Remco Wouter Campert was born in The Hague on 28 July 1929, the son of writer Jan Campert and actress Joekie Broedelet. His parents separated when he was three years old, after which he lived alternately with one or the other of his parents and with his grandparents. In 1941 he moved to Amsterdam with his mother, but in the following year was sent east to live with a family in Epe. He was still living there when he learned of the death of his father (author of a famous poem about the first Dutch Resistance fighters, *De Achtien Dooden*) in 1943 in the concentration camp at Neuengamme. Later, in 2005, Campert was challenged with the information that his father had died not of exhaustion but had been murdered by fellow prisoners for the supposed betrayal of several of their own to the camp leaders. Further inquiry proved this accusation against Jan Campert to be false, revealing instead a man who admittedly had published articles in pro-German magazines in order to earn money, but who had also taken part in Resistance activities.

In September 1945, after the war had ended, Remco Campert returned to his mother in Amsterdam, where he attended the Amsterdam Lyceum, a grammar school (*gymnasium*). He became involved in the school paper, writing his own column and a comic strip. As the years progressed, however, he increasingly neglected his classes in favour of going to the cinema (attending as many as four films a day), jazz clubs and cafés. After taking the pivotal decision to become a writer, he dropped out of school entirely.

Teaming up with Rudy Kousbroek, who was a fellow pupil at the Amsterdam Lyceum, Campert founded a magazine titled *Braak*, of which the first edition appeared in May 1950. Rather than aspiring to any highfalutin objective, their ambition was ‘to put out a little magazine in the same way other lads might play at being post office master’.

Meanwhile, Campert married his first wife, Freddie Rugters, in 1949. After living together in Paris for some time during the early 1950s, they separated five years later. Whilst living in the French capital, Campert strove to sell his self-produced collection, *Ten lessons with Timothy*. With a print run of 25 copies, Campert – an avid jazz fan – had titled the volume after the eponymous record by Dizzy Gillespie. To earn a living, he also wrote advertising copy and translated works by foreign authors during the 1950s.
Campert subsequently married the writer Fritzi ten Harmsen van der Beek, with whom he lived in Blaricum until 1957, when he returned to Amsterdam. In 1961 he married Lucia van den Berg. Having wearied of life in Amsterdam, the family moved to Antwerp in 1964. Two years later, Campert returned, alone, to the Dutch capital. Back in Amsterdam, he became acquainted with Deborah Wolf, with whom he lived together until 1980. In an interview with Cees van Hoore in the Dutch daily Nieuwsblad van het Noorden in 1994, Campert said of his later, solitary years: ‘Being on my own is not oppressive to me. I enjoy my own company. When I was living with someone else, I'd sometimes stay submerged for days. Living together is a dual solitude, and I have no desire for that. My authorship and I have a very happy marriage.’ This notwithstanding, Campert has since married Deborah Wolf.

In the 1970s, Campert suffered a classic case of writer’s block and published almost no new work. In an interview with Jan Brokken in the weekly newspaper Haagse Post near the end of this period, he commented: ‘For years, I was virtually unable to write. I just didn't feel like it anymore. I felt a physical aversion to writing. Though I thought about it, I was plagued by a debilitating doubt.’ However, in 1979 Campert finally resumed his craft, and in 1985 published the Dutch national book week novella, Somberman’s actie. From 1989 until the duo’s farewell tour in 1995, Campert and Jan Mulder (former footballer, writer and TV personality) put on literary theatre performances together, drawing on their combined texts. The two also alternated in writing a daily column in de Volkskrant newspaper, entitled ‘Camu’, in which they responded to current events. Mulder and Campert also teamed up to write the national book week essay in 1999, centring on the theme of ‘the family’ and titled Familie-album. In 1995, Campert was broadcast reading his ever-popular novel Het leven is vurrulkulluk on Dutch radio.

From 6 October 2000 to 10 June 2001, the Letterkundig Museum (literary museum) in The Hague hosted a major exhibition paying tribute to Campert and spanning the author’s entire oeuvre. On the occasion of the author’s 75th birthday in 2004 a major public celebration was organized that also featured the issue of a compilation cassette of his entire oeuvre, titled Campert Compleet, and the publication of entries from his journal under the title Schrijversleven. To mark Campert’s 80th birthday five years later, an extensive collection of his poems was published alongside a collection of his early novels (Het leven is vurrulkulluk, Liefdes schijnbewegingen and Tjeempie! of Liesje in Luiletterland), under the title Vurrulkulluk, and a publication featuring 80 poems by a wide range of Dutch authors written in tribute to Campert (Poëzie is een daad: 80 gedichten voor Remco Campert). In 2014 he was honoured with the presentation of the Gouden Schrijfmachine, an award conferred by young writers on individuals or organizations that have made efforts to promote ‘new literature’ by talented young writers.
Main themes in Campert’s oeuvre

