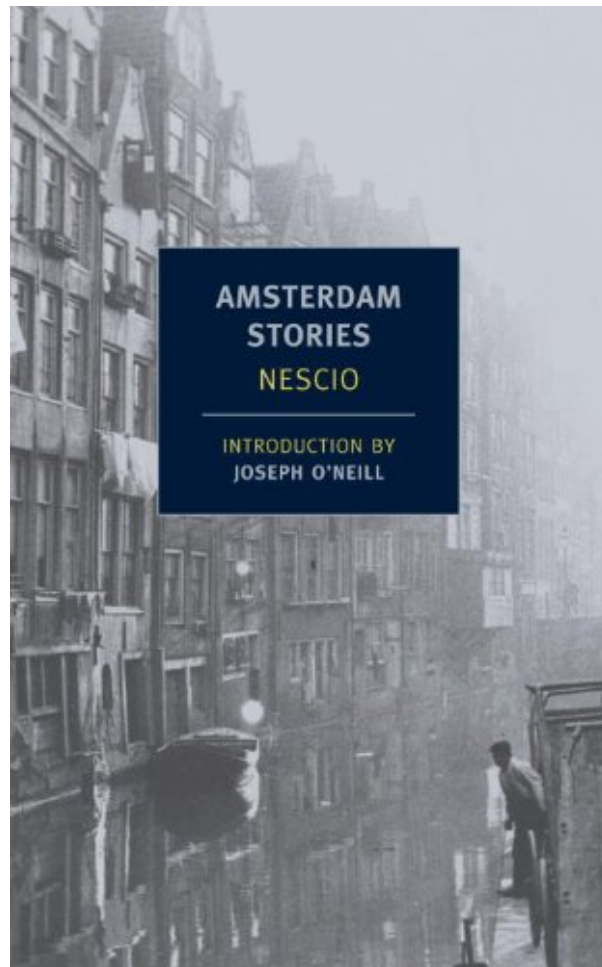
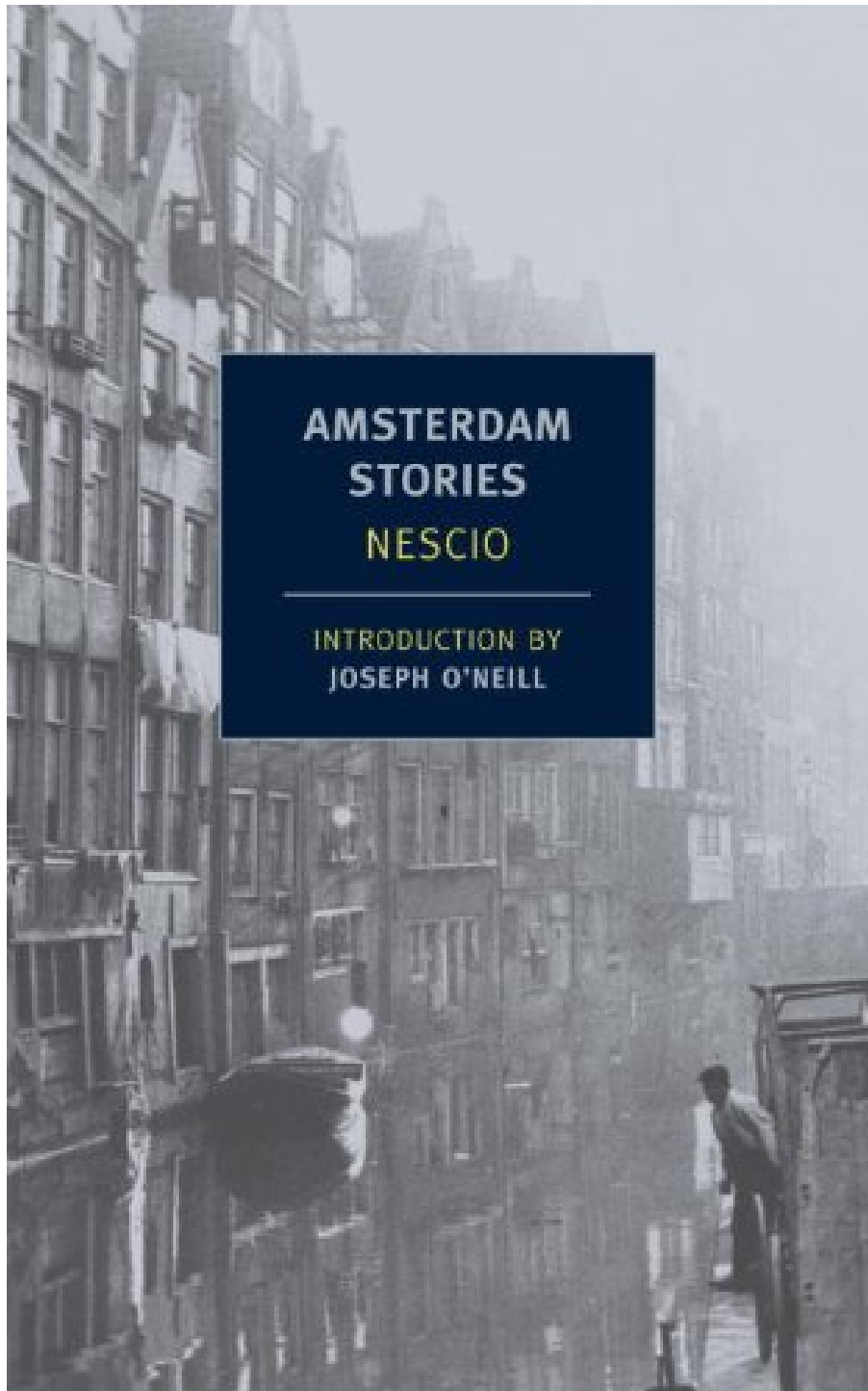


