

POWL & HELLO WALL



ERIK JAN HARMENS

'Pow! is a great book, and the real strength of this translation is that the humor comes across well, yet doesn't overshadow the novel's poignancy. Very hard to do' – Paul Beatty

'Hello Wall is brilliant. Harmens offers compulsively readable emotional truth on every page' – Matt Haig

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POWL & HELLO WALL

Erik Jan Harmens

Powl
&
Hello Wall

Lebowski Agency, 2017

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Powl

Paul, (34, almost 35) is autistic. Everybody mispronounces his name ('Powl'). During the week he lives in a collective called The Three Master. Every first weekend of the month he visits his mother. In his room there's a terrarium where his inland bearded dragon Wilfred lives. He works for the parks department and is secretly in love with Carol, who is much younger.

One morning Wilfred goes missing, and Paul has to go to the bathroom but he can't find any peace and quiet to do so, and in the town hall, where Paul is allowed to use the bathroom because he dislikes Dixies, the ladies and gents signs have been switched. It's the overture to unbearable confusion. What started as a regular, calm day, quickly changes into a little nightmare.

Powl is a realistic, moving and funny account of the impediments and enrichments of a life with autism. Erik Jan Harmens has once again written a novel that comes straight from the soul.

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Erik Jan Harmens

Powl

Lebowski Agency, 2017

‘This is a very good translation, it really captures Paul’s voice. The linguistic gymnastics of his thought process, and the frenzy of life in a residential facility are wonderfully rendered. There’s a slight, yet oftentimes playful formality to the tone that seems unique to him, as it suggests a certain education level (even if self taught) and a steadfast resolve. *Powl* is a great book, and the real strength of this translation is that the humor comes across well, yet doesn’t overshadow the novel’s poignancy. Very hard to do.’

– Paul Beatty, author of *The Sellout*,
winner of the Man Booker Prize 2016

*You get to know the sounds of silence
I wasn't aware of their number before*

Rob de Nijs

5:32 a.m.

My name is Paul. People often have difficulty pronouncing my name. They'll say 'Pal'. Or like this, 'Powl'.

My surname is Peelage. Paul Peelage. It's remarkable that my first and last names start with a p. When I was at school, I was teased about my name; classmates would make a lot of saliva when pronouncing the p's: 'Pppfffal! Pppfffeelage!'

I have autism. PDD-NOS, to be exact. Actually that is not exact at all, because PDD-NOS stands for Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified. It's a repository, the category Others; all types of autism except classic autism and Asperger syndrome. So actually I can't say 'I have PDD-NOS', because of course you don't *have* the category Others; you are *in* a category.

Classic autism is autism as it's meant to be, with lots of looking away, long silences, and sometimes hours of lying on a bed in a question mark pose. Asperger syndrome was discovered in the last century by the Austrian doctor Hans Asperger. People with Asperger syndrome often have average or above average intelligence. This isn't to say that people with classic autism or PDD-NOS aren't intelligent,

but they're often less intelligent than people with Asperger syndrome.

Autistic people on TV often have Asperger syndrome. They are funny without being aware of it, but in reality, they are actors. They pretend they don't understand jokes or sarcastic remarks, or always want to see a programme on TV at the exact same time. This last problem has been solved now; you can just watch a programme on your mobile, or afterwards by using TV Catch Up. There does have to be Wi-Fi or you'll exceed your data allowance and in the Three Master, an EMCA -accredited and HQCH-certified healthcare centre where I live, the rule is: if you exceed your data allowance, pay the bill yourself.

HQCH stands for Harmonization Quality Control Healthcare – those are quality standards the Three Master and other healthcare centres have to meet. To give two examples: the buildings are well maintained, and the emergency exit lights come on if there's a power failure.

EMCA stands for Exceptional Medical Care Act; if your healthcare centre falls under this act, accommodation expenses will be refunded.

Which is a good thing, because my mother isn't made of money. That's what she always used to say. I knew it was an expression, but I kept picturing her covered in coins and barely able to lift a finger.

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I used to lick things. I had this strong impulse to touch everything with my tongue, to place a little stamp on it. I'd lick my food before putting it in my mouth, or else it would be refused entry. It was like hosting a party for knights and first having to knight all the commoners requesting admittance (if, by the way, anyone else licked my food, I wouldn't put it in my mouth for a million euro).

I licked my alarm clock before I set it, and I licked it before switching it off. I licked the railing before crossing the bridge, and I licked my card before putting it in the ATM to withdraw cash. I licked the tips of my shoes before putting them on, and I licked my watch before checking the time.

But licking everything is no way to live. In addition to being ridiculed on the street, it's not very hygienic either. You lap up all the bacteria as you go along. In consultation with Marco, my coach at the Three Master, I came up with an alternative: each time I want to lick something, I'll lick the metacarpal bone of my left or right index finger instead. As I do this, I picture myself licking the thing I actually want to touch with my tongue. I'm fooling myself a little this way, but it works.

A week from now, I'll be 35. That's quite something. I have a sister, Danny, she's two years younger (I never see her), and a mother, she'll be 60 in six months, but she won't celebrate and she doesn't want a surprise party either.

My father has been dead for eighteen years. I think if we were to dig him up now, we would find the coffin empty. He said he was just going to place the top on our Christmas tree; he froze as he stretched out, then fell over with the tree and everything. We were all there, but not for long; everyone had to leave the room, and our neighbour collected me to go out for fried eggs, which is rather unusual at 5 p.m.

I eat all fried eggs, preferably on light wholemeal bread, with the cheese unfried, underneath the eggs, the ham fried, on top. These were on white poppy seed bread with both the cheese and ham fried – a mess, but it was fine. Although of course it's a bit uncomfortable having a meal just after you've seen your father die.

My father worked in a butchers shop and always brought meat home. It had to be finished, it would be a shame to throw the meat out. 'The poor animal's life was wasted', he said, and I'd spread another slice of bread with lots of *filet*

american because I didn't want an animal's life to have been wasted. I'd sometimes ask if I could come and work in the butchers shop with him. He promised he'd ask, but then he wouldn't mention it again.

'Is it because I'm autistic?' I asked him, not in real life, but only in bed, at night. In real life I'd ask again, six months later, if I could come and work with him. He promised he would ask.

Every night he ironed his shirt meticulously; he said it was a man's job. Why he was so meticulous, I didn't understand, because he wore a white overcoat with just the top button undone – you could only see the collar.

In the morning he tied his tie about ten times (sometimes eight, sometimes nine, sometimes eleven, but let's say ten times). Every time he had a knot and he'd untie it again. After a while, the tie was suddenly good and it was done. I couldn't tell the difference from the knot that went wrong just before.

