

**BEZOEKADRES
VISIT ADDRESS**

Oudegracht 237
3511 NK Utrecht
The Netherlands
T 0031 (0)30 231 83 76

POST / MAIL

Postbus 274
3500 AG Utrecht
The Netherlands

info@hetliteratuurhuis.nl
hetliteratuurhuis.nl

utrecht@cityofliterature.nl
cityofliterature.nl

Ladies and Gentlemen, esteemed guest Ms. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,

We are honoured and delighted that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has come to Utrecht to give the 11th Belle van Zuylen lecture this evening, and to receive the very first Belle van Zuylen Ring this afternoon. With the lecture and ring, we honour contemporary writers whose work pays ample attention to current social issues and who find impressive ways to raise those issues in their literary works. The jury has awarded Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie this Belle van Zuylen Ring in recognition of the unique way she is able to illustrate today's world and her interior thought patterns and bring them up for discussion. Throughout her oeuvre, she has advocated for pluralism in culture, telling different stories with a variety of characters, so that a variety of people can see their histories and backgrounds reflected in literature.

Ladies and Gentlemen, today we are assembled in the stately Gobelin Hall of Castle Zuylen. This is the place where Belle van Zuylen grew up in the mid-18th century: she was a member of an aristocratic dynasty, with servants, tutors, a cook, always plenty to eat, and a moat to keep the sinister outside world at a safe distance. Today, we associate the name Belle van Zuylen with that privileged upbringing, her now-famous defiance and anachronistic feminism, and of course her brilliant letters and literary works. But now that we're here, in the house where she was born, surrounded by those tapestries that Belle may have touched with her own hands, and down the corridor from that petite desk where she penned many of her writings, I wish I could go back in time this afternoon. This isn't just where the famous author, intellectual, enlightenment philosopher, poet, composer, novelist, and playwright lived, but also the little Isabella; the girl running through the corridors with a hobby horse between her knees, who wanted to wear pretty dresses, who climbed on top of the canapé, and who spit out the Brussels sprouts that her nanny tried to feed her. Because every icon, every great writer or artist, once chewed on Brussels sprouts that she didn't want to eat and rode around on a hobby horse in the ornate or sober rooms of the house they grew up in.

And Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is no exception. Her house probably didn't have a moat, or these opulent wall hangings (fortunately for her, some might say!). She grew up in a house on the Margaret Cartwright Avenue on the campus of the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, in an upper-middle-class family as the daughter of a registrar and a statistician at the university. That was where she ran through the corridors, spit out her Brussels sprouts, played football

with her brothers Okey and Kene, and climbed the limbs of a frangipani tree. In an essay from 2012, she described her house thus:

“It had a gracious, gravelled driveway, a wide yard that in front was bright with red hibiscus and purple bougainvillea, and at the back was dense with avocado, mango, and cashew trees. The first time we saw the house, we looked at the living room, the dining room, the kitchen, and then it was time to go upstairs. I began to cry when I saw the stairs: endless, gleaming a deep burgundy, and insurmountably high. I stood there and refused to climb. Finally my big sister, Uche, held my hand and we took it one step at a time until we got to the top. Only weeks later I was whooping and sliding on a pillow down the banister with my brothers, to see who could do it the fastest before my mother came home.”

Like millions of other girls all over the world, Belle and Chimamanda must have stood at the bottom of a very different stairway at some point in their young lives. A stairway they didn't dare to climb, until with the help of a sister, mother or friend, they carefully took the first step, and then another, and eventually gained the confidence to run to the top and slide down on a cushion or the bannister. See it as a metaphor for the sudden realisation that the world looks differently for girls than it does for boys. That there are upper floors where people with darker skin are never allowed to enter. That there are people whose background, skin colour, convictions, gender or sexual preference prohibits them from standing on even the bottom steps, or perhaps worse, dare not to attempt the climb at all. The moments at which the girls came to that realisation are legion. From a young age, Belle loved mathematics, the Italian language, reading and writing. She wrote her first novella at the age of 17, and published it (anonymously) at 23. It was a satirical portrait of her own class; the aristocracy. But her parents withdrew the book from sale in the fear that it would cause a scandal, and someone from her circle of intellectual friends - which were exclusively male - wrote (and I quote): “This intellectual woman should quickly be made to see reason. That would be a sympathetic addition to society, and perhaps a good and widely acclaimed housewife to boot”.

