



Before we get to the life and achievements of Helene Dutrieu, a little about your own background and life with bicycles. You are the author of many books, for children and adults. Tell us please about your own writing and illustration.

- Well, to be creative seems to be in my DNA from the day I was born. I started with drawing on every paper I found in my parents house (including theire wedding registration papers) and ended up as a graphic designer, illustrator, author and publishers of books.
- I live in Belgium and well, there is no escaping the bicyle or cyling races. My earliest childhood memories is that I was, at 4 years old, watching the arrival of a stage of the tour de france, with Eddy Merckx miracuously appearing out of the fog on a mountain. Cycling is by far the most popular sport in Belgium, everybody knows the names of the cyclists, races are broadcasted on the national prime TV.

One of the reasons cycling is so popular is because cycling and the cyclist are very close to the people. Unlike soccer you don't have to go to a stadium to see the stars shine, the cyclist ride on the open road and if you'r lucky you can see them passing your frontdoor. If not you can go out and attend the races, for free. At every race big or small the village where the cyclist start the race are packed. And the amazing thing is: you can watch the riders and their bikes getting of the teambus, from closeby, you can talk to them, ask autographs. This makes the cyclists very human – not unreachable stars. It gives an amazing connection, you can get really amazed on how these athletes are real daredevils risking their lives cycling as hard as they can on a fragile bike, with just a helmet as protection.

We just had the Tour of Flanders – with an amazing Matthieu van der poel – and sunday we have another legendary race coming up, the illustrious Paris-Roubaix.

You grew up in Belgium, a country rich in cycling history including cycling champions like Eddy Merckx. What is the state of cycling in Belgium today?

Overall the global state of cycling is at a high peak I could say, because we are lucky to have a lot of amazing cyclists as Pogacar, Van der Poel, Vingegaard, and speaking as a Belgian fan we have the hope of the nation Remco Evenepoel – the first belgian cyclist in decades who was able to win a big Tour (of Spain) – , we have of course Wout Van Aert (so unfortunate to have crashed just cannot participate now), but also a lot of riders on their peak as Philippe (who won Milaan Sanremo), and a lot of very talented youngsters as De Lie, Maxim Van Gils and Cian Uittebroeks, to name a few.

Above that there is also Lotte Kopecky, the female world champion cycling, who shines in both road races and track racing (which makes her some kind of heir apparent of Helene Dutrieu).

How do you compare to your neighbors up north, the Dutch, as far as the popularity of cycling or government investment in bicycle infrastructure?

- Cycling in Netherlands is also in great shape and very popular with – of course – vanderpoel, but also riders as Van Baarle, a bunch of great cyclocross riders and some amazing female cyclists as Annemiek van Vleuten, Marianne Vos and Lorena Wiebes.
- Off course there are also things that can get better: the wages and price money of woman cyclists should be the same as the male cyclists, the cycling sport as a whole should be able to evolve so it has a better financial basis, and the sport should get a bit more safe.
- On the other hand the cycling sport really needs more governmental support, especially in Belgium. There is an amazing amount of talent that needs support.

What were Helene Nutrient's origins, early life and how did she discover her remarkable talent as a cyclist.

Helenes had a five year older brother, Eugène, who started cycling at early age and who was pretty popular in the north of france. Hélène followed him when he went practising on the cycling tracks, and while he was resting she took his bike and cycled on the tracks.

Immediately it became clear that – although she was a fragile little girl – she could cycle very fast. Spectators and other cyclists were amazed. Her first step to fame came when she found out in Paris a woman had set an hour record, and with just little practice she put the hour record on her name. For a decade she improved the hour record over and over when other riders tried to take it from her.

The fact she was the record holder of the hour opened doors for Hélène, and she was invited to cycle on the Paris cycle tracks. She competed in road races and track races all over Europe, she won races against other cyclists, she even won a cycle race against a rider on a horse.

You write that to each of her successes there were also twice as many setbacks and that her life is a story of falling (literally) and getting up. What motivated her? Where did she get the inner strength to do the things she did?

It is indeed very remarkable that she had many setbacks, her life is literally a story of falling (crashing) and getting back up.

