

Robert Lecker (ed.), *Do You Want to Be Happy and Write? – Critical Essays on Michael Ondaatje*, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023, pp. 488.

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Phillip Michael Ondaatje is a Sri Lankan-born Canadian author whose literary career started in 1967 when he published a book of poetry, *The Dainty Monsters*. Even though Ondaatje established himself as a poet, his prose ensured that literary critics recognized his international stature when Ondaatje joined a group of select Canadian authors who managed to publish not only in Canada, but also in the US and the UK. Several years ago, we could have discussed the scarcity of literary criticism of Ondaatje, and today, he is undeniably one of the most prominent and internationally recognized Canadian writers. However, amidst a plethora of scholarly works on Ondaatje that we have today, Robert Lecker's *Do You Want to Be Happy and Write?: Critical Essays on Michael Ondaatje* has emerged as one of the latest and most extensive collection of essays on Ondaatje's works.

The collection exhaustively examines Ondaatje's works through five chapters: "Poetry", "Visuality", "Intermediality", "Novels and Narratives" and "Endings", which open after the author's thorough introduction, with a principal focus on underlining the importance of Ondaatje's international reputation.

The first chapter "Poetry" brings into focus Ondaatje's poetry from *The Dainty Monsters* (1967) to *Handwriting* (1998). The chapter contains five essays highlighting the development of Ondaatje's career in an undoubtedly transnational era. The first three essays gather around various poetic works, while the last two essays narrow their focus to specific poems, "The Cinnamon Peeler" and "The Tin Roof". In the essay "dancing new / on this terrific ancient earth': Michael Ondaatje's Astonishing Poetics of Renewal", Di Brandt explores *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do* and *Secular Love*, focusing on how Ondaatje masterfully uses a well-known North American frontier legend to allude to the man's animalistic nature and to make intimate connections to his family's history of madness. The second essay, Karen Solie's "Restlessness, Vertigo: Michael Ondaatje's Poetry" discusses *Secular Love* and *Handwriting* as the author tries to chart "a vertiginous territory" (Lecker 2023: 95) in Ondaatje's poetry. Ondaatje's restlessness is again elucidated in Antje M. Rauwerda's essay "Strange Familiars: Dogs in Michael Ondaatje's Early Poetry". Rauwerda systematically explores Ondaatje's continuing poetic preoccupation with wild and domestic animals in the Ondaatje's poetry and rightly points out the symbolic meaning of dogs and analyzes their representation in Ondaatje's early poetry. "The Scent of Paradise: Michael Ondaatje's "The Cinnamon Peeler"" by Ulla Ratheiser elaborates on the connection between the delicate and exotic cinnamon scent and the world Ondaatje creates in this love poem.

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Ratheiser offers a fresh perspective of the multi-layered reading of *The Cinnamon Peeler*, suggesting close analogies between biblical texts and the poem in which Ondaatje rekindles treasured memories of Sri Lanka. Again, the importance of understanding Ondaatje's personal life is underlined in Ian Rae's "The Pivot: Michael Ondaatje's *Tin Roof*". Rae's systematic and in-depth analysis of the poem represents an important turning point in interpreting "intertextual and cross-cultural complexities in Ondaatje's poetics" (Lecker 2023: 149).

The second chapter, entitled "Visuality", contains three essays gathering around visual elements in Ondaatje's works and the careful constructive process behind his poems and novels. This chapter presents Ondaatje in a new light and provides different perspectives for interpreting his entire oeuvre. Allan Hepburn in "'The illusion of the unexceptional': Michael Ondaatje as Editor" sheds light on Ondaatje's editorial experience and its profound influence on his novels. Hepburn underlines that Ondaatje applies the structure of a film to a novel and shows a comprehensive analysis of the analogous techniques in film and text editing that Ondaatje successfully employs in *The English Patient*, *In the Skin of a Lion*, *Divisadero*, *The Cat's Table* and *Anil's Ghost*. Similarly, Bart Testa in "Michael Ondaatje in the Cinema" puts forward a "seductive hypothesis" (Lecker 2023: 175) that filmmaking helped Ondaatje's writing and focuses on the analysis of *The English Patient* and Ondaatje's collaboration with Anthony Minghella. "'Landscapes and stories flung into branches': The Photography of Effect and Transnational Mobility in the Writings of Michael Ondaatje" by Lorraine York explores Ondaatje's passionate engagement with film and photography. The essay considers the considerable potential that the use of photography unlocks in Ondaatje's works and highlights kinetic, affective and transnational notions of photography.

