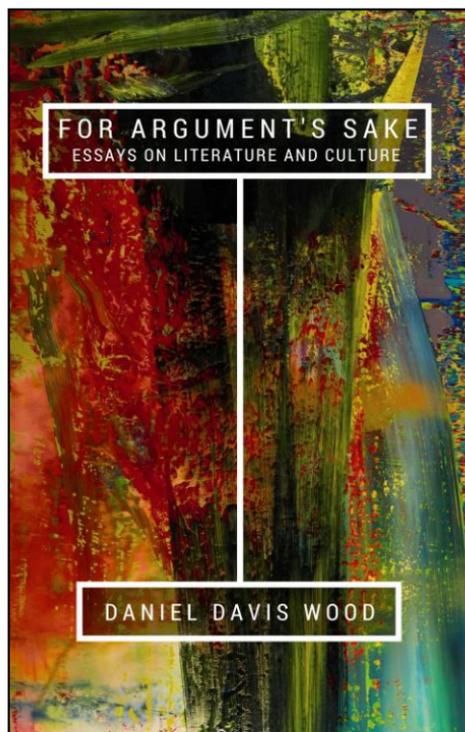


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MUDDY LANGUAGE

MICHAEL SALA'S *THE LAST THREAD*

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DUTCH IS AN AWKWARD LANGUAGE. IT SOUNDS HUMOROUS TO me even now, except when someone uses it in anger. When my stepfather cursed, I imagined dirt in his lungs, old black farming earth from the north of Holland, dotted with blood and bone. *God verdomme.* (21-22)

On the back cover of Michael Sala's *The Last Thread*, the publisher's blurb hails the book as "[r]eminiscent of the great autobiographical novels of J.M. Coetzee and Michael Ondaatje." For a publisher to associate those names with a debut work is an audacious move, an attempt to make the book appealing to a very particular readership even at the risk of raising readers' expectations to heights the book can't reach. Thankfully, there's more substance to this association than mere marketing gimmickry. Like Coetzee's *Scenes from Provincial Life* and Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, Sala's autobiographical novel depicts the tensions of a troubled youth in prose that oscillates between the eloquent and the stilted. Like those novels, too, *The Last Thread* strikes a balance between the personalisation and the de-personalisation of a life story, concluding with an adult's first-person reminiscence on his boyhood years after he has offered a third-person depiction of his younger self. But are those similarities enough to make *The Last Thread* worth reading? If troubled youths are a dime a dozen in the age of the misery memoir, and if Coetzee and Ondaatje have breathed new life into a tired genre with various artistic flourishes, is it enough for Sala to follow his masters' footsteps through such well-trodden territory or does he break away from them to blaze a trail of his own?

Michael Sala was born in Holland in 1975 but immigrated to Australia in the 1980s. The first part of *The Last Thread* follows a young boy, Michaelis, on a broadly similar but less straightforward journey. Born in Bergen Op Zoom to a Greek father and a Dutch mother who divorced when he was an infant, Michaelis moves to Australia with his brother, his mother, and his abusive stepfather

Dirk. After his mother experiences difficulties adjusting to life in Australia, the family makes a return to Holland but then, when a change of heart leaves his mother longing to see Australia again, the family embarks on a third migration back to the coastal city of Newcastle. Intertwined with the turmoil of repeated and prolonged migration are a succession of other disruptions to Michaelis' social and emotional stability. His ongoing fear of the tempestuous Dirk leads him to gravitate towards his distant father in Holland, the birth of a half-brother signals Dirk's permanent presence in the life of the family, the relationship between his mother and his stepfather deteriorates quite rapidly, and Michaelis uncovers a terrible secret that has shamed his Dutch family for the better part of forty years.

