

# Rowohlt Verlag – Highlights

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Wolfgang Herrndorf

## Sand

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fiction

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480 pages

*Sand* is both a spy thriller and a sublime work of literature. Set in an imaginary country in North Africa, sometime during the Seventies, it is populated by colourful figures with wacky names, who talk like B movie characters and seem taken straight from films and genre fiction. All of them are after a microfilm containing blueprints for an ultracentrifuge, but before the hunt is even fully on, sunstroke hits. Further complications ensue when inept CIA agents muddle up things even more, an accident causes amnesia in a character at a crucial point, an espresso maker is mistaken for the top-secret ultracentrifuge, and overall stupidity runs rampant ...

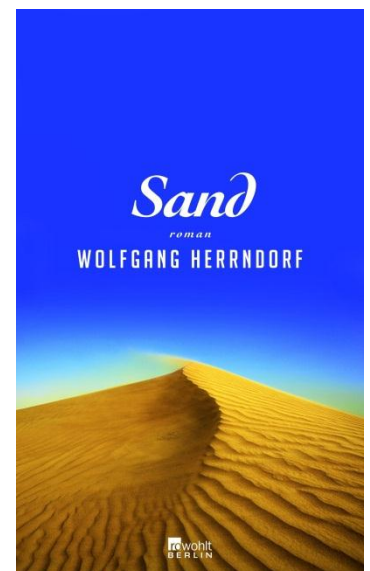
A novel such as can only be written by this author: artfully composed and nonchalant, profound, funny and mysterious, accessible on various levels – a fantastic read!

Wolfgang Herrndorf, born in Hamburg in 1965, studied art, contributed drawings to *Titanic* amongst other publications, and began to write relatively late in his career. He lives in Berlin. His road novel *Tschick* became a huge bestseller (370,000 copies sold to date) and won the Clemens Brentano Preis (2011), the Deutscher Jugendbuchpreis (2011) and the Hans-Fallada-Preis (2012). Rights were sold to 17 countries.

“Last year, we all loved his road novel *Tschick* – now Wolfgang Herrndorf presents us with a literary thriller: *Sand*, a terrific novel set in the desert”  
*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*

“Wolfgang Herrndorf has written a gripping and marvelously comic thriller with a philosophical subtext.” *Focus*

- Winner of the Leipzig Book Fair Prize 2012
- Rights sold to France (Thierry Magnier), Japan (Ronsosha) and Brazil (Tordesilhas)
- More than 70,000 copies sold in hardcover since publication in November 2011!
- Recommended by New Books in German



**Sand by Wolfgang Herrndorf**  
sample translation by Amanda DeMarco  
pp. 7-20

## 1. Targat, on the Sea

Each year we send a ship to Africa — sparing neither lives nor money — to seek answers to the questions: Who are you? What are your laws? What language do you speak? They, however, never send a ship to us.

Herodotus

A man stood on the clay brick wall, naked from the waist up and with his arms extended to the sides, as if crucified. He had a rusty wrench in the one hand and a blue plastic canister in the other. His gaze fell on tents and shacks, heaps of trash and plastic tarps, and across the endless desert to a point on the horizon over which the sun would have to rise soon.

When the time had come, he banged the wrench and the plastic canister together and cried: “My children! My children!”

The eastern walls of the shacks blazed bright orange. The hollow, sluggish rhythm sank down into the lead-gray alleys. Shrouded figures laying in pits and trenches like mummies awoke, cracked lips formed words of praise and glory to the one God. Three dogs dipped their tongues into a murky puddle. The whole night long the temperature hadn’t fallen below thirty degrees.