19.85

This is what my room looks like: my bed is beside the window. It's a three-quarter bed, which I think sounds funny. Next to it is my desk, with a globe on it; this way I can always see where I am, which is in that tiny little country.

On the wall behind my desk is the screen of my computer (at eye level), on the desk next to the globe are the keyboard and the mouse, underneath the desk is the computer itself. It stands diagonally; enough space left for me to put my feet.

A piece of string hangs above the screen, with two little nails at exactly one metre to the left and one metre to the right. On the piece of string, attached with little pegs (which often come off when you move the cards to fit in new ones - POIING!), are all the cards I've received from my sister since I came to live at the Three Master. There are thirteen of them. There'll be a new one coming next week, when I turn 35; you can put your money on that.

On the small chest of drawers next to the desk is a terrarium, where Wilfred lives. He's my lizard, or actually a Pogona Vitticeps or inland bearded dragon, but no one knows what a Pogona Vitticeps is, so lizard.

More towards the door: two chairs and a small coffee table. When I have guests, we can talk there. The shower is down the hall, but I have a sink where I wash myself with a facecloth. Another funny word: facecloth. I wash myself with my facecloth. I brush my teeth there too, and next to the sink is a kettle so I can make coffee and tea. When someone comes to see me, I say, 'Please sit down, would you like something to drink? Coffee? Tea?' And then they will say, 'coffee', or 'tea', or they ask if I have anything else, such as Coca-Cola, and then I say, 'I'm sorry, I only have coffee and tea'.

The walls of my room are white, just like the ceiling, but the man in the DIY shop said it would look nicer if I painted the ceiling one shade brighter than the walls.

Let's, I thought, but then I needed two containers of paint so it was twice as expensive. Even more, because the ceiling paint had the tiniest grain in it, to make it look even better.

Marco took it back, but because I'd already used some from both containers, they could not be exchanged. Much effing and blinding, but it does look pretty. When you look closely, you can really see a difference between the wall and the ceiling.

The floor is covered with linoleum, not the same linoleum as in the hall because that's grey, and I don't live in a crematorium, so my linoleum is green. Underneath the door is a low doorstep, separating my green from the grey.

Two years ago, when they rebuilt the Three Master and were tearing out the old linoleum upstairs, I put my foot down. As a result I was allowed to choose my own linoleum, but I did have to pay for half of it myself. The little threshold I had to pay for entirely myself. Marco suggested using a piece of tape, but that's like wearing battered football shoes with a tuxedo. So I went to the DIY shop for a threshold, colour charcoal grey, €19.85. The men screwed it on for me, and it looks really nice.

But Marco will never say such a thing. He looks at it and nods, as if looking at someone he knows vaguely, instead of at a threshold.

1

When I introduce myself to someone, I don't say I have autism, just like someone who has chronic back pain won't mention his back the moment you shake hands (unless he's completely stooped forward, in which case an explanation is quite useful). But if after the first courtesies a reason comes up, for example a door slams shut loudly and I wince (most people with autism, because our brains work differently, are rather sensitive to loud noises and bright light, especially when it comes unexpectedly, for example not at a funfair, because there they are to be expected), or we're overtaken by a motor sounding like an hysterical blowfly (particularly when the motorcyclist keeps giving it throttle – 'VOORRRR... VOORRR... VOORRR...' – then I'll say I have it.

'Sorry, I have autism. My brain works differently, and I am rather sensitive to loud noises and bright light.'

'Gosh', the other person will say, 'that sounds quite hard. On a shopping street, for instance, or at the funfair?'

'Not at the funfair, I don't find the loud noises and the bright light hard there, because they are to be expected', I answer. 'But if, on a quiet shopping street, someone with a very loud voice asks me for some change for a snack – 'Hey,

hey you! Do you have any change, some small change? For a snack? Hey!’ – then I usually walk away covering my ears with my hands, because I wasn’t prepared.’

‘Right, I see.’

‘Unless I wear my ear caps, in which case I only hear him a little bit.’

‘Ear caps?’

‘Those are ear protectors. A kind of earplugs, except they don’t go into your ears but cover them instead.’

‘Right, of course. Ear caps.’

‘Construction workers wear them too.’

That’s how a conversation might go, although you never know beforehand how a conversation goes. You get someone started and then you just have to wait and see what happens.

When I’m not at the Three Master, I often (almost always) wear my ear caps. I still hear things, but less loudly. I can hear the emergency services approaching, and when someone shouts ‘Hands off me!’ I can see if there’s anything I can do. When someone speaks to me softly, I move one cap away and ask, ‘Could you repeat that, please?’

Sometimes people laugh at me because of my ear caps. Fortunately I don’t hear their harassment as loudly as it is in real life. Sometimes people laugh at me when I lick one of my metacarpal bones. When I don’t lick them for a while, I’m thinking the whole time that I’m not licking the bone of my index finger. Until I can’t hold out any longer.

If people ask *why* I want to lick things, I tell them it’s

a tic, like when people keep pressing the corners of their mouth sideways or sniffle through their nose without having a cold. When someone makes a joke about my tic with the sole purpose of hurting me, I give them one warning. 'There will not be a second one', I tell them, which is usually sufficient to make them stop.

10

In the morning or in the evening the strangest sounds can be heard in the Three Master. A lot of people are responsible for this. For example Roy, who was born in Driebergen but whose parents are from Laos. If you want to know where that is, you have to give the globe in my room half a turn. Roy looks like a Chinese person, short and skinny with black flat hair evenly trimmed around the head. He puts hair gel in it when there's a party and it'll stick up in every which way. Roy doesn't say a word, but sometimes he makes a lot of noise with his mouth; it sounds like a peacock with his voice breaking. Sometimes he gives me a real fright when he stands behind me and suddenly starts squawking: 'Squawk! Squawk!'

Roy burps very loudly, and sometimes some stomach acid comes up and he almost starts puking. He has a sweet mum, I think her name is 'Pita', just like the sandwich you put kebab in, or perhaps it's Rita. She did mention her name once when we introduced ourselves, but we both said our names at the same time: 'Paul,' and her name which ended with 'ita'.

Then there's Dave, who is very tiny, his one leg is much longer than the other, as if he's walking on one stilt. At his peak he is taller than I am, and I'm six feet tall. I think he's six foot five.

