

Nathan Benillouche : “Equal relationships are like the Cold War”

Interview with Ángel Flores and Nathan Benillouche
Saskia Morgenstern

Angels, a lying soothsayer, a transsexual singer, a lady with a mustache, Grace Jones as a goddess of love: a colorful parade of characters pass by in the tragic, but imaginative novel Charlie Dark. It is a story where the protagonist, Ángel Floris develops an obsessive infatuation for Charlie Dark, a skinny, reclusive young man. He recognizes in him the friend of his childhood. Charlie also pops up in the fairy tale his mother told him and that is intertwined in the novel, and runs parallel with the love story. In the tale, the boys Ángel and Charlie end up in the underworld while ditch jumping. After reading, the story would not let me go. A fellow journalist told me that one of the main fictional characters, Nathan Benillouche, currently resides in the Netherlands. Clarissa Sonsbeek, my colleagues aunt, has played with Nathan in the Concertgebouw Orchestra, decennia ago. Through her, I managed to snare Nathan for an interview. He might even persuade the main character, Ángel Flores, for a double interview. Plenty of time before our appointment, I waited anxiously until they would arrive in the cafe of Hotel Americain. They were late. After three quarters of an hour wait, economical sipping my second glass of white wine, they finally appeared. Both perfectly dressed, as if they were just passing by on their way to a gala. Nathan Benillouche greeted me warmly. A charming, very handsome man who quickly endeared himself to me. Also Ángel Flores was a beautiful boy, but surly and defensive. He hardly looked at me. I could see on his face that he was not interested in this interview. Of both men there came no excuse for their late arrival. I started the recording.

Saskia Morgenstern: Charlie Dark is a story with extraordinary characters! I wonder if there is one normal person to be found.

Ángel Flores: Yes, there is. My dad is pretty normal [Hugo Floris, a successful cloth merchant and designer who was a sensation in the seventies with his whole new approach in colors and patterns. A man who always remained himself though he gave advice to the jet set, eds.]

SM: In this queerly love story, the friendship between you two is intriguing. Maybe even more than that between Ángel and Charlie.

AF: Really? (Mocking)

Nathan Benillouche: The fascination Ángel has for Charlie is a mystery to me, and tout cas!

SM: Could you explain that?

AF: There is no mystery

NB: Comment expliquer cela? I love Ángel dearly. Comment dire en néerlandais? He makes the wrong choices, that's the way to put it.

AF: It's not a choice

NB: Allons donc! You always have a choice!

SM: Monsieur Benillouche, you mentioned that wrong choices were made. Could you be more explicit in his?

NB: Ángel fell in love with Charlie. Bon, you can't control falling in love. But you definitely have

a choice when it comes to actually do something with it. Especially if you see that it's going wrong from the beginning. En outre: Charlie does not love Ángel.

AF: You talk about things you know nothing about! It's complicated.

NB: Pourquoi tu veux-faire compliqué! You even involve your childhood friend. He has nothing to do with Charlie!

AF: He and Charlie are the same person!

NB: Ha ha, Quelle absurdité!

AF: You don't know nothing about it

NB: C'est ridicule. You want to be Charlie's angel, non?

SM: Gentlemen!

I saw Ángel's eyes shot fire. He looked at me as if I had caused this altercation. He stood up and walked away without saying a word.

NB: Don't worry. He's kind of a hothead. He'll come around.

SM: That gives me the opportunity to ask you some questions in person. You are not the main character in the novel, but you do play a very important role. It seems that you even determine Ángel's fate.

NB: Vraiment?

SM: Let me make it clearer. It is suggested that you are an angel. In that capacity you determine a large part of the course of both the love story as the fairy tale that is intertwined in the story.

NB: The fairy tale is also a histoire d'amour!

SM: Are you an angel?

Monsieur Benillouche looked at me piercingly sweet like he was about to seduce me. Like he wanted to make love to me, here and now. I forced myself not to glance down.

NB: You think it's important to know who I am?

SM: Um, for the story it is.

NB: I'm Nathan Benillouche, son of a French mother from a wealthy family and a Jamaican musician. It has shaped me. That's all.

SM: How would you describe your relationship with Ángel?

NB: I'm his tutor and his lover

SM: That doesn't sound like an equal relationship.

NB: It is said that relations should be equal, but in reality they never are. Jamais!

SM: What do you mean?