AMSTERDAM STORIES (NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS CLASSICS) BY NESCIO



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Review

“His utter simplicity goes hand-in-hand with a great command of humour, irony, matter-of-factness, understatement and sentiment (never sentimentality or self-pity) all of which miraculously balance each other out. . . . Nescio is essentially a lyricist, a poet writing in prose.” —Dutch Foundation for Literature

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No one has written more feelingly and more beautifully than Nescio about the madness and sadness, courage and vulnerability of youth: its big plans and vague longings, not to mention the binges, crashes, and marathon walks and talks. No one, for that matter, has written with such pristine clarity about the radiating canals of Amsterdam and the cloud-swept landscape of the Netherlands.

Who was Nescio? Nescio—Latin for “I don’t know”—was the pen name of J.H.F. Grönloh, the highly successful director of the Holland–Bombay Trading Company and a father of four—someone who knew more than enough about respectable maturity. Only in his spare time and under the cover of a pseudonym, as if commemorating a lost self, did he let himself go, producing over the course of his lifetime a handful of utterly original stories that contain some of the most luminous pages in modern literature.

This is the first English translation of Nescio’s stories.

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Most helpful customer reviews

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful.

A Flat Landscape

By Roger Brunyate

New York Review Books have a real oddity in this one: the four stories and five fragments that together comprise a large part of the published work of the Dutch author Jan Hendrik Gröloh, writing under the self-effacing pen name of Nescio (Latin for "I don't know"). Three of the stories, *The Freeloader*, *Young Titans*, and *Little Poet*, belong to the period 1909-19; the fourth, the darkly enigmatic *Insula Dei*, comes from 1942, when Holland was under German occupation. But although both World Wars are visible very faintly in the background, Nescio's real subject is the inner lives of young people hoping to make a mark as writers or artists, determined to break free of bourgeois convention, but inevitably getting either sucked back into it or destroyed by it. "It was a strange time. And when I come to think about it, I realize that that time must still be happening now, it will last as long as there are young men of nineteen or twenty running around. It's only for us that the time is long since past."