Unimpressed, the sun rose over the horizon and shone over the living and the dead, believers and nonbelievers, the wretched and the rich. It shone over corrugated metal, plywood, and cardboard, over tamarisks and filth and a thirty-meter high barrier of trash that separated the Salt Quarter and the Empty Quarter from the city’s other districts. Vast masses of plastic bottles and gutted cars gleamed in its light, pylons of cracked battery cases, crushed bricks, ceramic tiles, mountains of fecal sludge and animal carcasses. The sun rose across the barrier and illuminated the first buildings of the Ville Nouvelle, scattered two-story structures in the Spanish style, and the crumbling minarets on the outskirts of the city. It slid silently over the military airport’s taxiway, the wing of a forlorn Mirage 5, the souk and the neighboring office buildings of Targat. Its light glinted off the lowered metal grilles of small tradesmen’s shops and forced its way through the

shutters of the central police station, vacant at this hour, wandered up the esparto-grass lined harbor street, rippled down the twenty-story Sheraton hotel, and shortly after six it reached the sea, gently shielded by its coastal mountains. It was the morning of August 23, 1972.

The wind wasn't blowing, no waves lapped the shore. The sea stretched like an armor plate to the horizon. A giant cruise liner with yellow smokestacks and darkened strings of lights lay asleep at anchor, empty champagne glasses standing on the railing.

Wealth, as our friend with the blue plastic canister likes to say, wealth belongs to everyone. Go get it.

## 2. The Central Police Station

You know what happened to the Greeks? Homosexuality destroyed them. Sure, Aristotle was a homo, we all know that, so was Socrates. Do you know what happened to the Romans? The last six Roman emperors were fags.

Nixon

Polidorio had an IQ of 102, according to a worksheet for French schoolchildren aged twelve to thirteen. They'd found the worksheet in the central police station, it was packing paper for forms printed in Marseille, and one after the other they filled it out in pencil, in the prescribed amount of time. Polidorio was extremely drunk. So was Canisades. It was the long night of the files.

Twice a year mountains of papers were piled up in the hallways, hastily glanced over and burned in the courtyard, an onerous duty that often lasted til morning light and was traditionally left to those with the least seniority. No one could explain why some of the files were thrown away and others were kept. They had taken the administration over from the French as you would take over a polite formality, and the bureaucratic efforts had no relation to practice. Very few defendants could read or write, trials were short.

In the middle of the night there had been a power outage in the station, Polidorio and Canisades spent hours trying to chase down somebody who had a square wrench for the fuse box. For a while they worked on by candlelight, and under the influence of grass and alcohol their exhaustion turned to euphoria. They organized snowball fights in the

courtyard with crumpled-up paper and in the hallways they held a wild pursuit with rolling file cabinets. Canisades declared himself to be Emerson Fittipaldi, Polidorio set a heap of trash on fire with a cigarette, then a stack of colonial-era special identification papers fell out of an overturned hanging file folder. They fed the papers into the typewriter, filled them out with imaginary names, and with them in hand they stumbled into a brothel together in the breaking light of day (“Special Investigator of the Virtue Committee, Bédeux’s my name”).

And before that the ill-fated IQ test. Polidorio could only dimly remember most of the experiences of this disastrous night. But the test results stuck. One hundred and two.

“Alcohol, stress, power outage!” cried Canisades, a small-breasted dark woman on each knee. “Is that any excuse? Let’s just round it down to a hundred.”

Canisades’ results were significantly higher. How much higher Polidorio himself couldn’t remember. But his own number was cemented into his memory from now on. Although he was certain that in a more levelheaded state he would have gotten more points — not more than Canisades, but more, in any case — it now crossed his mind every time he didn’t understand something. When he took a bit more effort to grasp something than others, when he laughed at a joke a fraction of a second later than his colleagues.

Polidorio had always thought of himself as an intelligent and capable person. Now when he thought about it, he didn’t know what that conviction had been based on. He had made it through school, training, and exams without any great difficulties, but that was all. Always middle of the pack, always average. And the number didn’t say anything different: average.

The realization that they aren’t anything special strikes most people once in their life, not infrequently at the end of their schooling or while training for their careers, the intelligent rather than the unintelligent. But not all of them suffer equally because of it. Anyone who as a child wasn’t made sufficiently acquainted with the ideals of personal merit, of achievement, of rising above, might take an awareness of insipid mediocrity in stride like a big nose or thin hair. Others react with well-known escape maneuvers, ranging from eccentric clothing and an eccentric life to an ambitious search for a self they speculate exists within them like a magnificent concealed treasure, which gracious psychoanalysis concedes to every last jerk. And the sensitive react with depression.

