

## A Biographical Paper on Herman Koch

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Tonight's author was born in the fall of 1953 in the city of Arnhem, which is situated in the eastern part of the Netherlands. The site of significant WWII battles, the second major attack on the city took place in April 1945. After this devastating conflict the residents of Arnhem and its surrounding towns and villages were forcibly evicted from their homes by the Germans. Many families had their possessions confiscated and distributed among the victors.

Citizens were not allowed to return home without a permit and most did not do so until the summer of 1945. The reconstruction of Arnhem was slow and disruptive, taking almost 25 years to be completed, and it's possible this is the reason the Koch family moved to Holland when Herman was two. In Amsterdam his father was, for an interim period, director of the liberal Dutch social-democracy newspaper *Het Vrije Volk*. A successor to a pre-war socialist daily, it was the biggest newspaper in the Netherlands and at its peak had over 300 editors and reporters.

His mother was an artist and goldsmith. In his spare time as editor, the father wrote children's books. There were four half-siblings from a previous marriage. Elsa Koch, an award-winning children's writer 20 years Herman's senior, published under the pseudonym *Els Pelgrom*. Another half-sister was a translator of literature. Although I was unable to learn more about the other children, it appears the family was close.

Herman appears to have also inherited his parents' artistic skills. Even at a young age he was writing stories and drawing comics. His parents enrolled him at the famous Montessori Lyceum Amsterdam, the first secondary Montessori school in the world, which, after the war, was experimenting with a lot of educational concepts, but he had trouble fitting in. He was - as he later recorded - "good at nothing."

A nervous and thin child, in class he acted the comic to mask his profound shyness and was known for his sense of humor. And his writing got attention: Dutch teachers were impressed by his essays and stories. But he was intentionally disruptive in class and consequently sent to a psychologist to sort things out. The psychologist's advice? Write more stories.

Unfortunately, his classroom presence remained hostile and he was expelled from the Montessori school as a negative influence. He was then accepted at the Spinoza Lyceum, a progressive public school in Amsterdam where independence and cooperative behavior were emphasized in an artistic environment.

A love of literature developed during his late teens at the Lyceum, when he was introduced to the works of Chekhov, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Later he read Salinger, Fante, and Hemingway. In an online Good Reads interview, when asked what Dutch books had influenced him, he claims there was only one: *The Dark Room of Damocles* by W. F. Hermans, and added, "Maybe Dutch literature...is unique in that it wasn't noticed in the past 200 years by the rest of the world."

His mother's death from an incurable illness when he is seventeen left a big impression on the young man. At school he was having difficulty writing the final essay needed to graduate. At the same time, he was also attempting to get a short story published in a Soma magazine-an effort that failed because he insisted on delivering the manuscript personally to the homes of three different editors, none of whom happened to be there when he showed up. Troubled by the state of his life, he left home in hope of changing outcomes, looking for activities that challenged him to do what he could not or dared not do.

After a year working on a Finnish farm, Koch, who is fluent in multiple languages, returned home to Amsterdam and scratched out a living translating detective novels for a publishing house, although he remained unable to work on his own book. Following his father's death in 1978, Herman, now 25, decided to move to London, but there he is unhappy and stressed out - having bouts of hyperventilation. But on the day his live-in girlfriend ends their relationship he learned that a literary magazine had accepted one of his stories. He is at last a published writer. Crisis averted.

Led by his keen interest in comedy, he would eventually embark on an acting career, writing and performing for the Dutch absurdist radio program *Borat*, which was first broadcast in 1984 and aired four years.

A year later, he collaborated with two other comedic writers to produce an absurdist comedy sketch show called *Jeskafit* for Dutch television, in which he also acted in a principle role. The title of the show itself means “ashcan” in a local old Germanic ethnic language. It was enormously successful program and would establish his celebrity as a comedic actor.

But Koch never abandoned his fiction writing while working in television. He made an understated début with ‘The Passerby’, a collection of short stories, in 1985. This allowed him to make a substantial impact on the literary scene while still working within the television industry. This first book was followed by another collection, *Hansaplast for a Rebel*, written under the pseudonym Menno Voorhof. His first novel, published in 1989, “Save Us, Maria Montanelli”, was about a victim of Montessori schooling and has been described by one critic as a “mixture of confession and tirade in the style of J.D. Salinger”. It ushered in the satirical twist of Koch’s fictional focus on the foibles of middle-class families.

During this period, he also wrote newspaper columns for the liberal Dutch daily *The People* under his pseudonym Menno Voorhof. Additionally, he had minor roles - more like celebrity appearances in other TV shows. All this acting helped focus Koch’s fiction writing: “It taught me how to find a voice for a character, which is the most important thing. Once you know how someone speaks, the scene or novel is already 90 per cent done.”

By 2005 the co-writers of *Jeskafit* agreed it was time to retire the show. “I got the idea in my head that living in another country would stimulate my writing. It did,” Koch says. “I worked for radio as well during that period, on another comic program, but the distance from my own country and, more importantly, the distance from myself, gave my writing a new impulse.”

He lived again in Finland for half a year, Morocco for another six months, and finally in Spain for seven years, mostly in Barcelona, where he met and married his current wife, the writer Amalia de Tena. Amalia wrote an award-winning

biography about her Spanish family and their postwar life after eviction from their land during the Franco-Spanish war. Eventually the book was translated into Dutch by Herman's half-sister Elsa, who also lived in Spain.

Koch opted for novels that worked from a perspective of social-commentary. Known for having an extremely astute eye when it comes to human interaction, he has been able to exploit the foibles of human nature. This has all made for a style that's extremely easy to relate to, something which audience's worldwide have reacted to. He raises questions about plot and character in his storylines that he chooses not to answer.

Even while acting and writing script, during the 15-year run of *Jeskafit* Koch managed to publish five short-story collections and 4 novels. But his big literary breakthrough came in 2009 with his 6th novel, *The Dinner*, which has now been translated into 21 languages and sold over one million copies throughout Europe. Later works are *Summer House with Swimming Pool* (2011), *Dear Mr. M* (2014), *The Ditch* (2019), and, more recently, an anthology: *Amsterdam Noir* (2019).

A Dutch play of *The Dinner* was in theaters by 2011 and a Dutch movie of the book was released in 2013. Four years later the English-language version film was released, with the screen-play adapted with a softer ending for the American audience.

His writings continue to raise questions about our bonds and values, both on a personal and a societal level, but leave the answers to the reader. Koch says he is drawn to the notion of moral codes breaking down; his characters are embittered and often emotionally unhinged.

In a Reuters interview he noted, "The interesting thing about writing for me is that I know I can very easily be persuaded to change my mind. In a novel, you can hold every opinion on a subject simultaneously, using different characters to advance opposing opinions. You can weave all your own doubts into the storyline".

Although considered a "high impact writer" in his country, he's spoken wistfully to the press about going back into oblivion and not being that well known, at least in his own country. He doesn't necessarily like being recognized as Herman Koch

the writer and having to talk about his books. “I also like to talk about football or the Olympics or movies”.

In his view, having literary success arrive later in life has had its benefits. “This success that came to me later is a kind of bonus. I treat it more like a present than thinking I’ll finally show the world how good a writer I am. I don’t have that ambition any more. Maybe I never had it”.

He continues to write and publish work both under his name and his pen-name, currently living in Amsterdam with his wife Amalia and their adult son Pablo.