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## Toni Sala



### Toni Sala

Carles Miró

Toni Sala (Sant Feliu de Guíxols, 1969) is a teacher of Catalan literature. This professional experience led to the non-fiction essay *Petita crònica d'un professor a secundària* (Small Chronicle of a Secondary School Teacher) (2001), one of the best-selling and most controversial books of the decade, in which Toni Sala exposes the frustration prevalent among educators today with disarming sincerity and raw candour.

Toni Sala (Sant Feliu de Guíxols, Girona, 1969) is presently the author of two books of short stories and two novels, although it could also be said that he is the author of three novels, or four or five. It is not that there are any doubts about the attribution of the books he has written. The doubts are of another nature. His novel *Rodalies* (Outskirts) (2004), winner of the Sant Joan Prize and the National Prize for Catalan Literature, is usually presented as the author's "second novel", whereas it would be truer to say that it is his fifth (or at least his fourth).

One of Sala's books that has gone most unnoticed is *Un relat de la nova immigració africana* (A Tale of the New African Immigration) (2003), a *nouvelle* that may serve to explain them all. In this work, Sala relates a day in the life of a black immigrant in the Maresme area outside Barcelona: he goes to work in the fields, drops by a telephone office to call his wife (who lives in Gambia), has his day's wages stolen, asks for work in gardens of private homes, goes out in the evening with a few friends, etc.. The theft of the day's wage is what makes the story progress, affording an ending that rounds off the tale. However, if this were the only strand that maintained the coherence of the book, it would be very little. The small everyday history that we are told has a precise location (the remains of the farming operations of the Maresme and its tourist region, on the seashore), and it is this location that counts. Sala does not write a story and place it against an available background, but instead he uses a setting he knows well out of which he makes the protagonist emerge. This would not be possible without an extraordinary power of description. His descriptions are never exercises in virtuosity that burn themselves out, they ever become tedious. They are fragments that set out to reveal the possibilities of a specific setting, including the characters and events he is describing, in such a way that they never have the air of universal clichés that could be "set" anywhere else on the planet.

Sala's first book, *Entomologia* (Entomology) (1997, Documenta Prize), is a book of short stories that establishes him as a story-teller with a voice all his own. It is no surprise that the book won praise from Quim Monzó, the "father" of Catalan literature today. *Entomologia* comprises short stories, woven with a style of short sentences, refined and efficient, that serves its purposes perfectly: to treat with coldness and the utmost precision the human insects that populate his stories. They are desolate stories, occasionally truculent, which often have a clear symbolic element. *Entomologia* begins with a description of a dung hill and the animals that populate it: the dung beetles that rove its surface ("but we do not admire these, we only see them as we gaze at the dung hill") and "the worms the size of a noodle, white, clean, smooth as a baby's skin", which live under the pile of steaming, fermented dung (the ones we admire are the ones underneath it all, when we discover them); the insects with which the book is concerned are the beetles ("they live, as we do, under the sun's cape"), incapable of

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imagining that "all those kilos beneath them, those sinuous white worms and that burning blue dung could exist". What never occurs with Sala is the construction of a symbolic artefact solely for the reader to feel the satisfaction of decoding it. A short story such as "L'avenç cultural" (Cultural Progress), a meta-literary fable - to put it inelegantly - is funny, not because the cause of the stench that appears in the library and that, is impossible to get rid of has to be found, but rather because we really "believe" the whole rigmarole of the investigation as it is seriously planned and not a mere trick to reach a conclusion.

The second book, *Pere Marín* (1998), stands at the same point of moral change (or crisis) that he had already explored in some, perhaps the best, short stories in *Entomologia*. Besides the interest of the story of teenagers that he relates - as everyone has been a teenager, it is no mystery that it is one of Sala's most critically acclaimed books - it is a novel that clearly highlights one of the author's strong points: the creation of settings. The bar, the delivery van, the wasteland in which the protagonists move, are all elements of a decaying urban environment that stay in the memory not because they are submitted to a "direct" description but because they are part of the construction of the characters. We also find this presence of the setting in *Un relat de la nova immigració africana* and in *Rodalies*.

