

Marischka Verbeek – Transcript Translation (ENG)

Welcome to, Met Terugwerkende Kracht ('with retroactive force'), a podcast and audio tour from Utrecht University in honour of International Women's Day. We are podcasters Corinne Heyrman, Marieke van der Ven, and Jozien Wijkhuijs, and we are taking you on a tour of Utrecht. Along the way, we will make stops at places with an underexposed history and listen to people with a story to tell. We learn about the history of intersectional feminism in the city and at the university. At this stop, we speak to Marischka Verbeek en Melle Schakel Savannah Bay, a bookstore on Telingstraat number 13.

VO

We are at Savannah Bay, a bookstore in Utrecht. Big vinyl letters on the back wall of the store declare, "This a story told by way of other stories".

On the back wall of Savannah Bay, big vinyl letter declare: "This a story told by way of other stories" is written in large letters.

It's the first sentence of a short story called, *The Story of Love* by Ali Smith. The narrative is about two lovers who tell each other a series of stories, giving you, the reader, access to their love story. To me, it's also very symbolic of this bookstore; the stories on the shelves of the store kind of interact with the customers who come here, as well as with our volunteers and the people who work here.

VO

This is Marischka, the owner of Savannah Bay. She tells us the history of the store, and how it all began in a wharf cellar in Utrecht.

Savannah Bay evolved from the very first, and so the oldest, women's bookstore in the Netherlands, *de Heksenkelder (the Witches cellar)*. It was founded by two women, real forewomen of lesbian feminism of the time, Dorelies Kraakman and Silvia Botnar. I always like to mention their names. Both of them have passed away already, they didn't grow very old, and both died of illness. They were really very important, so it's a kind of tribute to keep mentioning them. They thought: we have a women's movement, there is an enormous need for information, and you can't find it in ordinary bookstores – at that time. The stencils, the pamphlets, the translations, they just didn't exist.

But then, at a certain point, things started crumbling a bit. The cellar was a fairly bad environment for books because it was very damp and stuffy, so the store went looking for a new home.

VO

The building at 13 Telingstraat was to become this new home, where the store is still located today.

Marischka

Flash forward to the nineties, I graduated from university and began working here as a volunteer. I did literature and women's studies, and soon fell in love with the book business. A lot happened in that time. I was busy doing lots of different things, but at one point the store was really in a dire financial situation. It really was the 1990s: the women's movement was pretty much dead, or the victim of austerity.

And yes, there was very little room left for idealism. At the time I just thought that this was such a lovely spot. I thought it was so important, I wanted to go forward with it as an owner. It is somewhat of a mad motivation; often people will start their own business because they've dreamt of doing so; they wanted to be their own boss; they've already thought about how exactly they want to execute it... And I was just thinking: yeah, I don't want this to disappear, so I'll do it I guess. But I'm not an entrepreneur and I'm very bad with numbers! But people just kept coming. And that's the magic of Savannah Bay. People said they wanted to help out, and they just came. That was in 1997 – and now, in 2022, it is still like that.

The most important change that I implemented right away, really *du moment*, 25 years ago when I became the owner, I said: I don't want a women's bookstore. Still idealistic, but no longer limited to the women's movement. That is actually still the case; we specialize in gender, in sexuality, in diversity. And a lot of different people have found themselves here, truly. They found their feet here. They grew towards in their work or studies, or in their personal lives, or coming out, it doesn't matter. But almost everyone who comes here has taken a certain step at some point and is thus an inspiration to others. That, of course, is the backbone of Savannah Bay: these stories. I don't mean just what we sell and tell but all the stories that are here... There is so much... I always say: if this table could talk, well....

VO

And it's at this table that we are now sitting. A large, wooden table painted black, which actually used to stand in *de Heksenkelder*. Marisckha asked if Melle could join the conversation, too, so I pin a microphone to Melle, and he immediately talks candidly about how testosterone has changed his voice.

Melle

Yes, it just turned out to be mostly very nice. What I had to get used to was that, at one point, it became so low that even if I just talk, I can feel it vibrating in my chest.

Marisckha

Ah that's fantastic, isn't it!

Melle

That was – I really had to get used to that. When that had just started, it was already starting to become lower, but at some point it really got to a point where I felt it vibrating in my chest all the time. So, the first two or so months of that, every time I started talking I was like huhh....

