

H.M. van den Brink, *Aurora schrijft* (Aurora Writes) Uitgeverij Augustus, 2020

On the Book and its Author

After his international success with *Over het water* (On the Water, 1998, published by Faber and Faber), a lyrical study of two young oarsmen preparing for a championship in the shadow of WWII, H.M. van den Brink's stylish and poignant fifth novel, *Aurora schrijft* (Aurora Writes), evokes an episode in the life of the accomplished, though somewhat self-absorbed Catalan writer Josep Pla i Casadevall (1897-1981)* and his mistress Aurora Perea Mené (1910-1969), whom he met in 1940. The couple lived for some years on the Costa Brava until Aurora left for Argentina, where she married. However, the bond between the two was maintained by a long series of erotic letters written by Aurora with assistance from her husband, as requested and paid for by Pla. In reality the letters were lost, but in the novel they are alluded to in Pla's reactions and from Aurora's point of view. In the 1960s Pla travelled to Argentina on board a tanker and resumed the relationship. But it was clear that the ménage à trois was not tenable in the long run, and Pla returned home, realising, for all his ironic tone, that he had truly 'lost the love of his life'. Or at least the only love that could compete with his greatest passion: writing.

The first excerpt describes the beginning of their affair, while in the second Aurora finds her own voice.

Paul Vincent

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H.M. VAN DEN BRINK

From: *Aurora schrijft* (Aurora Writes) Uitgeverij Augustus, 2020

Translated by Paul Vincent

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He thought he'd send her packing one day. After the storm had subsided. After the summer. After he had got to know every part of her body. After they had tired of the game. One day.

But the storm was followed almost immediately by a period of blistering heat that lasted far into August and from which the dark house offered cooling relief; after the summer came a splendid autumn with longer and longer nights, which stayed warm until November; and once he had learnt her whole body off by heart his curiosity did not decrease, but rather increased; nor did the intensity of their game grow less. That was of course because she kept changing the rules. Or perhaps you should say: because she did not recognise any rules and so constantly opened up new possibilities.

One day in autumn – the days had already grown shorter but even at night a mild warmth still prevailed outside – a mirror appeared in the bedroom, close to the bed. A full-length mirror of the kind one finds in shops and in fashion designers' studios. Pla had no idea where she had got the thing from, no one in the village had a mirror like that, he could not imagine that the women here would survey themselves from head to toe every day before they started on the washing or went to the market. Apart from that, he himself was not wild about mirrors. He did not like being reminded of what he looked like, not fully dressed and certainly not in his vest or naked.

Aurora stood in front of it on the very first evening. She had put candles on the floor on either side and taken off her clothes. She examined herself intently, stretched, twisted to the left and to the right, playing with the shadows and the flickering light on her belly, her breasts and her hips. Pla felt his mouth growing dry and his heart pounding in his chest. His excitement was so intense it was almost indistinguishable from fear.

He did not dare come closer immediately. She waited patiently, with that dreamy smile around her mouth that was almost imperceptible, and that he knew so well by now and still was unable to interpret. It could mean all kinds of things, mockery, nonchalance, pity, astonishment, but in any case she was holding something back, something he could guess at

but she refused to tell him. It was a game. And she was not in a hurry. She waited calmly until he started moving.

He knew every inch of her body, inside and out. The slim waist, the broad hips, the short legs, the small breasts, and under the motto 'in praise of the Mediterranean woman' he had even devoted some notes to it in the cashbook he used as a diary. The columns for expenses and income, profit and loss were admirably suited to such an inventory, which could have led to a frank article, were it not easy to work out that the censors would have been sure to use the blue pencil, so he didn't write the article.

Anyway, the description could never have had the effect of what he now saw scarcely two metres away. How was it possible that the reflection excited him even more than the body itself, of which only the shoulders, almost completely enveloped in shadow, the back, the buttocks, the calves were turned towards him? When they were finally lying on the bed, he found himself closing his eyes and while he felt her very real and close thought back to the image of just now.

The smile was there even when she did the washing with graceful movements or rinsed a couple of glasses. When on one of those mornings with an improbable and immaculate blue sky she stood at the window and looked out for ages. When after swimming they lay next to each other in a deserted spot on the warm rocks. And when she accompanied him on a walk, to a café, to the club or a restaurant.

