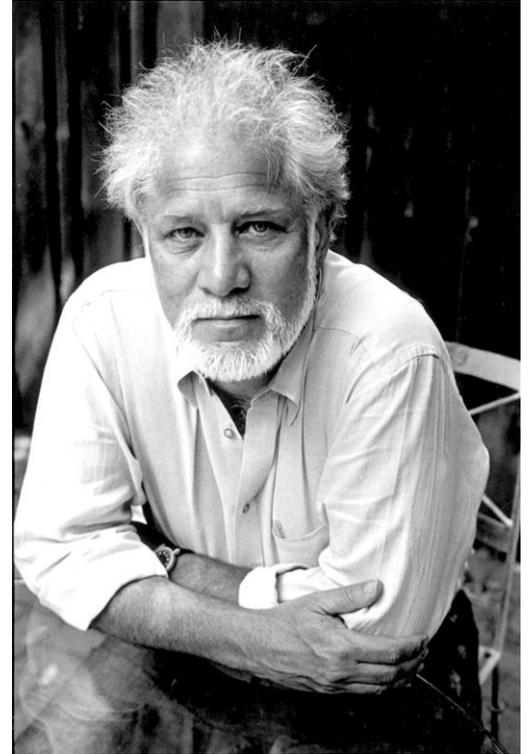


# Michael Ondaatje (born 1943)

## Gale Database: Contemporary Literary Criticism

### Introduction

Ondaatje emerged during the 1960s as one of Canada's most respected young poets. In his verse, Ondaatje examines the dichotomy between rational intellect and disorderly reality, suggesting that the poet's efforts to render personal experience must necessarily result in distortion. Ondaatje's style is characterized by humor, flamboyant imagery, extravagant metaphors, and sudden shifts in tone. Sam Solecki observed that in Ondaatje's poetry, "the fundamental or essential nature of experience is consistently being described and examined. The entire thrust of his vision is directed at compelling the reader to re-perceive reality, to assume an unusual angle of vision from which reality appears surreal, absurd, inchoate, dynamic, and, most importantly, ambiguous."



### Biographical Information

Ondaatje was born September 12, 1943, in Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). He moved to London, England with his mother, brother, and sister. Dissatisfied with the English school system, he immigrated to Canada when he was nineteen. While at Bishop's University, Ondaatje focused on literature and began to write. After completing his B. A. at the University of Toronto in 1965, Ondaatje went on to complete his M. A. at Queen's University in 1967. Shortly thereafter, his first book of poems, *The Dainty Monster* (1967), was published. In 1964, Ondaatje married Kim Jones, with whom he has had two children. Ondaatje is a member of the Department of English, Glendon College, York University, in Toronto, Canada.

### Major Works

Ondaatje's early poetry collections, *The Dainty Monsters* and *The Man with Seven Toes* (1969), display a preoccupation with domestic and personal conflicts, mythical and historical figures, the often violent relationship between humans and animals, and destructive impulses among artists. *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems* (1970), which won a Governor General's Award, is considered Ondaatje's most important volume of poetry. Combining prose, verse, photographs, and drawings, Ondaatje presents a fictionalized biography that probes the psyche of the notorious American outlaw William Bonney. According to Stephen Scobie, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* "is an attempt to comprehend the legend of Billy the Kid, to see him as one of the exemplary figures of modern consciousness, outlaw as artist, artist as outlaw." Ondaatje's next collection, *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do: Poems, 1963-1978* (1979), also won a Governor General's Award; it

contains selections from *The Dainty Monsters* and *Rat Jelly* (1973) as well as nineteen new poems centering on such topics as friendship and family history. *Secular Love* (1984) comprises four unified sequences of confessional lyrics exploring paternal love, Ondaatje's traumatic divorce, and the redemptive qualities of love. In these poems, Ondaatje is both a character and a creative observer molding his experiences into art. John Cook stated: "Throughout [*Secular Love*] the poetry finds energy in the dynamic interplay between the cunning duplicity of the artist and the heartfelt truth of a suffering man."

