



## The Folly

*Ivan Vladislavić*

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A vacant patch of South African veld next to the comfortable, complacent Malgas household has been taken over by a mysterious, eccentric figure with "a plan". Fashioning his tools out of recycled garbage, the stranger enlists Malgas's help in clearing the land and planning his mansion. Slowly but inevitably, the stranger's charm and the novel's richly inventive language draws Malgas into "the plan" and he sees, feels and moves into the new building. Then, just as remorselessly, all that seemed solid begins to melt back into air.

## The Folly Details

Date : Published June 1st 1994 by Serif Publishing (first published January 1st 1993)

ISBN : 9781897959114

Author : Ivan Vladislavi?

Format : Paperback 152 pages

Genre : Cultural, Africa, Fiction, Southern Africa, South Africa, Novels, Literary Fiction

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## From Reader Review The Folly for online ebook

### Lukasz Pruski says

*"Practice makes perfect, and Malgas was something of a perfectionist. He practised seeing the new house until it came out of his ears. He popped open its rooms as if they were Chinese lanterns and stretched out entire wings like concertinas. He telescoped columns and slotted them into moist sockets on balconies. He unrolled floors and stacked up stairs. He rollercoastered reams of tiles over the rafters. Then, in the wink of an eye, he did all of these things again in reverse."*

I could consider Ivan Vladislav's *The Folly* (1993) the second enigmatic book in a row that I have read this week, after Nicolas Freeling's *This Is the Castle*. Yet books can be considered enigmatic only if one looks for some meaning hidden under layers of prose, some messages that can be filtered out from the text. I believe that the prose in a book can stand on its own, without needing a crutch of some deeper truths to be gleaned from it. I think this is the case in Mr. Vladislav's hilarious novel: it does not need interpretation and should be taken as is. The author seems to have had fun writing the book, and I certainly have had a fun time reading it.

Mr. Nieuwenhuizen (which, of course, means "new house", and which - for sake of brevity - I will abbreviate to N.) arrives to take possession of his property - an empty plot of land, overrun by weeds and covered with trash - and sets a camp there. When visited by Mr. Malgas, a curious neighbor (whose wife calls him Mr while he calls her Mrs), N. claims that he intends to build a house on the (p)lot. Mr - who runs a hardware store and is quite bored with his uneventful life with Mrs - is intrigued with his new neighbor's plan and tries to help him by procuring various potentially useful objects. Gradually, he seems to be gaining N.'s confidence and is allowed to help in the activities. When they finish clearing the lot, N. begins preparations to design a plan of the house. Pretty soon, while Mr gets more and more involved in the project, the reader begins to understand that N. does not have any intention to build anything. Still, the building plan is created, in the form of a tangle of strings held by huge nails hammered into the ground (N. sometimes resorts to using his forehead to accomplish the task). The crucial moment comes when Mr discovers an ability to visualize, at will, the building as if it were a real object. From there things go quickly to their logical conclusion.

Not only does the author seem to be having immense fun constructing the delightfully surreal plot but also he constantly plays with the language: in fact, I have had more fun with the quirky prose than with the bizarre plot. For instance, take the snippet "She switched off the set, belatedly, and the image died down into two coals under her eyelids. Remember, embers, mbrs, mrs, s." Wonderful! Take the lists of words that begin with a 'c'! Take N.'s peculiar way of moving around, reminiscent of Monty Python's *Ministry of Silly Walks*. Not to forget the overall hilarity of situations and dialogues between Mr and Mrs, who is more grounded in the so-called reality and less than impressed with the ongoing "construction activities".

There are a few items that probably go deeper than the pure surrealism and language play, but I am unable to quite grasp the author's intent (if indeed he had any). The most intriguing are the references to small-scale models of actual houses: the house-shaped mailbox as well as the models of houses, which N. conjures and juggles with like a magician. Is it a sort of literary *mise en abyme*? Also, the author - more than once - writes about how Mr's fingers either fit or don't fit into the ear of a mug. Curiouser and curioser!

To sum up: while *The Folly* is a fascinating read that I have fully enjoyed, I still prefer books which - in addition to masterly form - resonate with me on deeper levels.

