

Running in the family

Literature



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"Running in the Family," Michael Ondaatje's quest to discover his family's roots in his native Sri Lanka is a rich mix of documentary, personal reminiscence, poetic bursts and hilarious comedy, arranged more psychologically than chronologically. The basic plot of this story revolves around Michael Ondaatje who is a Sri Lankan emigre to Canada. Now, after years of living abroad, he returns to his native island of Ceylon to explore the history of his parents and their family. The Ondaatjes are a notable family in Sri Lankan society, and the author's father was drunken personality lighting up the landscape of his generation.

His mother is less morose, more talkative and vivacious, but is eventually wounded by his father's drunken escapades. She moves on, leaving his father to find a new life, without who was probably his one big romance. "He had rented extravagant rooms in Cambridge and simply eliminated the academic element of university, making close friends among the students, reading contemporary novels, boating and making a name for himself as someone who knew exactly what was valuable and interesting in the Cambridge circles of the 1920s." So begins Michael Ondaatje's novel of his family history.

This novel uses poetry, prose and the "reported speech" of others to tell its story, but this one is more stitched together, perhaps because the author himself is more obviously present. Ondaatje's prose is luminous and his poetry makes Sri Lanka a tangible presence. The author generously included several of his poems in the middle of the book. "The Cinnamon Peeler", with its strong sensuality, serves as a fitting metaphor for the stories about romantic interludes in the author's family. Ondaatje also masterfully uses the <https://assignbuster.com/running-in-the-family/>

oral histories he gleans from aunts, uncles, siblings and cousins to weave a story that he tells with wit and compassion.

It is a beautifully written history/memoir, with a tone of magical realism about it. There is much here that one can learn about Sri Lanka, its history, its tropical culture and its idiosyncratic moods. And there is the evocative tale of Ondaatje's father, mother, grandmother, and, to a lesser extent, others in the family. While the story is a more or less historical one, Ondaatje's writing is poetic. The story seems fictional and fantastic, and one might come away wanting to be able to write so about one's own family. The third section, " Don't Talk to Me about Matisse" is a literary treasure!

Ondaatje weaves a travel journal with childhood memories. Ondaatje's journey through Sri Lanka and memory land is depicted with great passion and reflection: " I witnessed everything. One morning I would wake and just smell things for the whole day, it was so rich I had to select senses. And still everything moved slowly with the assured fateful speed of a coconut falling on someone's head, like the Jaffna train, like the fan at low speed, like the necessary sleep in the afternoon with dreams blinded by toddy. " Another interesting aspect of this book is the way the author dwells on the salient qualities of his relatives and homeland.

If this book were a painting, it would be a mostly green wash of color with bright, blood red splashes. The red splashes could represent the tragedy so inherent in Ondaatje's family history. Alcoholism and mental illness rule the house in this family. Yet the color and beauty of his writing doesn't end there

are there are also many humorous moments, which are weaved into the tale, and the author, Michael Ondaatje delivers them with great bravado.

The Lines, " Lalla's great claim to fame was that she was the first woman in Ceylon to have a mastectomy. .. She kept losing the contraption to servants who were mystified by it as well as to the dog, Chindit, who would be found gnawing at the foam as if it were tender chicken," make for some of the hilarious memories that give the reader a reprieve from the underlying tragedy like a much-needed downpour during a drought. In the final sections, as Ondaatje slowly reveals the many layers of this underlying tragedy by recounting the tale of his father's sad, but remarkable life, the readers will bear witness to the mastery of Ondaatje.

One chapter, called " Dialogues" merely consists of bits and pieces of conversations about his father. Whether Ondaatje imagined these conversations or actually heard them retold is not important. They give homage to his father in a unique and poignant way. This warm, sometimes funny, sometimes sad, book is part travelogue and part memoir. It tells the sweet and painful story of Michael Ondaatje's journey during the late 1970s to his native Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon).

The book is not only the nostalgic portrait of a dissipated and deservedly passing age and of the concomitant decay of a once-privileged family, but also the portrait of a teeming country gradually torn apart by class and ethnic divisions and sundered by the 1971 uprising that still lingers in the continuing civil war championed by the rebel " Tamil Tigers. " More than merely a stylistic reflection of Ondaatje's novels, it is a son's search for his

father through his own recollection and scant remains, with the author's acknowledgement that, in the end, the man he seeks to know is intriguingly ambivalent and finally unknowable.

In his attempt to capture his islands past and his own, Ondaatje's own tendencies, his superstitions and his reticence to disturb the ghosts of ancestry, his socialism and his feelings about race emerge. In fact, though, when we complete with him his conflated personal journeys of 1978 and 1980, we as far from know him as he is from knowing his father. We know of him and them as much as the record will permit and no more.