I think part of her strength came from the fact she was determined to be successful and that she knew that falling was not a sign of failure or lack of talent, but that is was part of the way to success. You can't make an omelet without breaking the eggs.

She crashed many times as a cyclist, with some severe crashes while she was unconscious. She crashed as a cycling stuntwoman with a motorcycle, an accident that almost cost her life. And once she became a pilot, an aviation pioneer, it was inevitable that from time to time she crashed and destroyed her plane.

Almost miraculously she survived all these accidents, she herself claimed that she survived because she was given a magical amulet she wore with her all the time, if this was true or some kind of legend you can read in her autobiography.

Early women's rights leader Susan B. Anthony has said that bicycling "has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world." How was the bicycle an emancipatory vehicle?

Oh, this is a major topic that is so interesting I'm currently writing a new book about it. What I learned is that the bicycle made it possible for woman to broaden their horizon. Before, the life of the woman took place between the kitchen and the church. Women were supposed to be housewives or work in the factory. With the popularity the bicycle became much cheaper so lots of women could buy one, and with the bicycle came a lot of new things: you needed handy clothes to ride the bike, so pretty soon the corset was traded in for bloomer shorts or pants, women – and men – started cycling clubs and as a pastime cycled through the country, villages and cities. Women could even travel – cheap – with their bike, even travelling around the world in some cases. This was a global phenomenon and the impact was huge. You can really say that the bicycle was a freedom machine, and it still is up to this day.

The emancipation of the female cyclists pretty soon led to greater awareness of the position of women in various areas, legal, political, on voting rights, proto-feminism, the suffragettes, all of which were linked. And the battle isn't over yet :)

Women cycling races drew more spectators than men races in the early days and yet the women riders faced much prejudice, ridicule and obstacles. Tell us about the early women's racing scene.

Well, there is a big discrepancy between the spectators – who really came in great masses to see the female cyclists – and the way some people regarded female cyclists. The attraction of course came from the novelty – cycling women –, the fact that these riders were a bit more fancy clothed – you might be able to see a naked ankle, and the fact that the female cycling races were fun to watch because the ladies really went all in on the races (just as female cycle races nowadays are also very attractive to watch).

On the other hand some male voices in the public opinion were scared of this rise of female power, some men were afraid they would lose their privileged position (because of the emancipation of the woman), so they pulled out all the stops to diabolize women's cycling.

Cycling would make women barren, cycling would make women ugly (you could get a 'bicycle face', women would become a third sex), the church also intervened – claiming

that cycling would give women pleasure, causing them to forsake their marital duties.

But luckily there were also voices in the public opinion who encouraged cycling for women, like doctors who thought cycling was just right for women's health

This is the first biography of this remarkable woman. How did you decide to write about this “Girl Sparrow Hawk?” What was the research and writing process like?

In the first place I kind off wrote the book for myself because I wanted to know more about this lady, because the only information I could find were some tiny biographical texts: “first female world champion cycling, aviation pioneer, stuntwoman, world war I hero...” You can only be curious who she was , and the moment I discovered more about Hélène Dutrieu it was kind of as she used me as a tool to write her story down for the first time. Throughout the photos and articles I found it was I could hear her talking to me.

I took a lot of time to do the research, simply because it was fun to do, going through archives and finding new details every time. So it was very rewarding.

Of course it was an enormous task, as I ended up with more than 8000 articles and 5000 pictures I had to date, chronologise, read and translate, double check, cross-read with books and other sources of people mentioned in the articles, so it took me a long time to do.

As a matter of fact, I think the research took me about 10 years, and the writing was done in six months. I also did the graphic design and photo editing of the book, that was big fun, but also a big job as the book is 400 pages.

Helene broke many cycling records. Which ones stand out?

I have to pick several: her world hour records on the bicycle, because with the times and speeds you can measure her against other cyclists from other continents and times, you can safely say that she was the fastest cyclist of this period, although the American Tillie Anderson might come very close to her (she had a distance record of something like 50 minutes, so you can't compare it to Helene's). The world hour record is a very good scale, it was one of – and still is one of – the arguments to name Eddy Merckx as the greatest cyclist ever, because his world hour record still is amazing compared with today's standards.

