

Abstract:

This Master thesis examines the ethical issues and benefits of literary portrayals of real-life perpetrators, focusing primarily on an analysis of the novel *The Woman Who Fed the Dogs* (*De vrouw die de honden eten gaf*) by Belgian author Kristien Hemmerechts. The book explores the mindworld of Michelle Martin, the ex-wife of Belgian serial killer Marc Dutroux, in the period leading up to her release from prison in 2012. Following its release in 2014, the book provoked strong reactions in Belgium, influenced by the collective trauma from the Dutroux case, which contributed to the discussion on the ethical handling of real crimes.

The thesis addresses three main questions: Is the perpetrator a human being? Is understanding perpetrators important for society? What are the ethical criteria for depicting real-life perpetrators? De studie analyseert de aanpak van Hemmerechts en vergelijkt deze met *Vous vous appelez Michelle Martin*, een boek van de Belgische auteur Nicole Malinconi, met als doel te bepalen of dergelijke werken goed zijn voor de maatschappij of bijdragen aan het verdiepen van trauma's.

The analysis also includes media reactions and critical reviews, primarily of Hemmerechts' book, to assess the ethical implications of portraying the still-sensitive Dutroux case. The examination shows that although both books capture many aspects of the humanity of the perpetrators through various literary devices, they fail to offer a deeper understanding of their actions. They also introduce problematic themes that may contribute to re-traumatizing victims and survivors of similar crimes. Hemmerechts' approach sparks controversy over the ethical aspects of literary portrayals of real-life perpetrators. The study concludes that *The Woman Who Fed the Dogs* does not effectively aid in processing the collective trauma of the Dutroux case, which remains an open wound in Belgian society and does not always fully meet the established ethical criteria.