
In our curriculum, this memoir is the first of three texts in Part 2, Detailed Study, texts for the semester-ending IB assessment, the Individual Oral Commentary (IOC); the other two texts for first semester are the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop and Shakespeare’s Hamlet.

“No story is ever told just once.” (26)

“We own the country we grow up in, or we are aliens and invaders.” (81)

“A literary work is a communal act.” (205)

“And if those listed above disapprove of the fictional air I apologize and can only say that in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts.” (206)

THE AUTHOR
Born in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1943, Michael Ondaatje moved to England with his mother in 1954. In 1962 Ondaatje moved to Canada and became a Canadian citizen. A novelist, poet, and filmmaker, Ondaatje has won numerous prizes for his work, including the 1982 Man-Booker Prize for his novel The English Patient, a novel that was later adapted into an Academy Award-winning film. A decade earlier, Ondaatje published Running in the Family, a “fictional memoir” based on his travels to his native country in 1978 and 1980. Ondaatje lives in Toronto with his wife, who is also an author.

OVERVIEW
At the end of the novel, in the acknowledgements of Running in the Family, Ondaatje writes that his book “is not a history but a portrait or ‘gesture.’ And if those listed above disapprove of the fictional air I apologize and can only say that in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts” (206). In interviews, Ondaatje is quick to assert that this is not nonfiction, but a fictionalized memoir. On the surface, the work appears to be a travel memoir of what Ondaatje uncovers about his family when he returns to his native land, Sri Lanka. The book centers on Ondaatje’s quest to understand his father, Mervyn Ondaatje, but in doing so, he also explores his ancestors and the country itself:

“[F]act and fiction blur to create a dazzlingly original portrait of a lost time and place...Almost twenty-five years [after leaving Ceylon], he returned to sort out the recollected fragments of experience, legend, and family scandal, and to reconstruct the carefree, doomed life his parents and grandparents had led in a place where couples danced the tango in the moonlight, where drink, gambling, and romance were the main occupations of the upper class. Rich with eccentric characters and captivating stories, and set against the exotic landscape of a colonial empire in decline, Running in the Family is Ondaatje’s unforgettable journey through memory and imagination to reclaim his past” (note by first-edition publisher, McClelland & Stewart).

SETTING & HISTORY
Running in the Family takes place in the late 1970s, in Sri Lanka (called Ceylon until 1972).

In Ondaatje’s novel, the past is present. There are several points in the novel when he emphasizes just how long humans have inhabited Sri Lanka. The earliest archaeological evidence of human colonization in Sri Lanka appears about 34,000 years ago, identified as Mesolithic hunter-gatherers who lived in caves. Ondaatje mentions cave paintings from a later era, in Sigiriya 900-700 BCE.

Sri Lanka was colonized at various times by the Portuguese (16th century), Dutch (17th-18th centuries), and British (19th-mid-20th centuries). It is a culturally rich country, with a number of different ethnic groups:

• **Sinhalese**—The largest group, about 75% of the population; primarily Buddhists, although many converted to Catholicism as a result of colonialism; historically

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1 Adapted from that of Ms. Alissa Mears, 2013.
from northern India; favored by colonialists and therefore granted more social prestige particularly the Sinhalese who descended from the former Kingdom of Kandy.

- **Tamil**—About 20% of the population; primarily Hindu, with a proud literary tradition; historically from southern India’s state of Tamil Nadu; during nineteenth century, the British facilitated the immigration of Indian Tamils to work on the tea and rubber plantations.

- **Moors**—Less than 10% of the population; Muslim; descended from Arab coastal traders; can be divided into Sri Lankan Moors, the Indian Moors, and the Malays, each with its own history and traditions, and each arriving at various times beginning in the eighth century; when persecuted by Portuguese colonizers many moved into the Central Highlands; primarily Tamil-speaking.

- **Burghers**—During the Dutch and Portuguese colonial periods, name for European nationals who lived in Sri Lanka; now essentially means any Sri Lankan who can trace family heritage back to Europe; both culturally and linguistically they distanced themselves from native Sri Lankans; dominated the best positions in education and administration during colonial period; dominantly Christian; after Independence in 1948, lost their influence, and are now less than 1% of the population.