The third chapter, titled "Intermediality", contains two essays whose primary focus is on visual elements in Ondaatje's novels by exploring the interaction between music, painting and photography. "Creases and Broken Glass: Michael Ondaatje's Narrative and Intermediality" explores the concept of intermediality through careful analyses of intermedial qualities and potentials in Ondaatje's four novels: *Coming Through Slaughter*, *In the Skin of a Lion*, *The English Patient* and *Divisadero*. Serena Fusco places specific emphasis on "how literary storytelling is filtered by channels provided by non-verbal media" (Lecker 2023: 211). Birgit Neumann's "Intermedial Aesthetics in *The Cat's Table*" reveals Ondaatje's intermedial references to visual media to "invite readers to see the world from different, multiplied, and multiplying angles" (Lecker 2023: 228). Neumann's approach takes into account multi-faceted intermedial aesthetics in *The Cat's Table* which reflects the novel's openness rather than presenting a self-enclosed perspective.

The fourth chapter, "Novels and Narratives", consists of six essays which explore liminal forms in Ondaatje's fiction. Winfried Siemerling, in "Fascination and Liminality in Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*", discusses Ondaatje's experimentation with prose and verse, "the liminal area" (Lecker 2023: 247) where the self and the historical other meet. The second essay, Jody Mason's "'The animal out of the desert': The Nomadic Metaphysics of Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*" provides a careful analysis of "nomadic metaphysics" (Lecker 2023: 263) which dismisses fixed identities and draws attention to different patterns of mobility in Ondaatje's novel. Kai-su Wu's essay "Love, War and the Other in Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and

Michael Ondaatje: *The English Patient* as the Dialogic Field" is an insightful and unique observation of the concept of otherness represented in Ondaatje's novel that derives from the philosophical thinking of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. In the fourth essay, "Reconfiguring an East-West Dialectic of Trauma in Michael Ondaatje's War Novels: *The English Patient*, *Anil's Ghost*, and *Warlight*", Justin M. Hewitson offers an East-West dialectical reading of Ondaatje's three novels and outlines the view that Ondaatje aims to show how we confront suffering by using Western reason and Indian intuition. Martin Loschnigg's "Wartime Ghost: War and the Liminal in *The English Patient*, *Anil's Ghost*, and *Warlight*" unveils the transformative power of the Second World War and the civil war in Sri Lanka. Loschnigg's essay presents a comparative view of the three novels, outlining that "spectrality is a central motif" (Lecker 2023: 325) as these novels blur the line between the past and the present.

The last chapter "Endings" contains five essays primarily dealing with Ondaatje's fiction from different perspectives. Mrinalini Chakravorty's essay "The dead that Haunt *Anil's Ghost*: Subaltern Difference and Postcolonial Melancholia" examines different forms of violence in postcolonial Sri Lanka and "dubious stereotypes about insurmountable civilizational differences" (Lecker 2023: 336). The second essay, Pico Iyer's "Casualties of Love" explores, highlights Ondaatje's outstanding ability to "turn the fragments into a living whole" (Lecker 2023: 355) and explores how fugitives attempt to trace forgotten history from marginal spaces. The third essay, "Ondaatje's Late Style", takes on a different path as Moez Surani discusses and identifies characteristics of Ondaatje's fiction by delineating it into early, middle and late style and overviews and identifies characteristics of each period. "'That eventual stranger': Toward Unrecognizability in *Warlight*" offers a careful analysis of Ondaatje's novel, which the author of the essay, Joel Deshayé, characterizes as detective fiction. Deshayé explores the theme of the difficulty, or the concept of "*schwer*" (Lecker 2023: 379), and how it reflects on Ondaatje's readers and characters. Elias Schwieler's essay "Teaching Ondaatje: Learning to Live" emphasizes the challenges of teaching literature and offers a unique pedagogical perspective on Ondaatje's works as it is based on the author's personal experience.

In comparison to other studies on Ondaatje (such as Sam Solecki's *Spider Blues*, Douglas Barbour's *Michael Ondaatje*, Lee Spinks' *Michael Ondaatje*) Robert Lecker offers fresh and detailed insights into Ondaatje's works along with a thorough critical assessment of Ondaatje's lucrative and varied career. The structure of *Do You Want to Be Happy and Write?* is coherent and elaborate with well-chosen and wide-ranging topics that illuminate postmodernist, postcolonial, diasporic and transnational aspects of Ondaatje's writing. The abovementioned five chapters address Ondaatje's interest in representing the complexity of reconstructing one's identity, the importance of knowing and remembering history, the impact of trauma on the human body and the power of photography and film. The essays gather international writers and critics who identify different themes that prevail in Ondaatje's work and elucidate the restlessness of his poetry and prose. Therefore, this collection is a unique scholarly tribute that presents a systematic analysis of Ondaatje's trajectory and develops a comprehensive approach to Ondaatje, with critical literature for a more in-depth examination of Ondaatje's poetry and prose.