I wasn't captured by Sala's story, although I'm not sure that the story is supposed to be so captivating. The tension has been sapped from every source that might generate drama. Dirk's abuses are acknowledged, summarised, but rarely described in detail. Michaelis' father in Holland hovers around the narrative margins without doing anything particularly interesting. Even the vaunted family secret turns out to be less a source of shock, outrage, and familial conflict than a half-hearted revelation coloured by ignobility. The storyteller is too guarded, too detached, to mine all the depths of storytelling.

Where *The Last Thread* works best is in its exploitation of the interstice between the story told and the telling of it. Consider what happens after the events of *The Last Thread* have ended but before they can be distilled into words and transformed into literature. Sala's decision to engage in autobiographical fiction suggests a belief that the act of writing allows the author to retrospectively edit, reshape, explain, and manage the experiences he could neither understand nor control when he first endured them. Yet, counterbalancing the belief implicit in its form, *The Last Thread* is guided by an undercurrent of ambivalence about whether the act of writing is indeed able to allow for the reclamation of control, and the novel comes to life when the narrator's anxieties leave him paralysed and vacillating between subjecting his material to renewed control and wallowing in the linguistic mud.

For the most part, *The Last Thread* unfolds with what appears to be a steady stylistic assurance. I counted only one use of parentheses and no more than perhaps a dozen dashes: the point being that the novel consists of a succession of statements laid on the page largely without interjection, digression, equivocation, and qualification. The prose strides on, clear and direct, and yet, beneath the sense of assurance it conveys, the narrative seems crippled by the narrator's ambivalence about the assuredness of his linguistic and recollective capabilities. With his sentences of almost relentless linearity, the narrator, Michael, erects a façade of certainty over a narrative that repeatedly returns to those moments in which he senses the fragility of both his words and his memories. The premises of the form of the autobiographical novel begin to falter as *The Last Thread* pushes forward with a life story told by a narrator who holds less than total confidence in his abilities to remember the life and to tell a story.

"It's important to know what happened," Michaelis' mother tells him after he gains an awareness of the Holocaust. "If enough people know, if they really know about that sort of thing, maybe it won't happen again" (99). But the causal connections of that last sentence crumble under the pressure of a moment's thought. "When Mum is gone," the adult Michael writes, "Michaelis lies in the darkness thinking about what she said. He doesn't understand. He doesn't understand how knowing about something can stop it from happening again. It's never been that way for him. Like when he crosses his legs under the table. He's eight and he's been doing it forever. When he crosses his legs, Dirk kicks him in the shin. Once the pain has died down, Michaelis just does the same thing again. ... It is called forgetting" (99). But because the forgetting is remembered by the adult version of the child who forgets, it undermines the veracity of what else is remembered in this scene and throughout the novel.

At times, too, other characters in the novel, versions of real people remembered by Michael, explicitly challenge the accuracy of what he, as the narrator, remembers. "They ride [their bicycles] alongside a field locked in early morning fog," he writes of his younger self, his brother, and his father, and he adds that "[t]he ears

of rabbits rise and dip as the bike rattles past" (9). But then, without having spoken as his younger self, he remembers his father refuting the observation that Michael makes as the narrator: "'You always say they're rabbits,' Dad says, 'but they're not. They're hares. Hares have longer ears.'" Remembered events are remembered in a way that repeatedly challenges the authority of the rememberer. "Oh God," says Michaelis' mother, remembering the moment, years earlier, when her husband's Greek parents offered her the culinary delicacy of pickled sparrows. "[T]hose naked little sparrows," she complains. "It made me sick to the stomach just looking at them!" Michaelis chimes in — "I remember that," he says — but then his brother, Constantine, enters the conversation and shouts him down. "You don't remember anything," Constantine sneers (14).