A few days after Canisades had told all of his colleagues and acquaintances about that night's delightful experiences, Polidorio stood in front of his office mailbox with the number 703 and saw that some joker with a pen had made the 7 a 1 and the 3 a 2.

For twenty-eight years he hadn't lost a thought over the extent and measurability of his intelligence — now he sometimes didn't think of anything else.

### 3. Coffee and a Migraine

A lunatic of course, one who's scared stiff and senses sheer exquisite emotions within himself, he always has it made.

Joseph Conrad

“And what does that have to do with me? Go tell somebody else, go tell your briquettes about it, but not me.” Polidorio had poured himself coffee and stirred it with his pen. The blue shutters were closed except for a narrow gap of white midday heat. “And you can't just walk in here and drag whoever along with you. Hollerith machines! You don't even know what that is. And that doesn't have anything to do with me. The only thing I care about is: Where did it happen? It happened in Tindirna. Who is responsible there? So. Pack that up and get out of here. No, don't talk. Stop jabbering. You've been talking for an hour. Listen to me.”

But the fat man didn't listen. He stood in front of Polidorio's desk in a grimy uniform and he did what they all did here. If they didn't want to cooperate, they talked nonsense. If you asked them about it, they talked some different nonsense.

Polidorio had offered him neither coffee nor a chair, and he spoke to him informally though the man was thirty years older than him and of the same rank. Normally that was a dependable method for offending these people. But the fat man seemed immune to it. Unmoved, he talked about his upcoming retirement, driving the service car, gardening, and vitamin deficiency. For the fourth and fifth and sixth time, he elucidated what he put in his gas tank and his system for prisoner transport, spoke of justice, chance, and a higher power. He pointed to the two opposing windows on either side of the room (desert, ocean), at the door (the long path through the Salt Quarter), the inoperative ceiling fan (Allah), and kicked his foot against the bundle laying on the floor (the root of all evil).

The root of all evil was a young man bound at the hands and feet named Amadou, whom the fat man had picked up in the desert between Targat and Tindirna, a fact that only surfaced peripherally in his endless torrent of words.

Had he ever heard of responsibilities, Polidorio wanted to know, and he received the answer that successful police work is a question of technique. He asked what technique had to do with the scene of the crime, and received as an answer how difficult it was to practice agriculture near the oasis. Polidorio asked what agriculture had to do with it, and the fat man talked about shortfalls in supply, about airborne sand, water shortages, and resentful neighbors on the one hand, prosperity, thinking machines, and high levels of police organization on the other. He cast another glance at the broken Hollerith machine, looked around the room in feigned delight, and sat, since a chair wasn't within reach, on the prisoner without interrupting his torrent of words for a second.

“Quiet now,” said Polidorio. “Quiet. Listen to me.” The palms of his hands hovered over his desktop for a moment before he resolutely propped them on all ten fingers to the left and right of the coffee cup. The fat man repeated his last sentence. Two buttons were missing from his pants. Drops of sweat hung from his fleshy earlobes and swung in cadence. At once Polidorio had forgotten what he wanted to say. He felt a faint throbbing in his temples.

His gaze fell on hundreds of tiny bubbles that his stirring had created in the cup, and which were now uniting into a spinning carpet. As the rotation weakened, the bubbles wandered to the edge of the cup, where they piled up into a ring-shaped barrier. Trapped inside each bubble was a little head that stared at him with squinting eyes, in the small bubbles a small head, in the medium ones a medium one, and in the big ones a big one. The auditorium moved with militaristic synchronicity and fell for a few seconds into a sort of rigor mortis. Then all of the heads suddenly became bigger and when Polidorio exhaled a quarter of his audience died.