Dave has red hair, which turns a light shade of orange in summer. His face is dented, as if a truck drove across his cheek. It's a bit scary at first, but at some point it's all you've ever known. Dave has autism too, but unlike me, he's your typical autistic person. He needs to have everything planned right down to the last detail. If you want to meet up with him and you say 'around three o'clock', he will lose it: 'What do you mean *around* three o'clock, what do you want?' he'll yell. 'Are we seeing each other *at* three o'clock? Or at five *past* three? Or at ten *to* three? Twat! Dipshit!'

It's simply impossible. When you agree to meet him at three, he will call you at ten *to* three to say he'll be there in ten minutes.

'I'll see you in a bit', I then say.

'Yes, in ten minutes', Dave responds, emphasizing the number ten.

In the notes on his phone Dave keeps a list of the television programmes he watched, but he never adds if he enjoyed them or not. It only says '20:30h watched rerun *Idols* till 22:30h'. And there's another thing he does: with the stopwatch on his phone he measures the duration of the commercial breaks, after which he'll use his calculator to work out the 'Net Programme Length', NPL for short. The NPL's of the live broadcast of *Idols* and the rerun are always

identical, but the commercial breaks are much shorter the second time.

What use it is to him to measure and record all this: unknown.

Then there's Mari (spelled with an i, not with ie); she has an angelic voice, but she taps glasses and dishes with teaspoons all day long. I've often asked her to stop, but she says she can't.

Mari is very tall and very skinny. I don't think I've seen her eat anything ever. She has short dark brown hair, cut in a square, which makes it seem as if she's wearing a carpet tile on her head (but that's not a very nice thing to say). Her mother visits every month to crop it.

Youssef has a police siren on his bicycle which has to be on any time he rides it, but also when he walks or takes a shower or takes off his clothes before bed. There's always the sound of a siren from deep within his throat: 'Weeeeeoooooooo!!!!' The device on his bicycle sounds like a Dutch police siren, but when he does it himself it's an American one, with elongated weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee's. Sometimes it falters. You'll hear: 'Pwoah, pwoah, pwoah, pwoah', a bit like a chicken. Sometimes I want to twist the animal's neck because it just doesn't stop, except when he's sleeping. But then I'm asleep too, so I'm not really enjoying it. This is why I get up at 5:30 a.m. on weekdays, so I don't have to hear anything for an hour, until they call me at 6:30 a.m.

And then there's Alwin, Carol, Hakim, Peter, and myself; we make noise of course – sometimes a lot, we're not made of stone – but you won't hear us too often. We don't say 'Tooooooooooooooot!' right in the middle of each sentence, unless we feel like it or unless someone asks me to make the sound of a steamer. Hakim very often runs into things with his wheelchair; sometimes that makes me angry, particularly when he hits me full on my shin. He says he's sorry, but he's staring at the ground so I can't look into his eyes to see if he means it.

Marco says I must put my ear caps on if all the noise bothers me. Or else headphones with music, but the disadvantage there is not only do you stop hearing the unpleasant sounds, but also the things that you *should* hear. For example 'Fire!' in case of a fire.

When everyone heads off to bed and is brushing their teeth, it's like being at the funfair.

'Squawk! Squawk!' Roy squawks.

'Twat! Dipshit!' yells Dave.

'Tingggg! Clingggg! Clatterrrrr!' does Mari with her teaspoons.

'Weeeeeoooooooooooo!!!!' whoops Youssef. 'Pwoah, pwoah, pwoah, pwoah!'

There's noise everywhere, until gradually sounds begin to fade as if one by one the batteries run out. When the silence is complete, I enjoy it deeply, despite knowing that each minute takes me closer to the moment it will all start again.

6:32 a.m.

I take a bath in the evening and in the morning I shower. Yesterday I washed my hair in the bath, and after drying myself off, I did not put any hair gel in it. This morning I had a shower and then I did put some hair gel in, because my hairdresser said otherwise it's just like wearing a pudding basin on your head.

Having a shower takes fifteen minutes: half a minute to take off my pyjamas and fold them, thirteen minutes in the shower, a minute and a half to get dressed. Marco wants me to spend less time in the shower, but I won't let him rush me.

When I open the tap it sounds like someone firing off a machine gun. The plumber came to look at it (a woman, she was wearing dungarees and her short hair was bleached with a little black line in the middle, as if there had been an earthquake on her head, and she spoke with a loud, deep voice, as if you were standing on the other side of the room instead of right next to her) and she said the pipes are loose. She could fix them but the pipes are behind the wall, so the entire wall would have to come off, and that is too expensive. Now I turn on the shower, bend my knees

slightly, clench my fists, stretch out my right arm, press my left fist against my belly, and start to shoot along to the sound of the water pipes: ‘Ratatatatatatat!’ If it hadn’t been so expensive to break open the wall and fix the pipes, I wouldn’t have been able to play that game every morning. In short: long live the wall.

Put pants on, socks, and the work clothes I laid out yesterday: a black shirt with short sleeves from HEMA (fine shirt, fine price), elastic waist jeans, because I don’t like belts, they cut into your flesh like the strings in the rolled meat from my father’s butcher shop. Those strings serve to keep the meat together, but my flesh is already together. Then a blue Mickey Mouse sweater. Too childish for a 34-year-old man? I wear what I like. The advantage is that it’s already old and can get nicely dirty, so there’s not a constant worry about making a mess. Lastly black work boots with steel toecaps, designed with ergonomics in mind; the salesman said you could drop a block of concrete on them so to speak.

I smoke another two cigarettes out the window, then it’s time for breakfast. I take a quick look in the terrarium and don’t see Wilfred. Sadly, I don’t have time to have a proper look, although even when you don’t have time for a proper look, you could find what you’re looking for. It’s not that big a terrarium. But no such luck today.

He might have dug himself into the granules although he must have gone deep or I would have discovered him. The granules are white, and the bearded dragon is greyish

brown. Because downstairs Marco is screaming ‘Pau-haul!’ at the top of his voice, I don’t check if perhaps Wilfred is behind the cave. Now I feel bad because I can’t imagine a life without him. If he isn’t behind the cave, where is he? I should make a thorough search, but Marco keeps calling, and being late for breakfast is no picnic. Because at the Three Master, when it comes to food, the law of the jungle applies: when it’s gone, it’s gone.

5

Marco's hair always looks exactly the same. Whether there's any wind or not, no matter whether there's a party or it's just an ordinary day, it always looks exactly like the day before. It has a light brown colour and is a bit wavy, it's not short, but certainly not long either: half long. He must go to the hairdresser regularly, or keep it up himself, or he has an illness, which stops your hair from growing and from falling out.