Belle definitely wasn't planning on becoming a housewife; she was nonplussed and continued to write prolifically. She was both passionate and clear-headed, critical and amiable; she desperately longed for freedom, but the patriarchal establishment of the 18th century didn't give an inch. The only place she could be truly free was on paper. That made writing one of Belle's primary needs. She refused around 15 proposals for marriage, of which the most famous (and eloquent) refusal was that of the Scottish attorney and writer

James Boswell: “I have no talent for subordination.” When she finally succumbed to the social pressure from her family and surroundings and married at the ripe old age of 31, she did so with the stipulation that her betrothed Charles-Emmanuel de Charrière would grant her full freedom to read and write whatever she wanted.

Chimamanda grew up in a very different part of the world than Belle, and in a completely different time, where she found a society that was in every way more tolerant, open and fair than that of 250 years ago. But there were times when she, like so many of our contemporaries, still found herself at the bottom of the stairway, hesitant to climb up. She wrote how as a nine-year-old schoolgirl, she wanted to become class monitor, which was reserved for the pupil with the highest grade for a written test. And how even though Chimamanda had earned the highest grade, the teacher still chose the second-best, because the class monitor simply ‘had to be a boy’. She remembers how her economics teacher asked her: ‘Why don’t you like embroidery? You’re a girl, aren’t you?’ Or the time she rode in a taxi with her friend Louis, and when she gave the driver a tip, he thanked Louis instead of her with a submissive ‘Thank you, sir’, assuming that she belonged to him.

Even today, two centuries after the death of Belle van Zuylen, these minor incidents mark the inequality that still exists between men and women.

So it remains vital that literature and art continue to call out that inequality. As Belle wrote: “All capacities are originally the same in men and women, and if men’s capacity for reason is more perfected, then it is through study and solely and exclusively through study”. Over the course of her life, Van Zuylen became a tutor for many, not only instructing her far-flung friends and family about what they should read and study, but also acting as a *maître à penser* for several young women in her surroundings. She scoffed at her male fellow authors, who in the newspaper columns of the day busied themselves with the urgent question of whether or not Voltaire deserved to be interred in the Pantheon in Paris, while she had to fight like a lion to get her writings published at all. She was willing to negotiate about all aspects of the male-dominated establishment, tradition and social mores, except for one: her freedom of thought. “I do not ask for the freedom of thought; I have it”, is fittingly one of her most famous quotes, and is today engraved in the paving stones of the sidewalks of Utrecht. In her essay *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, from 2017, Chimamanda wrote: “Your feminist premise should be: I matter. I matter equally. Not ‘if only.’ Not ‘as long as.’ I matter equally. Full stop.” Believing that you matter, maintaining freedom of thought, seeing equality not as a favour, but as a natural condition: here are two women from different countries, living in

different moments in time, separated by centuries, but who both proclaim a similar, ever-relevant message.

In conclusion, I want to emphasise that both women are much more than that single message: they are also both great writers, storytellers, unconventional thinkers, and all-round intellectuals. At the end of her life, Belle described herself as: “a market where ideas are imported and exported”, an international marketplace where a wide range of visions, theories, opinions and convictions were transported and crafted into new works of art. I have the impression that the same applies to Chimamanda: in her novels *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *The Thing Around Your Neck* and *Americanah*, she makes room for a plethora of subjects, voices and characters. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s oeuvre is an intercession for a myriad of voices, polyphonic histories, a diversity of characters and the telling of more than one single story. Her work is compelling and inspires readers around the globe. Through her stories, novels and essays, she shows that writing is an act of beauty, that it grants satisfaction, acts as a source of amusement, and can enchant, but that it can also intervene in the real world and serve as an ‘act of change’. For that ambition, and for the impressive manner that she has expressed it in her work so far, the jury is proud to present the Belle van Zuylen Ring 2019 to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

11th January 2020,

Selection committee of the Belle van Zuylen Lecture and Ring 2019
Tessa Hagen (programmer TivoliVredenburg)
Ilja Klink (board member House of Literature)
Michaël Stoker (director ILFU Festival)