

An Angel Among Publishers

Jos Knipscheer In Memoriam 1945-1997

by Astrid H. Roemer

With thanks to Franc Knipscheer
The Hague, Winter 1997

My Reflections

It is difficult for me to separate Jos Knipscheer the man from Jos Knipscheer the publisher. For me the two dimensions are hard to keep apart. Even when he became ill and his involvement in the publishing business was sporadic at best, he was and remained "my publisher." In this respect his significance for me lies in the fact that he more or less prodded me to choose writing as a profession. He did this by continuing to publish my work, by regularly inquiring about new work, by greeting my manuscripts with joy and treating them with appreciation. But more than anything else, as my editor he turned me into the self-assured writer that I am today by giving me the unlimited freedom to search and to experiment; he remained present and involved by asking just the right questions and by letting me find the answers.

It was around 1977. I had been living in the Netherlands for three years. By that time I had three publications to my name: a collection of poetry, a novel and a novella. As was customary (and still is), these had been privately published in Paramaribo. Jos Knipscheer was working at the time for various newspapers, among them *PLUG* and the *Volkskrant*. He had discussed my work in those papers, and in quite positive terms. It was the first time that a Dutch journalist had given any coverage to my work in the pages of a Dutch newspaper. Jos Knipscheer made sure that I received copies of his reviews. About a year later he attended a Suriname literary evening in Amsterdam and came up to speak to me. He told me that he was interested in my work and was launching a publishing company. We have been in touch ever since. Jos Knipscheer has given back to Dutch literature its colonial past in the form of authentic voices. His commitment was never incidental but structural. And I believe that he could take all the risks he took because he knew that what he

and his brother Franc (and others) were doing was necessary and right. He inspired me to produce manuscripts because I knew that he cared not only for my work but also for me. I'll never forget him. His position in my life is fast and secure, an anchorage for my beginnings in the Netherlands. Meeting him was the best thing that has happened to me as far as the Netherlands is concerned.

His Biographical Facts

Jos Knipscheer (born 7 February 1945 in Amsterdam) began his career in the book trade in the 1970s, first as a translator (among his works were Angela Davis's *An Autobiography*, Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and four novels by Richard Brautigan) and as a literary reviewer of non-white Dutch and English literature for the important Dutch daily newspaper the *Volkskrant* and as editor and pop journalist for the musical magazine *OOR*.

In 1975 he became the co-founder and editor of *MANDALA*, a magazine for international avant-garde and ethnic literature. To continue this multicultural idea, he and his brother Franc began a literary publishing house in 1976 that they called IN DE KNIPSCHEER. During those early years, IN DE KNIPSCHEER was for many Native American and black American authors the first non-English publisher to issue their novels in translation. Examples are James Welch, N. Scott Momaday, Craig Strete, Leslie Silko, Alice Walker, Charles Johnson and Ishmael Reed. These were soon followed in 1980 by translations of English, French and Spanish Caribbean and South American writers such as Edgar Mittelholzer, Earl Lovelace, Maryse Condé, Simone Schwarz-Bart, Miquel Barnet, Ariel Dorfman, and Osvaldo Soriano. A typical feature of their publishing program was to issue original Dutch works by young authors whose roots were in the former Dutch colonies (Indonesia, Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles). They launched the now-famous Jewish author Leon de Winter, the Euro-Asians Marion Bloem and Frans Lopulalan, and the Suriname authors Edgar Cairo and Astrid H. Roemer. The publisher did not neglect older work, however, and made sure that the writing of such noted authors as Albert Helman (Suriname) and Boeli van Leeuwen (Curaçao) was made accessible to a large audience, thereby inspiring these aging artists to produce new work.

From 1978 to 1984, Jos Knipscheer was the co-organizer and presenter of the popular One World Poetry Festivals. He brought poets and performers from all over the world to appear at the Kosmos, Paradiso and the Melkweg in Amsterdam.

At the end of the 1970s Jos Knipscheer became aware that he was suffering from a kidney ailment which kept him from pursuing a regular work schedule and, in early 1987, forced him to undergo a kidney transplant. He continued in a weakened condition, but it was not until 1993 that he pulled out of the publishing house for good. On February 9, 1997, on the birthday of his daughter Zohra, he had a stroke. He fell into a coma and died on February 10, 1997.

Posthumous

“Reading¹ your novel *‘The Master’s Bedroom’* (*Gewaagd leven*) was a unique experience. When I started out I was profoundly fixated on the state of my health. At the end of last year; I felt so weak that I decided to sign up for a cardiac rehabilitation program. For the first three months of this year, dealing with my health became a full-time occupation; three mornings each week in rehab, two afternoons and evenings each week in dialysis. I began to read your book during the first hour and a half or so of the dialysis – that is, bit by bit – and by the time I finished it was almost summer. Despite this choppy concentration I never had the feeling that I had lost the story line somewhere along the way, that I had to go back and reread what I had lost. When I had turned the last page I gave in to the urgent need to read the prologue once again. I discovered that the prologue works just as well as a continuation of the last chapter, which makes your book a completely rounded story. I read it that way and enjoyed it immensely. It wasn’t until the second reading that I got to really know the characters and to care for them. And now that I’ve gotten to know them, I only hope that they continue living on in your next books of the trilogy.’

How could Jos Knipscheer and I have known that my trilogy of novels would be posthumously dedicated to him? 2

Translated by Nancy Forest-Flier

¹ Fragment of a letter from Jos Knipscheer to Astrid H. Roemer; Amsterdam, October 9, 1996

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