

How to Ask a Question Like the Little Prince: An Interview with Filmmaker Marjoleine Boonstra

By [Susannah Greenblatt](#)



Marjoleine Boonstra, writer and director of “The Miracle of the Little Prince”

There will be [a screening of The Miracle of the Little Prince](#) at the Film Forum in New York City on Friday, August 30, followed by a Q&A with Marjoleine Boonstra.

“What planet have I landed on?” asked the prince.

“Planet Earth,” replied the snake. “This is Africa.”

“Aha. But is there no one living on this planet Earth?”

“We’re in the desert. Nobody lives here. But planet Earth is a big place,” said the snake.

Antoine De Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* is the second most translated book on planet Earth (the Bible is the first). The lines above have been translated into 375 different languages. They also float above the opening shot of Dutch filmmaker Marjoleine Boonstra’s documentary *The Miracle of the Little Prince*. Against a bird’s-eye shot of a smoldering volcano, this planet Earth feels strange, empty, even hostile. But this is part of Boonstra’s genius: she knows how to capture the strangeness in the familiar and the familiar in the strange.

It is unusual for translators to be the protagonists of a film. In fact, they are more often praised for their invisibility. But Boonstra follows Saint-Exupéry’s book around the world—from Morocco to Samiland to El Salvador to France—taking as her subjects the translators who have brought *The Little Prince* into Tamazight, Sami, Nawat, and Tibetan. These are four of the world’s endangered languages, meaning there’s a high likelihood that there will not be a next generation of fluent speakers. These translators grapple with fascinating questions—like how to translate “rose,” which is not native to El Salvador and not codified in Nawat. They also grapple with more daunting ones—does a book have the power to keep a language alive for future generations?

I spoke with Marjoleine Boonstra about language justice, the ways a mother tongue shapes us, and how to ask a question like a Little Prince. The day after the interview, I was standing on line at a grocery store in Brooklyn and saw on the bicep of the woman in front of me a little tattoo: a line drawing of a hat—or was it a boa constrictor eating an elephant? (If this image is difficult to conjure in the imagination, I highly recommend you open Saint-Exupéry's book to the first page.) And perhaps this is what's so miraculous about *The Little Prince*: it has left its mark on people across the entire globe, just as it has left its mark on the people right in front of you.

Susannah Greenblatt (SG): In the *The Miracle of the Little Prince*, you ask people all over the world about their first experiences reading *The Little Prince*. What was your first experience with the book?

Marjoleine Boonstra (MB): I'll tell you a secret: before starting with the film, I hadn't read it at all. So there is no beautiful story of me being a small kid reading the book. I read it when I was studying Italian. I went into a book shop in Italy and there was *The Little Prince* in Italian. So this was the first time I met *The Little Prince*, not in Dutch, not in French but rather in Italian.

SG: Well, I have to tell you a secret. I didn't read it as a child, either.

MB: Well then, we can shake hands.

SG: Reading it as an adult, it's sort of strange to me that it's thought of as children's literature, because the questions it's asking are enormous. There's nothing "little" about it.

MB: You're right; it's really strange.

SG: What captured your imagination about *The Little Prince*? What made you want to make a film about it?

MB: Well, we wanted to make a film about translating and the difficulties you come across when you transform one language to another. And then I was thinking in my research, *How can we make it more vivid?* And then we thought, *Why don't we focus on a book that is translated around the world.*

I love the character of the Little Prince so much. When I do interviews with people, I don't ask very much; as a documentary maker, I like to observe. And the Little Prince is, in such a

wonderful way, observing the world without saying what is good or what is bad. So I thought it would be nice to be a character like he is, to open up the world and ask the simple question, “What are you doing what you are doing today, and why?”

We don't want to just talk about language; we want to experience what language is through emotional, personal stories.

SG: The Little Prince comes from another planet; he is kind of an alien in that way. Do you feel as though being an outsider enables you to ask those very simple questions?

MB: I think as a documentary maker, you're always someone from another world. I made a film about Hurricane Katrina. I was really a stranger, but I had human interest. I was falling out of the plane and asking people how it was and how they continued on with life. It's not only with this film that I feel like an alien; I feel it more often than that.

