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The Comfort Bird (Book Review)

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we can receive inspiration to seek “a refreshingly new kind of human society” (423).

Wright concludes his biography with a powerful, albeit imagined, portrait of Paul’s final hours in this life. Bringing Paul alongside the Greek martyr Socrates and the Jewish martyr Rabbi Akiba, Wright envisions Paul surrounded by friends and awaiting his executioner. As Paul prays with “Jewish-style loyalty [and] Messiah-shaped loyalty” to the one true God revealed in the one Lord Jesus, he sacrifices his life for

“not just ‘a religion’ but a new kind of humanity—a new people, a new community, a new world. A new *polis*. A new kind of love” (431). Wright imagines Paul’s final prayer and whole life as resulting in things that Paul “could hardly have imagined,” and in this way Wright encourages his readers as well to give all our love and our whole lives to serve God’s plan for a new creation “abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20).

The Comfort Bird. Hylke Speerstra. Originally published in the Frisian language as *De Treastfugel*. Translated by Henry Baron. Niagara Falls, NY: Mokeham Publishing Company, 2017. 117 pages. Reviewed by Dr. James C. Schaap, Emeritus Professor of English, Dordt University.

I’ve been to Terschelling, a North Sea island just off the Dutch coast—well, as some would have it said, the Frisian coast. On the island, I’ve biked down narrow roads my Schaap ancestors must have traveled themselves. I’ve walked on beaches they had to have known very well. I have a picture of a house family lore claims was, once upon a time, theirs—which is to say, ours.

But I don’t know how those Schaaps lived before they came to America. I know they weren’t rich. I know they held exacting definitions of what the Christian faith required of them and others, definitions that drew them apart from a goodly number of their neighbors. They left “the old country,” I’m told, for reasons they would have noted to be, first of all, religious. But, I have no doubt they were poor and sad—they’d lost three children.

What I know and what I don’t may explain why I found *The Comfort Bird*, by Hylke Speerstra, so fascinating—more than that, so enlightening and moving. Speerstra, a highly-regarded Dutch writer, wrote *The Comfort Bird* in his native Frisian language, about men and women who seem familiar—even familial. I could bike up the road to the township cemetery right now and find most of the Speerstra’s characters’ names.

In a profound and even unsettling way, *The Comfort Bird* is my story. My Schaap ancestors went to South Dakota just as one of the book’s families, the Hiemstras, did, believing a Dakota they could only have imagined to be the promised land. When grinding poverty once again left the Schaaps little choice, they moved, this time east, as did the Hiemstras.

In the last twenty years, I’ve read a few library shelves full of books about 19th-century life in the

Upper Midwest, from *Giants in the Earth* to *Black Elk Speaks*. *The Comfort Bird* is something new, peopled with characters very much like my own ancestors, very much kin to the founding generations of Dordt College, now University.

But *The Comfort Bird* isn’t simply a Dutch or Frisian story. It’s a very human story.

In Friesland, when prices drop beneath the cost of production, when there is simply no more money and little sustenance, Grandma Ytske bakes extra bread and takes to the streets to peddle it, only to discover she’s not alone: “In one year, the number of bread peddlers has doubled. Besides, it seems as if there are only Dutch Reformed bakery goods in her basket. Her honey bread may be the best, but the Secessionists, the Mennonites, the Catholics stick to their own tastes” (32).

Her husband sees no way out of their poverty, but Ytske is struck with what she imagines America promises. When he tells her joyously that their only cow will calve, Ytske tells him it’s the “the golden calf.” She refuses to believe God wants them to stay in Friesland and lets her husband know her conviction has come to her in a vision:

Through Him, I was shown a moment ago the path to a world without troubles. I have to take Sibbele aside again and present my vision of this night; this time I’ll get him to go as our pioneer to America, like the oldest son of King Hezekiah who was sent ahead to the other side of the ocean. (33)

When her husband won’t hear of emigration, she tells him, “You have to trust me and the Lord, Hizkia” (33).