By 1815, Britain had total control of the country. Several rebellions arose during the 19th century while under the colonial power, and following one rebellion, Sinhalese farmers in the central region of Kandy were stripped of all their land. The British took control of coffee, tea, and rubber plantations; Ceylon tea had become central to the British market. (In the novel Ondaatje refers to such tea plantations, owned by white Englishmen.) In order to run the plantations, the owners imported Tamil workers as indentured laborers from south India, who worked in slave-like conditions. The British colonialists favored the semi-European Burghers, certain high-caste Sinhalese, and the Tamils concentrated to the north of the country, which led to divisions that persist today.

Other history connected to the novel is that Sri Lanka acted as a British military base in fighting the Japanese during World War II; yet many Sri Lankans opposed the war, particularly Marxist organizations and others, who were arrested by colonial authorities. In 1942, the war came even closer to Sri Lanka as Japan bombed Colombo. Three years after the end of WWII, Sri Lanka gained independence, in 1948 (however, the country remained a Dominion of the British Empire until 1972 when Sri Lanka assumed the status of a Republic). The successful post-war independence movement consisted of two parties: the “constitutionalists”, seeking independence gradually; and the more radical groups associated with the Colombo Youth League (which Ondaatje refers to in the book), Labor movement of Goonasinghe, and the Jaffna Youth Congress.

In 1956 the Sinhala Only Act established the Sinhalese language as the first and preferred language in commerce and education. As a consequence vast numbers of people—mostly European-focused Burghers—left the country to live abroad, as they rightfully felt discriminated against. Ondaatje’s family experience ties to this event. In 1958 the first major riots between Sinhalese and Tamils flared up in Colombo, which were a direct result of the government’s language policy. The tension built until the leftist 1971 uprising against the government which gained international attention. Although the insurgents were young, poorly armed, inadequately trained, and mainly from the lower castes, they succeeded in seizing and holding major areas in Southern and Central provinces before they were defeated. Their attempt to seize power created a major crisis for the government, forced to reassess the nation’s security needs. Over fifteen thousand fighters died in the rebellion.

Regional and ethnic tensions continued to flare up for a decade after that, leading to the outbreak of the Sri Lankan Civil War in 1983, shortly after Ondaatje wrote and published the novel. The war lasted for 25 years until 2009, with the defeat of the Tamil Tigers, the militant organization that sought independence. The Civil War cost nearly 100,000 lives, caused the displacement of over 300,000 people, and devastated the country’s economy.

**NARRATIVE STRUCTURE, METHOD & STYLE**

Ondaatje divides his work into seven parts, and within each of those parts are short chapters, some as short as a page. One of the key points we’ll be discussing is why he chose to organize events in the manner he did and how he grouped his subjects, so as you are reading pay attention to the titles of the seven parts and the chapters, along with how they relate to the other chapters within their section. Also consider how Ondaatje creates a narrative arc through what seems like narrative fragments.

Like our first novel of the IB Literature program, Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* is a post-modern work. Some of the characteristics of a post-modern novel include the use of *pastiche* (multiple genres and styles), *intertextuality* (acknowledgement and use of other literary works); *metafiction* (writing about writing, and the self-conscious presence of the writer); *nonlinear narrative*; *ironic and humorous tone* (even treating difficult subjects from a position of dislocation and humor); and *magical realism* (fantastical elements incorporated into realism, and treated as part of reality).
Ondaatje's novel is told from the first-person perspective of a character named “Michael Ondaatje.” As with O'Brien's narrator, this is confusing because it's the same name as the author; however, it is important to note that the narrator is a persona, not the author himself. [You will see in the questions in this Study Guide that I shift between “Michael” and “Ondaatje.”] As you read, consider reasons why Ondaatje might have chosen his own name for his narrator.

The author does away with linear structure; instead, the fictional memoir reads like small vignettes that, when pieced together, create an understanding about the narrative but also about several of the themes Ondaatje develops; you will see how content and form are linked as he uses several genres to tell his story: narratives, journals, dialogues, photographs, poetry, epigraphs, and maps.