Three and a half stars.

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## Neil says

When I recently took out a subscription to *And Other Stories*, they welcomed me with a list of books from which I could choose one as a free gift (ebook format). This is the book I chose. And what a strange, but strangely enjoyable read it is!

A man named Nieuwenhuizen arrives at a plot of land and sets about clearing it and laying out a plan for a large house he intends to build. He is watched by his neighbours, Mr and Mrs Malgas (who call themselves Mr and Mrs through most of the book). Mr is fascinated and gradually gets sucked into the preparation of the land and the marking out of the plan. Mrs is less enthusiastic and worries about the noise and the dust. Not much actual building seems to happen until one day something bizarre and magical takes place. Note that Nieuwenhuizen translates into English as Newhouse.

When it was originally released, this book from South Africa was labelled as "*an evocative allegory of the rise and fall of apartheid*". That was nearly 25 years ago and is a long way outside my personal experience, so it is difficult for me to see it that way. I can imagine, though, that a South African person reading this, with its frequent references to things that would be every day life for someone in South Africa, would see the points being made and the parallels being drawn.

However, for non-South African readers, it is still interesting to read this as an allegory of apartheid. But it is equally possible to read it as an allegory of any absurd situation. And this makes it applicable to all readers, wherever and whenever they read it.

The writing style is unusual with some (seemingly random) lists of household objects suddenly appearing:

*"particoloured. Castanets, chromium-plated, Clackerjack (regd. T.M.). Willow-pattern Frisbee. Mickey and Minnie, blessed by Pope (Pius). Pine-cone. Crucifix, commemorative, balsa-wood and papier-mâché, 255mm × 140mm. Calendar, Solly Kramer's, Troyeville, indigenous fauna painted with the mouth, 1991. Clock, Ginza, broken (TocH?)"*

There is also a lot of observational detail e.g. descriptions of people making cups of tea.

It seems that the house exists primarily in Nieuwenhuizen's imagination and Mr struggles to understand what he is aiming for. Nieuwenhuizen tells him he is too focused on reality and not open to imagination:

*"There you are. That's what I'm talking about. No conception of the new house, but you're worrying yourself sick over what it's made of! You'd better sort out your priorities, man, or we won't be able to carry on collaborating on this project."*

That is until Nieuwenhuizen apparently disappears for a prolonged period leaving Mr to care for the plan which leads to a sudden realisation that enables Mr to see and enter the house.

At this point, the narrative becomes almost dreamlike as it heads towards a finale where Nieuwenhuizen dismantles the house leaving Mr and Mrs alone again wondering what, if anything, just happened.

The language is a joy to read, even if it is rather confusing at times. You can read it as being about apartheid or about other absurdities. You probably won't understand it all, but you may well enjoy it all.

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### **William says**

A classic allegorical tale. The mysterious Mr Nieuwenhuizen ( new house) occupies a vacant property next to a hitherto happy couple. Before long with great fanfare and elaborate promises the plans for the new house are laid out. And what a house it will be. Mr Malgas is seduced and before long is ready to throw himself wholeheartedly into the project. But of course it is all for naught. It is the story told all to often across Africa and so many other places.

Four stars for the quality of the writing, one star off because there is very little complexity to the book.

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### **Tom says**

First published in 1993, as South Africa's apartheid era was finally coming to a close, Ivan Vladislavic's *The Folly* invites initial reading as a political parable about that time and place, but easily generalizes to other utopian assumptions about a better life occurring immediately after political obstacles toward universal justice have been removed, although in the case of *The Folly*, not once is race, or apartheid for that matter, ever raised.

When a mysterious, eccentric character named Nieuwenhuisen ("Newhouse") moves onto an empty plot of land next to the Malagases to claim his "inheritance," Mr and Mrs (as the Malagases refer to each other) immediately become suspicious. Mr increasingly more curious than Mrs, and Mrs increasingly playing the role of the snooping, fearful biddy. For me, the first third of the book was the most interesting. Part of my interest was captured by the comic interplay between Mr and Mrs, and Vladislavic has a knack for one-liners and setting up funny scenes, that seem to come effortlessly to the page. But, more seriously, even though played with a light touch, was Vladislavic's description of the camp Nieuwenhuisen has set up for himself, tromping through his acre plot, pulling up discarded detritus and seeing in it not garbage but potential practical life as a tool. Nieuwenhuisen is shown in these scenes as an intelligent, resourceful, inventive man—an engineer of sorts, who's learned to transform what he has at hand into useful (if still potentially dangerous) goods.

