This biography of children’s author Nynke van Hichtum is more than the literary story of a life. Of course, Van Hichtum’s work will be discussed extensively: the nature of her work, the specific characteristics as well as her view of children’s literature in general. But this book is mostly a historical biography, that pays ample attention to Nynke van Hichtum’s world, the historical background and cultural entourage of the life she led, and to the development of socialism in the fin-de-siècle.

Nynke van Hichtum was born in 1860 as Sjoukje Maria Diederika Bokma de Boer in Nes, a small town community in the northern part of Friesland. She was a late arrival in the family of a minister who was influenced by Modernism in the Dutch Reformed Church, following a trend that emerged in the second half of the 19th century as a counterpart of orthodoxy. Bokma de Boer’s congregation consisted mainly of farmers and fishermen, mostly orthodox and firmly against liberalism. This caused problems between the minister and his church members. On the other hand he was valued thanks to his social approach and mild disposition. There was a strong tie between him and his youngest daughter Sjoukje. He would read her stories and show her the flowers and plants in the big garden of the parsonage.

After primary school in Nes, Sjoukje attended boarding school in Dokkum where she was educated in literature. She loved reading, had been brought up with it, and got the chance to get to know world literature. Her school essays must have been excellent: the minister in whose house the boarding school was situated, urged her to develop her storytelling talent.

In 1885 she met law school student Pieter Jelles Troelstra at a ball in Groningen. He had the same age as Sjoukje, was known as a good platform speaker, actor, writer and Frysian poet who played a major part in the Groningen student life. He was looking for a Frysian girl with similar interest in literature and the flamboyant Troelstra fell in love with the gentle Sjoukje. They were engaged two months later and would marry in 1888. They moved to Leeuwarden where Troelstra began to work as a lawyer.

Sjoukje had started to write. In 1887, she published Teltsjes yn skimerjoun (Stories in the twilight), a collection of Frysian fairy tales based on stories of a German physician using the pseudonym ‘Leander’. Her talent becomes clear in this collection: she retells stories in such a way that her own, intimate voice is heard. This book marks the first time she uses her pen name Nynke van Hichtum. The first name refers to the woman who took care of the garden in Nes and who was a great storyteller. The Frysian spelling is ‘Nynke’, the Dutch spelling ‘Nienke’ – Sjoukje preferred the Frysian name.
After *Teltsjes yn skimerjoun*, Sjoukje started to write for the Frysian family magazine *For Hûs en Hiem*, which was started by Troelstra. She was the editor of a ‘children’s corner’. In 1890, Troelstra included the poem *In Nije Tiid* in the magazine, which described his growing interest in socialism in a rhetorically effective way. The magazine lost subscribers due to the poem, which was reason for Troelstra and Sjoukje no longer to contribute. Troelstra’s increasing involvement with the worker’s movement cost him clients, and complicated relations with his father, the conservative Jelle Troelstra.

Sjoukje and Piet had two children: Dieuwke in 1889 and Jelle in 1891. After the birth of the second baby something went wrong and Sjoukje became ill. She had been bothered by weak nerves before, but after the difficult delivery of Jelle she recovered slowly and was troubled by weak mental health, an indication of ‘new mother’s psychosis’.

In 1893 she was treated by the Utrecht psychiatrist C. Winkler. After six weeks she was discharged, but not cured. Physical and mental problems kept haunting her for years, she fell ill often and remained ill in bed for months. Piet Troelstra especially suffered from the stress this caused in the family.

Troelstra’s situation in Leeuwarden became increasingly more difficult and when he was almost without clients, Sjoukje and Piet decided to move. In Utrecht they started a new life which yielded them poverty, but also the support of Utrecht labourers.

Troelstra published a paper and set up the Utrecht branch of what would become the SDAP in 1894; Sjoukje resumed writing in 1896, stimulated by the energetic children’s author and editor Nellie van Kol. Van Kol published a weekly for children, *Ons Blaadje* (Our Magazine) in which Sjoukje published several stories. The family moved to The Hague when Troelstra was elected in Dutch parliament. In this period, Sjoukje wrote two books about an Eskimo child and three about a little Kaffir boy, based upon research. She would remain true to this method for the rest of her writing career. The Eskimo and Kaffir-books showed her interest in exotic peoples and foreign cultures, elements that would return in many of her later collections of fairy tales.

