

The Cat's Table

Michael Ondaatje

Author Background

- Birth—September 12, 1943
- Where—Colombo, Sri Lanka
- Education—B.A. University of Toronto (Canada); M.A., Queens University (Canada)
- Awards—Booker Prize, Books in Canada First Novel Award, Governor General's Award, Kraszna-Krausz Book Award, Giller Prize, Prix Médicis, Kiriya Pacific Rim Book Prize, Irish Times International Fiction Prize.
- Currently—lives in Toronto.

Philip Michael Ondaatje, OC, is a Sri Lankan-born Canadian novelist and poet of Burgher origin (a Eurasian ethnic group historically from Sri Lanka). He is perhaps best known for his Booker Prize-winning novel, *The English Patient*, which was adapted into an Academy-Award-winning film. Michael Ondaatje was born in Colombo, (then Ceylon) in 1943 and moved to England in 1954. He attended Dulwich College (Alma Mater of literary luminaries such as P. G. Wodehouse and Raymond Chandler).

After relocating to Canada in 1962, Ondaatje became a Canadian citizen. He studied for a time at Bishop's College School and Bishop's University in Lennoxville, Quebec, but moved to Toronto, where he received his BA from the University of Toronto and his MA from Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario. He then began teaching at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario. In 1970, he settled in Toronto and, from 1971 to 1990, taught English Literature there at York University and Glendon College.

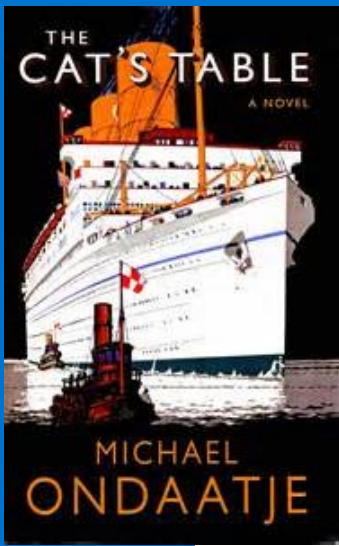
Ondaatje's work includes fiction, autobiography, poetry and film. He has published thirteen books of poetry, and won the Governor General's Award for *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) and *There's a Trick With a Knife I'm Learning to Do: Poems 1973-1978* (1979). *Anil's Ghost* was winner of the 2000 Giller Prize, the Prix Médicis, the Kiriya Pacific Rim Book Prize, the 2001 Irish Times International Fiction Prize and Canada's Governor General's Award. *The English Patient* won of the Booker Prize, the Canada Australia Prize, and the Governor General's Award and later made into a motion picture, winning the Academy Award for Best Picture. The English Patient could be considered a sequel to *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987). *In the Skin of a Lion*, a fictional story about early immigrant settlers in Toronto, won the 1988 City of Toronto Book Award, finalist for the 1987 Ritz Paris Hemingway Award for best novel of the year in English, and winner of the first Canada Reads competition in 2002. *Coming Through Slaughter*, is a fictional story of New Orleans, Louisiana circa 1900 loosely based on the lives of jazz pioneer Buddy Bolden and photographer E. J. Bellocq. It was the winner of the 1976 Books in Canada First Novel Award. *Divisadero* won the 2007 Governor General's Award. *Running in the Family* (1982) is a semi-fictional memoir of his Sri Lankan childhood.

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, *Coming Through Slaughter* and *Divisadero* have been adapted for the stage and produced in numerous theatrical productions across North America and Europe.

Ondaatje's three films include a documentary on fellow poet B.P. Nichol, *Sons of Captain Poetry*, and *The Clinton Special: A Film About The Farm Show*, which chronicles a collaborative theatre experience led in 1971 by Paul Thompson of Theatre Passe Muraille. In 2002, Ondaatje published a non-fiction book, *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film*, which won special recognition at the 2003 American Cinema Editors Awards, as well as a Kraszna-Krausz Book Award for best book of the year on the moving image.

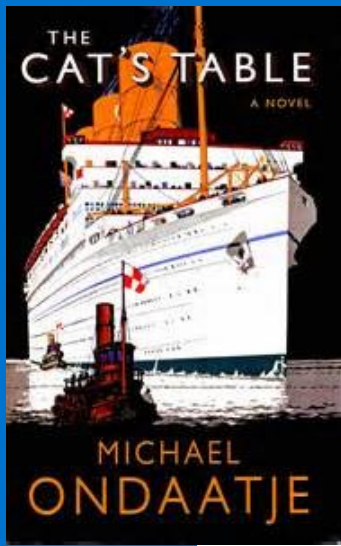
Since the 1960s, Ondaatje has been involved with Toronto's Coach House Books, supporting the independent small press by working as a poetry editor. Ondaatje and his wife, novelist and academic Linda Spalding, co-edit *Brick, A Literary Journal*, with Michael Redhill, Michael Helm, and Esta Spalding. In 1988, Ondaatje was made an Officer of the Order of Canada (OC) and two years later a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Ondaatje has two children and is the brother of philanthropist, businessman and author Christopher Ondaatje. Ondaatje's nephew David is a film director and screenwriter who made the 2009 film *The Lodger*. (From Wikipedia.)