Marischka

Like: what's going on here? (*laughs*)

Melle

And then I started talking more. I'm used to that now because it just suits me and I feel at home with it, but yes, it took some getting used to.

Well, maybe just a quick introduction. I'm Melle, I am 26 years-old, and I have been coming here since I was about 16.

I came here for the same reason that Savannah Bay was set up: the desire for information that you can't find anywhere else. You couldn't really find information about being queer, about all that kind of stuff, anywhere. If you went to the library or to the bookstore it was somewhere in the back of a dusty corner, and you had maybe three books. And here you came in and it was just bookcases full of them. That was really nice for me to discover – to come in here and to actually have a little community. Yes, for me Savannah Bay is really a piece of connection, a piece of community. Somewhere where I can also, well, do my own thing. I can do things that I like and I always learn something new. Because everyone who works here, with all their different backgrounds, and with everything on the shelves, you actually learn something new every day.

VO

Because without people, there are no stories; and without stories, no books.

Marischka

Twelve years ago, I was in love with someone who was transitioning, and they said: well, I want to read books about that – but there was nothing. *Niente, nada*, nothing. I was finally able to track three books down in America, with great difficulty, and I said: I'm going to import them and put them here on the shelf under a sign that reads, 'transgender'. The first bookstore in the Netherlands, and I still think the only one, that had such a section. Well, if you're open to that kind of change – now we do a lot with nature and climate, environmental activism – well, then of course you stay relevant.

No publisher is ever going to release a book on a subject or a story that no one has ever heard of. It just doesn't happen. Publishing is often an end point or a middle point, but there always has to be a few people saying, 'I have a story' or 'I have a feeling' or I have *something*. And then, at some point, they find out there are more people who have or are experiencing this or want to hear about it.

I can illustrate this with same-sex parenting, or LGBT parenting. There was nothing available about it for a long time, and yet gay and lesbian couples had children one way or another. And they would come here and say: yes, but there are no children's books, there are no picture books, there are no pregnancy books for two women. It's not all there. And then I would always say one of two things. If they appeared to be able to do so, I would say: please make it yourself, because it is entirely necessary, and I have a lot of people who would want it! And then they would do it. Or, I would say: wait a minute, because it's coming, it's coming. Really, there are more people working on it, and then at some point someone starts self-publishing. First it's often in an article, or nowadays online in a blog or something, and then a publisher will think: *oh wait a minute*.

Because for as long as I have been at trade shows, I have said: why isn't there a picture book with two moms. It just wasn't there. And then they would say that there was no market for that. No, there *is* a market, you just don't know it. At a certain point, yes, there is a market. Black Lives Matter is exactly the same.

VO

So it is this place where all these stories are told and shared. And it is this spot, a bookshop with a large table, that is very significant for many people.

Marsichka

A lot of organizations will say that they will put everything up on a website where everyone would be able to find it online. But that is not the case for everyone. A lot of people want to get a piece of paper; some people just can't access the internet safely at home; some people may have a language barrier. Well, I can think of all sorts of groups who would really enjoy having a space in the city that is pretty accessible, and where you can go and find all these flyers... where you can also just sit down with a cup of tea, just like that, because there is someone walking around who probably knows something about what I'm looking for. I still find it terribly exciting, but now I might dare to ask something. That is a very different experience from when you find Bodytalk online, and you have to go to a café full of people of whom you think whaaah. So I think that's super important.

Melle

For me, it's really a piece of community – and you can find that online too, but the feeling is really different. A lot of the people who work here are also queer, or well, very feminist and that kind of thing, they are all here. So, you see these people too, and that's quite something for a[n insecure] teenager. Seeing someone who embodies, who reflects how you would like to see yourself in the future, or something you feel at home with. And that's really a connection that you don't have on the internet. I mean you can talk to all kinds of people, you can find all kinds of information, but the feeling of just sitting in a room with the people who you think, 'okay this is my future that I can look at', that's very different.

VO

So in and around Savannah Bay, a constant interplay takes place; like a dance where books, people and stories share the dance floor. And the story isn't over yet...

Here the stories sometimes originate outside the books and come back later in those books and then go out those books again. That almost enters into a kind of... yeah, ongoing conversation. And you notice that every day, and it's different every day. Every day there are different kinds of people here, every day there are different customers and new books coming in. And that's what makes, "A story told by way of other stories" such an apt description for me, because the story just keeps going on and on through those other stories.