



**Pauline
van de Ven**



***The Tale of the
Bamboo Cutter***

Original title: *Het Verhaal van de Bamboesnijder*

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An adult's fairy-tale about love

**Inspired by the Japanese
fairy-tale *Taketori Monogatari*,
one of the oldest literary texts
in the world**

Pauline van de Ven

The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter

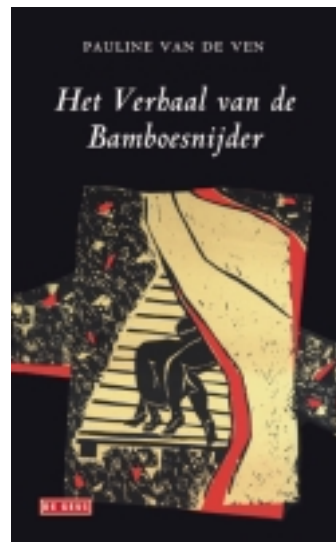
About the author

Pauline van de Ven (1956) made her literary debut in 1997 with the social satire *Drijvend paviljoen* ('Floating Pavilion'), followed by *De vrouw in het vogelhuis* ('The Woman in the Bird Cage') and *De ziel van Putter, een fabel over de dood* ('Putter's Soul – a Fable about Death'). A full time writer since 2001, she is also a graphic artist. The linocuts in *Het Verhaal van de Bamboesnijder* are her own work.

A journalist and an economist, Van de Ven was on the economic editorial staffs of the major dailies *Trouw* and *NRC Handelsblad* in the early 1980's. She wrote two popular books on economics and a number of scientific publications. From 2001 onwards, her entire focus is on prose and graphics.

About the book

An old bamboo cutter finds a little girl in a hollow bamboo stalk. He takes her home. Within a couple of months she grows into a beautiful woman, who turns the heads of all the eligible men in the kingdom. The 'Princess of Light from the Bending Bamboo', as they call her, dismisses her suitors harshly. Five princes persist. The 'princess' wants to be sure she finds perfect understanding and agreement in her future bridegroom. She asks them for gifts that appeal to her senses. The one who brings her something new and is able to describe it so well to her in advance that she can see it, hear it, smell it, feel it or taste it – will win her hand. The princes set out on the quest and find what they seek, but they all fail in the end. Then the emperor, who has also heard about this special girl, tries to win her heart.



Using the framework of *Taketori Monogatari*, one of the oldest literary works in the world, Van de Ven creates a multi-layered story about the hopeless desire for perfect loving agreement between individuals. The princes and the emperor, competing for the love of the most beautiful and unattainable girl in the land, symbolise the heart, mind and senses of one person. They illuminate various sides of the same character as well as varying expectations of love. *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* echoes Puccini's opera *Turandot*. There, too, the aloof heroine wants nothing to do with her lovers. However, whereas *Turandot* melts in the arms of her Tartar prince, the Princess of Light realises that her capacity to love is crippled, and the emperor accepts that. Paradoxically, it is this very distance and the acceptance of it that lend warmth and depth to the relationship between the princess and the emperor.

Pauline van de Ven, *Het Verhaal van de Bamboesnijder*

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Hardback, 224 p., with 12 linocuts by the author

Bibliography

Drijvend paviljoen ('The Floating Pavillion', 1997)

De vrouw in het vogelhuis ('The Woman in the Bird Cage', 2000)

De ziel van Putter, een fabel over de dood ('Putter's Soul – a Fable about Death', 2001)

The press

about *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*

'Good stories remind one of other good stories. I was reminded of De Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince and of Andersen's "Little Mermaid", that likewise depict a reality in terms of love.' – *Akkie Strijk*

'A captivating, special and unusual story with strong Japanese and mythological elements, written in a supple style. It deserves a large public.' – *Biblion advice to Dutch public libraries*

'A sparkling fairy-tale with a beautiful unraveling, illustrated with very fine linocuts.' – *Website Boekgrrls*

'Marvelous story, a real page-turner! The linocuts make it into a gem.' – *Website Boekenwurm*

about *The Woman in the Bird Cage*

'A sympathetic, at times very touching booklet.' – *Geassocieerde Pers Diensten*

'A fine short novel that sketches a loving picture of a self-willed old lady.' – *Biblion advice to Dutch public libraries*

'Movingly written, without slipping back into sentimentality.' – *Vrij Nederland*

about *Putter's Soul*

'You have to read *Putter's Soul*. Not only the story is marvellous, the presentation too deserves a

compliment. Wonderful illustrations that are separately pasted in.' – *Boekblad*

'Moves, comforts and warms the soul. Text and beautiful illustrations – pasted in separately – combine to evoke all these emotions.' – *Website Boekgrrls*

'The story is profound but not heavy, spiced with a light humour and sparkingly written. Thanks to different levels of understanding, both adults and children will appreciate the story. Moreover, the design of this booklet (12 x 18 cm) is splendid and the illustrations are little works of art.' – *Website OudersOnline*

The story has been reworked by others into a play and a musical performance for piano and choir.

about *The Floating Pavillion* (debut)

'Surely one of the best debuts of the year.' – *Algemeen Dagblad*

'Of this year's debutantes, I'll bet Van de Ven and Vredeling are going to make it. They rise head and shoulders above the others in originality, humour and, above all, readability.' – *Surplus*