Mr's curiosity soon gets the best of him, and he prods the Nieuwenhuisen into developing a friendship. Given the unhappy marriage between the Malagas—Mr is shown twice repelling the advances of Mrs—and the romantic way of life Nieuwenhuisen represents—life lived under the stars, with fresh air and campfire-cooked food, Mrs is soon the odd one out, which only increases her distrust of Nieuwenhuisen, whom she feels is the first step towards chaos and calamity. Meanwhile, Mr ardently embraces Nieuwenhuisen's vision of a new house on his plot of land, which he has outlined on the ground with a network of nailed and intertwining cord.

As *The Folly* drifts into fantasy—the imagining of a better world as exemplified by Nieuwenhuisen's "house"—I found the book less satisfying. But that may be a shortcoming on my part rather than Vladislavic's narrative abilities—my reluctance to play along with the fantasy, which, for Malagas, is crucial for the success of the plan. Still Vladislavic's notions of hope for building a better world aren't cynical. Instead, he tries to show that once the hopeful fantasies have vanished, the real work remains to begin.

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## Audrey Schoeman says

Twelve hours after I first picked up *The Folly*, I was bouncing on the bed next to my ever-patient husband. ‘Do you want to know what my favourite sentence is?’

The look on his face said that he didn’t, but he heard it anyway. I’d copied so many beautiful strings of words into my notebook that I had to share them. Instead of retyping them all here, let me just strongly suggest that you read the book.

I’ll admit to not knowing what to expect when I picked the book up. It’s a South African novel, first published in 1993, so politics, probably? But while *The Folly* can certainly be read as a political allegory, the story is a universal one, not reliant on the South African backdrop for its appeal. Its premise is simple. A stranger (Nieuwenhuizen, or ‘new house’ in Afrikaans) settles on a vacant lot with a plan to build a house. Next door live a middle aged couple, Mr and Mrs Malgas, who become fascinated by his presence; Mr (they refer to each other by title alone) is intrigued by the possibilities and Mrs repulsed by the disturbance to their lives. The house – the folly – ends up being constructed only in the minds of the men, and ultimately the whole fantastic edifice will collapse around them.

So yes, this can be read as an allegory to apartheid, that towering structure of legalized discrimination which was toppling as the book was written. More than that, it can be seen as scathing indictment of any of the political or personal fantasies we erect to feed our own importance, and one that feels just as relevant today as it must have twenty years ago.

Vladislavic has a mastery of language. He plays with sounds, often using alliteration and assonance to bring poetry into his writing and to turn conversation into a balloon, passed back and forth between the participants. One night we are told that the two men’s conversation moved from hardware to ‘wallpaper, sandpaper, zinc, sink, sank, surfaced again into the niceties of skinning a cat, dropped off, slid in slow motion through spec housing [...] found themselves talking about the weather’. On another day, as they battle the earth, sketching out the plan with nails, the verbs become military: ‘soldiered’, ‘discharged’, ‘reloaded’, ‘broached’. There is no lazy writing here; each word has been carefully selected to serve its purpose.

Things, people’s relationships to them, and the way that they are used to give a sense of safety and belonging are crucial to the novel. All of the characters at one point or another make lists and use them to assert their dominance over the world around them. Mrs. Malgas’ character is perfectly conveyed when, overwhelmed by the strangeness of events, she turns to her ‘prize knick-knack cabinet’ for relief. ‘In the end it was a glass paperweight with a guinea fowl aflutter in its heart that spoke to her’.

The three characters in the novel each have their role to play in the broader allegorical purpose of the book, but Mr and Mrs Malgas are also at heart believable characters; she who never leaves the home and is obsessed with order and things remaining the same, he full of admiration for this stranger who can build his own dream. Nieuwenhuizen remains more elusive, never quite of this world.

