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# School for Scandal

## The Erotics of Progressive Education in Gie Laenen's Juvenile Novels

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This article examines three novels by the popular Flemish youth author Gie Laenen, written between 1975 and 1982, in which the theories and practices associated with progressive education in the 1970s are key elements of the narrative. It argues that Laenen, who was convicted in 1973 and again in 2008 of serial sexual abuse of teenage boys, used progressive education as a narrative trope both to suggest to his young readers that close attachments between young boys and adult men were harmless and to provide an exculpatory defence for his own acts. Through narratological analysis and a contextualisation of the novels within the educational culture of the time, the article shows how Laenen – by drawing upon the ideas of progressive education, using these ideas to shape his narratives, and suggesting parallels between himself (as author) and several main characters – effectively appropriated the ideals of progressive education for ulterior purposes to justify his own abusive behaviour.

In 2008, the Flemish author Gie Laenen (b. 1944) was convicted of abusing more than 20 teenage boys over a period of some 20 years. This put an immediate stop to his career as a celebrated author of juvenile literature. It was not the first time, however, that Laenen's sexual behaviour had come to the attention of the Belgian authorities. In 1973, Laenen had already been convicted of and served a short prison sentence for similar offences committed against boys from a school where he was teaching. Despite this conviction, Laenen subsequently found work with the Flemish radio and television broadcaster BRT, where he would regularly make programmes with and for youngsters, and even began teaching acting workshops for young teenagers. By the mid-1970s, Laenen had also made his debut as an author with the award-winning juvenile novel *Leven Overleven* (1975) [Surviving Life], and would soon be established as »one of the most important discoveries of the 1970s«<sup>1</sup> (de Swert 1977 a, p. 51) in a new wave of engaged youth literature. For more than a decade, Laenen would remain a popular and widely read Flemish author of this type of fiction (Willekens 1989, p. 511).

In a previous discussion of Laenen's work, I argued that many elements in his books, including a number of narrative tropes that recur throughout his work, constitute a kind of grooming of which the books' young male readers are the object (Van Eecke 2017). My analysis focused on three tropes in particular: Laenen's deliberate and emphatic projection of himself on to one of his novels' characters; his repeated use of storylines that bring men and boys together in intimate attachments that are modelled on the father-son relationship; and the creation of isolated environments in which a man and a boy can enjoy each other's company without the intrusion of other significant adults. Laenen's novels offer many variations on these tropes, which are often combined. I ar-

1 Unless otherwise specified, all translations are by the author.

gued that they attempt to seduce their young readers into an accepting attitude towards similar man-boy attachments in real life, thus potentially preparing the ground for real-life sexual abuse. However, in the course of my research it became clear that there was a further narrative trope involved in this process which I had not discussed, and which was, in fact, so complex that it would require separate treatment: the representation of teacher-student relationships or, more specifically, Laenen's representation of what were called 'progressive approaches' to education in the 1970s.

The aim of the present article is to unpack the educational trope in Laenen's work and consider its potential role within the grooming of his readers, but also to consider this trope within the broader cultural and educational context of the 1970s.

Progressive education had been developing in many forms since the early twentieth century (Freinet, Montessori, Steiner, Neill, et al.), but its prestige soared with the revolutionary fervour that swept the Western world in the 1960s. The idea of an anti-authoritarian and child-centred education chimed well with the liberal spirit of the times (Ravitch 2001, pp. 382–407); also in Flanders, where there was a vivid educational reform movement (De Coster et al. 2009). However, revelations of systematic sexual abuse in a number of such progressive schools have now tainted the legacy of the movement (Brachmann 2015; Oelkers 2011). One need only think of the highly publicised case of the Odenwaldschule, a German private boarding school that was considered a jewel in the crown of progressive education until it was revealed, in 2010, that Gerold Becker, who was one of the leading figures in German educational reform from the 1960s through the 1990s, had systematically abused boys during his years as teacher and principal of the school between 1969 and 1985 (Oelkers 2016). In the aftermath of these revelations, which also implicated several other teachers at the school, it has become clear that Becker and others used the ideals of progressive education as a foil for their abuse. I will argue that Laenen does something similar in the way his novels represent progressive education.

