

If only reality wasn't so...real:

Beyond the Adventure in Michael Ondaatje's *The Cat's Table*

By Carrie Malin

Michael was eleven years old when he was sent away from the place he called home for the entirety of his life. For twenty-one days, Michael lives on a ship the size of a “castle...better lit than any town or village” (Ondaatje 4). As the voyage advances away from his home in Colombo toward awaiting England, Michael’s enchanting and terrifying experiences will shape and alter him forever. With friends accompanying him, Michael—or “Mynah” as he is come to be known as on the *Oronsay*—is undoubtedly “smuggled away accidentally, with no knowledge of the act, into the future” (Ondaatje 4). Michael Ondaatje’s latest novel *The Cat's Table* is written from the point of view of adult Michael while he reflects on his twenty-one day voyage in the 1950’s. Pico Iyer observes that *The Cat's Table* “holds you as a magical boy’s adventure might, rich with wonder and mysteries” but also acknowledges how “underneath its carnival surface it’s a plangent inquiry into exile, movement, and broken families” (Praise for *The Cat's Table*). Although the novel is replete with elements of a boy’s magical adventures, it is also a meditation on displacement, memory, identity, and fragmented families. Ondaatje deploys non-linear structural elements, vivid imagery, bruised characters whose lives lack clear resolutions, and the convergence of writing genres to overshadow the bliss of childhood and present a reality more terrifying than it is magical.

Michael Ondaatje captivates readers with his use of spellbinding imagery, which goes beyond the enchanting components of a boy’s adventure and dives into the deeper issues of memory, broken families, identity, and displacement. While uplifting imagery

describes Michael's "most vivid memory of the journey", Michael later fears that his adventures were "all part of a boy's fervent imagination" (Ondaatje 243). Ondaatje uses his imagery in *The Cat's Table* to illuminate the alarming effects a memory can have on an individual when years later, Michael is returned to the frightful night on the *Oronsay* in the 1950's when Cassius and he were voluntarily tied to the ship's deck during a vicious storm. Michael "wake[s] up, believing that he is mid-air, at the height of all the tall pines above the river, watching the approaching lightening, and hearing behind the arrival of its thunder" (Ondaatje 89). Ondaatje's imagery also captures a brief moment when Michael feels content with his life. Michael wakes up next to his cousin Emily as she drinks her coffee and he "hear[s] the quick swallows, [his] ear against her neck. Her other hand was still gripping [his]" (115). Ondaatje juxtaposes and overshadows these comforting images with descriptions of Michael's own identity and placement in Colombo. Michael reflects on his own family's relationship by confessing, "If [he] had to invent one photograph of himself, it would be of [him] alone, waiting for [his friends], looking away from the house to a dusty street" (Ondaatje 27). Characters like Michael, including Ramadhin, Cassius, Emily, and Asuntha, all illustrate the distressing reality of fragmented families through Ondaatje's use of descriptive imagery. J.P. O'Malley remarks how Ondaatje deploys "layers of rich images" to back up "the evocative passages he writes (171). As a result, the rich images incepted into the minds of readers reveal a darker side to adventure, a terribly uncomfortable reality populated with characters whose lives are more shattered than enchanted.

Intertwined with the vivid images in *The Cat's Table* are flashbacks and flash-forwards, lack of scheme in page numbers and chapter titles, and the voice of child

Michael alongside the nearly interrupting voice of adult Michael. This non-linearity in the structure of the novel exemplifies how the characters' memories, family structures, displacement, and identities present a reality more disturbing than wondrous. The complex plot of *The Cat's Table* unravels as the book is shifted backwards from and towards different time zones and continents (O'Malley 172). In a personal interview with Michael Hingston at MacEwan University, Ondaatje comments that he wrote his book not according to chronological structure, but according to "logical structure". As life does not always proceed simply according to the linearity of time, neither should the reflection of a perplexed man looking back on his disconcerted childhood. The "chapters that did not have titles did not need them," comments Ondaatje further along in his interview with Hingston, demonstrating that some things in life are more simply interpreted than others. At times, readers are lost in the untitled chapters and infrequent page numbers of the sixty-two chaptered novel, as Ondaatje articulates the non-linearity of the scattered mind of a man thinking back on his childhood voyage almost fifty years later. Adult Michael in *The Cat's Table* is a man that did not take Miss Lasqueti's advice to "despair young and never look back" (Ondaatje 231) as Michael continuously flashes back—appearing entrapped—to his youth. As the novel progresses, the adult voice begins to interrupt the younger, innocent voice, as readers are shown, through the lens of the older narrator, how Michael's voyage as a child was more damaging than a simple magical adventure would have been. The novel leaves readers with profiles of characters that are "no longer free from the realities of the Earth" (Ondaatje 24) and are trapped, like slaves, in a reality that they did not expect themselves to be living. The non-linearity in the structure of *The Cat's Table* illuminates the alarming, not magical, reality of the various characters

Michael encounters on his voyage while readers reflect on adult Michael's own melancholic life.