Aother record that has to be mentioned I think is her female aviation distance record – the famous Femina cup – this was done by cycling hours and hours over a square field, in the coldest december weather, in an open airplane, where she was sitting in front of a loud motor, unprotected. You need to be mentally very strong to be able to push yourself so far.

(By the way: the woman had to do the record attempt this way, cycling over a square field over and over, not unlike male pilots who flew over the country side in a straight line.... Because woman were not allowed to fly over mainland...)

She was also a stunt rider. What were some of the stunts she and other cyclists performed and what were the risks?

Dutrieu invented her own cycling stunt when she watched a man called Diavolo doing a lop the loop with his bike. Hélène changed the stunt into one where she came cycling with high speed from of a large ramp, at the end being catapulted of in the air, flying some 20 metres trough the air, landing on a platform high upon the roof on a platform high in the still of a hall or tent.

The platform was placed so high in some places they even had to break out the roof. This stunt – named ‘flying the fume’- was a big succes, she toured all over Europe with it, but it was very dangerous. One small tremble or hesitation while going down the ramp would be catastrophic, even letal.

There were a lot of cyclists and stuntman and woman who kind of copied Hélènes stunt, and many of them did not survive.

No wonder the stunt was even forbdden by some local authoroties, and in the beginning the theatres didnt want the stunt because they didnt want a dead performer.

Anyway, Hélène crashed several times but never gave up, until she traded the bicycle for a motorcycle when she performed a new version of the trick in Berlin, she flew trough the air, but in stead of landing on the platform, she hit it and was thrown backwards, falling on the ground from a big height, with the motorcycle crashing on her. She was thought dead, or at least paralysed, but she recoverd once again miracously, alltough she had to revalidate for 8

months, during this period she read about aviation pioneers.... So when she recovered from this almost lethal crash... she decided to become one of the first flying women...

The biography is full of lively characters like her coach, for a short while, Choppy Warburton who used to give his racers some white powder before races and had, according to Helene, “a questionable reputation.” Who were some of the interesting early men and women you encountered in your research? The villains and the saints or at least heroes?

For sure I think of two women who were much loved in their time and regarded brave and heroic:

One of the women to mention is certainly Miss Aboukaia, she almost shadowed Hélène Dutrieu: she also was a cyclist, she made her own version of Hélène's cycle stunt, but instead of cycling down a ramp, she threw herself from a ramp, no strings attached, flying through the air, almost killing herself every time she performed the trick. Later when Hélène became an aviation pioneer, the manufacturer of the airplane was convinced Hélène would not survive the demonstrations of the airplane, so in secret they hired Miss Aboukaia, and behind the curtains prepared her to take Hélène's role as aviation demonstrator, so certain they were Hélène would not survive,

An other woman to be mentioned is Marie Marvingt, a French lady who was an amazing athlete who excelled in swimming, cycling, aviation, skiing, who fought during World War I and even at late age cycled hundreds of kilometers on her bike. Amazing woman.

Choppy Warburton has the odds against him of being the villain of the book, but I did thorough research on him as well – there is a large chapter in the notes of the book dedicated entirely to him – because I wanted to know the truth, and what I discovered is that you need to know his life story to understand him and – however Choppy Warburton is regarded as the first ‘doping coach’, in reality he was partly ahead of his time in training and guidance, and probably his famous ‘black bottle’ was just a placebo and was there more for

show and to intimidate the other riders. You have a little book in a book about him in Hélènes biography.

There are lots of stories in the book and I even discovered more for the next book I'm writing.

You write that quite a few of the obstacles Dutrieu had to overcome are, in your words, "still burning relevant today." Can you explain?

Well, Dutrieu stopped her cycling career partly because she found out that – while she was regarded as the best female cyclist, she earned a lot less prize money as the male cyclists. An issue that still stands today.

