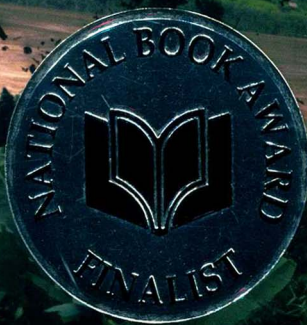


"A remarkable novel." —Stephen King, *The New York Times*

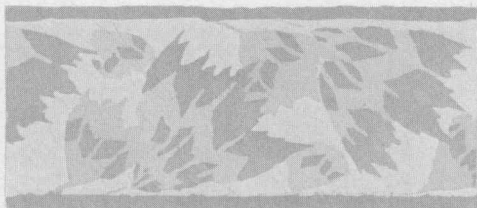
# Fieldwork

Mischa Berlinski

a novel



# FIELDWORK



MISCHA BERLINSKI

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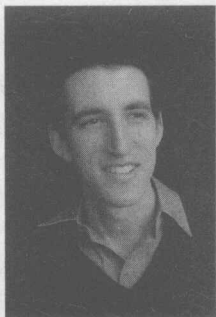
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Mischa Berlinski was born in New York in 1973. He studied classics at the University of California at Berkeley and Columbia College and has worked as a journalist in Thailand. *Fieldwork* is his first novel.



## Praise for *Fieldwork* by Mischa Berlinski

"A gripping and entertaining first novel . . . It's a quirky, often brilliant debut, bounced along by limitless energy, its wry tone not detracting from its thoughtfulness. You wonder what Berlinski will write next, and have faith that it will be something completely different."

—Hilary Mantel, *The New York Review of Books*

"Stories within stories, and a surprisingly compassionate look at Christianity in conflict with anthropology. I kept expecting tirades, and instead got sweetness and thoughtful good humor. A remarkable novel."

—Stephen King, *The New York Times Book Review*,

"Read Any Good Books Lately?"

"Succeeds in evoking the quixotic appeal of both the anthropological and missionary enterprises—of documenting other cultures and of converting them."

—*The New Yorker*

"A top-notch debut novel . . . A reader doesn't have to have any interest in Christian missionary work, anthropology, or the hill tribes of Thailand to be riveted, but odds are you'll have a greater appreciation for all three—not to mention Berlinski's storytelling abilities—by the time you put *Fieldwork* down. Grade: A."

—*The Christian Science Monitor*

"A hybrid that's complex enough to make any horticulturalist proud. Part family saga, part murder mystery, the literary graft doesn't merely sprout, it shoots up like spring hibiscus in Bangkok."

—*The New York Sun*

"Berlinski dexterously handles it all, with artistry, research, confident prose, and humor."

—*New York Post*

"Airtight and intensely gripping . . . His treatment of both religious missionary and anthropological fieldwork is subtle and insightful. Impeccable research and a juicy, intricate plot pay off in this perfectly executed debut."

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

"A clever book."

—*The Believer*

"An appealing blend of odd facts and enlightening fiction."

—*Deseret Morning News*

"Mischa Berlinski brings a wealth of vivid detail to his narrative and writes with real authority. *Fieldwork* is as fascinating as an ethnographer's private journal, as entertaining as a finely plotted thriller."

—John Wray, author of *Canaan's Tongue*

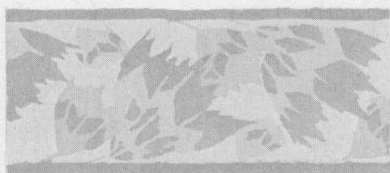
FOR MY MOTHER AND FATHER

*The main achievement of religion, as compared with animism, lies in the psychic binding of the fear of demons. Nevertheless, the evil spirit still has a place in the religious system as a relic of the previous age.*

