

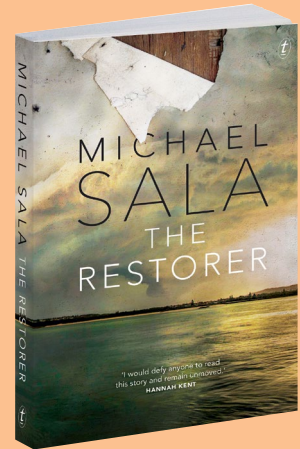
The Restorer



Michael Sala

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Praise for Michael Sala

THE RESTORER

'There is so much to praise about this book. Michael Sala's prose is clear and unadorned, the setting exquisitely rendered, but it is his characters—all of them flawed and complex and deeply, deeply human—who will stay with me for a very long time. I would defy anyone to read this story and remain unmoved. *The Restorer* is an incredibly powerful novel and, I believe, an important one.' HANNAH KENT

'Michael Sala is a sensitive, perceptive observer of human relationships and I have long admired his work. *The Restorer* is a beautifully written novel about growing up, starting again—and how the riptide of personal history can pull us further and further from safety, no matter how hard we fight.' CHARLOTTE WOOD

'Builds and breaks like a summer storm—just as beautiful, just as brutal.' FIONA McFARLANE

'Closely observed, with the visceral force of truth, Michael Sala's heartbreaking novel captures the tender hope of love and its terrible cost.' KATHRYN HEYMAN

THE LAST THREAD

'Michael Sala has a rare gift: in prose that takes your breath away, he tells a story of heart-rending sorrow without a trace of sentimentality. His debut as a novelist is one to celebrate.' RAIMOND GAITA

'A confronting and compelling story of a family. Sala captures perfectly the puzzled silence of the uncomprehending child in a narrative swollen with unspoken secrets.' DEBRA ADELAIDE

'Skillfully written...Sala explores the common but often damaging saga of family myth-making.' SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

'A gutsy, moving, beautifully wrought and utterly compelling work.' READINGS MONTHLY

About Michael Sala

Michael Sala was born in the Netherlands and first came to Australia as a child in the 1980s. He lives in Newcastle on the New South Wales north coast. His critically acclaimed debut novel, *The Last Thread*, was winner of the New South Wales Premier's Award for New Writing and regional winner of the Commonwealth Book Prize in 2013.

A reader's introduction to *The Restorer*

There's a harsh irony in the title of this novel. Roy wants to win back his wife, Maryanne, and rebuild a life together with their children, Freya and Daniel—but the house he restores for them to live in ultimately becomes the scene of the family's destruction.

The derelict house on the coast acts as a multi-layered metaphor for the family's past and present. Damaged and abandoned, it stands on shaky ground. The basement is full of rubbish that must be cleared away, its walls and floors filthy. They scrub it out with bleach, and yet a horrible stench lingers, wafting upstairs whenever the slightest breeze blows.

Much of the story is told from the point of view of fourteen-year-old Freya, who fiercely resents her mother's decision to return to her father, alternating between sympathy and scorn for her. Freya is just starting to feel her way in her relationships with other people, especially boys, and does not understand what draws Maryanne to Roy. She is also starting to question authority, shoplifting and experimenting with drugs. Preoccupied by thoughts of a friend's mother who committed suicide, Freya wonders whether life has any meaning, and when a girl from her school is

raped and murdered, these thoughts become more pressing.

The story is set in 1989, with the events of that turbulent year—the Tiananmen Square uprising, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dismantling of the Soviet Union—going on in the background. The sea and wind are a constant presence, with the noise of waves pounding at the coast always audible. There is frequent reference to the fact that the ground beneath Newcastle is riddled with tunnels, prone to collapse without warning.

As events near their climax, the city is hit by the earthquake of December 1989, one of the worst natural disasters in Australian history, and much of Roy's work on the house is undone. Maryanne's efforts to rebuild the family finally collapse, too, when Roy goads her into admitting that she made a mistake in returning to him and is planning to leave again. Freya comes home to find that her father has killed her mother. She is forced to assume the responsibilities of an adult, summoning all her strength to take on her mother's role as her younger brother's protector and escape with him from the house.