Marco has a funny surname: Turkenburg. It was months before I could look at him without laughing because of that name. So I just said I was laughing about something else, but he knew it was because of that name, Turkenburg, because he kept raising his eyebrow even when I said it was because of something else. And when someone raises his eyebrow, it means something is up (it could be anything).

Marco runs three times a week, but not exactly three times, *more or less three times*. Sometimes he doesn't feel like it, and at the time he was supposed to go for a run, he's in his office playing solitaire on the computer. He always says I should do it too, running, but I read somewhere that if you haven't been training you'll destroy your knees, and I don't want my knees to be destroyed. Also your shins and other

places might become a problem. Marco says I have to run through the pain, but that sounds a bit like a doctor allowing you to spend an entire day of your holiday sitting in the sun without any sun protection cream on; you *know* it isn't right.

Marco is at the Three Master five days a week, but again not exactly, because he lives four minutes walking distance away (if you walk calmly), and on the days he's not working, he often drops by too. He has no girlfriend waiting for him with a rolling pin at home for coming into work on his day off. If a woman is waiting for a man with a rolling pin, she doesn't want to roll the dough with him, she wants to use it to hit him on the head.

If Marco just does what he has to do, he's the best coach ever. Then he's really my buddy, much more than Liz and Wendel (but it isn't a competition).

Shame he can be bloody annoying too sometimes, for example when we go somewhere and he says, 'You coming down in a bit?' and I say, 'Five minutes!' and he'll say, 'Fine!' and then after two minutes he starts yelling at me to hurry up. Those are the moments when I'd like to tie his feet together and put the other end of the rope around the towing hook of a car and race through town taking a lot of sharp turns. It's just that I would need to find someone who's willing to drive, and I think a lot of people would say no if they were to see Marco behind the car. And also it would mean: second yellow card.

Liz has no husband and no children either. I once asked her why not, and tears welled up in her eyes, so I don't ask

about it anymore. Her armpits are always wet, and when she talks, she waves her arms – a lethal combination. If she stretches one or both of her arms out, I can't help but look at her armpits. Sometimes I'll see a wet stripe there, and on warmer days there's a mark the size of a fist. I find it disgusting and yet I can't *not* look at it.

Liz perspires more easily because she's fat. At first I tried to come up with other words: Liz is 'plump', Liz is 'solidly built', Liz is 'a tad heavy', but then one day Liz herself said, 'I'm fat,' and that was that. Although I'm still not sure if I'm allowed to use the F-word, because other than Liz herself, I haven't heard anyone call her 'fat'. 'Round and cuddly' is another way Liz described herself, but I wouldn't want to use those words either, unless I'm sure it's OK.

I often look at Liz's belly, which bubbles over her trousers everywhere. It runs around to the back, so is that still part of her belly or does it go with her back? Liz has always been fat, I overheard her tell Marco once. 'I was bullied terribly', she added, and she held the 'e' in the word 'te-rribly'.

I will never bully Liz for the way she looks, but in the midst of summer, I do feel sorry for her; she only has to do the tiniest thing, pour a cup of tea, for example, and she'll be puffing and need to sit down. 'Well, well', she'll say.

Liz has short hair, I once called it black, but she said, 'No, aubergine'. She dyes it, it's grey underneath. When I go grey, I won't dye mine. There's no need, says Liz, because 'grey makes men look sexy'. I think that's a strange word, 'sexy', it tickles my ears.

She once said she had bought her boyfriend a birthday

present, namely a weekend in Barcelona. ‘How nice’, I said, ‘do you have a hotel?’ (That’s a short version of: ‘Have you booked a room in a certain hotel somewhere in the city?’)

‘No, no, an apartment, through Airbnb.’

She didn’t say ‘air-bee-n-bee’ but ‘are-bee-n-bee’, and of course that’s not right. In terms of pronunciation she mixed two things up, namely ‘Airbnb’ and ‘r&b’. The latter being a popular music genre, the first a rental website for rooms and apartments.

‘It works great, this are-bee-n-bee.’ I licked the bones of both my index fingers a few times, really wanting to give her a good shake. Which of course I didn’t, but every time she said ‘are-bee-n-bee’ I coughed so I almost didn’t hear it anymore.

Wendel hasn’t been working here very long (two months, one week, and four days). When people first see him, they get a bit of a fright because he’s very tall and big and black and his head is shaved, and he’s always wearing really wild clothes. Along the outside corner of his eyes he has tattoos of a little tear, so people think he’s in a gang.

But he wouldn’t hurt a fly; Wendel is very emotional. If his favourite is voted off on *The Voice of Holland*, he always has to cry a lot. At the end of every show he cries anyway, no matter who gets voted off. Those tattooed little tears show that he’s very sensitive, I think. When I ask him about it, he merely smiles.

When I saw Wendel for the first time, I had a bit of a

fright too, but that's all gone now. Now he's my tall, big, bald, black friend. He says the two of us are Penotti Duo Spread. I don't make that joke to him, because I wouldn't want to hurt his feelings.

7:00 a.m.

It's 7:00 a.m. on the dot when I walk down the stairs (*standard procedure*). I could come down at 7:05, I could do it at exactly 7:00 every day. It gives structure: alarm at 5:30, really get up at 6:30, shower, get dressed (plus all the things in between), walk down the stairs at 7:00. I promise that if at 6:55 a fire breaks out on the top floor of the Three Master, I won't wait till 7:00 to walk downstairs. It's not that big a deal.

I have a set place at the dining table: Marco (or Liz, or Wendel, or the replacement) wants to sit close to the kitchen because sometimes he has to go grab something, and Peter has to sit next to the supervisors. We once discussed why this was the case, but I couldn't really focus, and later Peter said, 'Silence gives consent', so now it's just how it is.

I have the chair directly opposite Peter because it's right in the corner and close to the wall so that you never have to get up because someone needs to pass behind you; everyone has access to the chairs to my left and to my right. Only if you'd want to sit in my chair would you have to ask me to get up, which of course no one does.

The disadvantage is that, if I want to get up, I have to ask the person next to me to please let me pass, but I always

make sure I've just used the bathroom before we sit down to eat, and if I don't manage to, I just hold my water so I never have to get up during a meal.

Another advantage of my place is that I am not sitting opposite Marco. When he's tired, he always stares straight ahead and then sometimes I worry something will happen to him, for example he'll have a heart attack or a stroke, and I really wouldn't know what to do, except tell everyone, 'Stay calm' and call 112. And then pronounce our address slowly, which isn't easy, because the Three Master is at Abebe Bikila Lane number 7D, so if you say that quickly, no one understands a thing. And it's important to stress that D: '7D with D for Delta' I always say. 'Aa-bee-ee-bee-ee Bee-ai-bee-ai-el-aa La-ne Se-ven-Dee, with D for Delta.' If I do it like that, it will be all right.