Much of the narrative assumes a personal tone, but at times the first-person narrator seems to be distancing himself from events through sarcasm and humor, even suddenly referring to himself in the third person (e.g. pages 17 & 189). Additionally, Ondaatje consistently reminds us that we are reading his creation by mentioning the writing process and by using other meta-linguistic techniques (see especially page 189 as an example). As you read, consider the various ways in which his narrative style is self-conscious.

**MOTIFS, THEMES, & TECHNIQUES:** *Think about these topics, gathering your opinions on what point Ondaatje is making.*

**Motifs** to track as you read: weather, maps, the foreigner, guns, bones/skeletons, animals (snakes, dogs, boars, crows and cranes), nature (jungle, floods, draughts, rain), ghosts, dreams, fantastical elements, labyrinths, money, the relationship between the indoors and outdoors, voice and silence.

**Themes** to consider:
- Construction of identity
- Memory (its reliability and value to families and history); willed amnesia
- Generational divide
- What it means to be a foreigner
- The contrast between East and West
- Using language to as a means to explore, express, or cloak meaning.
- What is lost in retelling a story, what is gained
- What is lost in translation
- Assumptions about others
- Uncertainty and unanswered questions
- Wealth and frivolity
- The Prodigal Son
- Power struggles
- Loyalty and disloyalty
- The nature of forgiveness
- Disrepair and destruction
- Dipsomania

**Techniques** to examine:
- Epigraphs
- Use of art and allusion
- Intertextuality
- Metalinguistic techniques
- Direct dialogue
- Repetition of words and ideas
- Section divisions
CHARACTERS: Note that some relationships are a bit ambiguous; are all the women MO calls “aunt” really his aunts?

MICHAEL ONDAATJE [MO]
(narrator; persona; author)

older siblings: Christopher, Janet, and Gillian

MOTHER’S SIDE OF FAMILY

LALLA: MO’s maternal grandmother; descended from the Dickmans, a bloodline considered eccentric.
Willie Gratiaen: MO’s maternal grandfather; established the estate Palm Lodge, in Colombo; died when children Noel and Doris were young.
Vere: Lalla’s brother, “a sweet drunk.”
Dickie: Lalla’s sister, married to David Grenier, who drowned; then married to “a de Vos, a Womleck, and then an Englishman.”
Evan: Lalla’s brother, a distant figure, thought to be a thief.
Noel: Lalla’s son; Doris’s brother; married to Zillah, father of Wendy.
DORIS [Gratiaen]: MO’s mother

FATHER’S SIDE OF FAMILY

PHILIP ONDAATJE: MO’s paternal grandfather, “Bampa”; built the estate Rock Hill, in Kegalle.
Unnamed woman: MO’s paternal grandmother.
Aelian: Philip’s brother

MERVYN ONDAATJE: MO’s father; after divorce from Doris, marries Maureen, who has two children, Jennifer and Susan (who marries Sunil).
Stephy: Mervyn’s sister.
Dolly: Mervyn’s sister, now half-deaf, half-blind.
Phyllis: Mervyn’s sister? (MO calls her Aunt); married to Ned; but later he mentions a cousin named Phyllis.
Arthur: Mervyn’s close friend (a brother of Dolly)

OTHER CHARACTERS (in loose chronological order)