The Cat's Table

Michael Ondaatje



Book Summary

The Cat's Table

Michael Ondaatje, 2011

Knopf Doubleday

288 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780307744418

In the early 1950s, an eleven-year-old boy in Colombo boards a ship bound for England. At mealtimes he is seated at the “cat’s table”—as far from the Captain’s Table as can be—with a ragtag group of “insignificant” adults and two other boys, Cassius and Ramadhin.

As the ship makes its way across the Indian Ocean, through the Suez Canal, into the Mediterranean, the boys tumble from one adventure to another, bursting all over the place like freed mercury. But there are other diversions as well: one man talks with them about jazz and women, another opens the door to the world of literature.

The narrator’s elusive, beautiful cousin Emily becomes his confidante, allowing him to see himself “with a distant eye” for the first time, and to feel the first stirring of desire. Another Cat’s Table denizen, the shadowy Miss Lasqueti, is perhaps more than what she seems. And very late every night, the boys spy on a shackled prisoner, his crime and his fate a galvanizing mystery that will haunt them forever.

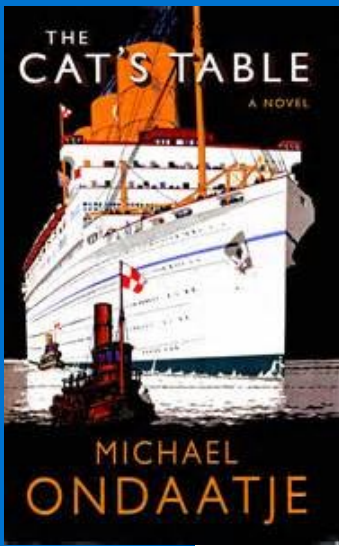
As the narrative moves between the decks and holds of the ship and the boy’s adult years, it tells a spellbinding story—by turns poignant and electrifying—about the magical, often forbidden, discoveries of childhood and a lifelong journey that begins unexpectedly with a spectacular sea voyage.

(From the publisher.)

The Cat's Table

Michael Ondaatje

Discussion Questions



1. The epigraph below is taken from the short story "Youth" by Joseph Conrad. How does this set up the major themes of *The Cat's Table*?

And this is how I see the East.... I see it always from a small boat—not a light, not a stir, not a sound. We conversed in low whispers, as if afraid to wake up the land.... It is all in that moment when I opened my young eyes on it. I came upon it from a tussle with the sea.

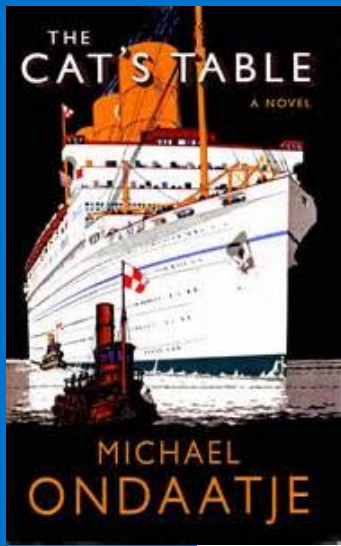
2. How is the voyage itself a metaphor for childhood?
3. Why do you think the opening passages of the book are told in third person?
4. We are 133 pages into the novel before Ondaatje gives us an idea of what year it is. How does he use time—or the sense of timelessness—to propel the story?
5. The anonymity of ocean travel and the sense that aboard ship we know only what others want us to know about them come into play at several points in the novel. What is Ondaatje saying about identity?
6. For several characters—the three boys and Emily among them—the journey represents a loss of innocence. For whom does it have the greatest impact?
7. Discuss the importance of some of the seemingly minor characters at the table: Mr. Mazappa, Mr. Fonseca, Mr. Nevil. What do they contribute to the story?
8. "What is interesting and important happens mostly in secret, in places where there is no power," the narrator realizes (page 75). "Nothing much of lasting value ever happens at the head table, held together by a familiar rhetoric. Those who already have power continue to glide along the familiar rut they have made for themselves." How does this prove true over the course of the novel?
9. How do the narrator's experiences breaking and entering with the Baron change his way of looking at the world?
10. Discuss the three boys' experience during the typhoon. How does it affect their friendship and their attitude toward authority figures?
11. How does the death of Sir Hector factor into the larger story?
12. On page 155, the narrator refers to Ramadhin as "the saint of our clandestine family." What does he mean?
13. When describing the collapse of his marriage, the narrator says,

"Massi said that sometimes, when things overwhelmed me, there was a trick or a habit I had: I turned myself into something that did not belong anywhere. I trusted nothing I was told, not even what I witnessed" (page 203).

