

Herman Wekker Prize 2009: Report of the Jury

The Professor Herman Wekker Prize is awarded during each biennial *Nationaal Congres Engels* to a journalist from the Netherlands who has given outstanding service to the spread of information about English-speaking countries and cultures among the Dutch public.

The prize is named in honour of the late Herman Wekker, former Professor of English Language at the University of Groningen and one of the founders of this national conference. He had an international vision and recognised the vital importance of responsible and exciting journalism in sharing insights and understanding between and across cultures. Before his premature death in 1997 he was, as many of us still remember, very active among English language scholars, teachers and writers in the Netherlands. It was he who conceived the idea of this award, an award which, over the years, has become widely appreciated among journalists in this country.

The winners to date are:

1995: Hans Bouman

1997: Tine van Houts

1999: Charles Groenhuijsen

2001: Peter Sierksma

2003: Max Westerman

2005: Hans Steketee

2007: Lia van Bekhoven

To whom will the prize be given this year?

The jury who faced the task of answering this question on your behalf consisted of five members with different perspectives on the teaching of English in the Netherlands. I am mentioning them here in order of seniority. Ton Crijnen is former Vice-Editor of the Dutch national weekly *De Tijd*. Until his retirement last year he was senior editor of the national daily *Trouw*. He is a seasoned journalist with a lot of experience both at home and in a global context. Frans Janssen is our member with the longest experience as a classroom practitioner; with his enthusiasm he has galvanized pupils of English in the VMBO sector in Helmond for many years, and he still continues to do so with great gusto. Manon Ketz is a former student of mine and of Herman Wekker's and after several teaching and managerial jobs in professional education, she is currently Director of Studies at the Edith Stein Polytechnic of Educational Centre Twente. Though Gilberto Tevreden is still our youngest colleague he has a mature judgement. His opinion is not seldom out of step with the rest of the jury, but that only makes for greater liveliness in our debates! Gilberto teaches English in Zaandam. The chair of the jury, Arthur van Essen, *ie* myself, is Professor Emeritus of Applied Linguistics and Language Pedagogy at the University of Groningen and a former teacher of English Language and Literature in Rotterdam.

After I took over from Helen Wilcox as chair, I had my first exchange of views with the other members in the autumn of 2006. Since then we have had several informal get-togethers in Utrecht, normally at King Arthur's, a local pub. Enjoying each others' company and relishing a good meal, laid on by the NCE Treasurer, and attended by the NCE Chair, Jan Valkenburg, we exchange our views on potential candidates, if not in person, then by e-mail. As I already hinted, our debates are invariably lively. That they *are* lively is not merely due to the intake of alcohol during the meal. Indeed most of us are teetotallers! It is rather the fact

that there is always a strong field of excellent candidates working in a variety of different media, ranging from weblogs, television, radio and the Internet to daily newspapers, weeklies, magazines, and books that causes us to become so excited!

In view of the presidential elections in America in the autumn of last year, and their worldwide impact, it was natural that in the interval between the previous conference and this one, many of the journalists should have focused on the presidential candidates' campaigns and in particular on the new Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, on whom such high hopes were and are being pinned, both at home and abroad, and especially so in the Netherlands, where Obamamania is as rife as conservatism in the American heartland. Our jury was particularly impressed by the work of one journalist who managed to keep the Dutch public well informed about all that went on across America in the run-up to the elections. Following his exploits on his weblog and in NRC/Handelsblad, we were amazed at seeing him travel the length and the breadth of the United States, conducting interviews with the black and the white man in the street, meeting up with Obama's sister, friends of Obama's white grandparents in Kansas, his former mentor in Chicago, his spiritual adviser in Washington. In short, on his journeys and in his meetings this journalist has managed to fathom the feelings of Joe the Plumber as well as of the powers that be, thus providing us with a psychologically and sociologically balanced and, indeed, fascinating view of American society in the run-up to the presidential elections.

We are well aware that comparisons are odious, yet like Sir Alistair Cooke's *Letters from America* this journalist's informed and informative writings about events in America have enlightened and entertained a large and broad readership in the Netherlands. His style is always transparent and to the point, combining readability with originality of approach and a

thorough knowledge of the subject in hand. He knows all the tricks of his trade, no matter whether he is writing a news item, a report, or conducting interviews and analyses. He also possesses excellent networking qualities. His recent book in particular will provide indispensable guidance to teachers and learners, indeed to all those who are interested in the personality and actions of the current President of the greatest English-speaking nation on earth.

It is, therefore, a great pleasure and honour for me to reveal here the name of this versatile and prolific journalist: ***Tom-Jan Meeus!***

Tom-Jan Meeuws (1961) is sinds 2005 correspondent van NRC-Handelsblad en nrc/next in Washington.

Daarvóór onderzoeksjournalist bij NRC-Handelsblad en politiek redacteur bij de inmiddels ter ziele gegane opinieweekbladen 'Nieuwsnet' en 'De Tijd'.