If *Pere Marín* was a story of teenagers, based around the formation of personal identity, in *Bones notícies* (Good News) (2001) we find a book about adults who have already chosen from the two options of an alternative with which one of the short stories ("Els implicats") had ended. The alternative is made by a terrorist to a companion who has just killed for the first time: "solitude or destruction". This sentence reappears, literally, in the following book written by Sala, *Petita crònica d'un professor a secundària* (Small Chronicle of a Secondary School Teacher) (2001), when he describes the uncertain balance lived by those who are adults in years but who are prolonging their adolescence: "They walk among the dead, and having to choose sides is a terrible dilemma. Solitude or death. Solitude or destruction. They suffer a great deal and live for years and years without deciding to take the step that life has not taken for them; they walk kilometres and kilometres on the edge of the precipice, without ever deciding to jump, waiting for a gust of wind, a misstep, a moment's carelessness?".

Mediaeval Catalan literary prose has what are known as "the four major chronicles", where the deeds of kings are related. Sala is to write a "small chronicle". The *Petita crònica d'un professor a secundària* effectively contains what happens to a secondary school teacher over a year. The book is structured in the three terms of the school year and, published in a non-fiction collection, had a great social impact, to the point where it triggered a controversy on the state of teaching in Catalonia. It is the book that made Sala known. However, it should be said that this work was not a change of style, or even of genre, with regard to Sala's earlier work. There is no discontinuity, either in terms of the expressive resources or the interest of the author in the moral crises of the characters, between *Petita crònica...* and *Pere Marín*. In other words, *Petita crònica* should rightfully be seen as Toni Sala's second novel. The difference is that the narrative material that Sala uses now is undeniably real. It is from here that the controversy arises. And it is not that this is any less so in his previous and subsequent books. Sala projects his gaze on something he knows and he writes a novel or a short story. But to tackle the narrative creation of a specific literary pretext, he has to have first-hand knowledge of that pretext. With *Petita crònica* the issue was that the subject had not been sufficiently well treated by journalists in this country (the same journalists resorted to *Petita crònica* to document the reality of schools). This book by Sala is part of the contemporary concern for western values and the conveying of these that we can find, for example, in the last books by George Steiner or Philip Roth.

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The same could be said of *Goril·la blanc* (White Gorilla) (2002) as for *Petita crònica*. It is not that it is a book that reads like a novel, it is a novel, and as such demands to be read. Added to this is the fact that the book's protagonist and, evidently, what he tells of his life, are real. This is its peculiarity. The fact that it is a gorilla. *Goril·la blanc* is the autobiography of the most famous gorilla in the world *Snowflake*, the white gorilla in Barcelona Zoo, in other words, a very clear case of a universal Catalan. Sala writes the gorilla's life in the first person, and this is sufficient to realise that it is a novel. Like *Bones notícies*, *Goril·la blanc* is a book for adults: the white gorilla's life behind bars, his "loving relationships", the children he has and who die before him... The first part is devoted to his childhood: from the moment when his mother is killed, he is taken from the jungle and, after a period of adaptation with an adoptive mother (human), he ends up in the zoo. To write this first part, Sala was missing something that he could not draw from his own experience: he had to see the jungle from where the gorilla was taken. So he went, and *Quatre dies a l'Àfrica* (Four Days in Africa) (2005), which is currently his latest book, tells the story that Sala made to Equatorial Guinea to see the jungle. It is not the making of *Goril·la blanc* but strictly the trip that the author made to Africa to be able to write his "autobiographical" novel. This book is a field study on the inter-cultural differences and the difficulties of understanding and communication between two such different cultures as European and African.

