



Bonita Avenue: A Novel

By Peter Buwalda

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"Dazzling...Critics hailed Buwalda as 'The Dutch answer to Jonathan Franzen', but his brilliance is entirely unique."--*The Times* (UK)

Siem Sigerius is a beloved, brilliant professor of mathematics with a promising future in politics. His family—including a loving wife, two gorgeous, intelligent stepdaughters and a successful future son-in-law—and carefully appointed home in the bucolic countryside complete the portrait of a comfortable, morally upright household. But there are elements of Siem's past that threaten to upend the peace and stability that he has achieved, and when he stumbles upon a deception that's painfully close to home, things begin to fall apart. A cataclysmic explosion in a fireworks factory, the advent of internet pornography, and the reappearances of a discarded, dangerous son all play a terrible role in the spectacular fragmentation of the Sigerius clan.

A riveting portrait of a family in crisis and the ways that even the smallest twists of fate can forever change our lives, *Bonita Avenue* is an incendiary, unpredictable debut of relationships torn asunder by lies, and minds destroyed by madness.

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Editorial Review

Review

"When I finished *Bonita Avenue*...I knew it was definitely a very good and structurally interesting book. But over the next nine months the novel has only grown more powerful in my imagination, and certain scenes have gotten stuck in my head and I can't get them out... Buwalda skillfully charts the course of a dysfunctional family with many secrets and, in the formidable Professor Siem Sigerius, a stubborn patriarch whose past may destroy his family. The characters are complex, often amoral, and masterfully observed by the author. The drama and pathos are offset in a lovely way by dark humor and absurdity. Buwalda handles the revelations of mysteries in both the present and past with remarkable assurance. The novel's climax is chilling, unforeseen, and in some ways, profound."—**Jeff VanderMeer**

"Robust [and] dark... In the manner of Iris Murdoch at her most manic...The plot orchestration and lively character renderings of *Bonita Avenue* are dazzling."—***New York Times Book Review***

"A bold and assured debut, *Bonita Avenue* deftly alternates between narrators and settings to keep readers morally unsettled and in suspense. It's not hard to see why Peter Buwalda's ambitious debut novel, first published in his native Holland in 2010, has attracted numerous comparisons to the work of Jonathan Franzen...A satisfying, psychologically nuanced read."—***Huffington Post***

"Buwalda's magnificent first novel offers proof of Tolstoy's dictum that 'every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' Three uniquely unreliable voices narrate this darkly humorous familial drama...Their interweaving narratives, which hop between the Netherlands, Shanghai, Belgium, and California, chart the years between the rise and fall of their outwardly successful but privately dysfunctional family."—***Publishers Weekly* (starred review)**

"This award-winning debut novel is flat-out extraordinary. The rich layer of detail would be impressive if applied to one topic, but Buwalda creates multiple complex worlds around vastly different subjects...An outstanding literary suspense story that will appeal to a wide range of readers."—***Library Journal*, (starred review)**

"Buwalda's debut...becomes increasingly compulsive reading as it nears its dark close...This tumultuous saga of a family breaking down...is an international bestseller and award winner. A significant literary achievement."—***Booklist*, (starred review)**

"Dazzling...[A] giddily twisting family drama."—***Penthouse***

International Praise for BONITA AVENUE

"One wild ride: a swirling helix of a family saga that swerves from gross-out sex comedy to pitch-black revenge tragedy as twist after twist reframes what we know about its dysfunctional cast...manic... as toe-curling as early Roth, as roomy as Franzen and as caustic as Houellebecq. Don't let me forget to mention Jonathan Reeder's note-perfect English translation."—***Telegraph* (UK)**

"No way that this is a debut novel, is your first impression when you start reading *Bonita Avenue*—but it is! An instant literary classic, loaded with suspense, by a brilliant and truly original writer."—**Herman Koch, author of THE DINNER and SUMMERHOUSE WITH SWIMMING POOL**

“A literary sensation...[A] crazy-paving, jigsaw puzzle...Addictive...A considerable achievement ...*Bonita Avenue* is an entertaining end in itself, and evidence that Buwalda is just getting started.”—*Independent (UK)*

“Compelling”—*The List (UK)*

"Plenty of wit and sharp human observation... Highly recommended for fans of dark family drama"—*We Love This Book*

"Fluent and complex, uncompromising and shocking.”—*Daily Mail (UK)*

“This dazzling family saga was a huge hit when it was published in the Netherlands in 2010; critics hailed Buwalda as 'The Dutch answer to Jonathan Franzen', but his brilliance is entirely unique.”—*The Times (UK)*

“Great European art: the Dutchman Peter Buwalda explodes the bourgeois family saga. The narrative pyrotechnics alone are a tour de force.”—*Die Ziet (Germany)*

"It's a fantastic debut which, at over 500 pages, doesn't outstay its welcome" —*Glasgow Herald*

About the Author

PETER BUWALDA worked as a journalist and editor before founding a music magazine and writing a weekly column for a major Dutch newspaper. He lives in the Netherlands with his family.

