

*I will go in my mind to Espagna
with bangles on my arms.*

*There is a man I love there, his name
is Pablo and he fights with bulls.*

*He teaches me the flamenco. I clack
my black castanets.*

*I wish we could forget about those
bulls. I wish we could dance the
flamenco forever, and I tell him so.*

“Ti Amo,” he whispers.

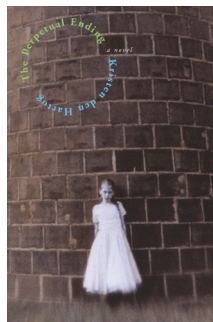
*It doesn’t mean “me too” but
“I love you,” which is not the same
thing, and so he returns to the ring
and the bull and I am in the stand
not shouting “Bravo,” because how
can I, knowing the perpetual ending?*

From *THE PERPETUAL ENDING* by Kristen den Hartog.
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Kristen den Hartog: The Perpetual Ending and storytelling



In many ways, *The Perpetual Ending* is about the crucial role stories play in our lives – how they allow us to both escape from our personal world and ultimately – hopefully – see it more clearly. Since the beginning of time, people have made up stories to explain or explore what they don’t understand, whether seasons or lightning or evil or love. What I admire about myths and fairy tales is the fact that they admit to being stories – anything can happen.

It was my exposure to myths (mainly Greek) and fairy tales that made me realize that the real could still exist within the

unreal. Myths allow women to change into laurel trees, or be born from their father's foreheads. They let the sky, a man, mate with the earth, a woman, and in some versions their embrace is so tight that they have to part lest they suffocate the children born from their union. Myths not only offer charming, make-believe reasons for flowers or the moon, but also examine complex questions to which no concrete answer comes: about love, betrayal and the human condition. In these stories, no one is perfect. The heroes, as well as the gods, are flawed.

The Perpetual Ending, which is about the bond shared by mirror-image twins, Jane and Eugenie, is also about storytelling. Jane turns to writing stories (which are included in the novel) after Eugenie dies in a tragic car accident. Through these stories the idea of gifts being



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accompanied by curses, or afflictions, weaves its way through the book. In stories like "Millicent and the Thousand Pennies" there's a faint, distorted echo of the Cassandra myth - the Trojan princess who sees the senseless acts before the blood is spilled, but her gift is inseparable

from her curse: She can see the future, but when she warns of it, no one ever believes her.

Jane's gift, in a sense, is her ability to tell these stories, but at the same time, she is unable to tell her own story, in plain words, to her partner, Simon, and thereby commit to him. Instead she writes about girls with spider-web hair, two left feet, or horns all over their bodies. Through them Jane's silent affliction emerges: the utter aloneness and invisible freakishness she feels as she moves through life without her sister and tries to be whole again.

My childhood inventions

Every morning through the winter, I met my best friend Diane at the corner, and we walked to school together. I had two coats that year – a blue and a green – and I loved them equally. The elegant pleat in the back of the blue, and the shiny double-breasted buttons down the front of the green made it difficult to choose one over the other. On the days that I wore the blue coat (Monday, Wednesday and Friday one week; Tuesday and Thursday the next, so as not to play favourites), I was Kristen, and on the days I wore the green coat, I was Colleen. Colleen is my middle name, but I told Diane that Colleen was my twin. That first day I showed up in my green coat, I introduced myself, knowing she would otherwise mistake me for me.

"I've been living with cousins all this time," I said to explain Colleen's life-long absence, "but now I'm home."

"Oh," said Diane. "Where's Kristen?"

I answered that Kristen was sick and would not be coming to school that day.

"Oh," said Diane.

And we walked, the way we always had. For Diane, it must have seemed much the same, but for me, it was exhilaratingly different.

Overnight, of course, Colleen caught Kristen's flu, so it was Kristen who showed up to meet Diane at the corner in her blue coat. Colleenless, and a bit wan from her illness. On it went. How long the charade continued, I can't recall. Diane doesn't remember it at all, so it's impossible to say whether she was a gracious or gullible child. What I do recall is that Kristen and Colleen were different. The real girl grew more specific and defined in the presence of her make-believe twin. Thus Kristen was somber and pensive, even mysterious. Like blue, she was sad and untouchable. Colleen was effervescent. Green like Ireland, flushed and happy. Both me, both not me. My inventions. **ff**

Kristen den Hartog is the author of the acclaimed novel *Water Wings*. *The Perpetual Ending* (Knopf) is her latest novel. For Karina Huber's thoughts on *The Perpetual Ending* see Quotable on page 18.