

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



48 / Maya Rispens, linguist, Voorburg, the Netherlands

A Flemish Belgian by birth—from the old town of Ghent—she was dispatched to the Netherlands more than ten years ago to fill a sort of diplomatic function at the *Nederlandse Taalunie (NTU)*, the Dutch Language Union, which has its headquarters in The Hague. Not much later she happened to meet my son Mizja, whom she turned into an even nicer guy than he was; they started living together and married some five years later while vacationing in Madrid, Spain. Maya Rispens is the mother of my grandson Raven.

Her meeting with Mizja was no coincidence—it was a blind date arranged for by a friend of ours and a woman working for NTU we’d known while still living in the Netherlands; and we ourselves, then living in New Mexico, plead innocent. Their first “date” started in Bodega De Posthoorn in The Hague, an old time artists, journalists and actors watering hole across from the U.S. Embassy which I myself started frequenting at age 18; in those days 25 cents bought me a beer from tap; for thirty years I kept returning frequently to De Posthoorn until the day before I left for America, when I had to pay 2.50 for a beer on tap (in guilders; then the equivalent of \$1.35). Often at 18, 19 I had a hard time paying for my drinks but that was no problem, said waiters Leo and Theo—“Next week, okay? Want a new one?” Yet many times I didn’t have to pay for my drinks at all; two quite important Dutch artists, Willem Hussem and Jaap Nanninga, both long deceased, would pick up the tab but only if I was accompanied by a mixed-blood Dutch/Indonesian exotic girlfriend these two dirty old men rather fancied, one Ariadne Jeanne Sinke. Sweet memories... Anyway, De Posthoorn plays an important role in the Haaks’ life—around the corner are NTU’s offices, and until 1994 Ans had her office in the art society building, right next door to NTU’s.

Maya was born in a family of classical musicians who became conservatorium directors in Ghent and Brussels. The culture at home was broad, with deep interests in good food and great wines and in literature, too, and with a profound abhorrence of ultra-capitalism and right-wing extremism. Americans would call Maya's background "Communist," although in Europe the Rispen would be considered not even hardline Socialists but merely quite moderate Social Democrats. In their opinion, though, the USA was and is an Empire to be suspicious of, and having some family-in-law that had *voluntary* decided to live there, well, what to think of that? On her first visit to America we managed to provide my son and Maya with a housesitting fortnight in Beth Ferguson's adobe on top of Abiquiu Lake (see # 47), which changed Maya's disposition to America a lot, although she may have a hard time confessing this.

Maya is still working for NTU, nowadays as head of the international department. "International" is more than just a banner—you won't believe this, but NTU is an octopus with tentacles across the globe. The Dutch language? All over the world? Yes. Like English and German, Dutch is a Germanic language; it is spoken by 23 million people. Within Europe, Dutch is an official language in the Netherlands and the Flemish part of Belgium. In South America it is an official language in Suriname as well as on the Caribbean islands of Aruba, Curaçao and St Martin (all former Dutch colonies). In 1980 the Netherlands and Flanders signed a treaty concerning NTU stipulating that the governments set a joint policy with respect to the Dutch language. NTU is a unique organization. Nowhere else in the world does such a treaty exist between different countries that use the same language.

NTU works in the interest of everyone using or learning Dutch, or wanting to discover Dutch literature. It ensures that the language is well described and that the grammar rules are easily accessible--a prerequisite for good education and linguistic advice. NTU is responsible for the official Dutch spelling; the Dutch Language Wordlist is updated every ten years with new words. Websites contain all kinds of information on Dutch words, including pre-mediaeval ones. The *pièce de resistance* is the Dictionary of the Dutch Language, the largest dictionary in the world.

Each year, an amazing 15,000 students all over the world study Dutch as a foreign language: in the United Kingdom and the United States as well as in countries such as Georgia and Poland, Ukraine, Spain and Indonesia. NTU supports Dutch studies outside the Dutch language area in many different ways. Where a university is in the process of setting up a new department or expanding the curriculum of an existing department, NTU provides support and ideas as well as financial assistance for the basic needs of the department. It also offers research grants and extra training to encourage foreign specialists in Dutch to broaden their knowledge further. Each summer, almost 300 excellent foreign students of Dutch are welcomed in the Netherlands and Flanders for a course on Dutch language and culture.

Until recently, Maya was responsible for practically all Dutch language promotion, studies and events in the countries that used to belong to the East Bloc. She traveled to Moscow, St. Petersburg, Prague, Budapest, Kiev, Warsaw and more to support study centers, manifestations, and performances in and about Dutch language and literature. Colleagues had southern Europe, the Americas, Asia or South Africa as their target areas. Nowadays Maya is the supervisor of the whole international Dutch language scene. Will she now travel to all of NTU's countries? Maya is a dedicated traveler, and I hope she does. As my son Mizja says: "Finally she is not just focused on whipping me and Raven around."