeding sparrows their birdfeed.

I miss you when my grandmas come  
to make my birthday cake.  
I miss you in all of my dreams  
and when I lie awake.

I miss you without saying,  
every day and every night.  
I miss you when I make my jokes  
but no one laughs outright.

I miss you in the living room  
in all those picture frames.  
I miss you when we - Dad and I -  
play all of our old games.

I miss you on vacation,  
in our cottage with the view.  
When we walk in any weather  
without you there, too.

I miss you each and every day  
again when I wake up.  
I miss your shoes in the hallway,  
your plate next to your cup.

I miss your bright blue toothbrush  
In the bathroom next to mine.  
I miss your footsteps on the stairs  
and when I say "I'm fine."

Ik mis jouw kleren in de kast,  
je broeken en je truien.  
Ik mis je geur, ik mis je stem,  
Ik mis je boze buien.

Ik mis je bij je graf  
als ik je naam zie op de steen.  
Ik mis je als ik samen ben  
met papa, en alleen.

Ik mis je als ik ijsjes eet,  
en appels en bananen.  
Ik mis je als ik huilen moet,  
ik mis je zonder tranen.

Ik mis je als je jarig was  
en iedereen er is.  
Ik mis je als ik eventjes  
niet merk dat ik je mis.

Ik mis je als ik keelpijn heb,  
ik mis je als ik val.  
Ik mis je nergens echt het ergst,  
maar altijd overall.

I miss your closet full of clothes,  
your sweaters and your pants.  
I miss your smell, I miss your voice  
I miss your angry rants.

I miss you at your grave  
with your name on the gravestone.  
I miss you when I'm with Dad,  
and when I'm alone.

I miss you when I eat ice cream,  
and when we all say cheers.  
I miss you when I have to cry  
and also without tears.

I miss you on your birthday,  
with everyone you knew.  
I miss you when one second  
I forget that I miss you.

I miss you when my throat is sore  
I miss you when I fall.  
I miss you when I'm nowhere most,  
but always, above all.