

MARIT
TÖRNQVIST

JOHANNES
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Marit Törnqvist Laureate Johannes Vermeer Award 2024 Jury Report

The Johannes Vermeer Award, the prestigious state prize for the arts, has been presented annually since 2009 to an artist residing and/or working in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Through this award, the Dutch government aims to highlight and honour outstanding artistic talent. The laureates demonstrate exceptional artistry and make significant contributions to both their fields and society. The award is open to artists from all disciplines: from dance to design, from fashion to music, and from painting to literature.

The Minister of Education, Culture, and Science (OCW), Eppo Bruins, is advised in the award process by an independent jury. The jury members are experts in their respective fields and, in their assessments, consider the diversity of artistic disciplines. This year's jury includes Ted Brandsen, Margot Dijkgraaf, Afaina de Jong, Bas Kusters, and Marise Voskens (chairperson).

In selecting the winner of this year's award, the jury considered both the laureate's exceptional artistic practice and the societal relevance of her work, which is primarily aimed at children and young adults. This engaged, multidisciplinary artist, with a celebrated career in her field, operates within an international arts landscape and brings a unifying and social voice to cultural education. The jury unanimously chooses Marit Törnqvist as the winner of the Johannes Vermeer Award 2024.

Illustrator and children's author Marit Törnqvist receives this award for her extraordinary artistic ability to depict universal emotions through language and images that resonate deeply with readers' experiences. Törnqvist's dedication to creating a safe space for exploring complex themes and embracing diverse perspectives with both pen and brush adds profound value for readers of all ages.

Törnqvist is a master at evoking emotion in both words and images. Her empathetic texts often subtly address themes such as identity, happiness, love, loneliness, parting, and migration. Her sentences are clear and impactful. Her illustrations reflect these themes, portraying situations and feelings not only through colour and light contrasts but also with depth and atmosphere. Her work embodies a free and open way of thinking, social engagement, and a love for the human experience. Seemingly simple, always recognisable and poignant, sometimes wistful, at times surreal, but always brilliant.

Her work is characterised by the persuasiveness of atmosphere and imagination. Images and language interact. What is left unspoken is illustrated, and vice versa. Brushstrokes and ink lines guide the reader through a story, supported by specific use of colour and dreamy landscapes. The figures are often small, allowing space for a world where the child is central and universal life themes are explored, such as: “How should I live?” and “When does it end?” Her work feels close, perhaps due to the often-ordinary scenes and deeply personal questions and emotions it addresses. Timeless, yet very much contemporary. Subtly impactful, her work shows courage. Time and again, Törnqvist creates a comforting space that consoles and moves and portrays the power of self-reliance. With love, she shows children life in all its facets, offering them small anchors for daily life in sometimes turbulent times.

Born in Sweden, Marit Törnqvist moved to the Netherlands at the age of five. She studied illustration at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam and made her debut in 1989 as an illustrator for Astrid Lindgren’s *A Calf Falls from Heaven*. This marked the beginning of a long collaboration with Lindgren and a series of other authors. Törnqvist created iconic illustrations for *You’re the Sweetest* (2000) by Hans and Monique Hagen and received the Gouden Penseel (Golden Brush) award for her illustrations in *Pikkuhenki* (2005), with text by Toon Tellegen.

In 1995, she debuted as an author with *Small Story About Love*, for which she received the Zilveren Griffel (Silver Stylus). Writing has become an increasingly significant part of her work. In recent years, she received the Zilveren Griffel for *The Happy Island* (2018) and *Turtle and Me* (2023). Törnqvist has participated in international exhibitions and received numerous important awards, including the IBBY-iRead Outstanding Reading Promoter Award in 2021 for her efforts in promoting reading. Her illustrations for other authors’ books and her design for Junibacken, the Astrid Lindgren Museum in Stockholm, have also garnered extensive international recognition. Marit Törnqvist’s books have been published in thirty languages worldwide.

The artistic practice and multidisciplinary work of this year’s laureate reflect empathy and an eye for universal vulnerabilities, both inside you and those near you as well as across the globe. Her work translates engagement into connection, inviting dialogue and offering access to new perspectives. The jury is impressed by the social voice with which Törnqvist resonates with her readers and her involvement in various international book projects promoting literacy, often for and with children in difficult circumstances.

She compiled an anthology of Dutch children’s literature translated into Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, Somali, Tigrinya, and Kurdish titled *A Book for You*, with 10,000 copies distributed in asylum centres as a welcome gift to children, enabling them to read in their own languages. This project invites them to feel, think, and imagine, making *A Book for You* both for and about them, amidst uncertain circumstances.

She also guides young illustrators and is involved in the Iranian book project called *Read with Me*. Törnqvist regularly advocates for asylum seekers and minors. With her art installation *The Big Loss*, she sat outside the Stockholm parliament for three days in 2022 around World Refugee Day to address issues in Swedish asylum policy and published several opinion pieces. To give children a voice in the economically deprived and politically neglected neighbourhood of Nydala in Malmö, where child recruitment by gangs is a major problem, she initiated a project in 2023. Eleven-year-olds, with professional guidance, wrote and illustrated a book about their lives, now available in all local libraries.



Törnqvist rarely looks back; her gaze is always forward, and her books tell, in a sense, her life story. She herself says, “While I create, I find answers. I choose an image, I paint it, and afterward, it often turns out to be about me. My books precede what I experience, sometimes immediately, sometimes only years later.”

For the first time, the Johannes Vermeer Award is presented to an artist primarily focused on children and young adults. Dutch children’s and young adult literature holds a prominent reputation both nationally and internationally. Törnqvist’s work exemplifies the strength for which Dutch children’s literature is known: a fully-fledged and innovative art form that does not shy away from challenging and sometimes controversial themes for children. This award recognises this place within Dutch arts and the societal importance of cultural education.

Marit Törnqvist is constantly creating, whether through new books or initiatives that can make a difference for others. She comments on her work, “Sometimes, while drawing, I feel a direct line from my heart to my hand, without any interference from reason.”

Believing that her work will continue to inspire, move, and console generations to come, and that she will keep sparking the imagination of her readers and encouraging them to understand the world, the jury presents the Johannes Vermeer Award 2024 to Marit Törnqvist.