Shelton de Saram: tentatively engaged to Lalla, but falls for Englishwoman Frieda Donhorst, breaking Lalla’s heart; later in life, Shelton visits Lalla frequently at Nuwara Eliya.
Rene de Saram: Lalla’s neighbor and friend, also an early widow; son Francis (and Trevor?) was Mervyn’s and Noel’s close friend and was a famous drunk.
Muriel Potger: during the war, ran the boarding house in Nuwara Eliya while Lalla “breezed through the rooms.”
Dorothy Clementi-Smith: girlhood friend of Doris, with whom she danced.
Hilden: when young, an admirer of Doris’s, along with Trevor.
Kayie Roseleaps: Englishwoman who was first engaged to Mervyn; friend of Mervyn’s sister Stephy.
The Daniels family, Emil, Rex: live on an estate called Royden; neighbors of Doris and Mervyn.
Sir John Kotelawala: fellow officer in Ceylon Light Infantry with Mervyn; later becomes a Prime Minister.
Sammy Dias Bandaranaike: man who has the “resthouses” feud with Mervyn; later becomes a Prime Minister.
V.C. de Silva: Mervyn’s close friend in middle age; a doctor.
Archer Jayawardene: Mervyn’s close friend in middle age; fellow member of the Cactus and Succulent Society.
Yasmine Gooneratne: prefect (with Gillian) at Bishop’s College for Girls; tells the story of Michael’s “bath” by Maratina.
Ian Goonetileke: librarian at Peradeniya with whom MO meets; friend of the poet Lakdasa Wikramasinha.
TIMELINE

Read this in consultation with the Characters list. You will notice that there are very few specific dates in the memoir. Along with the ambiguity of some of the relationships in the story, why do you think Ondaatje is often vague about this as well?

1928  Mervyn goes to Cambridge, England and pretends to study.

1930-31  Mervyn’s parents discover that he has not been studying and come to England to confront him; Mervyn then engaged to Englishwoman Kaye Roseleap for a time.

1931  Back in Sri Lanka, Mervyn engaged to Doris Gratiaen is called off and then reinstated.

1932  Doris and Mervyn marry.

mid-30’s  Mervyn starts drinking heavily; Lalla’s dairy cows at Palm Lodge are wiped out by disease, and she has to sell the estate; she starts visiting others.

1938  Philip Ondaatje dies at Rock Hill, Kegalle; funeral argument about how much to pay the coffin bearers.

1942  Aelian Ondaatje dies from liver problems.

1943  Mervyn’s last train ride; Michael is born.

mid-40’s  Lalla has a boarding house during World War II (but really managed by Muriel Potger).

1946  Probable date of divorce between Mervyn and Doris, who were together for 14 years; Doris works in the Mount Lavinia Hotel and then the Grand Oriental; Eventually she moves to England, possibly in 1947 by V.C. de Silva’s account (195).

late 40’s  Mervyn returns to Rock Hill and runs a chicken farm.

1947  15 August: Lalla dies in a flood in Nuwara Eliya, where she was visiting with her brother Vere.

1950  Mervyn marries again, to Maureen.


1971  The Insurgence.

1972  Rock Hill is sold.
OVERALL QUESTIONS: Consider the following as you read and after you finish the novel.

1. How do each of the two opening epigraphs suggest Michael’s conflicted feelings toward his home country and family?
2. How does the structural technique of omission convey symbolic significance?
3. How does non-linear structure complement meaning in the text?
4. What are the effects of Ondaatje telling his story in a non-linear, multi-genre fashion?
5. What is the significance of the allusions to writers and artists? What are their commonalities?
6. Do we learn more about the subjects or the storytellers in the way that Ondaatje/the narrator conveys the stories?
7. How do the first and final entries frame the novel?
8. How, and with what effect, does Ondaatje use sound and scent in his work?
9. How does Ondaatje use extended metaphor in his work?
10. How does diction reveal mood, tone, and atmosphere?
11. How does Ondaatje use connotation effectively? (For example, consider the phrase “running in the family” and its various meanings here.)
12. How does ambiguity express emotion?
13. What topics inspire Ondaatje to use an ironic tone and why does this occur?
14. How does Ondaatje use humor in his novel?
15. Ondaatje repeatedly tries to stay objective, but he gets increasingly more subjective in the novel; where do you see these shifts to subjectivity and why do you think he makes this shift?
16. Are fact and truth always synonymous? (What links to O’Brien’s story-truth and happening-truth can you make?)
17. What does it mean to be a foreigner? What is Ondaatje saying about what a foreigner is? How does he use allusions and historical references to comment on this in his text? Can we ever see the truth in what is foreign?
18. What are the complications in father-son relationships? In what ways are Michael and his father similar or different?
19. How much of living is performance?
20. What role does nature play in the lives of humans?
21. What part do Ondaatje’s ancestors play in his memoir?
22. What is Ondaatje saying about what a foreigner is? How does he use allusions and historical references to comment on this in his text?
23. In what ways is Ondaatje dealing with the issues of translation when trying to explain his family history?
24. How does Ondaatje’s relationship with Sri Lanka evolve throughout the memoir?
25. How does Ondaatje show us the importance of artists as record keepers?
26. What part do rumors play in Ondaatje’s storytelling? How do they come to define Ondaatje’s history?
ALLUSIONS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
As you read and annotate the novel, think about the following questions. It may help you to jot down a phrase or a relevant page number to help you remember details, link to your annotations, prepare for class discussions and the IOC.

