

Billowing Summer Frocks [1979] German / Swedish / French



Robes d'été flottant au vent, Edition Gallimard, 2014, translated by Philippe Noble; *Flatternde Sommerkleider*, Piper Verlag, Munich, 2002, translated by Thomas Hauth; *Fladdrande sommarklännigar*, Norstedts Förlag, Stockholm, 1983, translated by Per Holmer.

A search for harmony

In the first part of *Billowing Summer Frocks* we are introduced to eight-year-old Edo Mesch during a languid summer in rural Zeeland. He clings to his mother, but he also torments her. His squint keeps him indoors and away from his friends. Angry and proud, he spends his days sailing the imaginary seas with the aid of a rake. As Part Two opens, we watch as 17-year-old Edo gets into a black Citroën DS belonging to an attractive aunt. This is the beginning of a three-week involvement in a depressing triangle. The sensitive boy is now a difficult young man who is doing his best to believe in a philosophical system that can reduce all phenomena to a principle, while yet struggling with his feelings for his aunt.

At the beginning of the third part, Edo - now 24 years old - is on a ferry in the Mediterranean with his girlfriend Nina. By the time they disembark, the relationship is over. Edo escapes to Rome, but still cannot find peace, instead becoming entangled in erotic relationships, apparently determined to destroy everything around him, and himself in the process. Ultimately this places him in a situation where all his burdens fall from him, leaving only the will to survive.

This book took the literary world by storm in 1979: it made compulsive reading. The scenes he describes remain indelibly etched on the retina, and, thanks to subtle shifts in perspective, the novel retains its momentum and dynamic to the very end.

The themes which the author touches upon have earned the book its enduring reputation. Edo is a walking bundle of contradictions. He yearns for love, but walks away as soon as it appears. He wants to be in touch with his feelings, but is forever rationalising. He searches for naturalness, but is the epitome of artificiality. In the end, it is all about achieving harmony. Here the title scene is revealing when Edo, as a boy, is on the back of his mother's bike. They're on a cycle trip, together with a neighbour and her son. He feels the rush of the wind and sees the women's skirts billowing around their legs. An 'incredible sensation of light and space' comes over him. At last, things are all right. 'Everything was simply the way it was. But he was a part of everything and he was floating.'

230.000 copies sold.

Text: Dutch Foundation for Literature www.letterenfonds.nl/en/