In July 1950 the editorial board of *Braak* magazine, which Campert had launched together with Rudy Kousbroek in the spring of that year, was expanded with Lucebert and Bert Schierbeek. Alongside the magazine *Blurb*, published by the Dutch poet Simon Vinkenoog who was living in Paris at the time, *Braak* was the foremost publication of the experimental poets of the 1950s. In 1951 Vinkenoog brought the work of this new generation of poets together in an anthology titled *Atonaal*, leading these poets to subsequently be grouped together as part of a movement named for the decade as ‘De Vijftigers’. As far as the members of this group (which further included Kouwenaar, Elburg and Claus) were concerned, however, they were anything but a closed collective. Rather, they formed, as Kouwenaar phrased it, ‘a spontaneous conspiracy of subjective mentalities.’ What truly bound them together, beyond homogeneous social ideas or literary conceptions, was their rebellion against literary tradition and the awareness that they themselves represented a new generation, with its own new brand of poetry. Though he was part of this movement, Campert nonetheless retained his own identity. Less inclined to depart from the customary poetic norms, and less extravagant in his linguistic experimentations than contemporaries like Kouwenaar and Lucebert, Campert became known as the ‘the most comprehensible of the Vijftigers’.

In 1950, Campert made his début in the magazine *Libertinage* with a poem titled ‘*Te hard geschreeuwd?*’, a call to be a voice that ‘shorts the circuits of acquiescence.’ It is typical of Campert’s early work, in which he sought to express an idealistic faith in a poetry in which dreams and desires could hold their own against reality. Equally characteristic of his work, however, is that grim reality nevertheless eventually wins the day. Love, romantic desire and the beauty of poetry all offer a no more than brief reprieve. In his later work, Campert shows himself considerably more cynical and less hopeful about the possibility of pure love and the power of poetry. His début collection, titled *Vogels vliegen toch* (1951), opens with his well-known poem ‘Credo’, where poetry and reality face off in a quest for the impossible (‘I have no wish to strike water from rocks / but rather to carry water to the rocks’). Yet this faith in poetry as ‘an act of affirmation’, as he attests in the collection *Het huis waarin ik woonde* (1955), fades to the background in his later collections. In *Bij hoog en bij laag* (1959), *Dit gebeurde overal* (1962) and *Hoera, hoera* (1965), elements such as the joyless world, pain, sickness, old age, loneliness and a love that is ‘shorn to the bone’ loom far greater than in any of his previous collections. This dovetailed with a change in his formal approach, shifting to a poetry that was more direct in style and scant in imagery. Yet in *Mijn leven's liederen* (1968) and *Betere tijden* (1970), irony as yet wins out over the cynicism of his previous collections, with themes that once more look beyond the gloomy existence of the individual.

Having started out as a poet, in the 1960s Campert began devoting more and more of his energy to narrative writing. Though initially spurred by a lack of funds in the 1950s, with the publication of shorts in magazines including *Podium*, *Tirade*, *Vrij Nederland* and *Het Parool*, these very short stories gradually made way for longer texts of greater depth and complexity – though they, like his later poems, where also more pensive. In *Een ellendige nietsnut*, published in 1960, ennui, listlessness, loneliness, sorrow and disillusionment are the defining features of the narrative. This makes it all the more curious that the novels Campert subsequently wrote in the 1960s are, on the face of it, so cheerful. *Het leven is vurrukulluk* (1961), for example, is a light-hearted novel liberally sprinkled with word-plays. Set in and around Amsterdam’s Vondelpark on a warm summer’s Sunday, it also features an appearance by the youthful protagonist of Theo www.taalunie.org
Thijssen’s novel *Kees de jongen*, now an old greybeard, along with his beloved Rosa. The absurdities continue in *Liefdes schijnbewegingen* (1963), which tells the story of the young poet Gerard Beka who loses his mind after spending two days in a butcher’s cold store, only to regain his senses upon being hit with a bottle two years later. *Tjeempie of Liesje in Luileterland* (1968) is at once a blithe parody of the pornographic novel and caricatures a number of well-known Dutch authors. More serious by far is his novel *Het gangstermeisje* (1965), for which Campert also penned a screenplay, about a writer who retreats to a small French town – officially to write the script for a film about a gangster girl, but in reality because both his life and his writing are at a dead end and he hopes to wipe the slate clean and start afresh.