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1

When Joni Sigerius first took Aaron to meet her parents at their converted farmhouse one Sunday afternoon in 1996, her father's handshake was so firm it hurt. "You took that photo," the man said. Or was it a question?

Siem Sigerius was a stocky, dark-haired fellow with a pair of ears that you noticed immediately; they were lumpy, they looked deep-fried, and Aaron's judo past told him they were cauliflower ears. You got them from chafing against coarse cotton sleeves, from letting the flaps get scrunched up between hard bodies and rough mats; blood and pus built up between the cartilage and the baby-soft skin. Not doing anything about it meant being stuck with hardened, swollen lumps for good. Aaron had a pair of perfectly normal, unblemished, peachy-soft ears; cauliflower ears were reserved for champions, for the monomaniacs who scraped themselves across a tatami night after night. You had to earn ears like that, man-years had gone into it. There was no doubt in his mind that Joni's father wore them as a badge of honor, as proof of hard work and manliness. Aaron used to dread coming face-to-face with a similarly ear-marked beast at a tournament; a cauliflower ear on the horizon was bad news, as a competitive judoka he was useless. To hide his awe, he replied: "I take photos all the time."

Sigerius's ears quivered. His frizzy hair was close-cropped like felt against his broad, flat head. Despite his wardrobe--suits or corduroy trousers and Ralph Lauren polo shirts, the garb of the employer, the arrive--you'd never take him, judging from the ears and that buffalo body, for someone who ran a university, let alone believe he was the Netherlands' greatest mathematician since Luitzen Brouwer. It was a physique you expected to see at a construction site, or on a freeway at night in a fluorescent vest, trudging behind a tar-spreader. "You know full well which photo," he said.

Joni, her sister, Janis, his wife, Tineke, all of them in the spacious living room knew which photo he meant. It had been printed full-page about a year earlier in the newspaper serving Tubantia University, the small college whose campus was tucked into the woods between Enschede and Hengelo, and where Sigerius was rector magnificus. He was standing on the bank of the Amsterdam-Rhine Canal, wearing nothing but a necktie, legs planted wide in the muddy, trampled grass, his genitals clearly visible under his cautiously rounded fifty-plus belly. The next day the photo had found its way into nearly every national newspaper, from the NRC to De Telegraaf, and ultimately even to the German Bild and a Greek daily.

"I have a hunch," Aaron conceded, wondering whether Joni had told her father who he was, or if Sigerius simply recognized him: the tall, bald photographer from the Tubantia Weekly who buzzed around the rector during public appearances like a horsefly with a single-lens reflex. The latter option, he thought, was more flattering, just as anyone on campus would feel flattered to be recognized by the charismatic man who at this very moment was crushing his hand to a pulp.

Simon Sigerius was, since his appointment in 1993, the Helios of Tubantia University, a blazing sun around which 8,000 students and hard-working academics orbited in calm little ellipses, surprised yet grateful that he would bathe their campus, of all places, in his warmth, and not the Binnenhof in The Hague, where he had turned down a plum government post, or one of the big American universities that vied for his favor. The first time Aaron had seen Joni's father was on television several years earlier, when he was still living with his folks in Venlo. The August following his final exams, something possessed him and his brother to become fanatical Zomergasten viewers, and one of those exhilarating, reflective Sunday evening marathon interviews was with a mathematical judoka--or was it a judo-practicing mathematician--anyway, a man whose "ideal TV evening" selection alternated video fragments of judo star Wim Ruska, edgy jazz, the Tokyo 1964 Olympics, and a Dutch comedian with documentaries about prime numbers and Fermat's Last Theorem. Aaron recalled a clip where a talkative physicist succeeded in giving sworn art majors like him and his brother the impression that they actually understood something of quantum mechanics. ("Richard Feynman," Sigerius said later. "We'd just buried him.") The man himself rubbed his stubbly jaw and talked about computers, about the universe, about M.C. Escher, as though anything else was a complete waste of time. It turned out he'd also judoed against Geesink and Ruska, but owed this television appearance mainly to the fact that he'd been awarded a Fields Medal, a distinction the host called the Nobel Prize for mathematics.