Ytske’s burning desire for the unending possibilities the new land holds eventually wins out,

and the family moves to America, where, once again, grinding poverty seems their lot. When her children hear talk of far better farming land in Wisconsin, they leave South Dakota.

Meanwhile, another Friesland family confronts early 20th-century's horrendous poverty by crossing the border and milking for German dairymen, where they hear talk of the growing power of the German National Socialists and the courageous battling the Nazis undertake with powers who keep the poor from the opportunities, the justice, they deserve. Often marginalized, a son of that family feels potential for power and ends up in the forces of national socialism, and eventually the Nazis themselves.

Children and grandchildren of those two families, families once neighbors in Friesland but, by the 1940s, separated by an ocean and widely varied national and political motives, find themselves in World War II's bloodiest conflicts, from which their unscarred emergence seems almost miraculous.

The outline of the story feels evident from early on: two families, once neighbors in a tiny Frisian village, will somehow be brought together by the Second World War, despite the opposite sides each of the families' children favor.

That story line makes *The Comfort Bird* a war story too; two men fighting the same war separately, from Utah Beach to Stalingrad, and back to the Netherlands.

I don't know that I've ever read a book quite like *The Comfort Bird*. At times, it feels like memoir; Speerstra quotes from interviews with central characters who willingly reminisced with him about their war experiences. But *The Comfort Bird* is not memoir.

The historical research Speerstra includes makes the book feel like creative non-fiction. He deduces motivations by explaining doomed economic markets, by citing statistics when helpful, even though his characters could not have known what he does. He draws generalizations of character motivation based on what entire nations were suffering. The American Dust Bowl, for instance, requires background he willingly gives to his Frisian readers, even though such explanation requires significant sidetracks from the narrative. At times, *The Comfort Bird* feels like history.

Then again, when the story reveals what Speerstra could only have imagined of character motivation, *The Comfort Bird* feels like fiction. But it is not a novel.

It's just a very incredible true story, a story that concerns very real characters, characters he names. Perhaps it bears closest resemblance to reality

television stuck between the covers of a book. It's a story Speerstra stumbled on: two men at war who discover their close familial pasts in a tiny village in Friesland, the Netherlands, where once upon a time their grandparents were neighbors.

Serendipity is a darling word, but not much more substantive than the word *luck*. Generally, what's intended by *serendipity* is an explanation for something that can't really be anything other than unforeseen happenstance. It's simply *serendipitous* that just after World War II, two fighting men from long separated families strangely enough meet each other.

But then, there is immense human comfort in plain old happenstance. A man sits down beside you, and the two of you somehow discover that your daughter had a high school teacher whose son married this man's brother's daughter. Just for a moment maybe, a memorable moment, an otherwise complex world feels managed and therefore maybe manageable.

The Comfort Bird answers our very human need for order, for the old Calvinist doctrine of Providence, a sense of life as connected, a loop, a circle, a whole—what Native people consider the essential shape of things. All of us love completeness in any form, maybe most so when it's arrived at in a pattern that feels downright arbitrary.

My father used to tell me, straight-faced, that Christians should never use the word *luck* because there is no such thing in a world ruled by a sovereign God. I'm sure it gave my father comfort to believe that was true, even in those moments when a sovereign God seems to have given up his reign to the forces of darkness.

The Comfort Bird manages to bring its own species of comfort, especially to those who share much of the story it offers. I loved it, loved the book—found it occasionally confusing, but loved it nonetheless.

What drew Hylke Speerstra to research and write this story is nothing more or less than the shocking and improbable beauty of its unlikely end, when two scarred war veterans, just for a moment, identify who they are and who they've been. That's the story of *The Comfort Bird*, and its own odd comfort.

Pardon the Dutch bingo, but an hour or so after I finished *The Comfort Bird*, I walked out the back door of our house and over to the neighbor, who was, just then, mowing his lawn. "Ever hear of a man named Nanno Hiemstra?" I asked.

"Sure, he was my wife's uncle," he told me. "Why?"

I had a great time explaining.