After a long period of silence spanning much of the 1970s, a collection of poems (*Theater*, 1979) and of short stories (*Na de troonrede*, 1980) manifested no marked change in Campert’s tone or choice of themes. Gone is the faith in a better world, and likewise in the possibility of finding comfort in poetry, even if the poet has not lost his desire to write (‘even knowing all / yet after all this poem’). Nonetheless, his 1983 collection *Scènes in Hotel Morandi* was lauded by literary critics as clearly charting a new course – though less in terms of his themes than in how Campert approached his subjects. Ranging the spectrum from more classical to abstract poems, this collection closes with a piece on the death of Campert’s father.

In his stories in *Na de troonrede* and later books, his protagonists (mostly shy or unsociable writers of meagre talent) are still invariably dictated by passivity and uncertainty; their lives a series of small but repeated failures. A striking example from Campert’s more recent work is the character Menno van der Staak in his expansively titled novella *Ohi, hoho, bang, bang, of Het lied van de vrijheid* (1995). A playful piece peopled with eccentric poets and absurd plot-twists, in which the liquor flows freely, the story was intended as a humorous lampoon of Rotterdam Poetry International.

An exception to this pattern is *Gouden dagen* (1990), a short novel whose narrator and main character is a man who is utterly content. After this, it would be another fourteen years before Campert the novelist made another appearance, with the publication in early 2004 of *Een liefde in Parijs*, about a young Dutch writer who meets a mysterious woman in the French capital. His next novel came soon after, in 2006. Entitled *Het satijnen hart*, the narrative theme is closely tied to that of *Een liefde in Parijs*. In this case, the protagonist is a painter who, having learned of the death of his ex-girlfriend, is transported back twenty years in time to the moment she left him. This novel was nominated for a Gouden Uil award for the best work of literature in the Dutch language.

In 2007, Campert published another collection of poems after a hiatus of seven years, entitled *Nieuwe herinneringen*.

Campert’s popularity with the general public (including many school pupils who include *Het leven is vurrukulluk* or *Tjeempie* on their reading lists) owes primarily to his work as the author of eminently accessible and humoristic prose. Recognition within the literary circuit came when he was presented with the P.C. Hooft award in 1979. In its report, the jury wrote: ‘Taking into consideration Remco Campert’s entire poetic oeuvre, the jury has been impressed with the personal chronicle that it renders of the years from 1950 to 1970. The precarious and preposterous facts of this period are recorded by the poet in an unforgettable fashion.’

In 2011 Campert received a Gouden Ganzenveer award on account of his ‘major significance for the written and printed word in the Netherlands.’ Shortly thereafter it
was announced that his first novel *Het leven is vurruk kulluk* (from 1961) had been selected as the featured book in the 2011 edition of the Dutch annual public reading campaign *Nederland Leest*. At the close of the campaign it was further announced that the book would be made into a film by the director Frans Weisz.

In 2013 Campert published a book together with his daughter Cleo, entitled *De ziel krijgt voeten*, comprised of photographs taken by Cleo of people in her immediate circle, all furnished with poetic commentary by Remco. Later in the same year he published a new novel, *Hôtel du Nord*, centering on the ageing writer Walter Manning, who retreats to a hotel in a small French coastal town. Once there, his desire for anonymity is thwarted by complications involving other characters, and to make matters worse he is recognized by a journalist. The next Campert followed soon thereafter with *Te vroeg in het seizoen* – a compilation of ‘autobiographical sketches’ containing his thoughts on memory, ageing, writing and forgetting.

A few weeks before his 85th birthday, Campert published another new poetry collection, *Licht van mijn leven*, which was issued in conjunction with a selection of his short stories made by Bert Wagendorp under the title *Een nacht en een morgen*. From around the same period, in June 2014, Campert began publishing a new series of stories featuring the tellingly named Somberman in the *de Volkskrant* newspaper.
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<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Alle bundels gedichten (poems)</td>
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<td>1976</td>
<td>Luister goed naar wat ik verzwijg (thoughts and aphorisms from the work of Remco Campert collected by Gerd de Ley)</td>
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<td>Theater (poems)</td>
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<td>De tijden (short story)</td>
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<td>1983</td>
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<td>Drie vergeten gedichten (poems)</td>
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<td>Zeven vrijheden (poems to accompany etchings by Hannes Postma)</td>
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<td>1985</td>
<td>Somberman's actie (novella)</td>
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<td>Zijn hoofd verliezen (short story)</td>
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<td>1988</td>
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