'A clever, witty and original book. Written in a lucid style, with careful choice of words and lively dialogues.' – *VB Magazine, Who are going to make It? Women debutants in 1997*

'A funny book with curious observations and double-entendres.' – *Vrij Nederland*

'Entertaining and at times profound.' – *Reformatorisch Dagblad*

'A benevolent, laconic humour.' – *Leeuwarder Courant*

'Funny and clever. A social critique that should be taken seriously.' – *Radio 1 NPS*

Pauline van de Ven

The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter

A fragment from the book

One day in the spring, the bamboo cutter walked further into the fields than usual. The sky was grey, and every now and then a drip of rain fell from it. The earth smelt of leaves. The bright green bamboo was twice as tall as he was. He'd harvested enough for the new basketwork, and a glance at the sky told him it was going to rain heavier. He was just about to turn around when he saw a green bird, about the size of a pheasant with a similarly long neck and tail. He ran his sword into its sheath and followed the creature. The feathers glinted metallic in the grey light. What a strange bird, he thought. Let's have a closer look at you –

He crept closer, on tiptoe.

A twig snapped; the bird took to the air.

I suppose not, then, said the bamboo cutter.

Enough for today, it's getting too wet for me. He returned to where he'd left his sheaf and bent down. His eye caught a glimmer of something that appeared to be coming out of the end of a bamboo stalk. He knelt to look. Water soaked up from the ground through the knees of his trousers, but he was too surprised to notice. A light shone from the stalk. He shook the smooth underside between his thumb and index finger. And he saw a girl. No bigger than his thumb. In the hollow stem, the light fell on her as though the sun were shining on her head. She was holding on tightly so as not to fall; the knuckles of her little hands were white.

Carefully, the bamboo cutter plucked the little creature from the stalk. He straightened up stiffly and moved his hand away from his eyes to see better. She was crouching down and holding tightly onto his ring finger. Though small, she didn't have the oversized head or the short limbs of a child. Her arms and legs were long and fully grown. Thick brown hair hung down her back to her waist, and she wore a little black jacket with red satin piping.

The brow of the bamboo cutter, which was usually lined with a wrinkle, became smooth, and around his mouth appeared the deep tanned creases of a smile.

Hello, pretty girl! he said.

The rain pattered on the foliage. He looked at the girl, and she looked at him.

Who are you? Where do you come from?

She did not reply.

I found you in the bamboo that I plant and harvest myself, he said.

It's my bamboo –

So that makes you my child – what do you think of that?

Maybe she can't speak, he thought. I wouldn't be surprised. She's so tiny and yet so perfect. And that long hair – a strange little woman!

He cupped his hands against the rain and wind and carried her home.

The girl took a few wobbly steps on the kitchen table and fell asleep against a pumpkin conveniently placed there. The bamboo cutter's wife clapped her hands.

Just look at these little hands! And the tiny feet! And that hair! Oh, the little sweetheart. How *tiny* you are, my dear!

She was inside a bamboo stalk, said the bamboo cutter. He noticed that his wife failed to give him a towel for his wet head as she usually did, and that she had paid no attention to his soaked trousers.

It was pouring, he said. She must have got lost. Her parents will be looking for her; they must be worried. I'll report it tomorrow, otherwise it could bring trouble on our heads.

Report it? the woman said. Report it? If you hadn't found her she'd have died in the night. Feel these tiny feet - they're stone cold! How is a little thing like her supposed to survive in a bamboo field? Parents like that don't deserve a child. Anyway, she's not a child. You can see that for yourself.

The bamboo cutter looked at her hesitantly.

You found her, his wife said.

In the bamboo that you plant and harvest –

It's our bamboo –

– so it's our child!

Hmm, said the bamboo cutter. It disturbed him to hear his wife speak his own recent thoughts. He could hardly contradict them.

What do you mean, hmm? Come on, do something. Go to the attic and fetch a basket. He fetched a basket and set it down away from the draught from the window and the heat of the fire. The wife lifted the sleeping girl from the table, tucked her in and gave her a goodnight kiss.

Now there are three of us, thought the bamboo cutter. She's waited half a century for this. She knows exactly what to do. I've waited half a century for it, too, but I don't know what to do, and I'm not sure I still want it. He bent over the basket, grasped the little hand and held it for a moment. It was the little, slim, perfect hand of a woman. So lovely and tender in his big fist that he was afraid he'd break it.

He quickly let it go.

They sat by the basket the rest of the evening. Rain dripped down the windows. The wind whistled in the chimney and made the fire flicker in the grate. Around the house it bent and shook the bamboo with a rushing sound like a waterfall. The wife sighed deeply. It was a great happiness and a great uncertainty, suddenly to find the dream you'd given up long ago.

The day after, the bamboo cutter went into the field to fetch his sheaves. Among them he found a stem filled with gold from one knot to the other. This happened again and again, until another extraordinary thing happened to him: he became very rich.

Her foster parents called her Mikazuki – New Moon. True, she wasn't invisible, but she'd been just a slip of a thing when they found her. After three months of loving care, the girl was a young woman standing a head taller than them. She was exceptionally beautiful. Afraid that one day her own parents would come and claim their child, her foster parents kept her indoors as much as possible. She only came out once in a while, accompanied by the bamboo cutter.

Translated by Anne Hoey