OPENING PAGE
King Coconut (17) = a type of a coconut fruit cultivated in Sri Lanka where it is known as Thambili. It is sweeter than regular coconuts.

What is the narrative perspective on this first page?
What does his “nightmare” suggest about Michael, the narrator?
What is the effect of fragments on the story’s mood? What is the effect on you, the reader?
How does Ondaatje already use a metalinguistic device?

PART 1:
ASIAN RUMOURS
Asia; Jaffna Afternoons

Jane Austen’s Persuasion (22) = Austen’s 1816 novel (her last) tells the story of Anne Eliot who breaks off an engagement to Frederick Wentworth, because of her snobbish family’s persuasion. After a decade Anne sees him again, and realizes she never stopped loving him.

minotaur (25) = In Greek mythology, a creature with the head of a bull on the body of a man who inhabited the center of the Cretan labyrinth (eventually killed by the Athenian Theseus)

palmyrah (26) = a tall palm native to tropical regions capable of growing up to 30m high.
toddy (26) = drink.
Commission on race-riots (26) = Ondaatje’s reference to his uncle Ned as heading a commission on race-riots is ironic, considering the uncle secludes his family in the governor’s home. While the ethnic violence had not yet escalated to the point of civil war, tensions were certainly visible during Ondaatje’s time visited Sri Lanka in the late 1970’s.

Asia
How does Ondaatje juxtapose Canada and Ceylon (Sri Lanka)?
What is suggested about Ondaatje’s relationship with his father in the opening pages?
On page 22, Ondaatje notes that his ancestors stood in his “memory like a frozen opera.” What does this metaphor imply?
What does Ondaatje’s description of the word “Asia” reveal about his feelings? What techniques does he use to accomplish this?
How does Ondaatje connect himself to his grandmother in the final paragraph?

Jaffna Afternoons
What do the images Ondaatje uses to describe his ancestry and the rooms of the governor’s home in Jaffna (e.g. “family of acrobats,” “dresses of hanged brides,” “skeletons of beds,” “maze of relationships,” “the minotaur”) suggest about Michael’s state of mind?
What does Ondaatje mean when he says “No story is ever told just once”? (26)
What does the repeated oxymoron “a noisy solitude” suggest? (25, 27)
How might Ondaatje’s repeated image of the family in a “human pyramid” serve as a metaphor for Michael’s journey?

PART 2:
A FINE ROMANCE
The Courtship; April 11, 1932; Honeymoon; Historical Relations; The War Between Men and Women; Flaming Youth; The Babylon Stakes; Tropical Gossip; Kegalle (i)

the Rebels (32) = the Irish Republican Army (IRA) fought against British forces days after Ireland had declared its independence.
The war lasted from January 1919–July 1921, and it marked the end of British rule in Ireland.
Ceylon Light Infantry (CLI) (33) = oldest regiment in the Sri Lankan Army.

Isadora Duncan (33) = an American dancer, known for natural, improvised movements.

Lindberg’s baby (37) = refers to the infamous March 1932 kidnapping of the son of the famous aviator Charles Lindbergh. The toddler was abducted from his home, and two months later his body was discovered; the crime and trial were highly publicized.