At the end of the day this was a fantastic read. I loved the way Vladislavic plays with language; I loved the timeless nature of the story, and I loved the commentary on both South African politics and the broader world. There’s a lot to unpack here, and a lot of depth that I’ve not touched on here. I’m looking forward to coming back to this, and also to exploring more Vladislavic as I believe some of the themes recur in his later work.

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## Charles Dee Mitchell says

A taxi delivers Nieuwenhuizen to his new plot of land on the edge of the South African veld. At not quite a full acre, it is overgrown with weeds and strewn with rubble. Nieuwenhuizen steps over what was once the wire fence across the front of the property. A rangy hedgerow runs along one side and the back of the lot. On the other side is a fence of wagon wheels and what appear to be suns made from prefabricated cement. Behind that fence live his only neighbors, the middle-aged Mr. and Mrs. Malgas.

Nieuwenhuizen's arrival does not go unnoticed by the Mr and Mrs as they refer to themselves. When they spot the lanky stranger setting up camp on his vacant lot, they assume he is a vagrant. Mr. Malgas is curious, timid, and advises they let matters rest for a day or so. The stranger terrifies Mrs. Malgas. She can only imagine the worst possible outcomes. This is South Africa in the early 1990's. The couple eats their dinner on TV trays, watching the day's violence on the evening news with the sound turned down. Mr thinks that for two nights in a row they have seen the same shanty burn to the ground.

This is Vladislavi?'s set up for the events that will unfold over the next few weeks. There is a theatrical element to this scene setting, and I pictured the proceedings staged on a large proscenium, with Nieuwenhuizen's empty lot on stage right and the interior of the Malgas home stage left. Perhaps a revolving platform could shift focus between scenes. Vladislavi?'s prose evokes theatrical models. The detailed account of Nieuwenhizen's activities could come from a Samuel Beckett one-person play. Mr. and Mrs. Malgas speak in elliptical, comic banalities worthy of Harold Pinter.

Once Mr works up the courage to visit the new neighbor, there is much shifting from one set to the other. Mr romanticizes Nieuwenhuizen's roughing it existence, envying him his life under the stars. He guesses that his new neighbor plans to build on the property and to make the house a grand, two-storey affair. Mr. Malgas is in the hardware business and want to help with both labor and supplies. When Nieuwenhuizen reveals that this is his plan, the story follows a trajectory that abandons the physical possibilities of the stage.

With heavy nails and string supplied by Mr. Malgas, Nieuwenhuizen lays out his floor plan. When Mr. Malgas admits that he sees only a chaotic jumble of crisscrossed lines that bears no relationship to a possible structure, Nieuwenhuizen banishes him from the site. A crushed Mr. Malgas eventually admits that he can see the structure, and he works, indeed slaves, to realize his neighbor's vision. A spectacular edifice takes shape, and Mr. Malgas has his own, snug room under the stairs. When the whole thing falls apart, it is only Mr. Malgas who will be crushed. Nieuwenhuizen, after all, is just passing through.

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## Deborah says

I'm a diehard Southerner, but if I ever considered moving to New York, the only reason would be to live near the offices of Archipelago Books. This publisher has an unerring eye for the best in international fiction, whether in translation or written originally in English. *The Folly*, written by South African Ivan Vladislavi?, falls into the latter category, and it is absolutely sublime.

The easiest thing for me would be to simply appropriate Audrey Schoeman's Goodreads review. Like her, I

filled my reading journal with so many beautiful passages that I might as well have copied the entire book. As Audrey observes, Vladislavi? is a master of poetic prose, particularly in his description of everyday things, whether the "socks rolled into balls and swallowing their own toes" or Mr. Malgas's beloved overalls:

Each job had left a blemish on the cloth - a birthmark of enamel paint, a festering oil-stain, sutured cuts and tears, scabs of wood glue and Polyfilla.

Vladislavi? tells us that for Mrs. Malgas, "[j]ust to look at them gave her pins and needles in her hands"; just to read about them gives me pins and needles in my soul.