Abebe Bikila was an Ethiopian marathon runner. He only lived to age 41, which goes to show that top class sport is not always good for you.

On the Saturdays I don't spend at my mother's house (all Saturdays, except for the first weekend of the month), I do my *basic shop* for the week. *Basic shop* means I don't get everything. Some things you really need to buy fresh such as bread and some vegetables, and the supervisors buy those separately during the week. But I buy all the non-perishables on the Saturdays when I'm around. Usually I go on my own so I have a moment to myself. One of the supervisors does come along but will wait for me in the car park underneath the shopping centre.

Before I make a list, I lick the bones of both index fingers. Then I start. What doesn't help is that everyone then starts shouting all sorts of things I shouldn't forget. It's distracting and it's annoying. Six weeks ago, Peter said, 'Will you get sprinkles with funnies as well?'

'We only do own-brand sprinkles', I said.

'With funnies', said Peter.

'We only do own-brand sprinkles', I repeated. 'They don't come with funnies. If you want sprinkles with funnies, you have to buy them with your own money.'

'Pow!', Peter then said.

'Yes?'

‘Will you get sprinkles with funnies?’

I felt like pulling a dough hook out of the mixer and poking Peter’s eyes out with it. But then I wouldn’t even get a second yellow card, but red straight away, and I would no longer be allowed to live in the Three Master but I’d have to go straight to jail, or detention in a hospital with compulsory treatment. Compulsory treatment sounds as if you want to get up from your bed and someone pushes you back into the sheets, ‘You stay down!’

Instead of pulling the hook out of the mixer, I said, ‘I’ll see what I can do for you.’ Actually that’s the same as saying no, except it sounds more friendly.

I first check all the products we need no matter what. If we’ve run out, or if I expect we will within one week, I put them on the list. Then I write down all the things we need for breakfast and lunch. Subsequently, I write down the things for dinner and a couple of things for watching television, such as crisps and Mars Miniatures. With that list I go to Marco, because he has to give me the money, and sometimes he’ll change this or that, but we always discuss it first. He usually crosses off the Mars Miniatures and when I then start cursing, he says with a voice like they used to have on the cinema news, ‘Young man! I’d wash your mouth with soap if I were you, Pow!’

In the shopping centre there are two underground car parks: -1 and underneath that (what a surprise) -2. We always take -2 because there’s always space and at -1 there hardly ever is.

When you arrive, you have to press a button and the ticket buzzes out. I lick the bone of my right index finger on the hand I'm holding the ticket with, and then I put the ticket in my inside pocket. Before we leave, I have to feed the ticket into the machine again. If you have parked for an hour and a half or less, the display will say: To pay: €0.

Actually that's not right, because you don't have to pay anything, but that's probably just the system.

Some people are done within an hour and a half and don't feel like inserting their ticket into the machine. They pull their car up to the barrier and press the help button: 'I have parked for less than an hour and a half, but the barrier won't go up.'

'Did you put your ticket in the machine?' the manager quite rightly asks.

'No, there was no need, because I parked for less than an hour and a half.'

Some managers will just open the barrier, to be done with it, but others put their foot down, 'You will really have to insert your ticket into the machine.'

The result is a traffic jam for which truly the person in the car, not the manager, is to blame. Because otherwise you can just park for free for an entire month, drive up to the barrier and say, 'I've parked for less than an hour and a half.'

No one ever checks.

When I've stepped out of the car, I lick the bone of my right index finger once more, then I use that hand to move the ticket from my inside pocket to my wallet. I put it with

I see is divided in sections. Because otherwise it's too big and cluttered, and then I don't know which parts I have or haven't covered.

I always start with the first section at top left. It doesn't really matter where you start, but it's useful to pick the same point each time so you never have to think, where did I start again?

When I'm standing with my back towards the elevator, there's an illuminated sign of the 1 Euro Market. That's a shop where everything costs one euro. But that is in fact not true, because some things cost two euro. At first they didn't, but after a while the shop started doing that. There'd suddenly be an iPhone case for two euro. I went up to the shop assistant and she said, 'Yes sir, everything here is one euro... or indeed two euro.'

Even though that wasn't my question, she answered the question, how expensive are the items in this shop? But my question was, 'Why do you sell items for two euro at the 1 Euro Market?' I have tried not to punch her in the face: I succeeded.

So top left (section 1) is the sign of the 1 Euro Market, which hasn't blown off, youngsters haven't thrown a stone through it so you can see the lamp that's inside. The 1 Euro Market doesn't have a new logo either; it's the same sign that's always there.

Now I turn to bottom left (section 2), there are tiles there, nothing new on them, the same discarded chewing gum, once white, but after all the shoes that walked there: black. Across the wall running through the sections top left

and bottom left, nothing new has been written, there's still, in red paint, a little heart and then 'Deborah'.

Checked two sections and I continue like this, on to section 3: right from top left: the arcade roof, which is still there and hasn't blown off, with the row of neon lights, still hanging there, switched off, so they can't flicker. It will have to get dark to see if they're all still working.

Section 4, underneath section 3: the railings between which the escalators from the car park come up. There are two little dark children on them, both walking up and down, but on the escalators moving upwards, it's a game. One of the two could fall and break his teeth, imagine this happening, then you'll hear it, the boy who falls will shout first, if the other sees the state he's in, the other will shout too. No idea if parents might be anywhere near, I don't have a first aid certificate and I haven't brought a first aid box, so what to do in such a case: walk to the 1 Euro Market and ask the sales assistant whom I haven't punched in the face if she'll call an ambulance and whether she has a first aid certificate or might know someone who has a first aid certificate.

Section numberrrrrrrrrr 5: Snack bar The Munchies, the door is shut and has a mirror on it so you can't look inside and therefore you have no idea if there are any visitors. 'No idea how they make their money there', Liz once said at breakfast, and Marco nodded and Wendel said, 'Well, yes... ha ha...' and I wanted to know more about it. 'What do you

mean, they sell snacks, don't they?' and then Marco said, half laughing, 'No, never mind, I'll tell you sometime...' which is something I find bloody annoying. First of all, the 'never mind', as if I've been nagging him endlessly while in fact I'm simply asking a question; second, that stupid laugh, as if I'm some kind of four-year-old child; and third, that 'sometime': everyone knows 'sometime' means: never in your life.