Gasoline vouchers, desert sand, hoof-and-mouth disease. High birth rates, rebels, presidential palace. Polidorio knew what the fat man wasn't trying to get at. But he didn't know what he was trying to get at. Transferring a suspect to Targat made no sense. Maybe, he thought, the fat man was remotely familiar with his seating and he wanted to avoid personal involvement. Maybe the professional outing to the coast was reason in itself. Or he had business to take care of here. Maybe he wanted to see the harbor district. And it was definitely about money. Everything was always about money for

everybody. He probably wanted to sell a few things. He wouldn't be the first village sheriff to bring typewriters, blank government forms, or service weapons to the souk as compensation for overdue wages. And if it wasn't about money, it was about relatives. Maybe he had a son here who he wanted to visit. Or a fat daughter of marriageable age. Maybe he wanted to go to a brothel. Maybe his fat daughter also worked in a brothel, and he wanted to sell her his service weapon. It was all possible.

The muffled rattling of an alarm clock interrupted his considerations. Polidorio pulled a big wad of cloth out from the bottom drawer of his desk, and with the flat of his hand he hit a certain spot, recognizable only to him. The rattling silenced. He pulled a pack of aspirin from the same drawer and said irritably: "That's enough. Now go away. Just go back to your oasis and take that with."

He pushed two tablets out of the blister pack. He didn't have a headache, but if he didn't take any medicine now, the pain would start in exactly half an hour. Every day at four. The cause of these recurrent attacks hadn't yet been established. The last doctor had held the X-rays up to the light, spoke about variations within the normal range, and advised Polidorio to see a psychologist. The psychologist recommended medications, and the pharmacist, who had never heard of these medications, passed him on a wise man. The wise man, who weighed forty kilos, lay curled up in the street and sold Polidorio a sheet with incantations on it that had to be put under his bed at night. In the end, his wife brought an institutional-sized package of aspirin with her from France.

It wasn't anything to do with his soul. Polidorio refused to believe that it was something to do with his soul. What kind of soul would that be, that unleashed roaring pains at exactly the same time every day? Nothing particular happened at four in the afternoon. It couldn't be because of work, the pains came on his days off too. They started at four and lasted until he went to sleep. Polidorio was young, he was of an athletic constitution, and he didn't eat any differently than he had eaten in Europe. There was a store with imported goods in the immediate vicinity of the Sheraton, he didn't even use the local water to brush his teeth. The climate? Then why didn't he have headaches twenty-four hours a day?

In the lonely hours of the night, when the heat's miasma pressed its way through the mosquito net to him, when the unknown sea beat on the unknown cliffs and the insects rioted under his bed, he believed he knew that it was neither his body nor his soul. It was the land itself. In France he'd never had headaches. They started after two days in Africa.

He put the tablets into his mouth, washed them down with two gulps of coffee, and sensed the gentle pressure in his esophagus. It was his daily ritual, and it hurt him to be observed by the carelessly chattering fat man while he did it. As he stowed the package in the drawer again, he said: "Or do we look like a dumping zone for shitty backwater problems? Go back to your oasis. You ape."

Silence. Ape. He waited for the reaction and the reaction came with just a second's hesitation: the fat man opened his funny little eyes wide, made a small O with his mouth, and wagged a limp hand at shoulder height. Then he went on talking. Oasis, condition of the streets, Hollerith machine.

Two months had passed since Polidorio had reported for his work here. And for two months he'd wanted nothing other than to go back to Europe. On the day of his arrival he had already realized (and paid for this realization with a camera) that before these foreign faces he was no longer a capable judge of character. His grandfather himself had been Arab, but he emigrated to Marseille early on. Polidorio had a French passport, and after his parents' divorce he'd grown up with his mother in Switzerland. He went to school in Biel, and later he studied in Paris. He spent his free time in cafes, in movie theaters, and on the tennis court. People liked him, but when there was a fight they called him Pied-noir. Had his serve been better, maybe he could have gone pro. So he became a policeman.

Like so much in his life, it was a coincidence. A friend had taken him with to the entrance exam. The friend was rejected, Polidorio wasn't. Society changed a lot during the years of his training without his realizing it. He wasn't a political person. He didn't read newspapers. The 1968 Paris protests and the maniacs in Nanterre interested him as little as the gasping opposition. Justice and laws were roughly identical to him. He didn't like the longhairs, but mainly for aesthetic reasons. He'd read ten pages of Sartre. It was easier, his first girlfriend wrote when she broke up with him, to describe him by what he wasn't than what he was.

