

*The Mouse Mansion,  
a world of encounters. The  
story behind the story*



## The Mouse Mansion, a world of encounters. The story behind the story

In 2011 *The Mouse Mansion – Sam & Julia* is published. Two years later the book, together with *The Mouse Mansion – Sam & Julia in the theatre* (2012) and *The Mouse Mansion – Sam & Julia and the circus* (2013) enjoys overwhelming success both in The Netherlands and internationally. On the occasion of the coronation of King Willem-Alexander in April 2013 the Amsterdam Fund for the Arts requests a special edition Golden Book entitled *The Mouse Mansion – Sam & Julia. The great party*. The book is given to the three Dutch princesses as well as being distributed to all Amsterdam elementary school children.

However, like the ‘Sunflowers’ original that you didn’t manage to see after spending too long in the museum shop, there is the danger hanging over *The Mouse Mansion*, that this extraordinary creation will be covered over by its own success and its merchandise.

That would be regrettable. *The Mouse Mansion* is, like the ‘Sunflowers’, not just hype, rather it is art. A work of art presented as a children’s book. As with any other artwork, it is essential to look at it closely over and over again - something children in particular are good at. For only by attentive observation are you able to enter a world where it is possible to forget the other, the real world, even if only for a minute.

## From Mouse Book to Mouse Mansion

The series *The Mouse Mansion* is created by Karina Content (Leiden, 1960). She makes her debut as a writer in 2000 with the book *Schoolstrijd*<sup>1</sup>, using the name Karina Schaapman. In 2004 it is followed by *Zonder moeder* (*Motherless*, the English translation is published in 2007).<sup>2</sup> For these books as well as for the political reports that she writes while serving on the Amsterdam city council, she creates life-size sculptures from paper, wax, bronze and textile. Even though text and sculptures are interrelated in her work, Karina never displays these sculptures that she creates during the process of writing for adults. She only makes the text public.

*The Mouse Mansion* series is her first project for children. It is also the first time that she shows her three-dimensional work. In *The Mouse Mansion*, the sculpture is the stage on which the story takes place.

Opening the first book you enter a new world. It is the world of the mice Sam and Julia. With them you meet the other residents. Through the many objects in the house you learn of their histories, values and customs.

The opportunity to write a children’s book fulfills a long cherished wish for Karina.

She remembers *Het Muizenboek* (*The Mouse Book*) written in 1950 by Clinge Doorenbos with illustrations by Nans van Leeuwen. It is the only children’s book she had as a child. One that she asked her mother again and again to read to her. It is about a large family, whereas she lived alone with her mother, and it features a warm environment with adventures that always reach a happy end.

The book introduces her to Dutch culture, something her mother, who moved from Indonesia to Leiden (The Netherlands) in the mid fifties, could not get used to. Karina and her mother are subject to discrimination. Increasingly her mother withdraws from the outside world. *The Mouse Book* offers Karina a safer world.

After reading *The Mouse Book* again forty years later, Karina decides to build a mouse mansion. Not to be a dollhouse but to function as the stage for the book she wants to write. She starts sewing a small patchwork blanket, like the one in the illustrations of Nans van Leeuwen. A blanket intrinsically represents shelter, safety and warmth. This is exactly the way *The Mouse Mansion* should be: a safe, cozy world in which nothing terrible happens or where everything at least has a happy ending. The blanket is followed by a bed and soon an empty orange carton forms the first four rooms.

Today, there are more than a hundred rooms. The house has a front, a back and two sides. It includes a factory, a staircase, store rooms, shops, workshops and a scientist’s study containing real mouse skeletons, with an adjoining museum of natural history. In order to be able to look at everything, you have to walk around the house. While doing that, one sometimes forgets that the sculpture of the house is not the completion of the work, rather the book that features the house. The house is the location where the story takes place, as well as a showcase presenting the histories of its inhabitants. Every room tells its own story, while being part of a larger story.