On the left side of the mirror door, I see three men sitting in the sun lounge; I call it 'sun lounge' but it's a glass smoking cabin. The day has only just begun, but they've all got a pint of beer in front of them. But Marco has taught me not to judge too quickly: perhaps they've just finished their night shift and are now enjoying a well-deserved reward.

The men exhale their smoke, which bounces off the glass wall and comes back to the one who has just blown it out; this way they smoke double.

Section number 6: tiles, and a few drainage grates for the rain, because this part is not covered over. There is nothing on the floor; sometimes someone has dropped a plastic bag with in it, for example, a bottle of coffee milk, which is gushing out through the opening of the bag, and no one fetches a cloth, but now there's nothing. If something *were* lying there and it was something I really didn't want to look at, I'd isolate and blur that section: everything would be clear, apart from that section.

Section number 7: a tiny bit of the shop front of The Munchies, plus the first bit of the arcade roof going the other

direction, with underneath it the side of Halal Meat Paradise Mabrouk. Customers there are mostly men and women born in a Muslim country, or whose parents were born in a Muslim country; the meat comes from animals which have been slaughtered without stunning, which seems horrid to me. Bilal is the son of the butcher, and if he's free for a minute (which hardly ever happens, they're always busy there, while the people at The Munchies are often just standing about), he'll be outside the shop, greeting each passer-by, and I always say hello back, but once he asked, 'Hi there, how's it going?' and then I told him about the slaughter without prior stunning and that I hope that if I ever were to be slaughtered, which of course I hoped would never happen, that at least I would be stunned prior to that.

'But you're no animal, you're a human', said Bilal.

'Yes, but what *if*', I answered, which he didn't understand.

'The animal doesn't feel a thing, only three seconds. After three seconds, it's dead. *Within* three seconds!'

'That's more than nothing, three seconds!' I yelled back, which is true.

Section 8: again tiles partly with drainage grates, but where the roof starts again there are none.

Section 9: the roof of the second arcade, plus the entrance of the Tasty Bakery. They have custard buns there ('tasty custard buns!'), which I like, especially the first two bites, then you're actually stuffed and can't remember why you

fancied one in the first place. And they sell so-called 'tiger rolls' which don't have the usual panther print on top. These are actual tiger rolls with stripes and no spots.

Section 10: tiles and a sign with special offers from the Tasty Bakery. At first it said 'Daily Specials', now it's 'Weekly Specials'. That's five times less wiping the board and writing down the daily specials with a piece of chalk.

Section 11: the roof of the third arcade (the last one, there are three arcades with an open space in the middle) and in section 12 the entrance of Lidl. Directly opposite, in section 14, is the entrance to Jumbo, with above it in section 13 the roof and the shop front. Lidl and Jumbo are both supermarkets, except at Lidl most groceries are stacked in boxes and the supermarket assistants don't look you in the eye, and although it's a lot cheaper than it is at Jumbo, all *their* groceries are neatly placed on the shelves and the supermarket assistants do look you in the eye.

Section 15 and section 16 are the side of Jumbo, where the trolleys are lined up: on the left two rows of regular deep trolleys and to the right of that a row of shallow ones, for people who have difficulty bending over. You can use 50 cents, 1 euro, or 2 euro coins in the Jumbo trolleys, while the Lidl ones only take 50 cents, so that's +1 for Jumbo.

Usually the Big Issue seller is there too, with a stack of magazines in his hand. Every time someone passes by, he says, '*Big Issue: Homeless Magazine*'. Today he's not there;

perhaps he has a day off or he's gone to the bathroom, or perhaps he's no longer homeless.

Also there's a hook on the wall with a sign above it which says: YOUR DOG WAITS HERE. This always makes me think, how can you be sure? What if you come back and your dog is gone, then they'll have to take the sign off the wall.

Now that the panoramic picture is done, I make it faster than the suffering of an animal which is slaughtered without prior stunning. A few seconds later, I take another one (zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzt!). And another one (zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzt!). And another one (zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzt!). I am a paparazzo. I keep shooting pictures and dividing those pictures into sections, because the whole is too large. You can't look everywhere at the same time, so I make it uncluttered. Of course there's a chance of something happening in section 1 while you're looking at section 16. But if you have to take all that into account, you'll never get anywhere.

Interview by *Knack Focus*
3 Questions for Erik Jan Harmens

By Marnix Verplancke, 08-03-2017

1. In the afterword to Powl, you explicitly mention that this is a novel and therefore fiction, but you have an autistic sixteen-year-old son. How did you keep the story fictional?

ERIK JAN HARMENS: By mutual agreement. I promised my son he could read the manuscript and delete all references to him. He did so very accurately. A few beautiful passages didn't make it into the book. Hence my novel's main character is not my son's alter ego, nor does the story say anything about how Julian will be when he reaches Paul's age. Paul is totally different; he gets violent – for example, when he feels misunderstood – and angry. Julian's not like that at all.

2. You're not the first person to write a book about autism. What did you miss in the existing literature?

HARMENS: Two archetypes of autism keep coming back: the type of person who is totally introverted, lying on his bed in a foetal position, and the hyper-intelligent type, that we've all seen in Rain Man. But there are many normal, kind people with autism who do the best they can, exactly as they're told to, but run into problems because their brain has a hard time processing information. My son is like that; if you throw M&M's on the floor in front of him, he won't immediately recognize there are precisely 157 of them – he'll just think it's a waste. An autistic person is not a circus act, but he is someone who needs a bit more time. Sometimes it helps if you give him thirty more seconds to think about your question. Then you'll get a relevant answer. We often don't seem to have the time.

3. Apart from being a novelist, you're also a poet. Fifteen years ago you won the Dutch poetry slam contest. Does poetry enter your prose every now and then?

HARMENS: A poet who starts writing prose has the advantage of being able to phrase well, but that's also a great disadvantage. Many poets deliver unreadable novels because they're used to polishing their words until they're just right. Because of that my first novel was a tough read. While writing my last two novels I discarded my poetry and started telling a story. That works a lot better.