FREUD



PART ONE



A GOOD STORY



## ONE

### “GOOD GOD, NO”

WHEN HE WAS A YEAR out of Brown, my friend Josh O'Connor won a Thai beach vacation in a lottery in a bar. He spent two weeks on Ko Samui, decided that Thailand was home, and never left. That was at least ten years ago, and since then, Josh has done just about every sort of odd job a foreigner in Thailand can do: He taught English for a while, and was part owner of a nightclub in Phuket. He was a stringer for one of the wire agencies, and he took a few photos now and again for Agence France-Presse. Josh played the trumpet in the marching band in high school, and he parlayed the experience into a few years as the frontman for a Thai ska band called the King's Men. He founded a dating agency. He worked for a time for an environmental group attempting to stop construction of a large dam across the Mekong, and when the effort failed, he wrote publicity materials for a cement exporter. He hinted that many years ago, in a moment of real financial desperation, he smuggled a pound of hashish in his belly back to the States. I'm not sure that I entirely believe the story, but it was consistent with everything I know about Josh. Yet to see him, one would have no idea of his adventurous spirit: he was neither tall nor short but decidedly

round; he was chubby-cheeked, curly-haired, and round-nosed, with bulging eyes and an oversized head. He had thick lips and a gap between his two front teeth which whistled very slightly when he spoke and made his speech nervous and breathy. His body was pear-shaped, with an enormous, protruding posterior: when he walked, he waddled like a duck; and when he laughed, as he did often, his whole body shook. "I'm attractive," Josh once told me, "to a lady who likes herself a *big* man." As it happened, there were a lot of little Thai ladies who *did* like themselves a big man, and Josh was never lonely. He was one of the happiest men I've ever met. It was Josh's conceit that he could order a meal better than any other *farang* in the kingdom.

I first met Josh when I was on vacation just out of college and backpacking through Malaysia and Indonesia, long before Rachel and I moved to Thailand. Josh and I were staying at the same hotel in Penang. He was on a visa run, down from Bangkok. Within about five minutes of spotting me in the hotel bar, Josh had sat himself down next to me and, in admirably direct fashion, informed me of his plans to start a pornographic production company in Vietnam. He had the funding, he said, contacts in the government, and an *unbelievable* star. These plans, like so many Josh O'Connor plans, eventually came to nothing, but his account was sufficiently compelling that whenever I'm in Bangkok, I always give him a call.

Now I was down from Chiang Mai, writing an article for a Singaporean arts magazine about an up-and-coming Thai sculptor, and Josh and I agreed to meet just after sundown in front of the Ratchawat market. I spent a long, sultry afternoon teasing a few good quotations out of my sculptor; then, just as the streetlights across Bangkok were flickering on, a motorcycle taxi deposited me in front of the 7-Eleven opposite the market, where Josh was already waiting for me, a goofy smile on his chubby face.

Plastic tables packed the narrow sidewalk. The sting of frying chili peppers made my eyes water, and from the market, now closing for the day, the sweet smells of jasmine, lilies, incense, and

lemongrass mingled with the smells of rotting fish, molding durian, sweat, car exhaust, and garbage. On the corner, two competing noodle men served up bowls of *guoy tieo* in a ginger-and-coriander sauce; a little farther down the road, the curry lady had set up shop with huge vats of green curry and red, a jungle curry, a *panang* curry, and a spicy fish soup. A pretty girl cut up fresh mangoes and served them over sticky rice in a coconut sauce. There was somebody who grilled skewers of chicken over a small open flame and which he served with a peanut sauce.

But we were there for the fish family. All of the other vendors were ordinary, Josh said, nothing special, run-of-the-mill, the kind of stuff you'd find outside the market of any two-bit town from Isaan to the Malay border. But the fish lady and family, *boy howdy*, they were something else. "The prime minister's nephew told me about this place," Josh said, gesturing at the fish stall. Rows of silvery fish sprawled on a bed of ice, black-eyed, rainbow-gilled, and healthy-looking, as if they had just swum up minutes ago and were only resting; and below them massed ranks of clams, mussels, oysters, and ominous black anemones. "It's better than the Oriental Hotel."