The main focus of my discussion will be on *Leven Overleven*, where the educational trope is both introduced and most elaborately presented, and on *Twee en twee is vier* (1979) [Two Times Two Equals Four], a teenage gay romance set in a boarding school for boys and which develops several themes from the earlier novel. A third novel that I will draw into the discussion is *Juf is naar Japan* (1982a) [Our Teacher Has Left for Japan], in which Laenen explicitly returns to the critique of education formulated in *Leven Overleven*. In a first section, I will analyse Laenen's portrayal, in *Leven Overleven*, of a progressive teacher, and suggest how the author's presentation of progressive education could be seen as a rationale for man-boy love. The second section of the article will broaden the perspective to investigate Laenen's presentation of the homosocial school environment in both *Leven Overleven* and *Twee en twee is vier*. Finally, in a third section, I will show how the author manages the fictional world of his novels in ways that implicitly promote intergenerational man-boy relationships.

Nowhere in these novels does Laenen explicitly suggest that young teenage boys and adult teachers should engage in intimate relationships. In fact, the ideas presented in the novels were perfectly in tune with theories about education that circulated widely in progressive circles at the time. I will argue, however, that one of Laenen's projects was to devise an exculpatory defence for his own abusive behaviour and to present his young readers with stories that might make them look sympathetically upon close encounters between young teenage boys and older men. The politics of progressive education provided an excellent narrative and moral foil for this project.

## Kill your darling: the progressive teacher as sacrificial lamb

The main character in *Leven Overleven* is Geert, a boy of fifteen who lives in an unhappy working-class family situation with an abusive father who is prone to drink and violence. Geert spends a lot of time at the home of his best friend Imar, whose parents are cultured and caring people (Imar's father is a notary). In the course of the school year, Geert falls in love with Tama, who finds out that she will have to leave town because her parents are getting divorced and she is to go and live with her mother. The most significant influence on Geert's life, however, is Ief, the unconventional Dutch language teacher who advocates a more open and personal approach to teaching than is usual at the school. Ief encourages his students to speak about their feelings and convictions and treats them as friends and equals rather than as subordinates. His unorthodox ideas ultimately lead to his dismissal, to the horror of his pupils. Ief appears to be modelled on Laenen himself, who worked as a teacher until his 1973 conviction. In that role, he reputedly encouraged what Fred de Swert rather obliquely referred to at the time as »a kind of correspondence between teacher and students« (de Swert 1977 a). Several years later, another critic reported that »Gie Laenen himself considers the book to be a kind of testament, a regretful and melancholy farewell to education« (de Sterck 1986, n. p.), although nothing is said about the problematic reasons for this ›farewell,‹ perhaps because the critic was not aware of them. Today, these reasons are painfully obvious and beg for a rereading of Laenen's representation of progressive education in his first novel.

When we first encounter Ief in the novel, he begins one of his lessons by playing his students a recording of Vicky Leandros singing »Comme Je Suis« [As I am]. Ief wants to take the song as starting point for a series of group discussions about social roles. He explains that each person's life is determined by socially prescribed roles that can function as constraints upon one's sense of well-being because »every role has its basic rules, and if you do not conform to them, the whole group will regard you as a suspicious person, perhaps even sick, or mad.« (Laenen 1975, p. 14) Ief also wants to break through the traditional roles assigned to teachers and students. »You are not allowed to see a teacher as a human being,« Ief explains about traditional teacher-student relationships.

Everything he tries to do, must necessarily be a ruse to get the upper hand. It is impossible for him ever to do the right thing. He only has bad intentions and is constantly playing a part. [...] But I have no intention of going on teaching like that. Either we do this together, or you do it on your own. In which case I will teach as well and as professionally as possible, but nothing more. (Ibid., pp. 33–34)

In a subsequent class meeting, Ief asks: »How can we work together if we don't know each other?« (Ibid., p. 42) He also suggests that they move the class to the school theatre and attempt to act out their experiences in dance and play. It is during these sessions that Ief, for reasons that are not specified, begins to take special notice of Geert. While the students are expressing themselves to music,

Ief noticed that Geert was struggling with himself. His contrary opinions, his daring, his objections and now his vivid playing. No, Ief thought, if he doesn't come to me of his own accord, I will never ask him anything. He is old enough to come freely or stay away. I have taught him to dare to take chances. (Ibid., p. 43)

The novel reaches a crucial point when, in the course of a class discussion with Ief, Imar tells the class that