In 1903, *Afke’s Tiental* (Afke’s Ten) was published, a sketch of Frysian workers’ life, based on conversation she had with her first maid, Hiltje de Vries. Afke, who was based on Hiltje’s mother, is the wife of a farm worker, and a mother of ten. The family is poor, but mother manages to create an atmosphere of caring and nurturing in which the children flourished. *Afke’s Tiental* became a big success. Sjoukje Troelstra got an enthusiastic and even grateful response. This book made her name as an author, and because she wrote reviews and essays about children’s literature, she became an authority in the field. Often read, much loved and highly respected.

Things were not going equally well in her own family. Sjoukje’s health was still weak and because Piet was often not at home, due to his political work, they decided to send their children to boarding schools in Germany that were run according to the most recent pedagogical insights. This had fundamental consequences for the family: the parents missed their children, and Dieuwke especially had trouble fitting in so far from home. When both Sjoukje’s parents died within a short time span, Sjoukje and Piet first discussed a separation from bed and board. Sjoukje went to Dresden for a period of seven months, in order to follow a course of treatment there, Piet rested in Italy. They decided to stay together, but two years later, when Sjoukje became ill again and left for Dresden, Piet fell in love with the maid. This time they separated: Sjoukje moved to Utrecht with the children, Piet remarried two months after the divorce became final.

After the divorce, Sjoukje was extremely productive. She published almost a book per year and sometimes even more: story compilations, translations of children’s books, fairy tales; she wrote some original stories, reviewed
books and wrote articles about parenting. She lived with her children for years and when Dieuwke was married and moved to Switzerland, she never lived far away from Jelle, with whom she had a special bond. She moved often, travelled a lot and had more energy than ever during the course of her marriage.

After Piet’s death in 1930, Sjoukje published several books with a Frysian background: *Jelle van Sipke-Froukjies, Schimmels voor de koets* and *Drie van de oude plaats*. Just like Afke’s *Tiental*, the stories were based in reality. For *Jelle van Sipke-Froukjies* and *Schimmels voor de koets* she used material from her own childhood, and stories told by people from the village. *Drie van de oude plaats* was based on a story told to her by an old Frysian woman.

Despite her weak condition, she published a lot of books: fairy tales from world literature, story collections and, with music educationalist Jop Pollmann, a collection of nursery rhymes. She also cooperated with SDAP’s week calendar *Naar het Licht*, in which she had an advice column, interlaced with memories from her youth. When she died in 1939, exhausted, there were two plans that weren’t realized: one about her youth in Nes, and one about the AJC, the association for young socialists with whom she felt a bond.

The life of Sjoukje Bokma de Boer was characterized by some contradictions and some constants. She was weak and ailing, but produced an immense number of books, articles and collections. The body was weak, the spirit and will equally strong. She was an independent woman who did her work carefully, and demanded the space to do so. In the area of politics she completely depended on her husband. She admired him for his belligerence and his opinions and she followed him blindly. Troelstra’s reservations toward the women’s movement became her own, notwithstanding the opinion of her good friends or her own experiences as an author.

She was a caring mother, and in all her work the importance of motherhood for the children played an important role. Yet she sent her children to boarding school, when raising them became too much of a burden. She thought along with her husband about politics, yet showed little interest in theoretical socialism. She was an idealist ‘intuitive socialist’, who connected with the new movements and the ‘small faiths’ of her time: spiritualism, the reform movement, alternative/natural medicine and antroposophy.

It is difficult to say to which extent Sjoukje and Piet Troelstra influenced each other during their marriage. Troelstra said more than once that, without her, he couldn’t have done what he did in the worker’s movement but after the divorce, he denied her influence completely. This is unlikely in the case of two people who had such close ties in the course of twenty years. The least that can be said is that he encouraged her in her writing career and Sjoukje supported Piet with idealism in the face of sabotage, financial problems and arguments with her father.

As an author she became famous with *Afke’s Tiental, Jelle van Sipke-Froukjies, Schimmels voor de koets* and her many collections. Her style and her intimate tone were her strong suits. Her weakness was a lack of creative imagination. Her stories were versions of existing material or personal experience. Sjoukje considered this an advantage, because this was the truth and nothing but the truth. She didn’t realize that her version of the truth, her personal emphasis on family relations and the importance of reality and integrity changed the truth. One has to agree with Sjoukje when she claims to have written true books. There are several kinds of truth: one devoted to the accuracy of facts and one related to understanding, wisdom, style and feeling. Especially in that last respect, Sjoukje Troelstra-Bokma de Boer wrote some true and original books.