

Cardboard Boxes

Kartonnen dozen

Presented by: Dorota Walczak-Delanois

The novel *Cardboard boxes* is composed of three chapters and an epilogue. It is a combination of a Bildungsroman, an autobiographical novel, and a love story, among other genres. *Cardboard boxes* describes the first experiences of sexuality during late childhood and adolescence with remarkable openness, humour, and sensitivity. The narrator portrays Flanders in the 1970s, with its religious and social values. The novel contrasts the traditional Catholicism of Flanders with the socialism of Wallonia, both influenced by the rise of capitalism. It also explores education, family life, social belonging, conventions, rituals, first love, and human fascination.

The first chapter corresponds to the first of the four cardboard boxes given to the ten-year-old protagonist. The first box is a cardboard suitcase, handed out by the Christian Mutuality before a holiday camp in the Belgian Ardennes along the River Ourthe. During this trip, the protagonist, who serves as the author's alter ego, experiences his first love for another boy known only as Z. He is fascinated by Z.'s appearance, athletic abilities, beauty, and vitality. The first cardboard box contains memories of the trip, including the boys' discoveries of their own bodies, their observations of others, and their first experiences of masturbation.

The chapter also introduces four important women in young Tom's life: his older sister and childhood companion; Wieske, a family friend who serves as a guide into the worlds of politics and cinema; his beloved mother; and his Aunt Pit Germaine, gifted in storytelling and 'automatic non-stop speaking'. Despite these relationships, Tom longs above all for the attention and recognition of his older brother Guy, who remains largely indifferent toward him.

In the second chapter, the reader meets Tom and Z. again at a Jesuit college nicknamed "the Box" by its students. The boys are classmates, and Z. becomes the object of Tom's unspoken love and sexual fantasies. Tom carefully records the dates, places, and circumstances of his masturbatory experiences, which become an important outlet for his unacknowledged feelings.

The second cardboard box contains memories of another school trip organized by the Christian Mutuality, this time to Switzerland. The narrator recalls the contradiction between his true feelings and the attitudes he displays publicly. During a kissing game, he is delighted to receive a kiss from Z., yet pretends to react with disgust in order to conceal his emotions.

The third chapter centers on the third cardboard box, which contains memories of college life and a rich gallery of portraits of teachers, many of whom are also priests. The narrator describes lessons, sports activities, and books read during adolescence. The novel criticizes the boredom and inefficiency of the educational system while also presenting memorable teachers, including "Heinie", the German teacher, "Jap", the Japanese language teacher, and above all "Mussolini", a literature teacher, poet, and prominent figure of the Flemish Movement. Although Tom disagrees with

“Mussolini’s” political views and Flemish nationalism, he appreciates the teacher’s recognition of his literary talent. It is “Mussolini” who first notices the quality of Tom’s writing in a rewritten fairy tale about a prince and a princess. Meanwhile, Tom’s love for Z. remains strong. Hoping to spend more time with him, he tries to influence the choice of the next school trip to Greece, knowing they will share a room for two nights. However, the experience proves disappointing. He does not enjoy the trip, and his feelings for Z. seem increasingly impossible to fulfil. Ultimately, Tom persuades both himself and Z. that his homosexual attraction is merely a passing phase. Their attempt at a sexual relationship ends in failure.

In the epilogue, the narrator addresses both the reader and Z. directly. He reflects on his separation from Z., who in the end was not interested in a love relationship with him. Although he eventually finds another love, he remains nostalgic for the past. The narrator invites readers to preserve their memories and experiences, just as he does in a symbolic fourth cardboard box, a virtual space where precious, joyful, and painful memories are stored between the past and the future.

The novel is also political in its frank portrayal of a young homosexual love story. Through its depiction of various social environments, it examines their influence on education and identity formation. At the same time, it emphasizes the importance of individual experience and personal perspective. The novel invites readers to reflect on questions of morality, health, belonging, feelings, freedom, the impact of education and family, and on personal and collective choices in modern society.

LANGUAGE: Dutch

This title was not censored before publishing