



Volker Michels'tiny, cluttered office is packed with Hesse's life

## **TOTAL IMMERSION**

**VOLKER MICHELS, HERMANN HESSE ARCHIVIST**

A cosy kitchen somewhere in Offenbach is replete with all those comforting items like coffee, cake, a solid wooden table and a view of the garden. Step into it with Volker Michels for the afternoon, and you leave the modern world behind you and enter the life of another - namely that of Hermann Hesse.

As an editor at Suhrkamp Publishers in Frankfurt, Michels has published numerous books and anthologies and is considered one of the world's leading experts on Hesse as both a man and as an author. Several rooms of Michel's shelf-lined office open to the kitchen, but these are so jam-packed with Hesse's letters, manuscripts, books and watercolours, that there's no room for anyone but Michels himself to sit down, and even then, only just.

So his stories trail him into the kitchen, and together with his wife, the fragments of a great life are passionately reconstructed. Every so often, Michels wanders back into the office and from the maze of overfilled bookshelves, extracts the exact piece of information he is looking for. This time it's a hand-painted letter from Hesse to Michels himself, who as a 14-year old boy had written to ask the great writer's advice. Hesse's words are gentle and caring, with a small watercolour illustrating the text.

And there are thousands of such letters, equally concerned and personal. They have been carefully interpreted (many with the help of Hesse's now 89-year-old

son ), cross-referenced and filed both chronologically and according to subject matter. Many contain Hesse's criticisms of German politics which, Michels feels, have led to an unfairly negative portrayal of Hermann Hesse by the press.

Michel's life's work clearly takes place within the walls of these archives. It is devoted to the man he admires and to rectifying his image. "My problem is just too much information and too little space to store it in" he claims glancing around him. Yet in spite of this complaint, one can't help feeling that there couldn't be a better man to do the job.

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