[I] would like to ask Ief why he treats us as equals and why he wants to go down this difficult road with us. I know that few other teachers would agree with him. I also know that many among us will later speak badly of him. And I believe Ief also knows this. So why do you do this? (Ibid., p. 45)

This intervention foreshadows the fact that Henri, a student who refuses to go along with Ief's ›soft‹ approach to teaching, will complain to the school board about these sessions, and ultimately bring about Ief's dismissal. I suggest that Laenen is here voicing, through the character of Imar, a personal sense of betrayal. Abusers usually do not get caught unless one of their victims speaks out. From the abuser's perspective, this speaking out can be perceived as a betrayal of a relationship, or ›speaking badly‹ about the abuser. In fact, to this day, Laenen systematically minimises his crimes in public statements and claims to have been the victim of vicious slanders that distort the nature of his relationships with the boys that he has been convicted of assaulting (Van den Broecke 2005, p. 16–17; Stevens 2017). One could argue that this novel, published within two years of Laenen's own conviction in 1973, functions as an element in a larger process of denial and self-justification. By projecting himself on to Ief, who is portrayed as acting out of genuine idealism and affection for his students, Laenen would have us believe that he, too, was innocent and well intentioned in his engagements with boys. The narrative certainly invites the young reader to sympathise with the perspective shared by Imar and Geert, which entails regarding anyone who »betrays« Ief by »speaking badly« about him as a bad apple in the group rather than someone with a genuine complaint. Similarly, Ief's thoughts about Geert, previously quoted, imply that, if a relationship (of whatever nature) should develop between them, it would always be because Geert came to him ›of his own accord,‹ and not because he coerced the boy.

Imar's statement also sets Ief up as a martyr: someone who goes against the current of the times and who knows he will be betrayed, like Christ, and will surrender to his judges. In fact, when Ief announces to the group that the school board has urged him to offer his resignation, he explicitly asks his students not to take any action against Henri, the student who betrayed him. He effectively turns the other cheek in Christian fashion. He also adds that »this boy went so far as to intrude into the private life of the teacher to look for sensitive points where he could strike hard. [...] And this boy told stories about this class that were so distorted that they do not even deserve to be called a shadow of the truth.« (Laenen 1975, p. 96) The private details that were so painfully revealed are not specified, nor do we learn what distortions about Ief's teaching were propagated, but once again we can read in these observations the self-justification of a perpetrator – accusations are distortions, private details are unjustly revealed. Laenen has devised a narrative in which he can cast a proxy for himself, namely Ief, as the sacrificial lamb of a conservative society (represented by Henri and the school board) that crucially misunderstands his intentions.

But the presentation of Ief as a martyr has wider implications. Religion is an important theme in the novel. An entire chapter is devoted to a Christmas gathering at Imar's house to which Geert and several classmates, but also Ief and his wife, are invited. The chapter is cloyingly sentimental (songs are sung, and home-baked bread is broken and shared). In a harshly negative contemporary review of *Leven Overleven*, Eric Hulsens

called the book ›a tearjerker‹ (Sollie 1978, p. 38) and deplored its moral preaching as ›a sentimental derivative of the Gospel‹ (Ibid., p. 39). For Hulsens, the novel is an example of the sentimentalism associated with a progressive brand of Catholicism of the 1970s. But these religious elements were obviously important to Laenen, for three years later he published *Zeg het maar* (1978) [You Can Say It], a collection of self-penned modern prayers and religious services for children and teenagers which, perversely, cast Laenen in the role of a kind of lay pastor guiding his youthful flock.