That quotation is from *Young Titans*, perhaps the most characteristic of the stories, though it shares the same cast of would-be bohemians as three other items in the book. They sit up all evenings in ill-heated attics, one paints a picture, another writes a poem, they go for long walks in the Dutch countryside: "Every day we longed for something, without knowing what. It got monotonous. Sunrise and sunset and sunlight on the water and behind the drifting white clouds [...] all things I had seen so many times and thought about so many times while I was gone and would see again so many more times, so long as I didn't die. Who can spend his life watching all these things that constantly repeat themselves, who can keep longing for nothing? Trusting in a God who isn't there?"

Perhaps you need to be Dutch to get the most out of Nescio's writing, which is not only place- but culture-specific. Perhaps you need to have come to terms with the predictability as well as the occasional magnificence of all that flatness, to be comfortable with conformity. For Nescio's young *Titans* become respectable businessmen or, very touchingly in the 1942 story, an unemployed widower living only in the island of his memories. These are stories in which very little actually happens; there is pathos here, but little tragedy. Fortunately, though, there is also a good deal of gentle comedy: in his description of the eternal sponger Japi in *The Freeloader*, or in the suppressed eroticism of the *Little Poet*, for whom "the prettiest girls are always walking on the other side of the canal. And so his whole life turned into one long poem, and that can be tedious too."

Joseph O'Neill, the author of *NETHERLAND* and Dutch raised himself, says in his introduction that "one reads Nescio in the first person plural; his voice speaks to all our selves." I would so much like to agree, but

unfortunately I find these fragments easier to admire from a distance than to access for myself.

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Small Masterpieces in one Slender Volume

By Flippy

I am in love with the New York Review Books Classics. Yes, I've been devoted to Penguin Classics since my early teens but NYRB manages to surprise readers by giving them the 'other' reads. (I also recommend Dedalus from Britain which releases fascinating if not darker novels, novellas and story collections).

And once again, NYRB doesn't disappoint.

I have read several of these stories twice. Nescio is a grand master of capturing the angst, the romanticism, the lyrical longing of youth. These are stories about young men about to become indoctrinated into the serious routines of life - finding a job, getting married, having kids and so forth. And still, these are poets and painters, thinkers, philosophers, all of them friends, hanging out, taking long walks in the countryside, wandering through the streets of Amsterdam. They hang out in attic apartments and drink jenever (Dutch gin). They smoke, they tease each other. They feel lost. They're human.

I would say the above description succinctly summarizes the two stories of Little Titans and The Freeloader but Amsterdam Stories is more than what I've just written. Nescio in his works conveys a sense of place and emotion about that very place. Nescio (pseudonym for Jan Hendrik Gröhloh) was born and raised in Amsterdam. In a sense this is his youth, his city he is writing. He became the successful business man. He married and had four daughters. These stories are an elegy to his idealism, to the city he knew before he became successful. New York, Berlin, Paris and Munich have all had their writers, men and women who wrote and gave the world their collected vision of their city. For such a cosmopolitan town as Amsterdam, we have very few internationally known authors who've brought the city to life in literary prose.

Nescio has achieved that. And now, after over 80 years of relative obscurity in the English language, NYRB has brought this slender volume out, a beautiful translation by Damion Searls. Also, an excellent introduction by Joseph O'Neill, author of Netherland.

Read Nescio for all these reasons - for being young and idealistic. Read it for Amsterdam, a city beyond its Red Light District and coffeehouses. Read it because here's a beautiful opportunity to read a masterpiece by a Dutch author. This is beautiful stuff here. These aren't stories but prose poems with characters you know and understand. You love these people because they might be a lot like you or how you used to be.

16 of 20 people found the following review helpful.

Amsterdam Stories

By Jack Steele

The New York Times Book reviewer found nothing to like about the yellow landscapes and minimal character development, thus revealing himself to be tone deaf to this writer's unique gifts.

See all 7 customer reviews...

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