SG: What drew you to translation as a subject for a film?

MB: I think that language is more important than we are aware of. Throughout the process of making this film, I realized that language is also used to undermine people—like the Sami translator who wasn't allowed to speak her mother tongue when she went to boarding school at age twelve. Or what's going on in Tibet nowadays, as the translator Noyontsang Lhamokyab was telling us: the most important documents, the ones you need to sell your own land, to sell your house, have to be in Chinese, but what if you don't understand Chinese, only Tibetan? It's a serious question; it's a serious subject; it's a serious problem. I want to touch it only to say, “Hey, hi. Are we aware of what language can do with our lives?” We are now so focused on the image, but to understand each other well through language is very important.



Image: Still shot from “The Miracle of the Little Prince”

SG: One thing that surprised me about the film was how personal the translators' stories were—how much they were characters in the film.

MB: We were looking for people who had a personal story with the book. The Sami translator's story is most clear. Before we shot, we visited her and we really became close

friends and that maybe also made her open up. We don't want to just talk about language; we want to experience what language is through emotional, personal stories. I gave it a try by choosing this subject.

SG: There was an interesting paradox that struck me in the film. The translators talk about *The Little Prince* as having these universal philosophical questions, but they're also using it as a tool to push back against universality and globalization: to protect the cultures, histories, and traditions that live in these languages.

MB: But isn't that a paradox of how we live together now? We are losing cultures, and yet there are a lot of tourists traveling the world looking for exceptional cultural heritage. We want to open up everything for everyone, even our houses with Airbnb, and on the other hand, we want to keep cultures alive.

I'm really a watcher—I want to be behind the camera . . . and I always try to keep my interviews simple so that people speak the language of the world.

SG: What about the book were you hoping to translate into the visual language of your cinematography?

MB: For me the animals were very important. What I like about animals is that they are always in silence, observing you. And that's what I tried to film: the amazing look of an animal. You are looking back with all these lenses on your camera. You try to get as close as you can and they are so kind in response. It's like a whispering conversation—me with my camera and then the animal looking back at me. And I think that the Little Prince was also looking in a silent, observing way, with a simple question.

SG: Why did you choose to visit the four places you selected?

MB: We wanted to start in the past with a very old language, so that brought us to Morocco. We wanted to be in the desert, because Saint-Exupéry had an accident with his airplane engine in the desert. Tamazight is a very, very far-reaching language but it's a language in danger. It was the language of the Berbers, nomads. Then, we thought, if we have the sand, why don't we go to the white snow, and that brought us up to Samiland. We wanted to go to El Salvador because Saint-Exupéry's wife was born there. And then I also really wanted to make a very serious section, and that brought me to Tibet



Image: Still shot from “The Miracle of the Little Prince”

SG: What is it like to explore language through film, which is such a visual medium?

MB: What interests me about filmmaking is that you always have to deal with language, with music, with rhythm, and with the picture. I’m not that good with language myself. I’m really a watcher—I want to be behind the camera, I want to make pictures, I want to observe. So I don’t speak seven languages, for instance. But language is very important, and I always try to keep my interviews simple so that people speak the language of the world.

Once, I did an interview with a Japanese artist and he was telling me how it was for him to work with Do Ho Suh. And then I said, “Can you now speak about this in your own language?” He transformed: his body language totally started to come to life, he started to talk with his hands, with his whole body. And when he spoke English, it was all gone. And I said, “Now we have watched how you answered this in Japanese.” And he said, “Marjoleine, I wasn’t even *aware* of it. It’s beautiful to see myself back in the Japanese language.” So I think that is what language is. Language is much more than how we pronounce it. It’s in our bodies.

Marjoleine Boonstra is a Dutch film director and photographer with over twenty-five years of experience. Her documentaries always circle around the theme “what keeps mankind alive.” Her first feature film, *Kurai Kurai—Tales on the Wind*, premiered in 2015. She combines a poetic visual approach with a compassionate view on the world, which make her documentaries striking and touching

<https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/dispatches/article/how-to-ask-a-question-like-the-little-prince-an-interview-with-filmmaker-ma>