There is a further religious resonance in the novel. As Ief leaves the classroom after announcing his resignation, Imar stands up and calls upon his fellow students to rise to their feet if they consider Ief a friend. Needless to say, everyone stands up except Henri, who remains seated and stares shamefacedly at his desk. In a religious analogy, Imar is presented as the faithful disciple Peter rising to the defence of Ief's sacrificial Christ, while Henri is cast as Judas. This casting of Ief as a charismatic teacher and his students as his loyal followers is highly significant. In his inquiry into the historical roots of child sexual abuse in German educational reform movements, Jürgen Oelkers writes extensively about the ›pedagogical eros‹ that governed much late nineteenth-century thinking about education. This was the notion, based on ancient Greek pedagogics and articulated, among others, in the work of Plato, that the ideal pedagogical relationship was a bond of love between a male youth and an older man (Oelkers 2011, pp. 17–18). Under the designation of the ›love of comrades‹ this pedagogical eros characterised educational reform as it was pioneered in England and subsequently adapted in Germany and elsewhere (Oelkers 2011, pp. 23–71); for example in the influential work of Hartmut von Hentig, whose book *Platonisches Lehren* (1966) envisioned schools as communities on the model of the Greek polis (Oelkers 2016, pp. 110–111). The concept of love of comrades also influenced the late nineteenth-century homosexual emancipation movement that took shape in the intellectual circles around Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and John Addington Symonds (Dowling 1994). These men were educated at Oxford University, which is organised around colleges where, based on a medieval monastic model, teachers and students lived and worked together, and where the classics were taught in a tutorial system that sponsored ›an intense but secular religion of friendship‹ (Ibid., p. 44) inspired by Platonic pedagogical principles. Finally, educational reformers also found inspiration for this pedagogical eros in the work of the nineteenth-century American Transcendentalists: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman (most specifically in *Leaves of Grass*, 1860, where he sings of ›the love of comrades‹). This was the tradition that was popularised in the film *Dead Poets Society* (Peter Weir, 1989), in which Robin Williams played the charismatic teacher whose students rally around him as their Whitman-quoting Captain in scenes that are uncannily similar to Imar and his classmates rising to express their support for Ief. The Catholic sentimentalism that Hulsens identified in *Leven Overleven* also draws on this history of pedagogical eros, which provides Laenen with a philosophical framework for the symbolism of the novel.

### Boyzone: boarding school homosociality

The concept of love of comrades leads quite naturally to a discussion of one of the subtler subtexts of *Leven Overleven*, Imar's homosexuality. It is merely hinted at in the course of the novel, particularly in two brief passages where Imar is taunted by Henri for not running after girls (Laenen 1975, p. 61 and 89). However, the reader who is attuned to homosexual code, or who is on the lookout for subtle clues, can find several

other indicators. For example, when Imar is first introduced as Geert's best friend, Imar is described (with the kind of sentimentalism that Hulsens decried) as a person »with whom he could share all secrets and who silently taught him all the things of life with a gentleness that was much like that of a girl, but without being really fey or affected« (Ibid., p. 12). It is only at the very end of the novel that it becomes clear to Geert that Imar was, in fact, in love with him, and that Tama knew about it. This explains why, in another subtle clue, Tama had at one point urged Geert to »be kind to Imar« (Ibid., p. 64) and why Geert writes to his friend that »I did not know how much you loved me. And I hope that you, too, can find a friend like I found Tama.« (Ibid., p. 109) A final indication that Ief is actually attracted to boys – despite the fact that he is married and that his wife is, at the end of the novel, expecting their first child (Laenen himself was married and had a daughter) – can be found in Geert's final letter to Tama, where he writes that »Imar greatly resembles Ief. That may explain their close friendship and their profound kindness towards others.« (Ibid.)

This homosexual subtext became the main theme of *Twee en twee is vier* (1979), a novel published four years after *Leven Overleven* and which again takes up the educational trope of the school as repressive environment. In *Twee en twee is vier*, Laenen tells the story of Thomas, a boy from a very well-to-do family who has just turned sixteen, and who is sent off to boarding school because his mother has to accompany his grandmother abroad for extended medical treatment. He immediately befriends Jan, who soon becomes the boyfriend of Thomas's sister, Krisje. Thomas himself falls in love with Klaasje, a boy of fourteen who looks much younger than his age and who innocently assumes that he and Thomas are just ordinary friends. When the other students find out about the relationship (or intimate friendship), Thomas is relentlessly bullied and told by his teachers to stay away from Klaasje. When Thomas tries to visit Klaasje at home, the boy's mother warns him that he »should find other friends. My boy is too young for those kinds of games. You'd better get out of here before I call the police.« (Laenen 1979, p. 125) In the end, Thomas commits suicide. He kills himself in the woods in the exact same spot where, at the beginning of the novel, he had killed a young deer to save it from being chased and killed by hunters. The symbolism is obvious: like the deer, Thomas has now become the hunted who must be put down.