For its start, *Rodalies* recalls Hawthorne's "Wakefield" and Simenon's *The Man Who Watched the Trains Go By*. This novel starts with a man with no name ("this man") who leaves home, leaves work and his wife without knowing fully where he is going (he only has a map on a paper serviette), as what is important is not where he is going but the fact that he is escaping, and what he finds is the abandoned, devastated Catalan *hinterland* - what he sees as soon as he leaves Barcelona - which is an externalisation of the protagonist's inner landscape. As Joan Triadú said: "In *Rodalies* Toni Sala presents the alternative between giving in and freedom. Or to put it better, between freedom and death (of the soul)." Awarded one of the few prestigious prizes in Catalonia, the Sant Joan Prize, the novel has just won the National Prize for Catalan Literature.

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## A selection of texts

### Text



**WEB: El cotxe**

Narració inèdita publicada al diari cultural Núvol.

<http://www.nuvol.com/ebooks/>



**WEB: Rodalies**

Un fragment de l'obra, a Vilaweb (31/01/2005).

<http://www.vilaweb.com/www/lletres/lilibre?llibre=952750>



**WEB: Goril·la blanc**

Fragment del començament d'aquesta novel·la.

[http://www.autorsremenats.blogspot.com/2003\\_07\\_01\\_autorsremenats\\_archive.html](http://www.autorsremenats.blogspot.com/2003_07_01_autorsremenats_archive.html)

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**WEB: Toni Sala a Google books**

<http://www.google.es/search?q=inauthor%3A%22toni+sala%22&btnG=Cerca+llibres&tbm=bks&tbo=1&hl=ca>



**WEB: Toni Sala a WorldCat**

[http://www.worldcat.org/search?q=%22toni+sala%22&dblist=638&fq=ap%3A%22sala%2C+toni%22&qt=facet\\_ap%3A](http://www.worldcat.org/search?q=%22toni+sala%22&dblist=638&fq=ap%3A%22sala%2C+toni%22&qt=facet_ap%3A)



**WEB: Excerpt...**

... from *Rodalies* at Vilaweb (31/01/05).

<http://www.vilaweb.com/www/lletres/lilibre?llibre=952750>



**WEB: Goril·la blanc (White Gorilla)**

Excerpt from the beginning of this novel.

[http://www.autorsremenats.blogspot.com/2003\\_07\\_01\\_autorsremenats\\_archive.html](http://www.autorsremenats.blogspot.com/2003_07_01_autorsremenats_archive.html)

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## Bio-bibliography

### Biography



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<http://cultura.gencat.net/ilc/peq/FitxaAutors.asp?nom1=Sala&cerca2=Cercar&quinform=form1&NRegistre=5&idregistre=9211>



**WEB: Toni Sala a l'Institut Ramon Llull**

Nota biogràfica dins l'espai dedicat a la Fira Internacional del Llibre de Guadalajara 2004.

[http://fil04.llull.cat/cat/02protagonistes/Sala\\_Toni.shtm](http://fil04.llull.cat/cat/02protagonistes/Sala_Toni.shtm)



**WEB: The author in the Who's Who of Catalan Literature**

<http://cultura.gencat.net/ilc/peq/fitxaAutorsuk.asp?nom1=Sala&cercauk2=Search&quinform=form1&NRegistre=5&idregistre=9211>

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### Bibliography



**WEB: Què hi ha a la Biblioteca de Catalunya**

[http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search\\*cat/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Sala+Toni+1969&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=13&searchscope2=13&SORT=D](http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search*cat/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Sala+Toni+1969&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=13&searchscope2=13&SORT=D)



**WEB: Què hi ha a les biblioteques universitàries catalanes (CCUC)**

[http://ccuc.cbuc.es/search\\*cat/a?SEARCH=Sala+Toni+1969&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=23](http://ccuc.cbuc.es/search*cat/a?SEARCH=Sala+Toni+1969&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=23)



**WEB: Què hi ha a les biblioteques públiques**

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**WEB: Per comprar-ne llibres**