Quotes

‘Harmens describes how an autistic man sees the world and how he experiences life, in a smooth style and with an admirable sense of empathy.’ – *Trouw*

‘Harmens uses a light and compassionate tone. You feel for Paul without seeing him as a loser. That’s because you start to realize that we are all a bit like Paul to a certain extent. We all have our quirks and awkward characteristics.’ ****
– *Knack Focus*

‘The clever thing about this book is that Harmens leads his readers into the perspective of his main character. He shows them his unusual view of the world from the inside, a view that isn’t all that odd – just different. *Pauwl* is not really a book about autism but a small masterpiece about the arbitrariness of logic. Thanks to *Pauwl* I have started seeing the beautiful, pure, and admirable side to autism.’
– *NRC Handelsblad*

‘A funny but also at times moving novel. Paul Pielage is an enchanting main character. His level-headed gaze at everyday life is witty, yet we can all recognize his fears. Autism

isn't all that weird is the message Harmens tries to convey to us.' – *De Telegraaf*

'Pauwl is not an autistic stereotype: a shell, lying on the sofa curled up in a foetal position, or a brilliant mathematician who knows all the prime numbers. Pauwl is a normal autistic person.' – *Het Parool*

'This is the most wonderful thing about the novel: by taking Pauwl's autistic view, you start to feel how complicated and fake the world of so-called normal people really is. Erik Jan Harmens confronts us with a cruel mirror.' – *TROS Nieuwsshow*

'Harmens paints a loving picture of Paul, but doesn't spare him in doing so.' – *Tzum*

'A compelling read, honest, raw, but also full of humour. If you really want to have a peek inside the head of an autistic person, read *Powl*. Many parents with an autistic child or people with an autistic partner will recognize something in this book.' ***** – *Trotse Moeders*

Hello Wall

In *Hello Wall* a man literally talks to a wall. About the years behind him, during which he suffered a burnout, went through a divorce, saw his father and several best friends die, and had to come to grips with an alcohol addiction. The wall does not answer, but it does offer the man a new perspective. *Hello Wall* is Erik Jan Harmens' most autobiographical novel to date. It is an honest, moving and also very funny account of drifting, failing and surviving, and will buoy anyone trying to rebuild a life after hitting rock bottom.

Erik Jan Harmens

Hello Wall

Lebowski Agency, 2017

'Hello Wall is brilliant. It should be bleak, given the subject matter, but there is something electrifying and enlivening about the brutal honesty and dark humour here. There is never a dull sentence. I found it strangely therapeutic, reading it. Erik Jan Harmens offers compulsively readable emotional truth on every page.'

– Matt Haig, author of *Reasons to Stay Alive*, *The Humans* and *How to Stop Time*

The pit

Hello wall. You look just the same as yesterday. Not me, I've changed. I'm wearing different clothes, I see things differently. I also feel different.

Yesterday I could cope with the world. I put on my brown boots and walked through the shopping center like it was a pasture. I bumped into someone I don't know very well, but kissed on the cheek anyway. He let me.

The first avocado I took from the rack at the supermarket was quite ripe, but certainly not rotten. The second one was not ripe yet, but almost. This way I had one avocado for today and one for tomorrow. I did not weigh them, because they're sold by the piece. Weight didn't matter. So the cashier didn't have to swivel around on her stool to put a price sticker on the fruit.

At home I put the not-yet-ripe avocado away, the other one I sliced in half, down to the pit. It separated at once, the pit flicked out all by itself. I poured expensive olive oil onto both halves and did not slosh any. A sprinkle of salt and pepper. Then I began cutting the flesh into pieces with the side of my egg spoon, and after that I ate the avocado and it tasted good. The peels went into the washing-up tub to be thrown into the compost bin later. I wiped off the

counter with a cloth. Then I lay down on the sofa for about ten minutes to muse.

That was yesterday.

This morning I cut open the other avocado, but this one seemed harder than yesterday, as though it had petrified. The pit resisted, the peel clung to the flesh. With a bit of muscle I managed in the end, but the taste was vapid; I overdid the olive oil and was far too generous with the salt. I did eat it, but without the slightest trace of yesterday's divine victory.

I cleaned up and walked to the shopping center, this time wearing the expensive, too-small sneakers that pinch both my big toes, causing dark patches to appear under the nails, which will not go away anytime soon. Someone greeted me and I greeted them back, but a few meters further it hit me who it was and I realized I'd said hello way too enthusiastically. The other person must have wondered: what's with that guy, is he drunk?

I haven't drunk in a year and a half, well. This is true, although it could also be just for show, and in reality I sneak out to the shed every night to put a bottle of Bacardi to my lips. Maybe I even do it unconsciously, sleepwalking, although it does raise the question of who keeps refilling the Bacardi that's supposedly there.

Ever since I made the decision to stay sober, I meet lots of people who no longer drink. Were they always there, and in my drunkenness I didn't notice them? I don't know;

I don't have that much to say to them, nor they to me. Sometimes we exchange a tip about what to do when you feel like drinking. Then the other one nods a bit, like with a joke he's heard before.

One tip is that it helps to drink water. Drinking alcohol-free beer does not help, but jogging is good. Sex helps too; really sober, focused sex, although afterwards I still always want to smoke.

Essentially, abstinence is a sign of weakness. I believe that a strong person should have a sense of moderation. At the end of the day he ponders on his trials and tribulations with a glass. With dinner, while mulling things over, he drinks another glass. After that he muses by the fireside with a nightcap. Then he goes to sleep.

I am not that kind of person. I am a large-scale consumer. You say glass, and I think: bottle. If I *had* drunk in the past year and a half and never went to the bottle bank, there would now be five hundred empty wine bottles in my shed, and two thousand empty Westmalle Triples. Assuming you can carry fifty empty bottles at a time, this would mean I'd have to walk back and forth fifty times to the bottle bank and the deposit-bottle machine at the Jumbo.

I think that by not drinking I've saved ten thousand euros these last eighteen months. Where's that money gone to? If it's not here, it must be somewhere.

Hello wall. From a distance you look smooth and flawless, but from close by I can see the pockmarks. Once, when I

tried to pop a balloon with a knife, I slipped and jabbed a hole in you. At the hardware store I bought some instant spackling paste and a putty knife. Now the hole is gone, but you can see exactly where it was.

I'm going to tell you a story. About how, for a while, things didn't go so well with me, how I started drinking and drinking until it got so dark that I couldn't see my hand in front of my face, and how, much later, it got light again, after I stopped drinking.

The story ends well, although where I'm standing the light is pretty bright. Oftentimes the glare makes my eyes hurt something awful, and then I miss the Westmalle Triple, which dims the light and dampens the sound and makes everything softer, including the caressing hand of a woman.

I

My books don't sell all that well. They say it's because no one reads a book anymore. But a friend of mine who also writes has sold 100,000 copies, so people do read.

If people ask how much of my poetry I've sold, I always reply as nonchalantly as possible: 'Not much, a few thousand copies.' But in reality it's a few hundred.