In *The Cat's Table*, characters that Michael encounters appear as both enchanting and petrifying. Ondaatje uses bruised characters whose lives are scattered and unpredictable as a representation how the novel is more a meditation on the issues of past reflection, fragmented family connections, unfixed identities, and dislocation rather than a simple adventure. Michael meets an extensive amount of people on the *Oronsay* during his voyage from Colombo to England in the 1950's. On the one hand, some of the characters, such as Mr. Mazappa, Miss Lasqueti, and Mr. Fonseka provide a positive education for Michael, "open[ing] doors for [him] into another world" (Ondaatje 55). On the other hand, Niemeyer (the prisoner), the Captain, Sunil, and even his cousin Emily, result in undesirable experiences for Michael. All of the characters have a commonality, however, in that they are all "mongrels" (Ondaatje 119), who lack a sense of fixed identity and clear conclusions to their lives. The characters, both pleasant and hostile, present a solitary reality for Michael as he reflects on his memories years later and acknowledges the lack of permanency in his friendships. Ondaatje comments on his characters at a Q&A session at MacEwan University: "There's a sadness to it...they are also damaged...[but they are] constantly aware that they are all damaged". For instance, the small damaged family of the prisoner, Niemeyer, and his daughter, Asuntha, jump off the *Oronsay* never to be seen again. Readers speculate if the two survived or if they perished in the unforgiving waters of the ocean. Ondaatje, in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, remarks that Mr. Mazappa was always a "good education" for Michael. Mazappa then leaves the *Oronsay* and suddenly becomes torn away from Michael's life

forever. Michael discloses, “it was painful to realize that nothing was permanent” (Ondaatje 71). Emily is another complex character struggling for identity who “went on to live a life different from the one that was expected” (Ondaatje 46) after she is suspected to have murdered the pleasant Mr. Gunesekara and remains plagued by her experiences. Even his best friends on the voyage, Cassius and Ramadhin, are not part of Michael’s adult life; Cassius parts ways to evolve into an established painter, while sweet-hearted Ramadhin parts suddenly from the world with no closure to his short life. There lurks an overriding sense of loss and dislocation in Michael, Emily, and Ramadhin’s identities. J.P. O’Malley observes, “the notion of an unfixed identity is something that Ondaatje is grappling with in his novels” (172). Ramadhin, in particular, “does not belong in the new country that [he] came to” (Ondaatje 139), while Michael and Emily both confess that they “do not belong anywhere” (Ondaatje 251). The individuals that enter and leave Michael’s life do not leave him with a sense of wholeness, but more a sense of confusion to what his life is all for and who he is as an individual. The characters’ lack of fixedness and closure elucidates the depth of Ondaatje’s novel addressing the petrifying issues lying beneath the surface of a child’s blissful adventure and simplicity.

Ondaatje’s novel is comprised of fiction, poetry, and autobiography assembled into a chef-d’oeuvre meditating on the disturbing matters of scarred individuals overcome by adversity. By blending these writing genres into *The Cat’s Table*, Ondaatje reveals the power and freedom of combining the poetic, realistic, and expressive aspects of writing. Michael Ondaatje in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel elaborates on how he incorporates events of his own past into *The Cat’s Table*. Identical to character Michael,

Ondaatje himself departed from his uncle judge in Colombo to travel to England when he was eleven and frequented the swimming pool during his voyage. Although Ondaatje claims that *The Cat's Table* is a work of fiction, there are several elements of autobiography and poetry in the novel, giving Ondaatje more freedom to address the more profound issues of fragmented beings who come from another world. J.P. O'Malley describes how Ondaatje "has a passion for language and an incredible ability to tease out sentences in a very sensual way" (171). The same can be said for the technique Ondaatje utilizes to blend the genres of fiction, poetry, and autobiography. In an interview with O'Malley Ondaatje affirms that he tries to incorporate elements of poetry into the fictional works he does (173):

*"Broken heart you
timeless wonder.
What a small
place to be" (116).*

The excerpt from Robert Creeley's "Echo" is only an example of the integration of intertextual components in the novel. Ondaatje uses excerpts from Proust, Dante Alighieri on *Purgatorio* and the film *The Four Feathers* to give insight into the novel's deeper, more distressing meanings. Ondaatje confesses in an interview with O'Malley that he himself feels that "there is just as much truth in fiction as there is in nonfiction...there is a truth discovered...in this book". A terrifying truth, a message, is received from Ondaatje, illuminating the alarming reality of fragmented and translocated individuals that overshadows the simplicity of an innocent child's adventure.

While Michael and his friends innocently endure wonderful and terrifying experiences on the *Oronsay*—and adult Michael reflects on his life then and now—the voyage depicts a despondent reality within the fiction of *The Cat's Table*. Michael Ondaatje recounts during his interview with Hingston at MacEwan University that he “didn’t want to go somewhere too dark” with the novel, while indirectly admitting that the novel is more than a magical adventure of a young child. Characters from all walks of life are injected into and ejected from Michael’s existence and readers are able to take a scope and peer into the lives of those with fragmented families, vivid and unreliable memories, and displaced or unfixed feelings of identity. Michael Ondaatje’s use of brilliant imagery, non-linear structural elements, scarred characters whose lives lack clear resolutions, and blending of writing genres allows readers to acknowledge the underlying poignant meanings of Ondaatje’s novel. Although the novel may be interpreted as a tale of thrilling adventure, it is better representative that “beneath its carnival surface” (Iyer), Ondaatje’s *The Cat's Table* provides insight into the profoundly troubling issues that some individuals in fiction, and justifiably reality, may struggle with from childhood until the end of their lives.

Works Cited

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