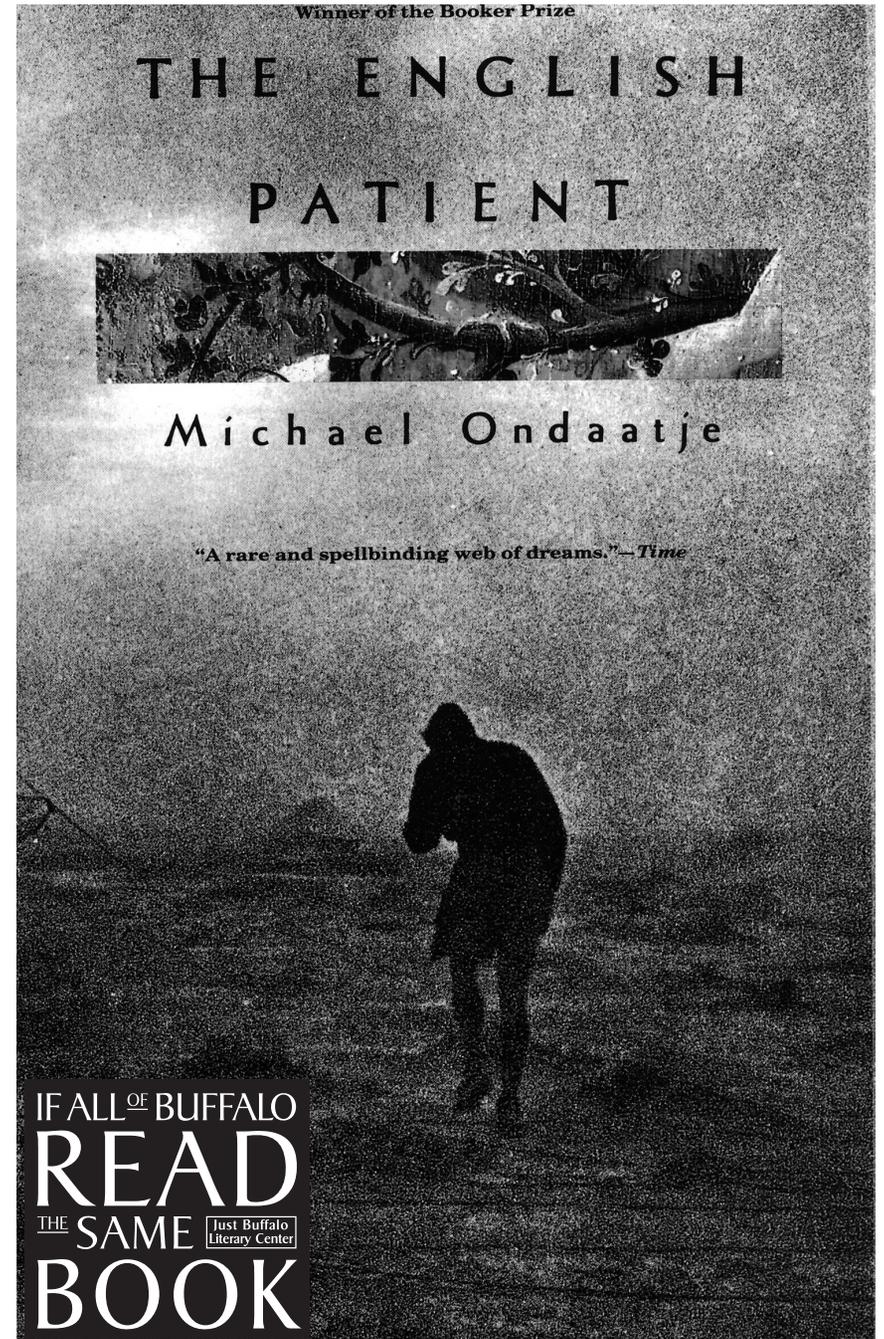


Just Buffalo
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2015



READER'S GUIDE
THE ENGLISH
PATIENT
MICHAEL ONDAATJE



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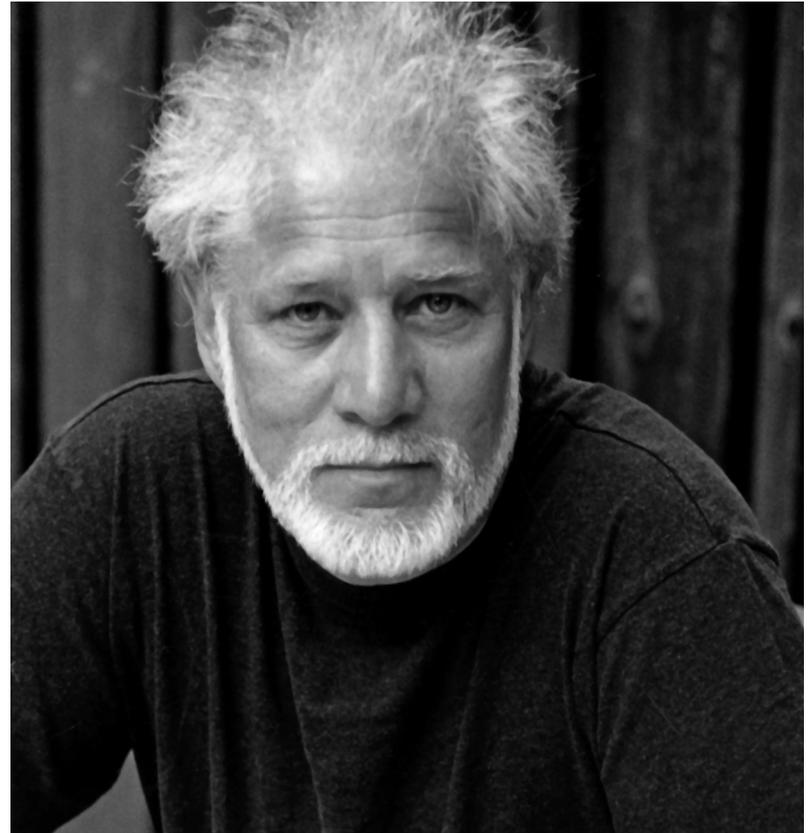
Michael Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) in 1943. He grew up in London and moved permanently to Canada when he was 18. For years when he was young, Michael Ondaatje thought literature was punishment—the result of having to write out lines at school as a penalty for throwing coconuts off a roof. He attributes his writing career to his adopted country: “If I lived in Sri Lanka or in England, I think I probably would not have been a writer,” he has said.

His father was from a wealthy family and owned a tea estate, joined the Ceylon Light Infantry, and died a chicken farmer, driven to depression by alcoholism. His mother was also from a prominent family, had a dramatic flair, and “was greatly influenced by the rumors of the dancing of Isadora Duncan.” After her divorce from Ondaatje’s father, she became a housekeeper at hotels and moved to England.

Ondaatje traces his Dutch, Indian, and Sinhalese lineage in Sri Lanka to an ancestor who arrived in 1600, “a doctor who cured the residing governor’s daughter with a strange herb and was rewarded with land, a foreign wife, and a new name which was a Dutch spelling of his own, Ondaatje.”

This mixed alliance of identities recurs in his novels, which often feature fictions built from real people and real places. “For me, the books grow out of documents,” he has said. “They need to have their feet on the earth in some way. They begin with a reality of a place or a time or a situation, and then gradually become fiction.”

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid (1970), for example, is a collage of prose, poetry, interviews and pictures that, in its unusual construction, depicts the reality of a “wild” American West. *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976) is framed around the historical figure of the cornet player, Buddy Bolden, who spent his last two decades in an asylum. *In The Skin of a Lion* (1987) recreates a real engineering feat—the construction of the Toronto waterworks—by focusing on the labor provided by migrants from elsewhere in Canada and the world. *The English Patient* (1992) weaves a real character, Count Laszlo Almásy, a real Tuscan villa, and a real war into a fiction about people unmoored from conventional identities.



Ondaatje has said that the novel articulates “all people born in one place who live in another place [and who] have lost their source.”

Ondaatje’s work ranges across genres and disciplines, from fiction and poetry to film and criticism, and all of it has an element of real or imagined history. It is a trend he has continued with his most recent book, *Divisadero* (2007), in which his protagonist, Anna, says at one point, “Those who have an orphan’s sense of history love history.”

“I’ve always been drawn to what’s unofficial,” Ondaatje has said, “what’s not part of the history books.”

HERODOTUS

For the English patient, history looks much like his copy of Herodotus' *Histories*—twice as large as the tidy original version because it is stuffed full of the scraps, stories, pictures and revisions that represent the accumulation of memory and experience.

