Dola de Jong – *The Tree and the Vine* reviews

‘This compelling novel allows us entry into a world in which the word lesbian is unspeakable and to be a Jew is unspeakably dangerous.’ – Evelyn Torton Beck, editor of *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*

‘A masterful depiction of the love of two women, one of whom loves without understanding her own sensuality, while the other indulges in passions with little concept of love.’ – Johan P. Snapper, Professor of the University of California, Berkeley

‘The tree and the vine is an intelligent book that showcases Dola de Jong’s talent at portraying deeper human motives, while at the same time having an eye for the banal details of life.’ – Bo van Houwelingen, *de Volkskrant*

‘The passive Bea views herself as the spectator of Erica’s escapades, but Dola de Jong subtly allows us to experience how jealousy and growing but repressed sexual desires play a trick on both friends. Meanwhile, the half-Jewish, lesbian Erica is playing with fire now that the German regime has an eye on her. “Friendship is an area that has yet to be explored in literature”, said writer Emma Cline last summer in this newspaper. It probably has to do with them formerly being considered scandalous that so little has been written in literature about relationships between women. It says a lot about Dola de Jong’s keen eye for detail that *The Tree and the Vine*, portraying the fascination of the timid Bea for the charismatic, reprobate Erica, reminds one so much of the big hit of last summer *The Girls* by Emma Cline. And that this writer draws you into this relationship as if it just happened yesterday, and not a long time ago, in the repressive 30’s.’ – Jann Ruyters, *Trouw*

‘Bea and Erica are wonderful, real-live characters. Bea’s clumsiness and Erica’s desperate reactions give meaning and direction to their relationship. It is a touching and delicately written story of a women that can only conclude afterwards that she had let her chance to happiness pass by. Well done and still worth reading!’ – Jannie Trouwborst, *De leestub van alles*

Full review – *The Tree and the Vine*

**Precarious relations**

Marja Pruiss, De Groene Amsterdammer, 1 March 2017

Dola de Jong, who died in 2003, wrote the remarkable novel *The Tree and the Vine*. The novel dates from 1954 and it seems that the publisher initially shied away from its publication. Why? It is an allusive rather than a blunt novel, and in so far as perversion is concerned, it is of merely
imaginative nature. Possibly the fact that it deals with an unhappy relationship between two women was shocking enough, I don’t know. The intensity with which the fairly analytical narrator evokes a to herself unknown and uncontrollable emotion is by all means still effective many years later. *The Tree and the Vine* is indeed somewhat shocking, but I am still wondering what it is precisely about this book that renders it so touching.

Publisher Eva Cossée had earlier discovered other gems of Dutch literature in her mother’s bookcase and breathed new life into them. Accordingly, the reissue of *A Foolish Virgin* by Ida Simons was a great success, and also Dola de Jong’s most successful novel in its time, *The Field*, again attracted a broad and international readership last year. Dola de Jong’s career as a writer is exceptional: On the eve of the Second World War, after a short-lived dancing career and an interlude as a journalist, she left the Netherlands, and eventually built a new life in the United States. She wrote in English and was better known and more successful in America than in the Netherlands.

It seems natural to compare Dola de Jong’s *The Tree and the Vine* to for example *Eenzaam avontuur* (Lonely adventure) by Anna Blaman, published seven years earlier, but only for the superficial reason that it also explores intimate relationships between women and exudes a similarly serious atmosphere. In terms of literary style and topic, it can just as legitimately be discussed together with the cautiously narcissistic work of André Gide and the oppressive novel *Giovanni’s Room* by James Baldwin. Precisely because its narrative doesn’t follow the beaten track that allows for a relationship between a man and a woman to develop, intimacy and the yearning for it are depicted as unadorned as possible. There is no protocol, no sanctuary, no protection by heterosexuality. You could say that in *The Tree and the Vine* the drama of dependency is the central theme, if it weren’t for Connie Palmen’s patent on this drama, which pronouncedly shaped her novel *The Friendship*. Yet, *The Tree and the Vine* is not really comparable to this novel, neither in narrative tone nor in context.

The narrator in *The Tree and the Vine*, the secretary Bea, looks back on her friendship with Erica, whom she met 1938 through a mutual friend. Already on the first pages, the writer clearly illuminates the difference between company you put up with and company you choose yourself. The latter constitutes attraction at first sight: being unabashedly and completely irrationally under the spell of someone’s appearance. ‘For a long time, I thought that my role was purely that of the spectator, but now I know that I rearranged my life course for Erica. And who can determine whether it was better like this, or whether I would have been happier without her? I surely can’t.’ Within a month they share an apartment on the Prinsengracht in Amsterdam, thanks to Bea’s practical attitude and financial resources. The author leaves no room for doubt about both having their own bedroom, but the sliding door between their rooms remaining closed seems to be more Erica’s wish than that of Bea. The relationship couldn’t have been more imbalanced anyhow: Erica simply does her own thing with Bea either following or beating about the bush. The words Dola de Jong puts into her narrator’s mouth resonate of Freudian thought and are beautiful in their precision and weightiness. ‘I was spared the anguish of insight and understanding during this first year, simply because I had disposed myself to reservation.’

Maybe Bea gains some insight after that first year, namely that Erica’s real life predominantly happens beyond her field of vision. This doesn’t mean that she learns to defend herself against Erica’s moods, secrets and asocial behaviour. Their cohabitation becomes increasingly the story of the tormenter and its victim; both cling to their destined roles. Bea’s worry about the imminent outbreak of the war fades in the face of her emotions concerning her fight with Erica. By means of a sophisticated narration technique, De Jong alternates between experiencing and
looking back, creating a sombre tension between what the narrator knows and what she feels. ‘And even now, despite having the entirety of this human’s life within my field of vision, I still wonder if what I took for a growing tree in the distance wasn’t perhaps a lifeless trunk, its own green suffocated by the weeds growing around it.’ Erica is elusive and boundless and Bea transforms into a dog panting after her, and very occasionally expects to regain her self-esteem by taking action, but she is prepared to be whistled back. ‘It is bizarre what one does to oneself’, writes De Jong dryly. Bizarre yes, but at the same time it isn’t. *The Tree and the Vine* is an intriguing work, a study of obsession and humiliation.