Questions for discussion

1. This story is told from the point of view of fourteen-year-old Freya and her mother, Maryanne. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story through Freya and Maryanne's eyes rather than Roy and Daniel's? How would the story be different if it was told from a male perspective?
2. Freya likes to define herself against her mother. What are the similarities and differences between them?
3. At the beginning of the novel, Freya equates her mother with Prometheus because of 'the strange mixture of hope and suffering with which she lived her life, how she never gave up on anything, even when it hurt her' (13). Is this a good description of Maryanne?
4. A question that people frequently ask about victims of domestic violence is: 'Why doesn't she just leave?' Does *The Restorer* show understanding of the reasons a woman might stay with (or return to) an abusive partner? Does the novel condemn Maryanne or show compassion towards her?
5. Maryanne tells her mother that she going back to Roy for the sake of the children (68). Later she tells Freya that whatever she does is for Freya and Daniel (139–140). Does Maryanne genuinely believe that reuniting the family is the best thing for her children? Or is Freya right when she accuses her mum of making the decision for herself alone, of being selfish (229)?
6. The author, Michael Sala, says that *The Restorer* is, in part, about the 'insufficiency of love'. What do you think he means, and how does the novel explore this idea? Maryanne and Roy share a certain chemistry, 'something primal and fierce that pulled them together hard when they got too close'—but do you think they love each other? Freya doesn't understand what draws Maryanne to Roy—do you? And what is it that draws Roy to Maryanne?
7. Maryanne lies in bed at night beside Roy as he moans and whimpers and sometimes even cries in his sleep, and his face reminds her of Daniel's, 'full of vulnerability and fear', though his eyes remain shut (93). We learn later that Roy's vulnerability was one of the things she'd originally fallen in love with (316). Does the novel have any sympathy for Roy? Does the reader feel empathy for him?
8. Roy's father 'used words and his hands to hack at everyone he should have cared for' (95) and Maryanne's mother refused to acknowledge her husband's abuse. How much are Roy and Maryanne products of their parents? Were they doomed to repeat the patterns they learned growing up? What does this mean for Freya and Daniel? Are they also doomed to repeat their parents' mistakes?
9. When Freya is caught shoplifting (246), Mrs O'Neill tells her: 'You have more control than you think. That's what you have to remember. *You have control*. No matter what anyone tells you. It's yours, if you take it.' Is Mrs O'Neill right to tell Freya that she has control? Freya is fifteen years old—is her age a factor here? Which characters in *The Restorer* have control over their lives? What does it mean to have control over your life?
10. After Josh and Freya watch *Pretty in Pink*, Josh complains: 'Girls nearly always go for jerks, talk about the jerks, think about the jerks. And then they wonder why boys are such jerks.' Maryanne is sexually attracted to Roy despite the threat he represents to her and to their children, and Freya is clearly attracted to Tim, even though she sees his resemblance to her father. What attracts Freya to Tim, when she is ambivalent about her feelings for Josh? Does this story give credence to the idea that women find 'bad' men more attractive than 'good' men? Are there any positive models of masculinity in the novel?
11. Roy warns Freya that all teenage boys are the same: 'You can't trust them. There's only one way they look at girls. One thing they're after. Whatever they pretend. Doesn't matter if they're smart or dumb or weak or strong or what they say. You're the one that has to be careful.' (202). Is Roy right? Or is he projecting his own attitudes towards women onto all other men?
12. Like Roy, Maryanne also tells Freya that she needs to be 'careful'. When they discuss the murder of the girl from Freya's school, Maryanne says that the

world isn't a safe place, 'especially for girls', but that's just the way it is, and that's why she doesn't like Freya to drink (227). Freya is angry and responds, 'What, you think it's her fault?' This story is set in 1989, nearly thirty years ago. Do you think attitudes have changed since then? Would parents today respond any differently? Are young girls still held responsible or partly responsible for violence committed against them, or are we more reluctant now to 'blame the victim'?

13. The novel's opening scene is narrated from Richard's perspective as he sees the family arrive, and we return to his perspective at the end. Apart from giving the reader an outsider's view of the family, what role does Richard play in the novel? What do we know about him?
14. Discuss the various ways the house functions as a metaphor. What are some of the other symbols and metaphors used in the novel?
15. How important is the novel's setting in Newcastle? Is it just the earthquake that makes the setting integral to the plot, or is it important for other reasons too?
16. The book's title seems at first to refer to Roy, but he is not the only character in this story seeking to restore something that has been damaged, lost or destroyed. Each of the main characters has their own restorer, someone who helps them to heal, builds them up and seeks to preserve them from further harm. Who are these other restorers?
17. Did you ever have any hope that things would work out for the family, or was the story's ending inevitable?