## On popsicle sticks, sheep wool and album covers

Every room is there for a reason. Karina says: ‘During the design process I have an image in my head. I imagine what kind of atmosphere is suited to that image and subsequently I create the objects. If you look well, you will be able to see of what kind of material the objects in the house are made of. Bottle caps are used to fabricate lamps, bicycle lights become bottles, seemingly enamel jugs and buckets are made of paper, and popsicle sticks change into wooden floors. I value the notion that children get to know the origin of objects.’ The authentic fabrics found in the house are in large part from a collection of pattern books that Karina received as a present from a draper. Thanks to this gift she is able to use fabrics from the fifties, sixties and seventies. Parents and grandparents reading to children from the book, often recognize the fabrics. The sentence ‘that is the

way our house used to look' offers an opportunity to tell one's own history. Identification is triggered as well by the use of images of people, as seen for example on album covers, packaging, book covers and framed photos. As Karina puts it: 'Not everything has to be mouse-like to create a mouse world.'

The furnishings of the rooms provide a recognizable world, in which a mixture of real and fantasy are intertwined. Specific objects not only present the residents' characters, but convey the Zeitgeist as well. Like the use of authentic fabrics, the presence of art in the house adds a particular atmosphere. It seldom happens that an artist integrates original artwork made by other artists. Even though *The Mouse Mansion* is a work of art in itself, in a number of rooms works of other artists can be seen. Awareness of the power of an authentic work of art in comparison with that of a reproduction, together with a firm belief in the importance for children to come into contact with art, motivate Karina to approach contemporary artists to create new works for *The Mouse Mansion*. There are no restrictions except for the size, which must be from three to five square centimeters. This request results in a number of artworks created by, among others, Eli Content, Merijn Bolink, Hermine van der Does, Jan Andriessse, Ansuya Blom, Ada Breedveld, Leo Vroegindewij and Paul Andriessse. The character and aura of the works form an integral part of *The Mouse Mansion*. The art at times becomes part of a mouse, as with Sam's grandfather's sailor tattoos by Henk Schiffmacher.

The house is a higgledy-piggledy structure, built room by room. When the house reaches almost three meters high, with Sam's grandfather occupying the top floor, the ceiling is (literally) reached. When space runs out for horizontal expansion, the work is complete. The house is exhibited as a sculpture at the OBA (Central Library Amsterdam), where everyone can view it without charge. Separate scenes that Karina builds for the various books, like a theatre, a hospital, and a circus, also belong to the world of *The Mouse Mansion*. A world that, just like the real world, is too big to grasp. In the books it is never shown in its entirety. It doesn't matter to a child how the whole world looks, it is about the way your own street looks and who your neighbors are.

### The staircase, a place of encounters

*The Mouse Mansion* explicitly concerns the notions of encounters and belonging. Therefore it is not a coincidence that on the cover of the first book, the staircase is a noticeable feature. The staircase takes Sam and Julia from one place to another and is an ideal location for encounters. It might even have been the exact place where Sam and Julia met for the first time and where they became friends. The importance of friendship is a recurrent theme in the story. An encounter is always something fun. This is shown the time that Sam and Julia notice a rat at the top of the stairs. They are afraid. It turns out to be their own shadow. It is a beautiful metaphor. Sometimes we are afraid of things, people or mice that are unknown to us. When we put them in a different light, they turn out to be our own prejudices and fears in the shape of our shadow. In the book Sam and

Julia learn not to fear new encounters. They dare to face everything, precisely because Julia is very inquisitive and because she knows that Sam will always be at her side.