Wimbledon in shorts (37) = a break from what was at the time deemed appropriate for women.

the body of Valentino (37) = Rudolph Valentino was a cinema sex symbol of the 1920’s, known as the “Latin Lover.” He died of multiple internal infections at the age of 31. Thousands of weeping women filled the streets after his death, mobbed the funeral parlor where his body lay in state, and generally created disorder in NYC.

C.B. Cochran (37) = Sir Charles Black Cochran was an English theatrical manager who produced several musicals and plays.

pythons were decreasing in Africa (37) = the population declined as they were captured to be used for luxury leather goods.

Charlie Chaplin (38) = English comedic actor and filmmaker who rose to prominence in the 1920’s, the silent film era.

Kandyan dance (38) = dance from Kandy, in the central highlands region in Sri Lanka, originally from an exorcism ritual known as the Kohamba Kankariya.

“Love Birds,” “Caught Cheating,” and “Forbidden Love” (38) = popular local films at the time.

fighting in Manchuria (38) = the Japanese began their invasion of Manchuria (northeast China); fighting went on from September 1932 to February 1933, and after that Manchuria became a Japanese “puppet state” (a state controlled by a foreign country) until the end of WWII.

Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British, & Burgher blood (41) = different ethnic groups and colonial influences in Sri Lanka, as mentioned in the Setting section of this Study Guide.

the Pettah market (42) = an open market in the Colombo suburb of Pettah, specializing in gold and jewelry trading.

“A Moonlight Bay” and “A Fine Romance” (46) = famous songs in the 1930’s; “A Fine Romance” is one of the well known songs by the American composer Jerome Kern.

Sinhalese baila (46) = dance and folk music that originated from Afro-Sinhalese communities of Portuguese, African and native Sinhalese people.

“Rio Rita” = name of 1932 musical film.

polecats (47) = weasels.

Wall Street crash (48) = American Stock Market Crash of 1929 led to the Great Depression in the US and affected other industrialized countries in the world.

lime-burners and fishmongers (48) = a lime burner had to heat chalk in a kiln to make quicklime, used in mortar; it was a dirty, dangerous job: the dust it produced could cause blindness and the carbon monoxide could make the workers faint and fall into the kiln. A fishmonger is an old term for a fisherman and, more vulgarly, a pimp (you will see this reference later in the semester, in Hamlet).

Gandhi enclosure (49) = area at the racetrack where gamblers bet the least money; over-crowded, specifically for poor people. It is an reference to Gandhi, who fought for justice and helped the poor.

coming of the Magi (49) = the three wise men, who traveled with gifts to worship Jesus after he was born in Bethlehem.

Japanese planes (50) = a reference to the Battle of Ceylon (also known as Easter Sunday Raid, April 2942), a Japanese air attack on Sri Lanka that targeted British warships and air bases. Japan wanted to force Britain’s fleet to leave Asia.

“the horse’s mouth” (51) = meaning from the highest authority. The origin of this comes from horse races where the people wished to get the best information possible on the horse, which usually came from the trainer or the stable manager, someone in the inner circle who knows what’s going on.

Ambalangoda (51) = a large town in southern Sri Lanka famous for its hand-painted masks used in the traditional devil dances, which come from the belief that some illnesses caused by “unseen hands,” could be cured through dancing.

catarrh (52) = an excessive discharge or build up of mucus in the nose or the throat, associated with inflammation.

Frangipani (52) = type of tree and flower common in the tropics; its botanical name is plumeria; known as the Temple Flower in Sri Lanka.

a Q.C. (53) = a Queen’s Counsel, i.e. a jurist or barrister (attorney).

dipsomania (58) = alcoholism; one who suffers from dipsomania is called a dipsomaniac.

Rodgers and Hart (59) = a famous American composing duo, who created famous musicals from the 1920’s to mid-1940’s, such as Pal Joey and Babes in Arms.

The Courtship

What do the events in Mervyn’s youth tell us about him?

What is the narrator’s tone in this section? What does it reveal about his feelings towards his father?

What do we learn about Michael’s mother, Doris Gratiaen?

How does Ondaatje make light of his father’s threat of suicide?

April 11, 1932

What details do we learn about Mervyn and Doris’ wedding? What does the omission of events suggest?