None of the other Goodreads reviewers, however, has pointed out two other things about this book which intrigued me. First was the title, which alludes to both meanings of the word "folly." Its primary definition is lack of good sense or foolishness, and that is clearly how Mrs. Malgas views her husband's efforts to assist Nieuwenhuizen in building his new house. However, a folly can also be an ornamental (and usually costly) edifice with no practical purpose; while Nieuwenhuizen's house is not costly, being constructed (to the extent it exists at all) from salvaged and repurposed materials, it certainly lacks any practical purpose because it is merely a figment of the men's imaginations. I don't know enough about South Africa, during or after apartheid, to recognize whether the idea of an architectural folly has political significance, either on its own or as compared with other cultures in which such buildings are typically found, but one of the joys of *The Folly*, and Archipelago's other titles, is that I want to dig deeper to find out.

My second observation involves Vladislavi?'s use of terms which seem to have Christian significance. I read an ARC, so it's entirely possible that this was a typographical anomaly corrected before publication, but almost immediately after Mr (as the spouses refer to each other) starts actively working on Nieuwenhuizen's plot, Mrs starts referring to Nieuwenhuizen as "Him": "Typical," she sniffed. "You'll give Him the shirt off your back, although you don't know Him from Adam, while your own family goes hungry." Christians use such capitalization when referring to Jesus; is Vladislavi? suggesting that Nieuwenhuizen is some type of Christ figure? Similarly, when Mr picks up the unusually long nails (spikes, as in the Crucifixion?) Nieuwenhuizen has requested, they are packaged in two boxes of a gross each, with the remaining dozen wrapped separately: "the surplus dozen - the Twelve, as he thought of them." The Twelve traditionally refers to the twelve apostles; is Mr drawing a parallel here between the nails and the apostles and, if so, what does he mean?

Regardless of the answers to these questions (if there even are any), *The Folly* is a language lover's dream, and the cover design selected by Archipelago is exquisite as well. I highly recommend *The Folly*.

I received a free copy of *The Folly* through NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Lizzie says**

Huh. I'm not sure I fully understood this book, but I did love it.

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### **Pascale says**

Vladislavic writes like a dream and initially I was quite entranced by this weird story of a mysterious stranger casting a spell on his new neighbor, the modest and decent hardware store manager Mr. Malgas. The

stranger, who first identifies himself to Malgas as "Father", then gives his name as Nieuwenhuizen or Newhouse, a name so uncannily apt for someone who claims to be about to build a new house that Mrs Malgas flatly refuses to buy it. Nieuwenhuizen drives a wedge between Mr and Mrs Malgas, whose marriage seems a bit shaky. Bored and unfulfilled, Malgas is all too easily lured by Nieuwenhuizen into giving him a helping hand with his construction project. In fact, the more ungracious Nieuwenhuizen makes himself, the harder Malgas tries to understand and befriend him. Nieuwenhuizen has little trouble in convincing Malgas that he is a visionary, and that he is doing his plodding neighbor a great favor by letting him be his amanuensis. From the start, Mrs Malgas sees through Nieuwenhuizen but she is powerless to prevent her husband from seeking to reclaim his life through male bonding with the exotic and ultimately toxic stranger. Malgas experiences what he sees as an epiphany when he finally visualizes the house Nieuwenhuizen purports to be on the verge of building, although the only building materials he has acquired are boxes of extra long nails and coils of string. I'm less sure what to make of the unraveling of the tale. The author hints that Nieuwenhuizen may be a kind of con man who intends to exploit Malgas's gullibility to get his dream house built on the cheap, but it's not what eventually happens. Maybe he is rather to be seen as the manifestation of the tensions at work within the Malgas marriage. Altogether this is a worthwhile book but Vladislavic doesn't pull it off completely.