NB: Relationships should excite, otherwise they bleed to death. People love to be challenged, to be told what to do, to be told how the world works, or tell the other to. It is to dominate or be dominated. Equal relationships are like the Cold War.

SM: You don't say!

NB: There are leaders and followers

SM: You have a simple approach to relationships, if I may be so bold. There are also people who rebel against leaders.

NB: Eh bien, of course you have critics. That are leaders whiteout success.

SM: Are you a leader or a follower?

NB: A leader

SM: And Ángel?

NB: What do you think? That's the reason why it went wrong between him and Charlie. Both are followers.

SM: What do you know about Ángel?

NB: He is partly shaped by violent events in his childhood. His mother, an energetic theatrical personality, had great influence on him, but she disappears when he was seven years old. He adores his father, but his father doesn't want any part of him. He comes into prostitution. At that point in his life I met him. I saw him walking near the Vondelpark, Amsterdam, when I was on my way in a taxi to an appointment. I fell in love with him. I skipped my appointment and called out to him. He stepped into the car. It took me a long time to win over his heart. He was damaged and distrusted everyone. He was abused by people in his own environment. Anyone would have been scarred by this.

SM: After his mother's disappearance he came in his puberty under the influence of his great-aunt Carmelia, a true charlatan.

NB: Carmelia was dead honest!

SM: Are you serious? She was an impostor. She was a fortune teller who simulated apparitions. And she claimed that Ángel also had the gift. How irresponsible can you be. The boy had lost his mother and his father did not look at him, he was bullied at school, mainly because of his epileptic seizures. And instead of being a beacon in such a turbulent time she comes with all that hocus pocus.

NB: Along with her sister Ana, Ángel's grandmother, she was the only true person who had influence on him.

SM: Oh come on!

NB: She believed in her gift. She also wanted him to believe in himself. Unfortunately, she didn't succeed.

SM: How would you describe his character?

NB: He is a passionate personality. He seems a mystery because he's introvert and says little. But in fact he is straightforward. He has strong likes and dislikes. And I have great sex with him (wink).

And parlant du loup!

Nathan looks past me at someone behind me. I turn around and see Ángel standing there.

NB: Hey tu nigaud, join us!

Ángel remains at a distance. I decided to concentrate on the interview.

SM: And what can you tell me about your character?

NB: Ángel and I are alike, only I'm outgoing!

SM: That's obvious! Are you really Nathan, the character from the novel?

NB: Haha, for some reason that would be impossible. You can see me as an actor who played a role. But it was a very intense role that has affected me very much.

SM: And what can you tell about Charlie?

NB: Charlie is a mystery. He is introverted like Ángel, but he is much more ambiguous. He is an exhibitionist; he challenges you, but simultaneously he keeps you at distance. He is afraid of intimacy. Both he and Ángel are damaged people; perhaps they recognize that in each other.

SM: Would you like to tell me what the novel is about, in your own words?

NB: It's the story of a man who lived in a fantasy world when he was a child with his imaginative theatrical mother, but after her disappearance ends up in the harsh reality. He becomes an outcast, meets another outcast and thinks he has found his true love. His love turns into an obsession. You see what happens when someone clings to a delusion. It's about obsession and what it can do to you. Sometimes damaged people can support one another, but they can also ruin each other. At the same time it's a fairy tale with magic realistic features.

SM: Why should people read this?

NB: Because it's so recognizable! But it also gives you food for thought. Is the one I'm in love with really the person I think he or she is? We all project our own reflection to others, but sometimes it can have serious consequences. Furthermore, the fairy tale of the magic ditch brings

you back to your childhood. The time when you still believed in magic. Moreover, while reading you meet very interesting personalities. Particularly I want to mention my friend, the singer Sarena. Heart on her sleeve, spicy and direct. And for myself, I would like to meet Herma Frodita some time, la dame avec la mustache in the fairy tale. A wise eccentric lady! And finally, everyone is curious about how it will end between Angel and Charlie, and ... between Angel and me of course!

SM: Monsieur Benillouche, thank you for this candid interview!

NB: You're welcome! If you'll excuse me, there's someone waiting for me.

Nathan Benillouche rushed to Ángel who was eagerly waiting for him. They kissed each other passionately. As if they were acting scene from the book. But now Ángel kissed with full dedication. I felt a little twinge of jealousy. I would have loved to taste Nathans lips, but for now I was happy with this interview.

Charlie Dark, magic realism novel by Gaby den Held.

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