We sat down, and Josh ordered for us. Twice our waiter walked away from the table, and twice Josh called him back to order still *more* food. Josh was at ease in his domain, leaning back in his chair like a pasha. It was August, the trailing end of the rainy season, when everything oozes. Josh pulled a piece of toilet paper from the roll on the table and gently blotted his face and hands, then opened his satchel and pulled out a half-empty bottle of Johnny Walker Black.

Josh was a natural raconteur, but he wasn't much for the old give-and-take of normal conversation: he asked after my day and listened to my reply with a distracted air, nodding occasionally, until he could be patient no longer. "That's just great," he interrupted. He took another slurp from his drink. "You know, I'm glad you're in town. I need someone who really knows the up-country."



This was Josh's subtle way of forming a segue from conversation to monologue: in all his years in Thailand, Josh had come to know the north far better than I did. There was hardly a corner of the kingdom that Josh didn't know, where he wouldn't be greeted by the abbot of the Buddhist temple—or by the madam of the best bordello—with a huge smile.

I waited to hear what Josh had to say. He paused for a second, as if gathering his strength. He leaned his heavy forearms on the plastic table. He pouted his heavy lips and flared his nostrils. He strained his round neck from side to side. Then he *launched* his story. There is no other way to describe it: a Josh O'Connor story is like a giant cruise ship leaving port, and when you make a dinner date with Josh O'Connor, you know in advance that you are going to set sail. It's part of the deal. It's a design feature, not a bug.

"Do you remember Wim DeKlerk?" Josh began.

He didn't wait for me to reply. In any case, I did remember Wim: he was a functionary at the Dutch embassy, and a drinking buddy of Josh's. The last time I was in Bangkok, I took Josh and Wim home from Royal City Avenue in a taxi, both of them singing Steely Dan songs at the top of their lungs. They were celebrating a stock tip that Josh had passed on to Wim from the prime minister's nephew. Apparently, Wim had made a killing.

"Well, about a year ago, I got a call from Wim. Some lady in Holland had called *him*, asking if he knew anybody who would go and visit her niece up at Chiang Mai Central Prison. This woman—the niece, not the lady in Holland, the niece is named Martiya, her aunt is Elena, both of them are van der Leun, are you following all this?—her uncle had just died, and the niece, Martiya, has inherited some money. Wim tells me the aunt wants somebody to go up there and take care of the details, you know, look this Martiya in the eye, explain what happened, make sure she understands everything. The aunt is about a zillion years old, doesn't want to travel,

the niece won't reply to her letters, so she wants somebody to take care of this in person. Wim asks if I want to do it."

The story didn't surprise me: I remembered Wim telling me about his job at the embassy. Every day, he had told me, a worried parent called him from Amsterdam looking for a detective to help track down a child lost in the island rave culture; or a textile importer from Utrecht would call, asking him to recommend a crack-erjack accountant to go over a potential business partner's books. Offering advice to Dutch people on how to get things done in Thailand was his specialty. Once, he told me, he had even helped a circus in Maastricht get an export permit for an elephant.

"Of course I said yes," Josh said.

That's why I always call Josh when I'm in Bangkok. Things like this *really* happen to him.

"So I give this woman in Holland a buzz before I go up to Chiang Mai," Josh continued. "She doesn't know anything. Last time she saw her niece, the niece was a little girl. Hadn't spoken to her in years. She hadn't gotten a letter from her in over ten years, not since she went to prison. In any case, she was from a distant branch of the van der Leun family. The niece grew up in California, had been there since she was little and was now an American. Before she went to jail, she lived in a village out near the Burmese border. You know that area? Southeast of Mae Hong Son?"

"Not really," I said.