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### **Sean says**

Mr. and Mrs. Malgas live a banal life together in suburban South Africa, she a stay-at-home housewife and he the owner of a local hardware store. One day a stranger appears in the night to occupy the vacant lot adjacent to their house. While Mrs. Malgas is immediately wary of the man's arrival, Mr. Malgas feels drawn to his new neighbor, known as Nieuwenhuizen. Soon he has ingratiated himself to the man and becomes inextricably sucked into Nieuwenhuizen's cryptic activities, which largely consist of elaborate preparation and planning for construction of a house, alternating with long periods of inactivity and sleep. As the plans progress, husband and wife drift further apart, their staid and structured middle-class existence splintered by Mr. Malgas's growing obsession with Nieuwenhuizen. Malgas appears desperate to help the man, as if for a long time he has subconsciously craved an opportunity like this to feel needed, and part of something more meaningful than perhaps his cold, mechanical marriage. For her part, Mrs. Malgas would prefer things to return to normal, and appears to be experiencing psychic breaks during moments when her husband is next door with the man she refers only to as Him.

The plot is taut and fast-paced, yet lingers in places over intriguing questions of Nieuwenhuizen's origins and the social context in which these events are occurring. Vladislavić's descriptive skills are impressive and his prose is a delight to read. The scenes of Mr. and Mrs. Malgas observing each others' physicality with clinical detachment capture with surgical precision the distance that has arisen between them in their marriage.

*Mr looked at her slippers. The sheepskin was the same colour as the carpet. He saw her glossy shins, sprouting from the bulbs of her feet like saplings, and his own hands burrowing in the tufted fibres as if he was trying to uproot her. The idea made him uncomfortable. He raised his eyes to her face. It was scrunched into a small, livid fruit. In the juicy pulp of the eyes the pupils glinted like pips.*

And in turn, as she observes him in the bath:

*Mrs turned her attention to his feet. She didn't care much for them in this naked state, against a background of creamy ceramic tiles; she preferred them in shoes. They were childish feet, too*

*soft and pink for the large brown body they were required to support. Their creased soles and shapeless toes made them look like underinflated bath toys. His whole anatomy was stubbornly indifferent to her evaluations. She left him to soak.*

Despite its brevity and narrow frame of action, the book leaves much space for readers to probe at a number of plot points, as well as to consider the overarching themes, particularly as relevant to South African politics at the time.

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### **Thomas Andrikus says**

The author Vladislavi? is an excellent master of descriptive prose. Not being entirely familiar with architectural lexicon, it annoyed me that I had to consult dictionary every five minutes I spent reading the novel, but it was worth it. I guess.

The story, which ended rather bizarrely, is pretty much summed up in the title of the book.

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### **Ethan says**

Not even sure! Maybe I didn't apply myself enough. I'm sure more was going on than I allowed myself to uncover, but I found myself uninterested in a novel that so determinedly refused to offer me generosity. That makes me feel like it's my fault, but maybe I wasn't the ideal reader for this charming little nugget. Beautiful language and a razor sharp sense of humor. Not sure if I got any of the punchlines, though.

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### **Paul Fulcher says**

Published originally in 1993 in South Africa, The Folly, Vladislavic's debut novel, was originally read as an allegory for the creation and collapse of the apartheid system. Bought out in the UK in 2015 by And Other Stories, and read by me on a plane flight to South Africa, I have to admit I struggled to see the specific allegory, but the novel worked for me as a comment on any absurd system or construction (as well as a critical comment on those lacking imagination and vision).

A stranger, Nieuwenhuizen, arrives one day and occupies the vacant plot next to the house of Mr and Mrs Malpas, who address each other simply as Mr and Mrs.

Mr, a hardware retailer ("Mr Hardware - a world of materials under one roof"), is intrigued by the newcomer:

*"Just look at the head he's got on him! When I behold that head I must say it gives me a good feeling about him, here, in the pit of my stomach."*

But Mrs is immediately suspicious:

*"Is he one of those squatters we've been hearing so much about? Will he put up a shack and bring hundreds of cronies to do the same? 'Extended families.' What do you think? Will they hammer together tomato boxes and rubbish bags, bits of supermarket trolleys and motor cars, noticeboards and yield signs, gunny sacks*

*and jungle gyms, plastic, paper, polystyrene ... '*

*'Enough.'*

*'...brass, bronze and beaverboard. Fine. We'll be forced out of our home. They'll play their radios loud. They'll go in the streets like dogs. They'll tear up our parquet for firewood.'*"

Nieuwenhuizen turns out to be there to build a new house - his coincidentally convenient name further rousing Mrs's suspicions but his task exciting Mr Malpas.