Honeymon

This section is a collage of events that occurred in the same season that Mervyn and Doris were married. Consider what events Michael chooses to include. What might they foreshadow about the marriage?

Historical Relations

What is a “casual tragedy”? How is this oxymoronic? (40)

What kind of atmosphere do these stories create for early twentieth-century Ceylon?
The War Between Men and Women
What does this story reveal about Lalla?
Who wins in this particular battle between men and women?
Why does Ondaatje title this section as he does?

Flaming Youth
What does the title of this chapter suggest about youth? (Note the final paragraph of the chapter.)
Why does Michael focus so much on the details of Francis de Saram?
How does Mervyn and Doris’ generation compare to that of their parents?

Babylon Stakes
What is the irony of this chapter’s epigraph? What theme does this develop?
How, and with what effect, is Ondaatje criticizing the leisure class?
What does Ondaatje’s description of Lalla reveal about her? (49)
Ondaatje writes: “They could have almost drowned or fallen in love and their lives would have been totally changed during any one of those evenings” (52). What is he suggesting in this sentence?

Tropical Gossip
Why does Ondaatje repeatedly come back to the idea of affairs that “rainbowed over marriages”?
Why does Ondaatje write, “But nothing is said of the closeness between two people: how they grew in the shade of each other’s presence”? (54) Look specifically at the diction and consider the title of this section of chapters.
What does Ondaatje reveal about his own desire at the end of this chapter?

Kegalle (i)
How does the tone shift in this chapter?
What is the relationship between Philip and Aelian?
What is revealed about “Bampa” (Philip Ondaatje) in this section?
What do we learn in this chapter about Mervyn’s dipsomania?
To what extent is Maureen’s question also Michael’s question? (59)
What does the polecat signify at the end of the chapter?
Look at the final two lines; what does the diction suggest about Ondaatje’s feelings? How is the garden symbolic?
Look again at the title of this section, “A Fine Romance.” What do you think it means?

PART 3:
DON’T TALK TO ME ABOUT MATISSE
Tabula Asiae; St Thomas’ Church; Monsoon Notebook (i); Tongue; Sweet like a Crow; The Karapothas; High Flowers; To Colombo; Women like You; The Cinnamon Peeler; Kegalle (ii)

Henri Matisse (61) = French expressionist painter (1869-1954) known for color. Matisse deeply disappointed his father when he became a painter instead of a lawyer. The title of this section comes from a work by the Sri Lankan poet Lakdasa Wikramasingha on page 85, which refers to Matisse’s paintings of reclining nudes. In 1942, Matisse painted “L’Asie.” Search for the image, and note how the image relates to what Ondaatje and the poet Wikramasingha write about regarding foreigner’s views of Sri Lanka.
Tabula (63) = board game similar to backgammon. The movement of the pieces may echo how the possession of Sri Lanka went back and forth between the different European powers and the dice rolls may reflect the way in which Sri Lankans didn’t have control over their own country. The title may also be a play on “tabula rasa,” Latin for “blank slate,” and the theory that we are
all born without preconceptions at birth; all knowledge is gained through experience and perception. With this in mind, consider the narrator’s objective in returning to Sri Lanka and writing the book.

cassowary (63) = a very large flightless bird, also considered the most dangerous bird in the world due to its weight, claws and aggression.

desertum (63) = Latin for desert or wasteland.

Moorish (63) = as you know from our Othello study, this refers to Medieval Arabic peoples of northern Africa.
satyrs (64) = in Greek mythology, the half-man, half-goat companions to Pan and Dionysus.
durian (69) = delicious but stinky southeast Asian fruit.
bullocks (69) = young bulls.
kabaragoya and thatalagoya (73) = Sri Lankan monitor lizards.
skinks (71) = another kind of lizard: long, skinny, and snake-like.

Paul Bowles (76) = American author who wrote travel literature, specifically of Africa and Spain, which explored the dilemma of the outsider in an alien society, the gap in understanding between two cultures, and the transmutation of identities.

vattacka (76) = type of vegetable.

