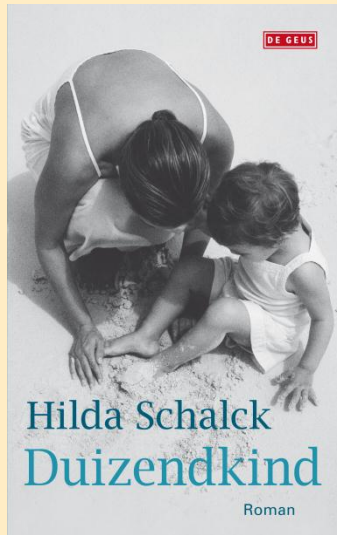




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Hilda Schalck

Child in a million

Original title: *Duizendkind*

NOVEL

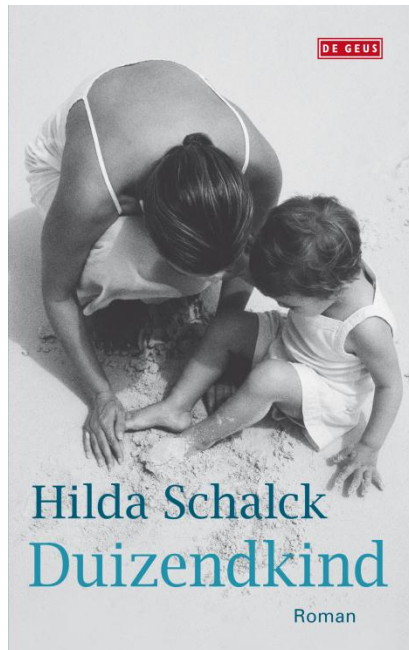
You easily become the prisoner of your thoughts if thoughts are the only thing you still have.

One woman's moving story. Will she submit to her zest for living or to her wish to die?

***Child in a Million* is the story of Elisabeth Deesse; about how intelligence, sensitivity and talent can colour a human life but can also get in the way.**

About the author

Hilda Schalck was born in Ghent, Belgium, but has lived most of her life in the Netherlands. *Child in a Million* is her debut novel. During various writing courses given by her literary agent, Paul Sebes, Hilda Schalck discovered her passion and talent for writing. Presently she is working on her second book, a historical novel about Leo Baekeland (Ghent 1863-New York 1944), who invented Velox photographic paper (1892) and Bakelite (1906).



About the book

Elisabeth Deesse suffers a stroke and lands in hospital where she will also die. She longs for death, but at the same time would like to live longer for her grandchild. She is no longer able to speak, but the memories that stir in her mind are of a highly intelligent and sensitive child, who from an early age saw and understood too much.

Elisabeth is brought up by her mother, an artist who is affected by the terrible things that happen in the world and incorporates them into collages and paintings. Elisabeth's father is distant and increasingly becomes more of a visitor than a member of the family. As a talented but misunderstood architect, Elisabeth tries to find her way in the world. At the end of her life, she is struggling with the question: 'Should I have lived my life differently?'

Hilda Schalck, *Duizendkind*
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Excerpt from the book

Every Thursday afternoon, grandad would take me to the harbour, wearing a customs officer's cap and a khaki uniform. 'They really get the women going,' he would say. And that Thursday, as always, we walked along the quay through the street with the naked women at the windows.

'Aren't they cold?'

'I must remember that one.'

As soon as they saw him, the women tapped on the windows and waved with their ample breasts. He stuck both thumbs in the air. I held my hands in front of my eyes, although my fingers were open.

Grandad raised his cap to an old woman with a half-open blouse, gave her a deep bow and said: 'Madame courtesan.'

'For you it will cost nothing,' she shouted, but grandad pointed to me and walked on to the boats. 'She is old and wise. All the adulteresses come to her; she can give advice on anything.'

On the quayside, the boatmen touched their caps to grandad in his uniform. They held their hands palms down, 'so you can't see the weathered oil and rust on their hands,' grandad said. We usually walked one after the other with our hands behind our backs. '*Right. Right.*' While grandad hummed the *Rondo Alla Turca*, we marched with equal tread over the large, oil-stained paving stones. If we were lucky, we could visit five ships in one afternoon.

'When will I be allowed on a crane? I'm three already.' They towered majestically above us and I wanted to see the world from the air.

'Almost three. When you're seven.'

'That's too long.'

'You always seem to have to wait long for nice things. Nasty things come without a wait. That's how things are in life. Careful on the plank. Hold my hand tightly.' Sometimes he lifted me up and I saw the world of the birds from his shoulders. I would be even closer to them on a crane. Grandad smelt of rusty oil.

Once in the cabin, he slid the captain's cap onto my blonde curls. On deck he showed me to the boatmen triumphantly. Now it was me they saluted. They spoke other languages and yet I understood them: grimaces, flattened noses, stretched mouths, purply blue tongues, chocolate. For chocolate, I could laugh in all languages.

'For your dessert.'

At home, in the garden, I meticulously unwound the wrapper from the bar. Greedily, I licked from the edge of the wrapper to the top where the chocolate stopped. My tongue was warm and slobbery. The chocolate melted. Any minute now it would be all over my hands and I wouldn't have tasted a thing.

I just licked off the outside, and then the new outside, until the inside came outside. When the chocolate deliciousness stuck to the roof of my mouth, I held it there with my tongue. I didn't want to swallow and yet that's what happened.

'Did you get some chocolate from grandad?'

'No.'

'Don't make me laugh! And shouldn't you wipe your mouth? Haven't you learnt that from grandma and grandad?'

Mothers look sweet enough, but before you know it, there's a hairy wart on their crooked chins and you have to watch out they don't magic you away.

Translated by Christine Davies
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