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## Michael Ondaatje: The Desert of the Soul

### Abstract

Readers who have enjoyed Ondaatje's evocation of damp and hot New Orleans in *Coming through Slaughter*, the lush descriptions of his native Sri Lanka in *Running in the Family* or the depictions of life in cold and windy Toronto in *In the Skin of a Lion*, will be in for a surprise: the real heroine of *The English Patient* is the Libyan Desert.

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## Michael Ondaatje: The Desert of the Soul

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Ondaatje's latest novel shares the time and space setting with Timothy Findley's *Famous Last Words*: a villa in Italy between Victory in Europe and the end of the war. As in Findley's novel, *The English Patient* has several characters who are all maimed by the war in visible and less visible ways: a pre-war love affair mixed with international intrigue, post-war discoveries and confessions. Central is the fate of the English patient himself: he was rescued by the inhabitants of the desert, who handed him over to the British. He ended up in the villa, which was used as a field hospital until the staff and patients moved north, following the front. A young Canadian nurse insisted on staying behind with the badly burned patient. They are joined by an 'uncle' of hers, a thief in Toronto but spy, hero and victim in the war, and by a Sikh sapper, member of an elite bomb-disposal unit who is clearing the mines and booby-traps left by the retreating Germans. Except for the English patient, who cannot stop talking, the three characters are silent at first. Shut off from the rest of the world, they begin to talk, to share their past with each other; secrets are uncovered, wounds healed, until the sapper hears of a bomb that is too large to do anything about.

The language of *The English Patient* is the poetic and metaphoric language that readers have come to expect from Ondaatje: his images are always surprising, they juxtapose realms of experience that do not normally mix. But he is not just a poet and his success is not purely linguistic: some of his most vivid and sensual images are visual, as when Hana is pouring milk into her cup: 'As she finished she moved the lip of the jug over Kip's hand and continued pouring the milk over his brown hand and up his arm to his elbow and then stopped. He didn't move it away'. Ondaatje should start making movies.

The structure of the book is cinematic: brief sketches give us glimpses of the characters' present and past, a stroboscopic effect that is illustrated in

the book itself by the frequent references to lightning. The war hero and thief is forced to steal a roll of film from a woman who took his picture at a party for German officers. When he enters her room in a villa full of German officers, she is making love to a German officer in a completely dark room. Just before he manages to take the film a car beam lights up the room and the woman sees him but does not betray him.

Hana, the Canadian nurse, is not the central character: she seems to function more as a link between the three men than as an independent person. This may have something to do with her job: having been thrown into the reality of war, she was just getting used to having young men die in her arms, when she hears the news of her father's death. In order to escape the reality of this most important death, the English patient has become her sole focus in life: as if her father has been left behind with burn wounds.

The three male characters resemble the protagonists of Ondaatje's other novels: they have one great gift, a gift like Buddy Bolden's in *Coming Through Slaughter*. David Caravaggio is a master-thief: he can get into and out of buildings nobody else would even be able to approach. As a spy he does not need disguises; he manages to get into the villa of the German officers because he does not wear a disguise: he is naked. When he is caught, his thumbs are cut off by a fascist police officer called Ranuccio Tommasoni. Neither the name of the officer, nor David's last name is accidental: as part of sub-text about Italian renaissance painting, Tommasoni was the man whom the seventeenth century painter Caravaggio was accused of having murdered.

One of the discoveries about the English patient is that he is not English; before the war he was a desert explorer who fell in love with the wife of a British colleague, in the war he works for the Germans. He has the gift of words and places: at the villa, he cannot stop talking. Whereas Caravaggio refuses to speak after his capture by the fascists, the English patient tells story after story, but he carefully avoids revealing his true identity until Caravaggio, a fellow-spy, gives him morphine. The English patient is a desert poet: the pages about Southern Libya are among the most beautiful in the book and Ondaatje uses his sources (the archives of the London Royal Geographical Society) in the masterful and sensual way we recognize from *In the Skin of a Lion* and *Running in the Family*. We learn the real story of the English patient in little doses, and gaps remain in the narrative. In a way the patient is doing the same thing as Hana, his nurse, who reads to him from different books she finds in the villa's library, among them an edition of Kipling's *Kim*. Hana reads on, regardless of whether her patient is awake or asleep.

The last hero is the Sikh sapper: like Caravaggio, he is in love with Italian painting, but his passion is bombs, and in some ways half of this book could be called 'There's a Trick with a Bomb I am Learning to Do'. Kip is an outsider in Europe, but he is also a professional survivor. The

descriptions of his training in England and of his struggle with some particularly clever booby traps make the sapper another of Ondaatje's artist figures. His final breakdown, when the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki are announced, is due to the realization that he is and remains a foreigner, even among his friends. When he blames the English patient for Nagasaki he does not realize that in reality he's not British, but he knows, and so does Caravaggio, that even that does not make a difference.

Ondaatje has managed to evoke an era and to describe a series of significant moments in the lives of characters who are emblems of dreams and perspectives. The result, *The English Patient*, deserves more than half a Booker prize.