<http://www.llibres.cat/Catalogo/Autor/sala-toni>



**WEB: Articles de l'autor (Traces)**

<http://traces.uab.cat/search?f=author&p=Sala%20Toni&sc=1&ln=ca>



**WEB: Articles sobre l'autor (Traces)**

[http://traces.uab.cat/search?ln=ca&p=Sala%2C+Toni&f=keyword&action\\_search=Cerca&c=Traces+%3A+base+de+dades+de+llengua+i+literatura+catalanes&sf=&so=d&rm=&rg=10&sc=1&of=hb](http://traces.uab.cat/search?ln=ca&p=Sala%2C+Toni&f=keyword&action_search=Cerca&c=Traces+%3A+base+de+dades+de+llengua+i+literatura+catalanes&sf=&so=d&rm=&rg=10&sc=1&of=hb)



**WEB: Works in the Biblioteca de Catalunya**

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**WEB: The author in The European Library**

<http://search.theeuropeanlibrary.org/portal/en/search/%28%22creator%22+all+%22sala+toni%22%29.query>



**WEB: The author in the Congress Library (US)**

<http://catalog.loc.gov/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&PAGE=First>



**WEB: The author in the COPAC Catalogue (UK)**

<http://copac.ac.uk/search?&au=Toni+Sala>

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## Comments on the author

### Criticism



**WEB: Blog de l'autor**

Blog que aplega textos de l'autor: articles periodístics, contes inèdits, etc.  
<http://www.tonisala.net>



**WEB: Blogcrònica**

Blog de Toni Sala durant les jornades "El dietarisme i nou dietarisme dels blogs", a Wilaweb.com.  
<http://blocs.mesvilaweb.com/dietaris>



**WEB: Toni Sala on the Lletra website in Catalan**

Including more resources and reading suggestions.  
<http://www.uoc.edu/lletra/noms/tsala/index.html>



**WEB: Blog**

Toni Sala's blog during the conference on "Diaries and the new blog diaries", at Wilaweb.com.

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<http://blocs.mesvilaweb.com/dietaris>

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## Miscellaneous



### WEB: Xerrada amb Toni Sala

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<http://es.youtube.com/watch?v=V7beB6plAK8>



### WEB: Premi Nacional de Cultura 2005

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### WEB: National Culture Prize

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### WEB: XXIV Sant Joan Caixa Sabadell Prize

Toni Sala won this prize in 2004 for *Rodalties*. At LaMalla.net.  
[http://www.lamalla.net/canal/actualitat\\_cultural/literatura/article.asp?id=151944](http://www.lamalla.net/canal/actualitat_cultural/literatura/article.asp?id=151944)

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## Comments



### WEB: Toni Sala fa Autoestop

Notícia de la publicació d'aquest llibre de viatges per la Catalunya d'ara.  
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### WEB: Entrevista a Toni Sala

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Entrevista de Carles Miró, a *Paper de vidre*, núm. 16 (setembre 2003).  
[http://www.paperdevidre.net/pdf\\_pdv/n16.pdf](http://www.paperdevidre.net/pdf_pdv/n16.pdf)



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<http://www.traces.uab.es/tracesbd/avui/av03560.pdf>



**PDF: Interview**

Carles Miró talks to Toni Sala, in *Paper de vidre*, número 16 (September 2003).

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**PDF: The alternative between submission and freedom**

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## The author 2.0

### Blogs of blogs



**WEB: La blogosfera diu...**

[http://blogsearch.google.es/blogsearch?hl=ca&ie=UTF-8&q=Toni+Sala&lr=lang\\_ca](http://blogsearch.google.es/blogsearch?hl=ca&ie=UTF-8&q=Toni+Sala&lr=lang_ca)



**WEB: The blogosphere says...**

[http://blogsearch.google.es/blogsearch?hl=ca&ie=UTF-8&q=Toni+Sala&lr=lang\\_ca](http://blogsearch.google.es/blogsearch?hl=ca&ie=UTF-8&q=Toni+Sala&lr=lang_ca)

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