### Julia and Karina

Julia is Karina, but at the same time she is not. Karina's autobiographical novel *Zonder moeder (Motherless)* starts with the following sentence: '1968. I am Karina, eight years old. I live together with my mother in the Hoflaan in Leiden, on the second floor of a walk-up flat.' In *The Mouse Mansion* Julia is introduced as follows: 'Julia lives on the sixth floor in the middle of the back of the house. She lives there together with her mother in a very small room.' *Motherless* is written in the first person singular, while Julia in *The Mouse Mansion* is described in the third person. In *Motherless* the reader is able to follow the main character till she is a grown woman, mother of four children. In *The Mouse Mansion*, Julia stays eight years old. In *Motherless* Karina describes the home where she and her mother live: 'Besides our bed, there is a desk with two drawers in our living room. That desk we also use as a table. (-) In the back room I am always creating huts. And we also have a rombeng [junk in Indonesian] room, the place for all the mess.'<sup>3</sup>

The room of Julia and her mother is also very spare. There is a bed, a table and two chairs. In the kitchen is a wadjan [pot in Indonesian] instead of a frying pan. There is no fridge. Even though it is evident that Julia is poor, just like Karina used to be, she is rich in the amount of freedom that she receives from her mother to create things and to be adventurous.

As a child Karina often goes on adventures. Home is the place where she longs for a larger family, while her mother longs for her country of origin. Karina describes it like this: 'I always draw little dolls, that I cut out to play with. The dolls make a family. (-) I made a house for them from cardboard boxes.'<sup>4</sup>

*The Mouse Mansion* is just like Karina's youth in The Netherlands. This is apparent in several ways: in the colonial past of Julia's mother, like Karina's mother she is from Indonesia; in the Diary of Anne Frank on the nightstand of Sam's aunt; in the yes-no sticker on the mailbox;<sup>5</sup> and in the scene of Sam and Julia playing in the snow. Still, The Netherlands as a specific location doesn't create a limitation. Because the story focuses on different religions and cultures, it feels like you are able to meet the whole world inside *The Mouse Mansion*.

### Friendship

It is important to have a friend with whom you can make a snowman, share secrets and go on adventures, which is why Sam exists. Sam together with his family embodies Julia's dream of having a large family. Sam's entire family plays a part in the book. Sam has a

Jewish background. Karina created a family tree that includes additional information about Sam's family. Their histories are to be found for example in the professions of the family members and in the interior design of various rooms. The room belonging to Sam's Jewish Orthodox uncle is decorated in a different way than that of his Jewish Progressive aunt, the mother of little Sophie. After completing the structure of the mouse mansion, Karina designs the inhabitants. The creation of the ideal mouse doesn't happen overnight. In the end she succeeds in giving the mice a facial composition that provides them with the appropriate expression for any situation. Their character is also expressed in the materials used; sheep wool and fabric, as well as in their shape. Julia shows initiative and is a mobile type. Her fur is rough and her body is slender. Sam is shy and mild, his body is round and made of a soft fabric. Sam and Julia complement each other even to the extent that Sam is made from the inside of Julia's fabric, while inside Julia a Sam could be found. The photographs in the book show these nuances well.

### The book

The book knows its own rhythm, wherein placement and size of the photographs in relation to the text play an important role. The story and the photographs go together. This doesn't mean that everything that can be seen in the photograph is described. Many of the photographs show, in addition to an entire room, part of the room above, next door, or below, indicating that while every room tells its own story, at the same time it is part of a larger story. Alongside the images, part of the story is told in words. The text is kept straightforward. A couple of superlatives, printed in capital letters, return again and again, providing familiar anchors. The text supplies the tone of the story and at the same time leaves room for one's own story. The fictional stories are related to experiences from Karina's life.<sup>6</sup> And, just as in the books and fables of Max Velthuijs<sup>7</sup> the moral of the stories in *The Mouse Mansion* are not teachings but rather lessons of life.<sup>8</sup>

### Recurring themes and hidden layers

With every book you learn to know the house and its inhabitants a bit more. There are some recurring themes. Every book communicates that nothing happens by itself; handbags don't fall from the sky, but are designed and created, as is shown in the bag shop in the house. A circus tent has to be pitched. You have to practice in order to be ready to perform a ballet. Even baking pancakes is something you have to learn.