What made him behave this way? How did it affect his marriage?

The Cat's Table

Michael Ondaatje



Discussion Questions (continued)

14. On page 208, the narrator tells us about a master class given by the filmmaker Luc Dardenne in which...

he spoke of how viewers of his films should not assume they understood everything about the characters. As members of an audience we should never feel ourselves wiser than they; we do not have more knowledge than the characters have about themselves.

Why did Ondaatje give us this warning, so far into the novel? What is he telling us?

15. What was your reaction to the revelations about Miss Lasqueti?

16. How do you think her letter to Emily might have changed the events on board the Oronsay? Why didn't she send it?

17. Miss Laqueti signs off her letter, "'Despair young and never look back,' an Irishman said. And this is what I did" (page 231). What does she mean?

18. Discuss Emily's relationship with Asuntha. Did she, as the narrator suggests on page 251, see herself in the deaf girl?

19. When Emily says to the narrator, "I don't think you can love me into safety," (page 250), to what is she referring? What is the danger, decades after the voyage?

20. The narrator wishes to protect Emily, Cassius has Asuntha, and Ramadhin has Heather Cave. "What happened that the three of us had a desire to protect others seemingly less secure than ourselves?" he asks on page 262. How would you answer that question? (*Questions issued by publisher.*)

The Cat's Table

Michael Ondaatje

Reviews

[T]his lovely, shimmering book...is a tender meditation on how a child can be "smuggled away accidentally, with no knowledge of the act, into the future"...Mr. Ondaatje succeeds so well in capturing the anticipation and inquisitiveness of boyhood.

New York Times

In Ondaatje's best novel since his Booker Prize winning *The English Patient*, an 11-year-old boy sets off on a voyage from Ceylon to London, where his mother awaits. Though Ondaatje tells us firmly in the "Author's Note" that the story is "pure invention," the young boy is also called Michael, was also born in Ceylon, and also grows up to become a writer. This air of the meta adds a gorgeous, modern twist to the timeless story of boys having an awfully big adventure: young Michael meets two children of a similar age on the Oronsay, Cassius and Ramadhin, and together the threesome gets up to all kinds of mischief on the ship, with, and at the expense of, an eccentric set of passengers. But it is Michael's older, beguiling cousin, Emily, also onboard, who allows him glimpses of the man he is to become. As always, Ondaatje's prose is lyrical, but here it is tempered; the result is clean and full of grace, such as in this description of the children having lashed themselves to the deck to experience a particularly violent storm: "our heads were stretched back to try to see how deep the bow would go on its next descent. Our screams unheard, even to each other, even to ourselves, even if the next day our throats were raw from yelling into that hallway of the sea."

Publishers Weekly

"The journey was to be an innocent story within the small parameter of my youth," says the narrator of his voyage aboard the Oronsay, which carried him through the Indian Ocean to England and his divorced mother. But for 11-year-old Michael, things shift from the moment he is seated at "the cat's table," the least propitious spot in the dining room. Michael enjoys wild escapades with the two other boys at the table, quiet Ramadhin and hell-raiser Cassius, while befriending the mismatched adults at his table as well as his card-playing roommate, who tends the ship's kennels. Others on board include Michael's older cousin Emily, who takes up with the magnetic head of a performing troupe while protecting a deaf and frail-looking girl named Asuntha, and a heavily chained prisoner. The relationship among these four characters precipitates crisis, but we're not led to it systematically; instead, Booker Prize winner Ondaatje (Anil's Ghost) flashes forward to Michael as an adult, showing us how unwittingly we lose our childhood innocence and how that loss comes to affect us much, much later. *Verdict:* Writing in a less lyrically wrought style than usual, Ondaatje turns in a quietly enthralling work. Highly recommended. —Barbara Hoffert

Library Journal

This being a novel by the eminently accomplished Ondaatje, you may be certain that the tale will involve some tragedy, some heartache, and some miscommunication—and, yes, death. It is also beautifully detailed, without a false note: It is easy to imagine, in Ondaatje's hands, being a passenger in the golden age of transoceanic voyaging, amid a sea of cocktail glasses and overflowing ashtrays, if in this case a setting more worthy of John le Carré than Noël Coward. Ondaatje writes with considerable tenderness of children who are all but abandoned, and at his best he lands squarely in Conrad territory, a place that smells of frankincense and in which "clotted clouds speckled the sky" and sandstorms blow out to sea from distant deserts—just the sort of place, in other words, that a reader wants to inhabit. Elegiac, mature and nostalgic—a fine evocation of childhood, and of days irretrievably past.

Kirkus Reviews