Ondaatje has also received critical acclaim as a novelist. His first novel, *Coming through Slaughter* (1976) again reflects his fascination with extraordinary personality types. In this work, Ondaatje employs what William Logan has termed "creative mythologizing" to depict the tormented life of legendary jazz pioneer Buddy Bolden. While *Coming through Slaughter* resembles *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* in its blend of poetry and various prose forms, Ondaatje also makes use of such quasi-factual journalistic material as interviews and documented reports. *Running in the Family* (1982) is set in Ondaatje's birthplace of Sri Lanka, then Ceylon, and integrates a travelogue with memoirs of his youth. In this novel, Ondaatje attempts an imaginative reconstruction of his family history, with particular emphasis on the eccentric personalities of his maternal grandmother and his father. While some critics considered the prose of *Running in the Family* overly poetic and occasionally obscure, others praised the novel's innovative structure and Ondaatje's descriptive power. *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) chronicles the oppressed lives of immigrant workers who helped expand and modernize the city of Toronto, Ontario, early in the twentieth century. Employing a nonlinear plot and a surreal, collage-like narrative, Ondaatje traces the growing social awareness of his protagonist, artist Patrick Lewis. Michael Hulse commented that *In the Skin of a Lion* "does for Toronto what Joyce did for Dublin or Doblin for Berlin."

*The English Patient* (1992) received both the Governor General's Award and the Booker Prize for fiction. In this novel, Ondaatje delineates the relationships that develop between three men and a woman encamped in a ruined Italian villa during the final months of World War II. As the work progresses, the relationships between the characters are shaped by the secrets that they divulge and the stress of their situation. Ondaatje has also written a well-regarded critical study, *Leonard Cohen* (1970). In addition, he has adapted three of his works for the stage and has directed several films.

## **Critical Reception**

Though first recognized for his talent as a poet, Ondaatje has drawn praise across a number of genres. Critics note the continual changes in his poetry, evolving as the author experiments with the shape and sound of words. His use of humor, flamboyant imagery, extravagant metaphors, and sudden shifts in tone prompted Sam Solecki to observe that "the fundamental or essential nature of experience in consistently being described and examined [in Ondaatje's poetry]. The entire thrust of his vision is directed at compelling the reader to re-perceive reality...." Ondaatje's novels have similar praise, most notably *The English Patient* (1992). Although some critics have charged that Ondaatje occasionally sacrifices accurate and concise diction to create poetic imagery, others have praised Ondaatje's use of figurative language in *The English Patient*.

## **INTRODUCTION TO *The English Patient***

*The English Patient* delineates the relationships that develop between four individuals during the last months of World War II. Set in the ruins of a convent in Italy, Ondaatje's novel begins with Hana, a Canadian nurse, caring for a severely burned and unidentified English soldier after whom the novel is named. Early in the work, David Caravaggio, a Canadian spy and thief whom Hana knew when she was growing up, stumbles across the make-shift hospital. While being treated for wounds he received after being caught by the Germans, Caravaggio protects Hana and aids her in her duties. The fourth character, Kirpal "Kip" Singh, is an Indian Sikh who has been recruited by the English army to defuse the bombs German troops left in the area. As the novel progresses, the relationships between the characters are shaped by the secrets that are divulged and the stress of their situation. Critics note that some of the most powerful passages in the novel are those in which the characters' histories are revealed: the English patient recounts memories of his lover and her death, Kip relates his experiences as a third-world citizen and his exploits as a demolitions expert in London during the blitzkrieg, and Caravaggio discovers that the burn victim is really a Hungarian count and German spy. Incorporating figurative language and poetic imagery into *The English Patient*, Ondaatje has been praised for dramatizing the characters' ability to find love in the midst of tragedy, the dangers of deception, and the strength of the human spirit.