

Documentary Seeds of Deceit shone light on Jan Karbaat



Fertility doctor Jan Karbaat in *Seeds of Deceit*.

-
- By HELEN BARLOW
 - 11:41PM MARCH 4, 2021

One of the standouts at a low-key Sundance Film Festival this year was a three-part Dutch miniseries, *Seeds of Deceit*, with an intriguing premise. It follows a Rotterdam fertility doctor, Jan Karbaat, who across three decades used his own semen to impregnate his patients without them knowing.

Although most of his patients were heterosexual, he was a pioneer of helping single women and lesbians who had no other recourse to have children.

Now his offspring have banded together, as have the offspring of two other donors he used in his practice, to form a kind of family.

READ NEXT



REGIONAL TREASURE

Weaving magic in Ararat

LEE ATKINSON

The series, which has been released this week in The Netherlands and is being sold at Berlin's European Film Market, is bound to be popular with buyers owing to some universal themes.

Director Miriam Guttmann, 26, spent four years on the evolving project. Initially, when she made her graduation film on the subject, there were 19 Karbaat children; now 68 have been identified, including one from abroad, and more will surely be revealed.

“There are still 40,000 donor children in The Netherlands who don't know that they're donor children because their parents didn't tell them,” Guttmann says. “Their doctors advised them to keep it silent.”



Miriam Guttman, director of *Seeds of*

Desire documentary film

Karbaat's offspring are so widespread that they even include people in Guttman's orbit: her sound designer's gardener, her gaffer's cousin and the wife of a newspaper editor who interviewed her for the series. The doctor's actions demonstrate how secrecy can be dangerous in a nation with a population of 17 million people.

Dutch children born to donors before 2004, when the law was changed, had no legal right to know the identity of their biological parent. Last month the Dutch government said international adoptions would be suspended.

"We live in an era where we give much more attention to the rights of donor children and to adopted children," Guttman says. "But back in the 70s and 80s it was all about conceiving and procreating and having babies. Nobody thought of the consequences, nobody thought of those children. It was coincidental that 19 children matched through a DNA bank."

At once shocking and heartwarming, *Seeds of Deceit* is structured as a kind of thriller with new details gradually being revealed in three episodes. The first, *A Promise*, tells the story of how Karbaat became the most renowned fertility doctor in the country and includes interviews with the women, reconstructions of how it happened — often unbearably — and there is even footage of the charming and

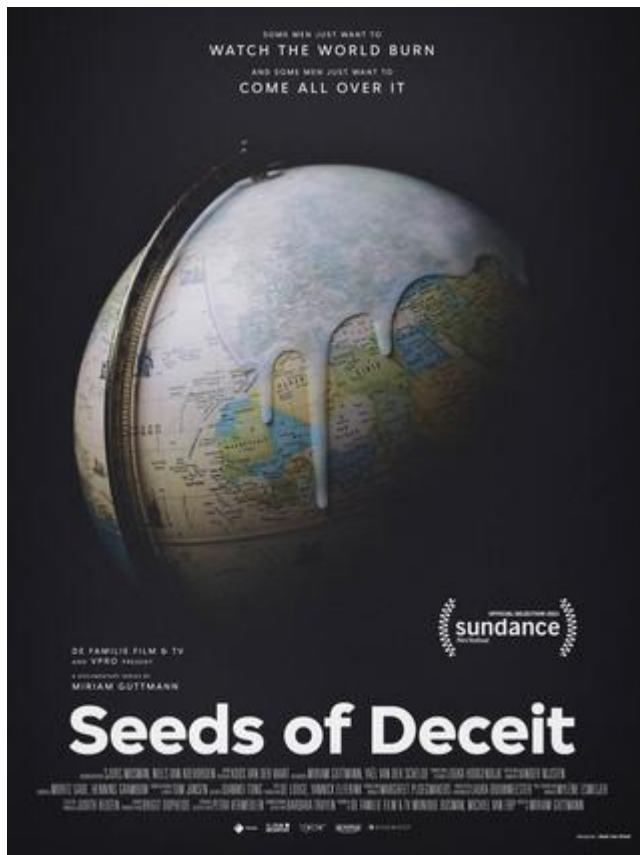
persuasive doctor at work with a speculum that was part of Ditteke Mensink's 1995 documentary *Zwart Zaad*.

The second episode, *Offspring*, follows the Karbaat children dealing with their heritage. They share a sense of belonging and recognition and a fear of inheriting malicious genetic traits. Many have had tough lives. "Some of them really embraced this new Karbaat identity and even got a tattoo saying Karbastard on their arm," Guttman says.

The third episode, *Liquid Love*, deals with Karbaat's two prominent sperm donors, one of whom, Louis, is on the spectrum and some of his offspring have inherited his condition. Louis never had children of his own and yearned for immortality with the 200 children he spawned. He's now keen to know them and some are up for it.

"Karbaat asked the donors to go to the clinic multiple times a week," Guttman recalls. "In the 70s and 80s sperm wasn't frozen. It had to be fresh. So there were situations where Karbaat would call a donor and he would come on his bicycle to donate and it would go directly into the patient. Louis told me that people who are that available have to be a little bit odd."

Guttman worked hard to gain her wide-ranging access and ultimately many of the offspring and even the donors make fascinating subjects. We can see the resemblances for ourselves. "I was really struck by how strong our genetics are, to see those half-brothers and sisters meeting each other for the first time, and having so much recognition," she says. "They're full adults and yet they have the same humour, the same teeth and similar interests. Many of them are doctors or work in the medical profession and many ride horses as Karbaat did. It was overwhelming to witness how much impact one single person can have."



The series shows how the charismatic Karbaat, while clearly a narcissist, had a father who was mean and into money. Perhaps his ability at deception came from his father, the nature versus nurture argument again? “Who knows? I find it very interesting to raise those questions,” Guttman says. “I really hope that viewers can relate somehow because we are all the children of parents.”

Karbaat died before he could be prosecuted. “There was a court case filed against him in 2017, but he died a month earlier,” Guttman says. Could it have been suicide? “It could have very well been as he was a doctor, so he had the medication. But nobody knows.”

In 2019 a Dutch court ruled that DNA tests should be made available to parents and children to conduct their own comparisons.

As for the poster it shows that the series is not without humour. “I had this image in my head of a globe which is covered in sperm,” Guttman explains. “But how could we do that? We considered milk, which isn’t thick enough and then we decided on soap. It’s actually really thick soap. At least it smelled nice,” she chuckles. Still the poster will be different in the US. “They have a very sane family picture for the US sales.”

What has Guttman taken away if she or anyone she knows needs help to conceive?

“I now sometimes speak to people who are considering using a donor and I always tell them to watch my film and be aware of what they are doing,” she says. “Don’t take an anonymous donor, take a friend or take your partner’s brother. You cannot order a child. It’s not like you just order genetic material. You also cannot deny 50 per cent of the genetic material.

“So you can’t just pretend it’s anonymous and say nurture is so strong that you’ll raise the child the way you want to. I want to have children one day, but I wouldn’t take a child who’s adopted, I wouldn’t take a donor child.”