



READING GROUP GUIDE

Malva

By Hagar Peeters

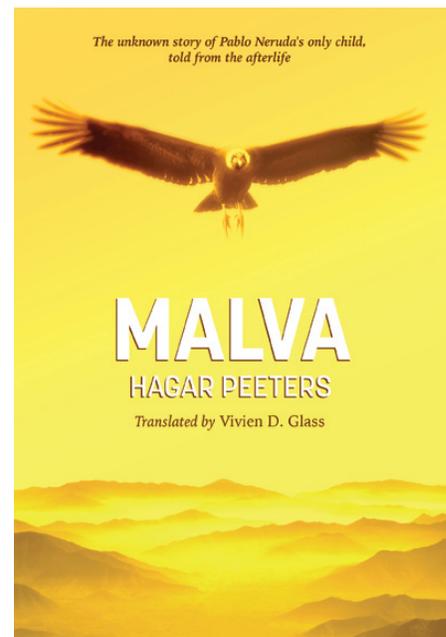
Translated by Vivien D. Glass

Introduction

Malva, a precocious eight-year-old ghost, is running amok in the afterlife with a cadre of other lost children. She searches for her father, the famous poet Pablo Neruda, and wants him to know the details of her small, but not insignificant life.

From her omniscient perspective, the once disabled and mute Malva now travels through the world and through time, seeing her father as a young boy, later as he courted her mother in Dutch-Indonesia, and how his political passions drove his life. She scrutinizes every moment, seeking to understand and resolve her loss. With the wisdom of a child, she picks up her father's pen and conducts literary mischief, courting the great poets of our time and bringing her chosen ghostwriter, Hagar Peeters, news of her own father, who was a journalist in Chile during the coup and Neruda's mysterious death....

Startling, profound, and graceful, Peeters brings to readers the world Malva could not describe in life, an extraordinary story of love that spans earth and heaven.



**Winner of the 2017
Fintro Prize
for Literature**

**"Ironic and lucid."
*Livres Hebdo***

**"An incandescent and
evocative debut."
*Trouw***



PRAISE

As lush with speculative literary history as it is with lyrical prose, picking its way through the sticky webs of family dynamics and revolutionary politics. [...] Malva is as much a triumphant meditation on disability as it is a fiercely revisionist biography. [...] Peeters misses no chance to show her poetic strength.

– *World Literature Today*

Malva is a hypnotically poetic novel, in Peeters's original Dutch as much as in the translation by Vivien Glass. The afterlife has granted the disabled eight-year-old Malva Marina a precociously eloquent kind of wisdom and a wicked sense of humor. Mute and powerless during her brief earthly existence, she's now chatty and happily omniscient. She barely seems to hold a grudge against her absent, famous father. But she's also ruthless when it comes to his contradictions.

– *Public Books*

Peeters impresses with poetic prose full of magical realism, biographical details and psychological insight.

– *Opzij*

An evocative portrait of a lost girl demanding agency even in the face of death itself.

– *Kirkus Reviews*

There are no blatant judgments in this novel, which goes beyond all dramaturgical rules. [...] This unusual book shows how individual moral misconduct counteracts political commitment; at the end, this leads to a poignant detour into the Nazi extermination camps.

– *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*

It only takes half a page to realize that the poet Hagar Peeters is also a novelist of exceptional ability.

– *NRC Handelsblad 4-stars*



READING GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What particular object of Neruda's does Malva seek out, and what significance does it hold for her? What significance does it hold for others in the book? For the reader? How does this object ultimately define Malva's relationships to all of the above?
2. Explore the theme of womanhood and women's place in the world through the book. In what ways have or haven't women's situations improved? Which female character interests you most, and why?
3. At one point, Malva writes "...the hereafter is all about going over old ground." How does this ground relate to Malva's sense of history? To her activities in the afterlife?
4. Malva mentions that Neruda's friend, Francisco, is one of the few not to abhor her deformity. Given what we've learned about him, why might he feel fondly about her? How does the author give him importance as a character?
5. Malva puts great emphasis on "rewriting history" – specifically her own. Reflect on the matter of who records history and why. What are the consequences of a biased and/or inaccurate account of history?
6. The book delves into two cultures: Dutch and Chilean. What are the cultural traits of each that are expressed within the character of Malva?
7. What is your opinion of Pablo Neruda after having read the book? How is Malva's story corroborated by other historical accounts? Where does it differ, and why do you think there are different versions of her life and of Neruda's?
8. "Cancel Culture" is a contemporary phenomenon that involves shaming or boycotting prominent figures due to bad or criminal behavior. Would Pablo Neruda's golden reputation and his poetry hold up to today's standards? To whom was he a hero, and to whom is he still a hero, and why?



9. Wislawa Szymborska was a famous Polish poet who escaped forced deportation during WWII and was a vocal Communist. How do the threads of Szymborska's life parallel Malva's? Why might Malva be drawn to this woman in the afterlife? Why does the author Hagar Peeters give her such prominence?
10. Who else does Malva consult as her mentors or guiding lights in the afterlife, and what do they offer her?
11. What is the town of Gouda famous for? How does this make the town an ironic place for Malva to live? What other parallels does the author make between Malva's physical life and her life reflected in language on the page? How does this relate to the poetic act of combining words and images?
12. Discuss the use of the semi-colon throughout the book as both a function of language and as an image.
13. A major theme of the novel is fathers who abandon their children in the name of art or science. Despite making major contributions to humanity, they inflict much suffering on their children. Do you believe these contributions absolve their behavior? Are deeds that help many worth the sacrifice of a few?
14. In chapter 19, Malva and her group of friends discuss whether or not to let other exiled children into their group, even though they are excluded members of society themselves. Do you believe it is in human nature to exclude others, and if so, why do we do it?
15. The book relates descriptions of Neruda's funeral as well as Malva's. In what ways are their deaths different, and how do these differences highlight the differences in their lives? Is one painted as more significant than the other, and to whom, and why?
16. Malva believes telling of her story will bring her peace in the afterlife. After finishing the book, do you believe she succeeds? Does she bring you any comfort, any peace? What is her contribution to your life?



Hagar Peeters (b.1972) , nominee for Dutch Poet Laureate in 2008, has won numerous prizes and published several volumes of poetry: *Enough Poems Written About Love Today* (1999), *Suitcases of Sea Air* (2003), *Runner of Light* (2008), *Maturity* (2011), *City of Sandcastles* (2018), and *The Author Is a Single Mother* (2019), published in September 2019 in the Netherlands and in October 2019 in Chile. This latest collection is the first part of a trilogy in which she examines the relationship between authorship and single motherhood. Its sequel consists of prose exercises and philosophical consideration, for which she was awarded a scholarship from the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences. Peeters broke through in 1997 as a rap poet and then graduated cum laude in the History of Culture, Mentality and Ideas after the Enlightenment. Her poems have been sung by prominent Dutch artists. Peeters spent ten years researching the life of Malva in the Netherlands and Chile. The novel has now been translated into six languages. She lives in Amsterdam with her son.



Photo: © Koos Breukel

Vivien D. Glass (b. 1975) is a literary translator from Dutch and German to English. She was born in Switzerland and moved to the Netherlands in 1995, where she completed degrees in translation and interpretation. Her published translations include works of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, children's verse and more. She is recipient of the 2013 Nederland Vertaalt prize for her poetry translation of a work by Gerrit Komrij.



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