"*Nobody* lives out there but the tigers. What was she doing out there? The aunt in Holland, she doesn't know. I figure she's one of those kids, got caught up in drug smuggling. 'How long was she up there?' I ask. Turns out the niece's been in Thailand since forever. Maybe since the seventies. And she's no kid, the woman's over fifty years old. *Strange*, I think. 'When's your niece getting out of prison?' I ask. Long pause on the phone. 'Fifty years,' the aunt says. 'So what's your niece doing in prison?' Long pause on the phone. Like she doesn't want to tell me. 'She is a murderer,' the woman finally says, in a thick Dutch accent. What do you say to that? I said,

‘Who’d she kill?’ Long pause on the phone. She doesn’t know. That’s all this Elena van der Leun can tell me. She wants me to go and tell her niece that her uncle is dead.”

Josh paused as the waiter arrived at our table with a steaming cauldron of *tam yam guum*. The young waiter lit a paraffin candle under the tureen, and Josh served me and then himself. The soup was, as Josh had promised, delicious, delicately flavored with lime, cilantro, ginger, and lemongrass; the shrimp, which that very morning had been frolicking in the Gulf of Thailand, were huge and tender, with an explosive touch of sea salt. Josh ate the very hot soup with vigorous splashing movements of his spoon, and only when he had finished his first bowl and was reaching to refill it did he pick up the story again.

Several weeks after his talk with Elena van der Leun, Josh found himself in the waiting room of Chiang Mai Central Prison. Josh told me that he had been in Chiang Mai for three or four days, enjoying the luxury of his expense account, before he finally steeled himself to the task at hand: Josh was a generous man, but he did not like to be presented too directly with the misery of others, a squeamishness which made him regret having accepted Wim’s offer. He had dreaded the visit, and day after day had done no more than note the location of the prison on the map, then distract himself from his unpleasant chore with a stiff drink, then another, after which the days dissolved into a blur. The morning of his prison visit, realizing that he could put off his errand no longer, he had awakened early and dressed himself neatly. He wore linen slacks and a white shirt, which when he left the hotel was crisply pressed but by the time he arrived at the prison was damp with sweat. A low sky like wet cement hid the hills which ring Chiang Mai.

“Oh man, I did not want to be there,” Josh said. “I got out of that tuk-tuk, told the driver to wait for me, and it was like they were going to lock me up inside, that’s what I felt like. Like I was never going to get out of there. *Bang!* The first gate closes behind me. *Bang!* The second gate closes behind me. *Bang!* That’s the third gate.”

Josh thumped hard on the table with every *bang*, and the other diners turned their heads.

"You ever been in a Thai jail?" Josh asked.

"No."

"The one here in Bangkok, it's a real shithole," Josh said knowingly. "Not a nice place. But this one in Chiang Mai, it wasn't bad. It wasn't what I expected."

Indeed, he said, the room in which the guards installed Josh could have been the waiting room for any provincial government ministry. Only the bars on the windows and the guard behind the heavy wooden desk betrayed the purpose of the place; that and a pervasive smell of urine and vomit. A large portrait of the king in full military regalia hung next to a clock whose loud ticks echoed through the room with impossible slowness. There were a half-dozen round metal tables, and at each table four plastic stools. Josh settled his tremendous bulk onto a stool much too small for a man of his size.

"I was the only *farang* in the room," Josh said. "There were just a couple of other people. A few hill-tribers, I don't know, maybe they were Hmong, or Dyalo, I can never remember all the costumes. They had that scared look people down from the hills always have. I remember one of them asked me if I had a cigarette, so I gave him one. There was some guy with tattoos up and down his arms, Buddhist sutras—you know, the way the gangsters have. Scary-looking dude. And some women, Thai women, chatting with each other, but looking around like they didn't want to be there. I guess *nobody* wants to be there."

Josh sat in the waiting room, which if not as horrible as he had imagined was certainly not cheerful, and reflected on the woman he was to meet. How was he to inform this stranger that her uncle was dead? Was this her last link to the world of the living? Josh wondered: What had brought Martiya van der Leun to this pass? A quick Internet search had revealed nothing about Martiya, and again, Josh thought it strange that *anyone* could have disappeared so