Like Ief in *Leven Overleven*, Thomas is the sacrificial lamb on the altar of propriety. In *Twee en twee is vier*, however, the society that demands this sacrifice is represented by the repressive environment of the boarding school, which reconnects with the trope of progressive educational models in Laenen's work. At boarding school, Thomas has to battle two enemies: the school system on the one hand and the student and teacher population on the other. The school system is described by Vanherve, a teacher who sympathises with Thomas, as a kind of production unit: »In our school factories, there is no more room for talent. [...] We would prefer to only have children cast from the same mould: average children.« (Ibid., p. 32) This echoes the rhetoric found in Everett Reimer's highly influential essay-cum-tract, *School is Dead* (1971), which became a core text for progressive approaches to education in the immediate post-1968 era. This essay was explicitly singled out, in a student workbook on Laenen's first novel, as an important intertext for understanding *Leven Overleven* and the attitudes to education defended by Ief in that novel (Sollie 1978, pp. 14–17). One of Reimer's main criticisms of the modern Western model of schooling was that »schools treat people and knowledge the way a technological world treats everything: as if they could be processed« (Reimer 1971, p. 89). Reimer refers to this model as »a knowledge factory which must run on a prearranged

schedule« (Ibid., p. 40) and one of the main functions of which »is the sorting of the young into the social slots they will occupy in adult life« (Ibid., p. 25). Besides this efficient manufacture of people as production units, schools also inculcate dominant social values. »School domesticates. [...] School requires conformity for survival and thus shapes its students to conform to the norms for survival.« (Ibid., p. 18)

This critique of the educational system was already apparent in Ief's refusal to adhere to the traditional hierarchical teacher-student relation in *Leven Overleven*: education is something that should be done ›together‹ and where students ought to be encouraged to think critically and to act like, and be treated as, equals.

This theme would continue to occupy Laenen and it later became the main topic of his novel *Juf is naar Japan: Bruno's avonturen met de Algehele Automatische Juf* (1982a) [Our Teacher Has Left for Japan: Bruno's Adventures with the Fully Automated Teacher]. In this novel, which was written for young readers aged around eight or nine, a love-sick teacher walks out on her class in pursuit of her boyfriend, who has left to work in Japan. She is replaced by a »Fully Automated Teacher,« a prototype of a robot that fulfils all the tasks of a teacher to perfection. She is incredibly strict, notices everything the children say or do, and hands out extra assignments and punishments for the smallest transgression. For efficiency's sake, the children's names are replaced by numbers: they are reduced to containers for knowledge whose performance and behaviour is constantly monitored and corrected by the all-seeing robot. When the students become aware of the Ministry of Education's plans to mass produce this robot as a cost-saving ploy and to improve the efficiency of education, they revolt and decide to sabotage the robot. At the end of the novel, the message of the story is made explicit: »Children are perfectly capable of governing themselves. Each child is unique, and if each child is allowed to cultivate its individuality, you educate people and not robots!« (Laenen 1982a, p. 116) Needless to say, a good educational environment based on this model would have allowed a boy like Thomas in *Twee en twee is vier* to flourish rather than have driven him to suicide.

The school system is not the only hurdle between Thomas and happiness. He also has to battle the other students and the boorish teachers, who together form a homophobic mob from which only Jan and Vanherve seem to be excluded. In fact, Vanherve at one point says that Thomas »deliberately did not want to conform. I admired that very much about him.« (Laenen 1979, p. 31) The combination of Thomas's well-to-do background, his principled aloofness in relation to the other students, and his homosexual attraction to Klaasje effectively put him in an almost untenably isolated position at school. In this respect, a significant motif in the novel is the fact that, each time he meets Klaasje, Thomas tells the boy part of the story of Hector Malot's novel *Sans famille* (1878), in which the young boy Remi forms an itinerant family unit with an older man and his dog. In view of Laenen's own attraction to young teenage boys, the choice of this novel is hardly innocent. As I argued above, Laenen projected himself on to the character of Ief in *Leven Overleven*. I also suggested that Geert's remark about how Imar and Ief resemble each other could be read as a hint about Laenen's own attraction to teenage boys. *Sans famille* is the first in a series of similar clues about Laenen's identification with Thomas in *Twee en twee is vier*. First of all, the novel makes a point of stressing that Klaasje looks much younger than his actual age. This means that he and Thomas, as a couple, look to be much further apart in age than they actually are. This is reinforced by the remark by Klaasje's mother quoted above. In Flemish, the reference to »dergelijke spelletjes« [those kinds of games] (Laenen 1979, p. 125) is actually a common colloquial form of referring to inappropriate sexual games that older boys might play with younger boys:



it suggests that Thomas is an older predator preying upon Klaasje rather than a loyal friend or partner.