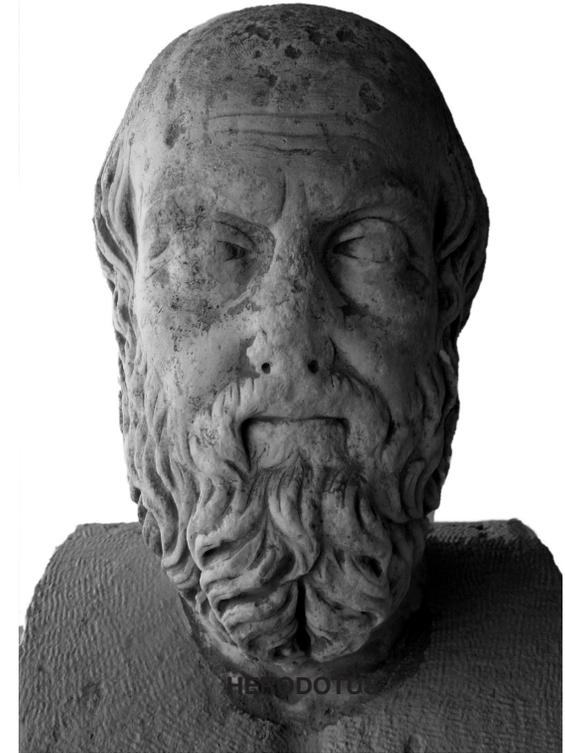
Herodotus' text, written around 430 B.C., serves as a guide for Almasy in the desert and a totem throughout his convalescence. It is also a model for Almasy's—and Ondaatje's—storytelling: Herodotus is known as both the father of history and the father of lies. His record chiefly recounts the imperial expansion of the Persians, but it also includes long digressions, anthropological notes, myths and rumors, all interwoven and recorded as fact.

Herodotus was born in Halicarnassus, a town in the Greek empire which is now Bodrum in southwestern Turkey. From his reporting in *The Histories*, he appears to have traveled throughout much of the ancient world known to the Greeks, from Babylon to the Crimea, to Egypt, Sicily and throughout North Africa.

The Histories is valuable to the English patient exactly for the emphasis it places on all manner of seemingly impossible things. Almasy says he sees Herodotus “as one of those spare men of the desert who travel from oasis to oasis, trading legends as if it is the exchange of seeds, consuming everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage. ‘This history of mine,’ Herodotus says, ‘has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument.’”

The English patient recites his memories with the same image-rich expression Herodotus uses to recount stories. In Book Four of the six-book *Histories*, Herodotus tells of the Atarantians, who live around a “salt-hill and a spring of water” in the Libyan Desert:

“The title of Atarantians is borne by the whole race in common; but the men have no particular names of their own. The Atarantians, when the sun rises high in the heaven, curse him, and load him with reproaches, because (they say) he burns and wastes both their country and themselves.”



Like the Atarantians, Almasy succeeds in “erasing his name and the place he had come from” over his years in the desert. Identity, for Herodotus as well as for Ondaatje's characters, is a product of geography, traits, and stories people invent for themselves or are assigned by others.

Herodotus' book tells a cautionary tale about the fall of empires—one that is equally resonant with Almasy and his desert explorers, as it is with Kip, Hana and Caravaggio in the World War II-era villa. Almasy and his desert explorers “knew power and great finance were temporary things. We all slept with Herodotus. ‘For those cities that were great in earlier times must have now become small, and those that were great in my time were small in the time before... Man's good fortune never abides in the same place.’”

This idea is central to Ondaatje in the creation of his book. He has said, that “once I got into the desert stuff, and through that to Herodotus, I began picking up a sense of the layers of history. I was going back deeper and deeper in time.”

QUESTIONS

1. Michael Ondaatje has said that writing, for him, is “a bit like doing collages.” How is *The English Patient* like a collage in both story and structure?
2. One critic has said that difficult and recondite work—like theft or diffusing bombs or mapping the desert—always stands in for the art of writing in Ondaatje’s books. Where in *The English Patient* is work compared explicitly or implicitly to writing? What does that comparison say about the characters or the world they live in?
3. Describe the Villa San Girolamo. How has the structure been changed by war and weather? How is it decorated? How do the characters use the rooms? How does the building reflect each character?
4. What books do the characters read in the novel? What is special about the English patient’s volume of Herodotus’ *Historie*? Who, or what, is likened to a book? Why?
5. Each character in the novel has a literal or figurative scar. What is each character’s scar and how does it define him or her? How do they work to heal their scars?
6. What kind of art does Kip admire? What kind of art does the English patient admire? How do these preferences define the characters?
7. The English patient says he was “taught by the desert” to “erase nations” and “erase the family name.” Where else is he defined as nameless and nationless in the novel? Does any character in *The English Patient* have a fixed identity? Why or why not?
8. Discuss the role of parents or mentors in the novel. What are some lessons of those relationships for Kip and Hana?

9. How do bombs—either the ones Kip diffuses or the atomic bomb—communicate messages across space and time in the novel? What are some of the messages they send?
10. What is the importance of names in the novel? When do they indicate power, foreignness, adaptation or loss? When are they shunned and when are they embraced?
11. Is Kip and Hana’s love affair a failure? Why does it end?
12. *The English Patient* is set in the dwindling days of the Second World War, but the characters’ allegiances are more complicated than a simple dedication to their home country or the country they are fighting for. What country, or person, is each character devoted to? Do those allegiances shift? What do those allegiances, either steady or shifting, imply about the experience of war?



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