

# Jaap Scholten

## Sugar Bastard

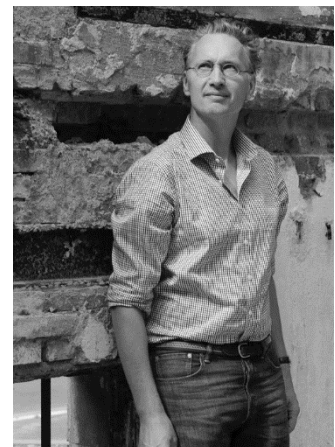
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When Frederik is eight years old, he is allowed to travel with his grandfather Dupont to Abyssinia. The family company has built three sugar factories there. Emperor Haile Selassie is coming to open the last factory, accompanied by a large entourage, the imperial musicians, and his dog Lulu. Forty years on –

Grandpa Dupont is dead, Frederik is living in Eastern Europe, and Emperor Haile Selassie is encased in cement in his palace – Frederik sees a man on television who claims to be his grandfather's son. He is so disconcerted by this report that he decides to return to the country to look for possible Ethiopian family members. The journey takes him back not only to Ethiopia, but also to his childhood in the Dutch countryside, to his grandfather, and above all, to Mila, his first great love. *Sugar Bastard* is a novel about family, loyalty, tradition, belonging and not belonging, and the eternal question of how to do what's right.

*In the 1950s and 1960s, Dutch manufacturer Stork built three sugar factories in Abyssinia. Young unmarried men from the factory in Twente went along on three-year contracts to assemble and maintain the machines. The strapping young men from the provincial towns of Hengelo and Overdinkel inevitably came into contact with the beautiful women of Ethiopia. Three years ago, Scholten was told about the children who had been born out of these relationships, and it was suggested that he might have relatives there too. In 2017, he travelled to Addis Ababa.*

**Jaap Scholten** (b. 1963) has lived in Hungary since 2003, alternating between Budapest and the countryside, surrounded by wild boars and jackals. Scholten made his debut in 1995 with his novel *Eighty*, which quickly found its way to the longlist of the AKO Literature Prize, as did *Morning Star* in 2000. In 2008, *Spengler's Law* was chosen as Book of the Year by bookseller chain Selexyz. His book *Comrade Baron* won the 2011 Libris History Prize. Scholten's book *Horizon City* was published by AFdH Publishers in 2014. His work has been translated in multiple languages.



# Sugar Bastard

by Jaap Scholten

The viaduct near our house was under at least a foot and a half of water, and only intrepid drivers dared go through it at top speed, throwing up a wave three feet high. I was kneeling on the sofa in the living room, my nose pressed against the window pane, hoping that in Africa the rainy season would be over. The rain splashed down in our narrow front garden. A small suitcase stood ready beside me. I'd borrowed the grey trousers and blue blazer from Engelbert for the occasion; they were a bit too big really, but Mummy said I looked very nice. I was going to meet the emperor, and thanked my lucky stars I wouldn't have to appear before him in that embarrassing sailor suit, which made me look like a girl.

I had solemnly swallowed a malaria pill. Now I jiggled up and down excitedly. I was going on a journey with Grandpa, all by myself. He'd chosen me, not one of my brothers, not my cousin Tijn. Mummy reminded me of the five rules I had to follow in Africa. Mummy was a stickler for clean hands and clean nails, and we weren't allowed to go to the loo in trains or service stations. If she'd had her way, we'd have done our business in the woods, like animals, squatting down, at a safe

distance from plebeian germs. Holding up five fingers one by one, she drilled it into me: 'Always wash your hands properly, take a malaria pill every day, only drink bottled or boiled water, don't eat uncooked vegetables and don't swim anywhere!'

This message was also conveyed to Grandpa at the front door, without the fingers; he didn't take it too much to heart. Four days later, under Grandpa's watchful gaze, I would swim at a little beach near Wonji, in the poo-coloured waters of the Awash, fearful that crocodiles and flesh-eating fish lurked below the surface. It was only after my return that I found out there aren't any piranhas in Abyssinia.

When the Mercedes appeared, Mummy put an arm round me and squeezed me tight. From the little cupboard under the washbasin in the bathroom she had taken two toilet rolls, which she brandished triumphantly in the air like a magician before stuffing them into the corners of my suitcase.

'I don't know if they have them there.'

Boele, wearing his peaked cap, got out, walked to the boot of the Mercedes, opened it, and unfurled a big black umbrella. Then he went to the rear passenger door, from which Grandpa, in a gabardine raincoat, had meanwhile emerged. Grandpa walked up to the front door, followed by Boele with the umbrella. They reached the door at the same time. I jumped off the sofa, grabbed the suitcase by the handle and ran into the hall. Mummy was already coming out of the kitchen.

'Go and get your coat.'

I put the suitcase down in the hall and ran back through the kitchen and the scullery to the coat stand. Which coat? I could only see one of mine, the shabby-looking pale-blue windcheater that Julius, Balthasar and Engelbert had all worn for at least a season. I grabbed Engelbert's dark-blue loden duffle coat: *that* was a coat you could appear before an emperor in. I put it on and fastened the three middle toggles through the loops. You had to push hard, because the toggles only just fitted through the loops. I inspected myself in the narrow mirror next to the scullery door. The coat fell below my knees. Feeling like a general, I strode through the kitchen with big strides, picked up my suitcase and headed for the front door.

When Mummy saw me she passed a hand through her hair and smiled rather artificially. She crouched down in front of me.

'That coat's far too warm.'

'Oh, it's fine,' Grandpa said. 'Very smart, and it can get cold at night in the mountains. Keep it on.'

We got into the back of the Mercedes, with its smell of leather and cigars. Boele started the car, the windscreen wipers began to beat back and forth like swans' wings. Turning his broad head round, he gave me a big grin.

*Translation by Jane Hedley-Prole*