She did not say much, gave friendly answers to questions but no more than that, and often even took a back seat when the conversation grew livelier and livelier and Pla, egged on by his friends and admirers, proclaimed one incontrovertible truth after another. Now and then he would look to the side for a moment, to where she was sitting, legs crossed in the stockings he had given her, staring quietly straight ahead with great, wide open eyes. He sometimes thought that he was the only one who could see the smile, that he was also in some small way the author of it. Sometimes he simply felt proud of her, of her presence, her appearance, her company. That is why he took her with him, not only to Barcelona and the surrounding villages, but even to Palafrugell. Not to his parents' house of course but certainly to the Casa Fraternal, a hive of gossip as always, where people did not believe for a moment that she was his housekeeper.

Winter passed, summer came again and Aurora was still there. You might think that routine had crept into their relationship and that was partly true. Pla was bad-tempered and criticised

her sloppiness, a characteristic that he tolerated in himself but not in others, wrote his articles and letters to the editor, drank and often slept till midday. But the mirror was still there. Even during the winter chill she had undressed for him and while an icy wind blew around and through the house she stood in front of it, with gooseflesh on her arms and all over her soft, firm body. In the most intimate folds, he imagined.

As she stood there like that, was she admiring herself? Did she become excited from looking at her own body, or was the whole breath-taking display just for his benefit? She stroked herself ostensibly without taking heed of his presence. But she knew very well what she was doing, he was convinced of that.

She even gradually managed to seduce him into appearing with her in the picture. At first just half in shadow behind her. His face not fully visible, but with his hands on her breasts, and between her thighs. He could not keep his eyes off these either, the strange fingers grabbing at her body. He could not believe at all what was happening though it was definitely himself showing more and more of his own body while he explored hers. He felt her wet and trembling.

Inevitably, she managed to make him go further and further. She took his breath away by holding her nipples and pulling up her breasts, by standing with legs apart and opening her labia herself, again with two slim fingers. She took him to the point where he could no longer resist, could no longer think, or only of one thing, and finally appeared fully in the picture, took her in front of the mirror in the way she had invited him to by bending further and further forward, so that after his face his chest, his belly and the beginning of his hips appeared. The whole while she stared straight at him via the mirror, only when he penetrated her did she refocus on the whole, including herself, while she rested on her knees and elbows, her buttocks pushing up and her breasts moving to the rhythm of his thrusts, her mouth at first greedily wide open, until she began to talk, describing precisely what she saw, what he could see, no more and no less, until he lost all sense of time and place and the last shred of self-control.

Sometimes when he lay on the bed afterwards, he tried to reconstruct what had happened. Did he love the image of her, let's face it, the image of her and him together, more than the real Aurora? But what was actually not genuine about that mirror image? It was she who showed it him, it was her initiative, she dreamt up what was going to happen, and if she gave in to her own fantasy it was never completely since she could also talk at the same time, even

if it was not exactly an example of critical reflection that she expressed in that hoarse but loud voice before he came.

Even in that second year, she constantly managed to think up something new. Household objects, for example, suddenly turned out to play a most surprising role when directed and staged by her. When it came to practical fantasy and freedom of thought, she was far and away his superior. Astonishing, since as far as Pla knew she had had no more than a couple of years of schooling, in an overcrowded classroom, at a strict girls' school, with black-hooded nuns. When she occasionally did some mending, darned his socks, stitched the darts in her own dresses, fitted shoulder pads, she did it in the correct way, following obediently and to the letter what someone else had devised. She cooked, but followed traditional recipes, without variations. Only where sex was concerned did she hate routine and predictability. There was always something unexpected, something that must derive from a feeling of total freedom, an innate talent for the fiction of physical love. Another possibility was that somewhere in her vague past she had had a perfect, perverse teacher. But he preferred not to think about that.

In the third year he got to know her family. Her sister came to visit. And with her came the stories that Aurora had not told him. Modesta was only too happy to dish them up, alternately stressing her sadness and her indignation, with a raised voice, tears and red cheeks; her behaviour and appearance thoroughly belied her name. It was clear that she saw Pla, despite the very simple house in the fishing village, which she had inspected with visible surprise, as a man of some wealth and at any rate of some note, who was doubtless on good terms with influential figures in the new regime. And that she expected help from him, something Aurora had never asked for.

He let her rattle on, meanwhile observing her body language, as she tried to add more force to her argument with movements of her hands and head. It was not dislike that he felt for her, rather a rift that grew ever deeper the longer she talked, a distance that became greater because she gave free rein to her emotions. He did not want to be used. Not that it was a trivial story that she was telling, to which Aurora, for whom it was of course nothing new, was from the look of it listening unmoved.

On her next visit Modesta brought a large sponge cake wrapped in a tea towel, and two children. One was her own daughter, born after the father, a communist mayor, had fled to France – he was never to be heard of again.