Except his building methods and tools are somewhat unorthodox. This description of him banging in a nail is typical:

*"He stepped off with his right foot and took six stiff paces. The earth felt unusually firm and steady. When his left foot came down for the third time, in the middle of IE, he flung the hammer in his right hand forward with all his might, pivoted on his heel, toppled sideways, flew into the air, flapped after the hammer like a broken wing, went rigid as a statue in mid-air, hung motionless for a long, oblique instant, and crashed to earth with a cry of triumph. He levered himself up and located the impression of his heel on the ground; then the starch went out of him and flopped down on all fours to get a good look at the mark. It was shaped like a comma, with a bloated head and a short, limp, tail. He took a nail from the bandoleer and pressed its points into the comma. Then, swinging his right arm like a piece of broken furniture, he hammered the nail into the ground."*

Indeed he doesn't really build at all. The nail is hammered into the ground simply as an anchor point for an elaborate construction of strings which seem to constitute the, unorthodox, plan of the house, or rather folly.

Mr gets increasingly engaged in the project and bewildered by the lack of concrete (pun intended) progress. He tries to ply Nieuwenhuizen with helpful supplies from his store only to be told:

*"You've got hardware on the brain, my friend, and it leaves no room for speculation."*

*"You can't rush the building of a new house. You've got to get the whole thing clear in the mind's eye."*

Mr Malpas admits he can not yet envision the house:

*"Plans aren't my thing, I admit. I'm a supplier at heart."*

Allegorical novels are often written in sparse prose, lacking in detail, so as to increase the universality of the story. Here, the opposite applies. The novel is perhaps most distinctive for its use of language, particularly lists of commonplace but evocative terms.

Mrs watches Nieuwenhuizen, through the window, refusing to enter the plot, and mutters inventories of her household knick knacks as defensive invocation against the intruder, trying to keep herself grounded in reality as Mr loses interest in his business as he tries to enter into Nieuwenhuizen's vision:

*"Copper ashtray. Welteverden coat of arms (wildebeest rampant). Wicker basket, yellow, a-tisket. Figurines viz. cobbler, gypsy, ballerina, plumber, horologist, Smurf. Paperweight, guineafowl feather. Paperweight, rose. Paperweight, Merry Pebbles Holiday Chalets. Cake-lifter, Continental China, coronation centenary crockery, crenate, crumbs. However. Spatula. Just as things were starting to become interesting. Mug. As*

*day followed day. Doll. As day follows night. Puppy-dog. As night follows day, sure enough, she found herself drawn back to the window."*

Nieuwenhuizen, in contrast, mentally categorises the house that lives largely in his imagination.

And Mr Malpas tries his hardest to follow, eventually reaching an epiphany when he suddenly sees and enters the new house as a physical reality, triumphantly proclaiming:

*"I must say: Bakelite, yes, balusters, bay windows, breastsummers, bricks of course, and, I almost forgot, braai-spots. Please insert, I do declare."*

Except the moment can not last. Nieuwenhuizen himself literally disentangles the edifice, as if his work is now done, leaving Mr and Mrs alone again in their house.

*"Mr sat down at the table and sighed heavily, 'I'm sorry Mrs. There, I've said it.'*

*'There's no need to apologise. I'm just grateful you've come to your senses while we've still got a roof over our heads and food on the table. Thank heavens everything's back to normal.'*

*'We're back where we started ... but let's not pretend that things are the same.'*

*'Words, words, words,' said Mrs, misunderstanding him. 'Let's not pretend at all. It doesn't suit us. Let's just get on with our lives. One day we'll look back on all this and discover that we can laugh about it.'*

Overall, a beautifully written tale, rich in language, but rather, wonderfully, baffling in its absurdity.

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### **Joseph Schreiber says**

A timeless fable about neighbours offered with humour, magic and the incredible talent of a gifted storyteller. Echoes of Calvino and Borges but remarkably but with a distinctive South African flavour. For a full review please see: <http://wp.me/p4GDHM-gQ>

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### **World Literature Today says**

This book was featured in the Nota Benes section of the May/Aug 2016 issue of World Literature Today Magazine.

<http://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2...>

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