He married his second girlfriend. That was in May 1969, and he didn't love her. She got pregnant right away. The first year was hell. When they offered him a position in the former colonies because of his knowledge of Arabic, he took it right away. Glossy coffee-table books full of picturesque deserts, primitive wood sculptures on living-room shelves, talk about roots. He didn't know anything about Africa.

What impressed itself upon his mind more than anything else was the strange smell at the airport. Then the loneliness of the first weeks, before his family followed



him. A picture in the daily paper: Thévenet on Mont Ventoux. A friend's postcard: snow-decked Alps. The stink, the horrific headaches. Polidorio began stopping still on the street when someone spoke a pure French without any asthmatic gurgle. The sight of tourists, their ease, the carefree blonde women. He put in a request for retransfer, the French government laughed in his face. With every passing week he became more sentimental. French tourists, French newspapers, French products. Even the packs of deadbeats and longhairs, who were always pouring single file out of the mountains and into the valley with five hundred grams of pot in their pockets to be subsequently handcuffed by him, filled him with a sort of emotion. They were idiots. But they were European idiots.

The fat man was still talking. Polidorio pushed the coffee cup to the side of his desk. He knew he was making a mistake. He gripped the far edge of the desk with both hands, pulled his upper body forward, and peered into the abyss.

“Twenty dollars, right?”

The captive boy seemed to have fallen asleep under the fat man's weight.

“The Chief Commissioner is speaking to you!” cried the fat man and smacked his open hand against the detainee's ear.

“Twenty dollars and a basket of vegetables?” repeated Polidorio.

“What?”

“Yes, you!”

“Yes, what, boss?”

“A few dollars and a basket of vegetables. And for that you knocked off four people in Tindirma?”

“What?” The bundle began to come to life. “Four people where?”

“Four people in Tindirma. Four white people.”

“I've never been to Tindirma in my life, boss. I swear!”

#### 4. The MS Kungsholm

Sexual conquests elicited the same childish intensity in Ellsberg and the same urge to talk as classified nuclear secrets. He once described his latest liaison to the people at the RAND Corporation with the words: “She had a gap between each tooth.”

Andrew Hunt

There are few people you can describe in a single sentence. As a rule, you need several, and for typical people an entire novel often isn't enough. Helen Gliese, leaning on the railing of the MS Kungsholm in white shorts, a white blouse, a white sun hat, and enormous sunglasses, chewing gum with her mouth half open and looking at the throng of people on the advancing shore, could be described in two words: beautiful and dumb. With this description you could send a stranger to the harbor and be sure that among the hundreds of travelers he would pick up the right one.

The astounding thing about it wasn't the brevity of the description though. The astounding thing was that this description didn't fit in the least. Helen wasn't beautiful. She was a collection of aesthetic banalities, an excess of personal grooming and efforts at fashion, but beautiful in the true sense she was not. She was someone best regarded from a distance. Some photos of her you could have put on the cover of fashion magazines — an impression of sleekness, cold, and long lines. But as soon as the picture started to come to life, you'd become strangely confused. Helen's facial expressions were badly synchronized with themselves. The sluggish, droning singsong of her voice gave the impression of an actress from an afternoon series on whose script someone in stage direction had written rich and smug, her arm and hand motions were like the parody of a homosexual's, and when you first met Helen all of this together with the excessive make-up and outlandish clothing could distract you for several minutes — or hours or days — from the realization that nearly everything she said was logical and well-considered. Her thoughts were completely clear and she formulated them effortlessly. It was even more surprising to read her letters.

In other words, Helen was the exact opposite of dumb, and if she wasn't the opposite of beautiful, then at least she was very far from a classical conception of beauty; which didn't change anything about the fact that this pick-her-up-from-the-harbor scheme worked. Or would have worked. It was Helen's first visit to Africa and no one picked her up.