Also working against the veracity of Michael's remembrances are, firstly, the recurrent accusation that Michaelis does not pay close enough attention to the details of the world around him — an accusation levelled by his father, his brother, and even his teacher — and, more importantly, the difficulties of articulating those remembrances in an adopted language. "Words from home" reflexively slip off Michaelis' tongue after his arrival in Australia, "but suddenly they are out of place." He cannot communicate in a lucid way. "What's Holland like?" a school counsellor asks him in an effort to help the boy open up. When Michaelis begins talking,

[w]ords from home tumble into his sentences. He talks about Dad and football in the park. He tells the [counsellor] about the endless rain — *het regen* — about his ten uncles and aunts, one for each finger, though he never saw most of them, and about snowy-haired Moessie who lives with a white dog Baasje on the top floor of an apartment block called the Bunthof. Underneath the apartment block stretches a dimly lit tunnel with lots of doors. Each door leads to a dry, stale smelling room like a prison cell, except people put bikes and old stuff they don't need down there. ... Michaelis runs out of words and has to draw pictures. (37)

Obviously, the adult Michael does not resort to drawing pictures in order to articulate his remembrances. But he does assemble his sentences in a way that suggests an uncertainty about the capacity of his English words to accurately refer to aspects of his childhood world. Michaelis arrives in “a place called Sydney” (32), for instance, and then he moves to “a place called Newcastle” (33) where he plays video games on “a machine called an Atari” (50). The English language “is so clean in his head yet comes out so muddy from his mouth” (37), and Michael’s efforts to ensure that it does not now come out muddy on the page result in the overdetermination of even those simple referents. As the fallibility of his memory places the narrator’s vision of his own childhood world forever on the brink of collapse, the words with which he reconstructs that world are burdened with the task of stabilising it where it risks faltering. Michael’s words, and especially his rare redundancies and circumlocutions, not only work to convey his remembrances but also suggest an attempt to forestall their dissolution.

Michaelis’ interactions with his beloved mother construe this later act of writing as an enterprise undertaken in her linguistic shadow. Her entire life revolves around the palpable realisation of a single word that occupies her mind and is forever on her tongue. The word is *gezellig*:

This is Mum’s word. ‘*Nou ja, dit is gezellig*,’ she says as she shrugs off her coat full of winter rain and puts on a light. *Gezellig*. Indoors you hear it, around talk and tea and coffee and pastries with cinnamon and dove and nutmeg, around Mum’s music. You hear it between people, and you cannot touch it because it is a feeling a place has when it is filled with the right kind of things, when it is safe, when Dirk is away. (28)

All the actions of Michaelis’ mother, the intermittent readjustments of her circumstances, are aimed ultimately at transforming her life into this single word. The actions of her adult son, the writing of his life in the form of a novel, testify to his inability to distill his own life into just one word — even though, in a sense, he should be able

to do so. Because he is now an adult, because his boyhood is behind him, because Dirk is away, his life should be *gezellig*. But insofar as that word cannot encapsulate his life, insofar as he makes recourse to tens of thousands of words, his boyhood is not behind him and Dirk, although absent, has not gone away.

For Michael to have grasped *gezelligheid* would have been for him to pre-emptively negate the need to sit down and write *The Last Thread*. The writing of the novel, then, is a recollective purging of Dirk, a reaching towards catharsis, whose ideal ending is the realisation of *gezelligheid*. Yet, perhaps inevitably, *gezelligheid* continues to elude Michael by the end of the novel. *The Last Thread* comes to an end without actually ending by veering into a circularity, by denying the author *gezelligheid* and directing him towards an abundance of words, by bringing Michael to a point at which the end of his childhood with Dirk allows him to remember and begin writing about his childhood with Dirk. “He doesn’t understand how knowing about something can stop it from happening again,” and in fact, in his own case, it is his knowledge of his childhood with Dirk that allows that childhood to be continually happening in the narrator’s memory. As above, while the story of that childhood is stirring and distressing, the thrust of *The Last Thread* lies less in the story told than in the telling of it, in the manner of that telling and in its failure to elaborate into something with reference beyond itself. If it’s not quite of the calibre of Coetzee and Ondaatje, it is recognisably — and audaciously — of the same blood.

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