Sometimes people compliment me on my column in *de Volkskrant*. 'I always read it,' they say. I don't tell them I stopped writing columns for *de Volkskrant* six months ago.

I say I *could* write a book that sells a hundred thousand copies, but that I don't *want* to. Because then I'd really have to write a book with a story, with a *plot* (at the word 'plot' I make a face), whereas my books are more *literary*, which is all about innovative language, avant-garde, capturing the zeitgeist.

I say so much. Words just keep rolling out of my mouth. Words, words, words. How many per day? Thousands. Words directed at someone or at no one. There it goes again, my mouth, opening like a garage door. A tenth of a second later come the first sounds. I start talking. The first word will probably be 'I'.

Without anesthetic

I get a lava lamp for my birthday. The giver says it's one of those gadgets people really notice when they come to your house. After an hour the wax starts to ooze upwards and when it cools off it sinks back down. I put on 'Ring My Bell' by Anita Ward and move my hips to the music. I imagine a much-too-young girl in baggy boxers, who makes movements that men aren't able to make. And shouldn't want to be able to make.

When the song is over I look into the light of the lava lamp. Because I feel lonely, I put on 'Hello Walls' by Willy Nelson. 'Hello walls, how'd things go for you today?'

I check my smartphone, but I have no emails, no apps, no updates. Have people forgotten me? Do I actually still matter? This aloneness is starting to make my throat clench.

Sometimes, wall, I'm afraid no one knows me anymore. That I call my best friend and he repeats my first name a few times out loud, but says it doesn't ring a bell. That there's no trace of me in the bookstore, nor can I be ordered. 'Erik Jan Harmens, with a 'k', did you say, and no hyphen? No, never heard of him, do you maybe have an ISBN for me?'

In the past, when I felt like this I would drink a few

glasses of Belgian beer and then I could wallow in it instead of suffering, but now I don't drink anymore and everything comes without anesthetic.

I set up a profile on Tinder, but then delete it, because I can't bear the thought that someone will look at my profile photo and then bring her index finger to the glass and swipe to the left. I want them to at least click on the 'i', for more information. Then they'll read my bio, where it says I'm not desperately looking.

We have each other

One evening, after the rice with curry sauce, and yogurt with sprinkles for dessert, my brother, my sister and I each get handed a form.

‘You need to sign this,’ my mother says. ‘It says you’ll be living me with me from now on.’

That’s not actually what it says. The court asks us, via the form, where we *want* to live, with our father or with our mother. My brother checks the box ‘with my mother’ and signs it. My sister does the same. I waver, consider my options, consider whether I have options.

‘Just sign it,’ my brother says, as though it’s a done deal. But the tip of my ballpoint pen hovers above the paper.

‘We’ll manage,’ my mother says. ‘Together. We’ll do this together.’ And then she adds: ‘We have *each other*.’

I lie on my bed and feel the mosquitos land on my skin and I let them bite me. I see on my clock radio that it’s eleven o’clock, fall asleep, wake up, look again and it’s ten after eleven. It feels like I’ve slept for a long time, I’m ready for a new day. People are constantly going to the bathroom. It strikes me how often people in our house go to the bathroom at night. Sometimes really to pee, but mostly just to

be on the safe side. You hear a few drops and then the toilet flushes again.

To avoid a confrontation with my mother I leave for school while she's still showering. There's nobody in the schoolyard yet, so I go to the basketball court, where time drags, because I don't have a ball with me. Just to have something to do, I stick my arms in the air and spin around on in circles.

On the way home from school I fantasize that our house has caught fire. The blaze has driven my mother, my brother and my sister into a corner. They don't stand a chance, and huddle close together, awaiting unimaginable pain. They try to inhale smoke, just to lose consciousness. Their skin scorches like roast chicken.

I slow down, so I can think about how to react when I get home. If I'm unfazed by the sight of my burnt-out house, that might make me a suspect. So it's important to do what other people do when they learn that their entire family has been burned alive: deny it has happened, get angry about what has happened, grieve for what has happened, and finally: acceptance.

At home, my mother pours hot water in a glass. She dips a used tea bag in it, which makes the water change color. She gives me a square cookie to dunk in the tea.

'Of course you can go live with Papa. If that's what you want,' she says.

‘I don’t *want* to live with Papa,’ I say. ‘I just don’t want it to be decided for me.’

‘You’re right. But where do you want to live?’

‘Do I have to decide right now?’ I ask.

‘Look at the date at the bottom of the letter,’ my mother says, pointing to a day in the month that is about to begin.

I check the box ‘with my mother’.

Quotes

‘Harmens’ words exemplify the addiction. Barbed and no holds barred. An honest book with a clear winner.’

– *NRC Handelsblad* ****

‘Few authors write as well and as compellingly about their own life as Harmens. His story has incredible drive, and with his blend of humor and exhibitionism he both attracts and repels the reader. *Hello Wall* is one of those hard-hitting books.’ – *De Tijd*

‘*Hello Wall* offers a direct look, in an uncomfortable, almost raw way, into Harmens’ headful of off-the-wall thoughts. It is a book written out of pure necessity and one you have to read at a single stretch.’ – *De Morgen*

‘Fortunately, *Hello Wall* is not a book that elevates a cautionary finger. It’s written in a realistic style, raw, intense and full of humour. Very well written to boot. Harmens succeeds in creating a drama, using a few accurate brush strokes, of our aimless, planless and hilariously dramatic existence’ – *Het Parool*

‘Not an ode to intoxication, but a settlement with a scourge’
– *de Volkskrant*

‘Harmens wrote a strong, shameless and at times humorous autobiographical novel’ – *De Telegraaf*

‘*Hello Wall* is a literary whopper, consisting of nothing but good sentences. Harmens’ authenticity elevates the darkness to a higher level. Let’s hope that the conclusion, that the deepest misery is able to give life to the purest kind of art, offers solace to Erik Jan, him being the writer or his character’ – *Cutting Edge* ****

‘Fantastically written... crystal clear... incredibly beautiful. A book like a surge current’ – *TROS Newsshow*

Biography

Erik Jan Harmens (1970) has written four novels; the third one, *Hello Wall*, became a bestseller. His collected poems were published in 2016, entitled *I Call This Poetry*. In 2016 he also co-wrote the volume *Duets*, with writer and poet Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer. In the spring of 2017 his first children's book, *Hans is Missing*, was published. The experiences of Paul have been published weekly in *Het Parool* newspaper since December 2016. Harmens has a daughter, and a son, Julian, who is autistic. As a co-reader, Julian has been closely involved in the making of *Powl*.