Laenen's identification with Thomas is most explicitly suggested, however, by the words of the narrator. The novel *Twee en twee is vier* has two narrative levels that feature in alternating chapters: the story of the last months of Thomas's life and an account of its reconstruction. This latter level consists of letters exchanged between the narrator and Thomas's sister Krisje, who is helping him to assemble all the pieces of the puzzle. These letters may arguably be read as a distancing device which helps to blur the distinction between the narrator and the author, an effect that is underscored when the narrator explains to Krisje how, in the course of his research, he has come to identify with Thomas. He compares his attempts to reconstruct the story to the slow emergence of an image in a Polaroid photograph:

I suddenly discovered an unknown player emerging from the background. [...] He has the same colour eyes as me, and his mouth is my mouth. I emerge from Thomas's image. I thought I could write this story from a safe distance, but this has turned out to be impossible. [...] I become vulnerable along with him. [...] Judgement falls upon me as brutally as it did on Thomas. To some extent, my name has become Thomas. (Laenen 1979, p. 117–118)

Of course, public judgement did fall quite brutally upon Laenen in 1973, as it would again in 2008 (which was an appeal trial after a previous conviction in 2005). It could therefore be argued that part of Laenen's project with *Twee en twee is vier* was to create a kind of parable in which Thomas's persecution becomes a symbol for Laenen's own. Both, in Laenen's view, are innocent victims of a mob that does not understand the true nature of their attachment to (a) younger boy(s). Both are, as already suggested, portrayed as sacrificial lambs.

### **A death in the family: multiple narrative levels and paedophile family romance**

The last two chapters of *Leven Overleven* are presented as a long letter written by Geert to Tama. He explains how, after Ief's resignation, he and several of the students visited Ief at home. During this visit, Geert's mother dies unexpectedly. The news is received by Ief in a phone call from Geert's father. Nothing in the novel has prepared the reader for this sudden dramatic event, nor is any explanation offered for the mother's sudden death. But it does allow Laenen to introduce a narrative trope to which he would regularly return in his subsequent novels: the domestic pastoral of an adult man and a young boy living together in blissful isolation from the rest of the world. In this case, the mother's death unites Geert with his father. The grief-stricken man promises his son that he will mend his ways, which includes giving up drinking. Laenen then forces an upbeat ending upon the novel. In the final section of the last chapter, after a blank line following the end of Geert's letter, the narrative voice abruptly states: »A boy is walking down a street.« (Laenen 1975, p. 110) Nobody pays any attention to the boy, except for »a man with a moustache and a camera, [who] looks at the boy, captures him through his lens and takes him along as a holiday souvenir« (Ibid.). The boy walks on and stops at the gate of a factory to wait for a man. Boy and man then walk home together while cheerfully whistling a tune. On that note, the novel ends.

This brief sequence requires considerable unpacking. As I pointed out before, Laenen regularly projected himself on to his novels by introducing figures or characters that double for the real author. Ief in *Leven Overleven* is the most obvious example. Another example is to be found in the novel *Anderland* (1982b) [Otherland], in which a young boy acquires a guardian angel modelled upon Laenen. In that particular case, the identification is unmistakable because in the novel's illustrations the figure of the guardian angel was created as a Laenen lookalike, complete with the moustache that Laenen sported in author photographs, such as the one on the back cover of *Leven Overleven*. Hence, I would argue that the detail of the photographer's moustache in the concluding sequence of that novel subtly introduces Laenen himself into the text and allows him to dramatise himself as a photographer who ›captures‹ Geert with his camera.