Since then Sigerius had grown into the national poster-boy scientist. Their rector would regularly, after a full workday on campus, pull up a seat on the evening news or a talk show and offer scientific commentary on current affairs, dazzlingly intelligent yet at the same time remarkably down-to-earth, never a word of gibberish. As photographer for the Weekly Aaron was front and center when Sigerius set up shop in the university's administrative wing, and what his camera saw, everybody saw: this was exactly the man Tubantia needed. Just by being himself, Sigerius had liberated this overlooked and underrated university from its Twents timidity and inferiority complex. In his inaugural address he vowed to turn Tubantia into the Netherlands' premier research institute, a phrase that was broadcast that same day on the national news. He was a media magnet: no sooner had somebody uttered the word "university" than the cauliflower ears appeared on air, and their rector gave, on behalf of their university, his opinion on the competitive position of Dutch research schools, on girls' technical ability, on the future of the Internet, you name it. Sigerius just as effortlessly attracted top international scholars. Maybe it was a pity that the Fields Medal wasn't a genuine Nobel Prize, of course that was a pity, but his aura of mathematical genius still mesmerized investors in pure science, dyscalculaic MPs with education portfolios, communications giants and chip manufacturers whose labs sprang up around the university. And perhaps even schoolkids, they too recognized Sigerius's stubbly mug from TV; don't forget the precious progeny, each year the little brats had to be lured to that godforsaken hick town in Twente, how do you entice them, how do you hook them?

The pied piper of Tubantia, bare-assed in the daily papers. "Nice work," he said, and released Aaron's hand.

He'd taken the photo on a Sunday afternoon in Houten, just after they had finished rowing the Varsity, the traditional student regatta between boats from various universities. Blaauwbroek, the editor-in-chief of the Weekly, had assured Aaron that something special was on the cards: the Tubantia boat had an Olympic skipper on board as well as an oarsman with the Holland 8 Atlanta crew. Still, it was unusual for a university rector to sacrifice his free day to accompany a busload of boozing fratboys all the way to the Amsterdam-Rhine Canal. During the minor events he observed Sigerius out of the corner of his eye; the man stood on the soggy washland grass between the bar and the wooden bleachers, surrounded by a rat pack of hard-core Siemsayers, fawning undergrads who went out of their way to claim the rector as their own. Sigerius appeared to take pleasure in these boys' company. He had sucked them out of their big townhouses, they came swarming to the campus, hankering after a part-time job at the policy office or with public relations, flattering themselves on being invited to Sigerius's annual barbecue at his farmhouse. Aaron felt a pang of jealousy. Was the guy acting or genuinely enjoying himself?

Blaauwbroek's instinct was right: it was a historic Sunday afternoon for Tubantia. An "Oude Vier" from Enschede won the race for the first time in its 112-year history. Aaron was standing on the windy bleachers when the crowd around him roared, an explosion of hoarse cheers mixing with the crackle of plastic beer glasses. And because fratboys will always do the predictable thing, the gang of fanatics down at the water's edge tore off their clothes and swam, stark naked, out to the boat--at which moment he caught sight of the rector, who did something totally unpredictable: Sigerius flung his half-filled beer tumbler into the grass and crossed the mudbank toward the water--Aaron had already clambered down from the bleachers, his camera lens followed the grinning rector as he removed his suit--everything came off, his shirt, his socks, his underwear, all except the necktie, a rowing tie, of course he'd let them foist a team tie on him, he was an honorary member of every club with a beer tap--and just before he broke into a sprint toward the canal to dive in after them, Aaron shouted his name, "Sigerius!", and snapped a photo of him from about four meters away, in all his glory.

Joni's dad was right, it was nice work, it was in all respects a fantastic photo. There was speed: his subject, filling the frame, stood on the balls of his feet, his arms thrown into the air, and while his torso appeared to already be heading for the glistening strip of water in the background, his bellowing mouth and furious eyes looked straight at the lens. The late-afternoon sun floodlit his naked body, the composition seemed meticulously arranged: Sigerius's outstretched left hand pointed more or less in the direction of the boat off in the canal; like a stylized sporting photograph, it resonated with a Greek-Olympian buzz. But this was all photographer blahblah--it was obvious why the newspaper wanted the picture. Even before Aaron left Houten he spent a quarter of an hour squabbling with a PR girl from Tubantia University, who insisted the photo had to be run by her department for approval, which of course would never be granted. On the contrary, the next morning the editors treated him like he was Robert Capa. "You bet I'm going to print that photo," snorted Blaauwbroek. "It's going to the printer's in an armored car, and I'll guard the presses with my life if need be."