Religion is also a recurring theme. In the first book Julia gets acquainted with the Sabbath. In the second book, the Eid al-Fitr feast marking the end of the Ramadan is discussed. And in the third book the Feast of the Epiphany is mentioned. The encounters between the different religions take place around food. A meal often connects people and for children it is a known ritual. It is remarkable that Karina lets food play this role



'Sometimes we are afraid of things, people or mice that are unknown to us. When we put them in a different light, they turn out to be our own prejudices and fears in the shape of our shadow.'

in her books, as it is exactly food that differentiated her from her neighbors. She says about this: 'My mother didn't like the Dutch kitchen. Therefore she bought food from a toko [shop in Indonesian]. We ate different things, a lot of rice, sambal and trassi [respectively a chili based sauce and a shrimp paste in Indonesian]. The last caused a sharp smell. Residents thought it stank. We should go to hell and go back to our own country.' In *The Mouse Mansion* she lets the mice literally taste each other's culture in order to bring them closer to one another. It becomes evident that this is working when the neighbor who in the afternoon offered Sam and Julia a taste of some food she prepared for Eid al-Fitr, is seen in the evening in the theatre audience watching a performance. Sam's entire family is present as well, even those from the other side of the family. You can recognize them by the different color of their fur.

In each book something happens to Julia. In the first book she catches chicken pox, in the second book she breaks her leg, after falling down the stairs while playing with a scooter and in the third book she suffers from toothache after eating too many candies. Still she stays optimistic. She keeps her spirit high and she overcomes her setbacks.

The rag-and-bone man features in every story as well. As a child Karina receives from time to time *Donald Duck* magazines from a collector of old paper. The magazines can be found in *The Mouse Mansion* on the floor next to Julia's bed. The room of the rag-and-bone man presents a space where treasures and stories are hidden. In each book the stories told within the story are of importance, like the stories about tigers and snakes told by her mother when Julia is ill. These refer to her mother's life in Indonesia. Another story is told by Sam's grandmother not long after his grandfather has passed away. Sam and Julia stay over at his grandmother's. Julia is homesick and Sam misses his grandfather. The grandmother does not take this feeling of loss lightly; instead she addresses it by telling a story about the grandfather. In doing this, Karina shows respect for the feeling of longing, which children may experience intensively. She shows that this feeling can be alleviated when it is handled with care. A big loss for Karina is embodied in the circus. As a child she traveled for some time with a circus. In *Motherless* she writes: 'Andreas [the horse breaker] recreated Circus Sarrasani from wood and fabric, including a real tent and carriages, and even the animals and people in miniature, everything like it is in reality. (-) When the dark sets in, he turns on the lights of the miniature circus. It is very beautiful and looks just like real. I am not allowed to touch anything. I am only allowed to look at it.'<sup>9</sup> For the book *The Mouse Mansion - Sam & Julia and the circus* she herself creates a circus tent and carriages. For this purpose she minimizes letters and photographs from the time she spent with the circus. In the book Julia and her mother spend a summer with the circus. Julia writes letters to Sam about her adventures. Karina too receives as a child letters about the circus. Rob Roberti, who is both the director of the circus as well as her stepfather, sends them to her at the times she is prevented from joining the circus because of school and in the period after her mother dies. Karina is thirteen years old when her mother dies. Not long after that the circus goes bankrupt. This makes for an insuperable loss. She does not attend a circus again, it is too painful, until the day Julia goes to one. During the book presentation of

*The Mouse Mansion - Sam & Julia and the circus*, Tony Wilson performs the same magic acts that Karina knows from forty years before when Wilson, just like her, was part of Circus Roberti.