Such a reading is reinforced by the fact that *Twee en twee is vier* ends with a similar image. Once the narrative of Thomas's suicide has come to an end, there is a blank line and then the observation: »The camera pulls back. The director calls out: ›slowly dim the lights, music!‹« (Laenen 1979, p. 126) In this case, there is no physical description of the director, but the analogy is obvious: by abruptly recasting the whole narrative as if it were an account of a film, the novel introduces a third narrative level. The sudden and unexpected appearance of the figure of the film director functions to further distance the reader from the narrative by introducing a new tier of mediation. This makes us aware of the novel as a text, and hence of the presence of the real author behind it. It requires only a small effort to connect the photographer who ›captured‹ Geert in *Leven Overleven* to the film director who is dramatised in *Twee en twee is vier*. And in both cases, Laenen himself looms large behind these emblematic figures of authorial control, especially if we consider that, from 1974 on, Laenen had been working for the Flemish broadcaster BRT, where he wrote both radio plays and scripts for television. As with the mustachioed photographer in *Leven Overleven*, in *Twee en twee is vier*, too, there is a subtle blurring of the distinction between narrator and author that is equivocal in the text, but which begs interpretation as a significant trope because it repeatedly manifests itself across several novels.

The image that concludes *Leven Overleven* – »A man and a boy whistle down a street at dusk. They are home now.« (Laenen 1975, p. 111) – can now be read as far more than a conventional authorial description of a scene: it is how Laenen himself, as author/director of the novel, chooses to dramatise these two characters. In fact, I would suggest that the significance of this scene is related to Laenen's own erotic attraction to young teenage boys, for the sudden death of Geert's mother can now be read as a deliberate elimination of the mother that functions as the catalyst for the father's transformation from a brutally abusive figure into a happy domestic companion for his teenage son. The mother's unexpected and unmotivated death serves one and only one narrative function in this novel: it allows Laenen to end his book with an image of same-sex intergenerational companionship as father and son are reconciled in domestic bliss. The book ends with a snapshot of an incestuous paedophile family romance: daddy and son happy together, with mommy (and other significant adults or siblings) safely out of the picture. Intriguingly, Ief has functioned as a kind of midwife who delivers the son back to the father. After he has received the phone call announcing Geert's mother's death, it is Ief who drives Geert home, accompanies him into the room where his mother is laid out, and finally also hugs him and tells him: »now you must help your father« (Ibid., p. 106). In an act of intergenerational matchmaking, the boy is instructed by the outcast radical teacher (and Laenen's proxy) to take the place of the mother and wife.

## Conclusion: a melancholy farewell to education

At the end of *Juf is naar Japan*, one of the characters observes that »you can only acquire wisdom if you are a little bit in love with your teacher« (Laenen 1982 a, p. 118). Obviously, many students experience crushes on their teachers, and this should not be considered problematic in itself, but in the context of Laenen's work, and considering his real-life abuse of his students, one might well wonder whether this aphorism here reflects a theory of progressive education (with echoes of Platonic pedagogical eros) or suggests a rationalisation of real-life abuse. I have argued the latter. In *Leven Overleven*, Laenen presented a defence of progressive educational ideas that could also be read as an oblique rationalisation and defence of his own abusive behaviour. As one historian of education has put it, »instead of being an ogre or the keeper of traditional mores and values, educators and teachers from the 1960s on increasingly positioned themselves as guides and companions in the process of learning and education« (Depaepe 1998, p. 224). This is also the position taken by Ief, who repeatedly makes clear to his students that he does not have all the answers, that he needs to digest what has been said, and that »I also need to seek, to study, to experiment.« (Laenen 1975, p. 34) I have argued that Laenen mobilises progressive education and the cultural currency it had in the 1970s for a more covert project: the use of juvenile literature as a tool to groom his young readers into accepting attitudes towards different kinds of friendships between adult men and young teenage boys. As such, Laenen's work invites us to reflect on the educational uses and persuasive powers of literature as an important tool for shaping the minds and attitudes of the young. When the analysis is done and the literary stratagems of Laenen's novels revealed, the image that remains is that of a man who was forced to say his melancholy farewell to education because he had been found out, and who turned to literature as a way of living out the fantasies that real life had suddenly denied him through the intervention of the law. But as we now know, the fantasy was not enough, and Laenen remained a serial abuser throughout his literary career. Both in reality and in fiction, the ideals of progressive education were appropriated for ulterior purposes. The teacher was an ogre after all. His books, I have argued, provide a key to his secrets. Or, as a great sexual liberator once said: »Never trust the teller, trust the tale.«<sup>2</sup>

2 It was D. H. Lawrence.

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## Short CV

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