After that the naked rector surfaced everywhere, blown up above the bar in the rowing club canteen, on a local debating society's T-shirts, on a poster announcing a massive summer festival on campus. Aaron saw him taped to dormitory bathroom doors. And, coincidence or no, Sigerius was increasingly the subject of wild speculation, in the fraternities on the Oude Markt, at parties in the campus housing. The rector was said to have traveled with Ruska through the Soviet Union and China en route to Japan, trashing Russian eateries on the way; he was purported to have been given electroshock treatment in an American madhouse after his big mathematical breakthrough; there were allegedly children from an earlier marriage who had come to no good. You only had to take a better look at the photo, and all doubt melted off the paper onto your lap.

Everyone could see that Sigerius's ears were representative of the body hidden beneath those immaculate two-piece suits, mostly monotonous dark blue, sometimes light-gray pinstripe; the body, so crudely exposed, appeared surprisingly tough and sinewy, hard, unbreakable--"dry," to express it in sports terms. It was difficult not to have an opinion about that body, or about the clearly visible tattoos on the left side of his chest, over Sigerius's heart: Aaron recognized the inscription, in cheap, dark-blue sailor's ink, the pair of Japanese characters--"judo." It evoked conflicting reactions: in 1995, not only were tattoos relatively rare, they were downright tacky. But at the same time it tallied entirely with Sigerius's physicality, the apeman who would tip back his chair during meetings, balancing on the back legs until he had to grab the edge of the table, who rolled his shoulders loose like a trapeze artist during the coffee breaks, looking around to see if there was anyone who needed a thrashing before the meeting reconvened--murky keyholes through which the campus could catch a glimpse of another, discarded Sigerius, a thug, a he-man whose dream career had begun with two European judo titles, a fighter for whom the Munich Olympics should have been the highlight of his life.

In interviews they read that their rector was, like Ruska, tipped for a medal in 1972, but that a month before the Games, fate intervened: hungry for a custard donut, Sigerius crossed the Biltstraat in Utrecht, and just as the soft, creamy custard made contact with his mouth he was sideswiped by a motor scooter, whose metal footboard drove straight through his shin: crack, goodbye athletic career. What no journalist, no student, no scientist could get enough of was the idea that without that uneaten donut, the real miracle of Sigerius's career would never have taken place. The Miracle of the Antonius Matthaëuslaan, as he himself called it, after the street in Utrecht where for eight months he was confined to a bed in a tiny upstairs apartment, encased up to his groin in plaster. In the dark winter following the '72 Olympics, as Joni's father, bruised and broken, lay thumbing through a cardboard box of back issues of waiting-room magazines, he came across a stray exam booklet from the Dutch Mathematics Olympiad--a pamphlet full of uncommonly difficult problems for uncommonly brainy high-school students--and out of sheer boredom started scribbling sums in the margins. The next morning he was finished.

Exactly what happened in those twenty-four hours, which doors were flung open in Sigerius's traumatized athlete's head, is anybody's guess, but the fact was that within three years he had graduated summa cum laude from the Utrecht Mathematics Department, produced an alarmingly brilliant doctoral dissertation, and in the early '80s moved with his family to Berkeley, California. And there, at long last, he reached his Olympian peak. The Ramanujan of Utrecht forced a breakthrough in knot theory, a branch of mathematics that attempts to understand the number of ways in which a piece of rope can be tied--there is no conciser, simpler definition of his work--which earned him the Fields Medal in 1986 at the quadrennial congress of the International Mathematics Union.

All this shot through Aaron's mind when he recognized the woman sitting diagonally across from him. Despite her metamorphosis he knew straightaway who she was. There, next to a gum-chewing girl in the crimson sales uniform of some chain store, sat Joni's mother. He was blinded by a stroboscopic shock of white light.

He had been jolted out of a dreamless doze, and although he was still sitting in the express train to Brussels--they'd already passed Liege--his situation had altered drastically in the half hour he'd been sleeping. The carriage was now jam-packed, the evening light that shone through the windows appeared heavy, leaden, it was Belgian light, refracted and made turbid by the undulating landscape. Tineke Sigerius, he saw in a glance, leaned with her temple against the window and stared absently at the receding Walloon hills and single-steepled villages. His first reflex was to bolt, make a run for it, but his escape route was blocked by

standing passengers--so to get up and move to the other end of the compartment was virtually impossible. His body acted as though it were racing up a steep slope in blind panic. He sat like this for several minutes, sweating, hyperventilating, exhorting himself to calm down, in anticipation of the confrontation.

Users Review

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