In the end *The Mouse Mansion* is a place with hidden layers. Important events and objects from her youth return in the books. The fact that the layers exist does not imply that what is shown and what is told need actually be analyzed. There is a boarded up window in Julia's kitchen. It refers to an incident described by Karina in *Motherless*. While her mother is being bombarded by snow balls by the neighbors, the kitchen window breaks. Her mother closes it with wooden boards. In *The Mouse Mansion* this incident is not mentioned although the boarded up window is shown. The stratification of image and word provides the basis on which the story can exist. Nothing is there without a reason, but not everything do you need to know. The most important thing you should know is that whatever happens there will be a happy end. That is indeed the moment the books end: when everything is all right again, evening falls and Sam and Julia go to sleep.

### Back to the staircase

To date, three volumes of *The Mouse Mansion* are published. Thanks to the precision, care and love with which Karina creates the world and the inhabitants of *The Mouse Mansion*, a story evolves in which every child would like to take part.

Karina is working on a fourth book in which Sam and Julia play at home and pay a short visit to the fair. Fortunately many more parts will be necessary to tell the stories of all the rooms and to get to know all the residents and their histories. If enough children and grown-ups will read and look at *The Mouse Mansion*, there is hope that one day the real world will look like the world of Sam and Julia, a world in which you are able to be yourself, even if that differs from your neighbor, and in which you feel safe and can live next to, but especially with each other. Till then we have *The Mouse Mansion*.

Text: Judy Jaffe-Schagen

Dr. Judy Jaffe-Schagen (1969), born in Amsterdam lives since 2002 in Israel. She is a historian and in 2013 obtained her PhD at VU University, Amsterdam for the research *Objects in context, peoples in places. Home, museums and belonging in the cultural landscape of Israel*.

Behind Julia's mother there is a boarded up window. 'The stratification of image and word provides the basis on which the story can exist.'



'The encounters between the different religions take place around food. A meal often connects people and for children it is a known ritual.'

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Schaapman, K. (2000) *Schoolstrijd. Ouders op de bres voor beter onderwijs*. Amsterdam, SWP Publishers.
- <sup>2</sup> Schaapman, K. (2007) *Motherless: A true story of love and survival*. London, John Murray.
- <sup>3</sup> Schaapman, K. (2004) *Zonder moeder*. Amsterdam, Uitgeverij Balans, p.10.
- <sup>4</sup> Schaapman, K. (2004) *Zonder moeder*. Amsterdam, Uitgeverij Balans, p.18.
- <sup>5</sup> A 'yes and no sticker' is part of a Dutch government initiative to enable residents to prevent delivery of unaddressed (junk) mail.
- <sup>6</sup> Velthuijs, M. (1995) 'Sprookjes in prentenboeken.' In: Lierop-Debrauwer, H. van, Mooren, P., Quelle, P. en Verschuren, H. (red). *Zo goed als klassieke. Klassieke (jeugd)literatuur*. Den Haag, NBLC, p.82.