The second child was the son of her brother, a soldier who had made the mistake of returning from exile after the mother of his child had died in childbirth. He was imprisoned and sentenced to death. A woman friend of the family had taken the baby every day to an open space in front of the prison and held it up, so that the father could see it from the cell in which he awaited death by garrotting.

As she revealed this part of the family history, Modesta lowered her voice to a whisper, as if she was afraid the boy would hear, or simply for dramatic effect. Aurora had got up from the small table at which they were sitting, with the sponge like an intact light-brown wheel between them. She had gone over to the window and was looking out.

Pla could see only her motionless back but he could imagine very well her as always hard to read and almost unmoving face. The two toddlers sat in a corner of the room and played with a wooden horse which they took turns trying to wrest from each other's little hands.

You would expect them to make a din while doing this, but not a sound escaped them, only a little rustling and shuffling. They were used to keeping quiet in the small flat that they shared with their grandfather and with Modesta; Aurora had also lived with them there.

When her sister had finished the story, Aurora turned round, went over to the table, picked up a knife and cut the cake into pieces. The sentence of her brother Manuel, the father of the little boy, had been first commuted to life imprisonment, then to twelve years and finally he was released so that he could die at home of tuberculosis, which he had done within a few days.

Aurora cut a smaller piece for Pla than for herself. He hesitated for a moment, then got three small glasses and from a green bottle poured them each a drop of aguardiente.

They drank a toast. They ate the cake. Modesta looked at him expectantly. It was clear that she expected a reaction, a token of sympathy, perhaps an immediate offer, preferably in the form of financial support. But Pla said nothing and Aurora knelt down with the children, stuffing fragments of the cake into their hands and mouths.

Pla felt that they could not accuse him of lack of feeling. However tragic the story of those involved was, hundreds of thousands had undergone something similar. He was glad that Aurora had not pestered him about it up to now. The image of the new-born child, the bundle that was held up before the prison walls by two woman's arms, was intended to impress him. He looked at the little boy, a piece of cake still in one hand, in the other the wooden horse that was his for as long as the girl concentrated completely on eating. Afterwards the conflict was bound to be resumed. He had meanwhile also tried a mouthful of

cake and nodded approvingly to Modesta who, now with her hands idle in her lap, seemed still to be waiting for an answer. The cake was dry and airy enough, rather like an *ensaimada* without pork fat, but to his taste it was still too sweet. Pla had to admit that children sometimes looked nice. You'd like to stroke them, like some animals, apes for instance. But when it came down to it they were egotistical, impulsive, absurd, cruel and far from innocent. In a world ruled by children hunger would never be assuaged and there would be constant civil war.

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My letters to him are not about the present, they are not about me. It took a while before I realised what they had to contain. Pla made his offer, an offer I could not refuse since things were as tight in Buenos Aires as in Barcelona, and I started writing about how I was doing, about everyday things, the house and who I had to share it with, the city, the weather and my moods.

Those first letters took me hours, as I really did my best. Hours when I bit my pen and then screwed up the paper and threw it in a corner, where one of the cats sometimes took enthusiastic charge of it. Everywhere I have lived there have been cats, except in L'Escala, because Pla did not like them.

While the animal batted the ball of paper from left to right, arched its back, observed the toy silently and then pounced again, I ran my fingers through my hair and went red, much to the amusement of my housemates. I had never got annoyed at all the din they made: I was used to having people around me. But now the slightest noise could drive me crazy. I had never thought that writing was so much more difficult than speaking. I would rather have just been that cat at play.

With a feeling of relief, because it was finished, I took the first letter to the post office. I bought stamps, green and yellow, with illustrations of seas and mountains and a globe which was pierced right through by an aeroplane, intended – at least if I remember correctly – as a celebration of an international aviation exhibition. I stuck the strange pictures neatly in the top right-hand corner of an envelope which would simply go by surface mail. I saw the man behind the counter stamp it with a bang and chuck it nonchalantly into a bin by his side.

Pla reacted icily to my first attempts. Disappointed, sermonising, angry. It was not what he had ordered. Only after writing back and forth a few times did it begin to dawn on

me: what he wanted to read must not be about the new life that I had begun. Far from it. Not about me. I must talk about life with him, how it might have been if I had not boarded that boat. And especially at night, of course. I had to fantasise. And use words that you do not normally put down on paper, but that he gets excited by. I had to talk about the past as if it were simply still there.

What a blessing when I no longer had to do it alone. When Carnicero [her future husband] came into my life.