Also the struggle for equal rights for woman and man is still a current issue. There is of course already a lot of emancipation, but woman who do the same job as man still get paid less. There are still 'glass ceilings' for woman, Hélène Dutrieu had to have lots of courage to escape from the life path that was written out for her, destined to be a working girl and a housewife, just as lots of woman today have to fight for their rights. In some regions of the world these fights are obvious, in other parts or branches they are less visible at first sight: medication is standarised and tested on 'an average man of 80 kilograms', causing a lot of hidden health issues for woman, and so on and on.

You write that Helene Dutrieu minimized her achievements and rejected her role as a feminist role model. What was she like in person, when not performing daredevil acts?

The fun thing is Hélène was on the one side a tomboy, a daredevil woman, although fragile and small, but on the other side she also was a comedy actress, a fashion girl who liked making her own clothes (you can even see her knitting in a picture in the book, sitting in her plane before a flight). She – and that's what other people tell of her too – was a very funny

vivid lady, who had a very positif mental attitude. She was a 'yes woman' who always wanted to go forward, try new things, and seemed fearless, altough deep inside – in her own words – she was scared of lots of things, she feared for her life everytime she stepped into a car with someone else driving! At some points I her life she broke records out of pure fear: she didnt dare to fly over sea – being afraid over water – so flew over land and thus breaking records.

You could kind off compare her with Serena Willams, the tennis player, who is a force of nature on the tennis field, but of court an elegant fashion glamour woman. So was Hélène, but hen with the looks and size of a early nineteenth century Kylie Minogue.

She minimised her role as a feminist role model, even acting against feminism, but you have to see the whle picture. She said she did not support a change in law giving married woman more rights, she simply said: if that are the rules, then just don't get married.

She and her husband were members of the Free France army in World War Two. Was she a political person?

Well, she married at late age, almost 40, with Pierre Mortier who was a very policalical active man, who fought for the rights of the vulnarable people and working class people. When they married Hélène became a bit his assistant and started writing for his journals, so you can imagine they shared the same opions. Worth to mention that in world War 8, Hélène begged the french army to be able to fight the germans as aviator, was refused several times but because she didnt' take no for an answer, she became a reconnaissance aviator (and later a commander of a field hospital).

Helene had a magic amulet which she credited with saving her life several times and helping her win. What else accounts for her many successes? Hard training? A strong character?

Apart from all mentioned before, another thing pushed her forward: a mixture of wanting to gain financial freedom – she hoped to be able to save enough money to be able to retire fast – in combination with the fear of losing all her money, both of which happened to her.

What explains the fact that this remarkable woman has been missing from the pages of history until recently? In the past decade Helene has received some recognition, with streets named for her, a Belgian 5 Euro coin bearing her image and even a spot on the planet Venus named for her. How did these come about?

Thats a mystery to me. I was amazed her life was forgotten. One of the facts I think is that – altough she was one kind of a character – her ego was not that big that she was promoting her self all the time, she was just having fun living her life, going from one adventure to another. She was not busy leaving a legacy.

On the other hand she was a Belgian woman living in France, so the French favoured french woman over her. She was sabotaged in becoming the first female aviator, so a French woman could earn that title. And because she lived most of her life in France, she was kind of forgotten in Belgium; surely completely unknown in the dutch speaking part of Belgium. Its just since the publication of the book that the name Dutrieu has been restored. A documentary is being made at the moment, but still there is a long way to go.

I dream of a Hélène Dutrieu museum, I want to give away my complete archives, and I dream that some great movie director would want to make a biopic or a series of her life.

On her tombstone are her name and the word- ‘Aviator.’ Listing all her accomplishments would have necessitated a very large marker but would a different description been more appropriate?

Ah, I'd put ‘here lies a amazing woman, check out her life and follow in her footsteps’ ! So people would go out and discover her and at the same time write knew their own amazing lifestories.

What is next for you?

Well I'm – as always – working on several projects at the same time, one is a major book on the history of female cycling; I'm working on a graphic novel, at the same time I'm running a book publishing house and my personal graphic design and illustration studio, while I keep promoting the Hélène Dutrieu biography, with this english edition and a French edition available as well, hoping and dreaming some movie producer or streaming service wants to make a biopic of Hélène's lifestory. I have a basic script written out, so if anyone out there is interested, you are very welcome to contact me :)