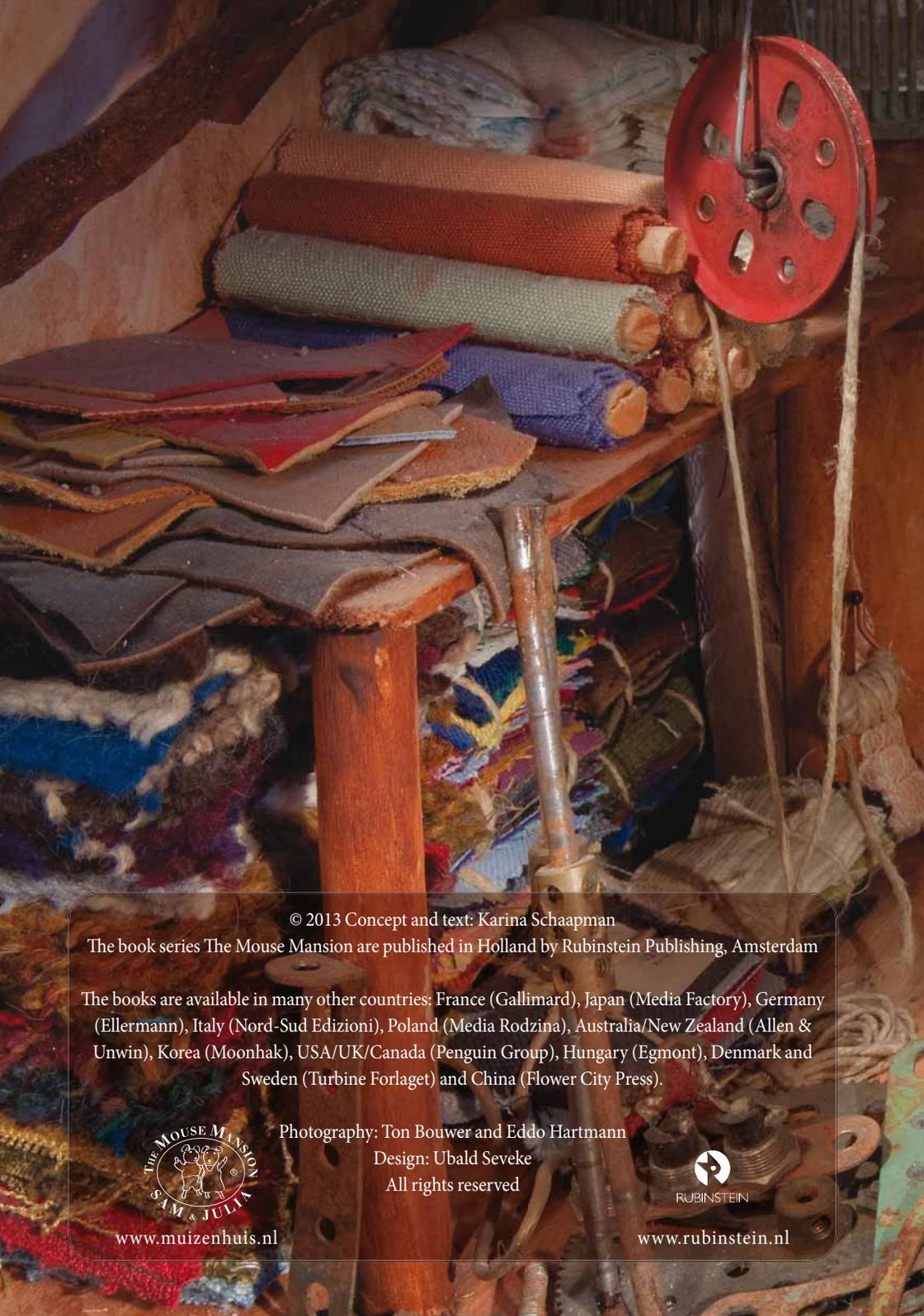
- <sup>7</sup> Max Velthuijs (1923-2005) a Dutch painter, illustrator and writer, was one of the most famous children's illustrators in The Netherlands. His stories about frog and his friends are translated in many languages.
- <sup>8</sup> Mooren, P. 'Ontluikende moraliteit en de fabels van Max Velthuijs.' In: Mooren, P., Lierop- Debrauwer, H. van en Vries, A. de (1999) *Morele verbeelding. Normen en waarden in jeugdcultuur*. Tilburg, Tilburg University Press, p.77-86.
- <sup>9</sup> Schaapman, K. (2004) *Zonder moeder*. Uitgeverij Balans p.34

openbare bibliotheek amsterdam

You can admire The Mouse Mansion at the Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam (OBA), the Amsterdam public library. You will find The Mouse Mansion at the children's department (level -1) of the library. The OBA can be visited daily from 10.00 till 22.00h. Entrance is free.

**Amsterdam public library (OBA)**

Oosterdokskade 143  
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[www.oba.nl/muizenhuis](http://www.oba.nl/muizenhuis)



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