Carnegie Hall (76) = concert venue in NYC.
magpie (76) = a crow.
pappadans (77) = large thin, crisp cracker made from a type of bean flour, common in Sri Lankan and Indian meals and snacks.
brinjals (77) = eggplant.
betel (77) = southeast Asian plant with leaves that are commonly chewed with the areca nut as a mild stimulant.

karapothas (78) = beetles with white spots on them. On page 80, Ondaatje’s niece calls foreigners this term because, like the beetles, they “never grew ancient here,” but just admired the landscape, disliked the natives, and left.

Edward Lear (78) = British painter of the 19th century who spent a year traveling in India and Ceylon in 1873-74.

Taormina (78) = a commune and small town on the east coast of Sicily, Italy.

like Jonahs (78) = In the Bible’s Old Testament, God asks Jonah to prophecy against the people of Nineveh because of their wickedness; instead, Jonah tries to flee by sailing away. There is a great storm that Jonah recognizes is because he abandoned God’s request. He is then thrown overboard by sailors and swallowed by a whale. After three days of praying in the whale’s belly, Jonah is spit out by the whale, and he returns to Nineveh to fulfill God’s request.

the prodigal (76) = the Prodigal Son is a parable in the Bible about a son who demands his father give him his inheritance. After wasting this fortune (the word “prodigal” means “wastefully extravagant”), the son goes hungry during a famine. Repentant, the son’s return home is celebrated by his father with a feast.

D.H. Lawrence (78, 79) = English novelist, poet and painter, a major figure in English literature, Lawrence traveled extensively with his wife in the early 1900’s. His home country expelled him in 1917 (during WWI they even suspected he was a spy for Germany), and he lived much of his life outside England. Lawrence’s best-known work is Lady Chatterley’s Lover, first published privately in Italy in 1928. It tells of the love affair between a wealthy, married woman, and a man who works on her husband’s estate; the book was banned for a time in both UK and the US as pornographic.

Leonard Woolf (78) = English political theorist, author, publisher and civil servant in Ceylon from 1904-1911; husband of author Virginia Woolf

Pablo Neruda (80) = a Chilean poet and diplomat. Neruda was a supporter of Communism and when it was outlawed in Chile in 1948, a warrant was issued for his arrest. An exile, he traveled extensively outside of Chile; yet when Allende came to power, he returned to Chile. Neruda wrote in a variety of styles including surrealist poems, historical epics, overtly political

manifestos, odes, and love poems. An interesting Brazil connection is that in 1945, at Pacaembu Stadium in São Paulo, Neruda read to 100,000 people in honor of the Communist revolutionary leader Luis Carlos Prestes.

Burma and Josie Bliss of “The widower’s tango” (80) = Neruda had an affair with Bliss in Burma. “The Widower’s Tango” is his 1928 poem about his escape from her, whom he called an “amorous terrorist.”

Residence on Earth (80) = collection of poem Neruda wrote over two decades (1925-1945), while a self-exiled diplomat in South Asia.

Robert Knox (81) = the British sea captain who landed on Sri Lanka in 1659 and was captured by the king of Kandy, along with his fellow sailors. Knox escaped after nearly twenty years and wrote an account of his experience, a story that was the basis for the novel Robinson Crusoe [see below]. Also note that on page 206, Ondaatje quotes from Knox’s account.

no more than Desdemona could understand truly the Moor’s military exploits (81) = as you know from our study of the play, in Shakespeare’s Othello, Desdemona is young daughter of a Venetian senator who falls in love with the Moor, Othello.

A perfumed sea (81) = this phrase is an allusion to Edgar Allen Poe’s poem “To Helen,” which celebrates the power of a woman’s beauty (the allusion is to Helen of Troy) to draw home the wanderer.

Defoe (82) = Daniel Defoe is most famous for the novel Robinson Crusoe (1719), a fictional autobiograpy of the title character, a castaway who spends years on a remote tropical island near Trinidad, encountering cannibals, captives, and mutineers before being rescued.

George Keyt (85) = considered Sri Lanka’s most distinguished modern painter. Keyt’s style is influenced by Cubism and by his contemporary Henri Matisse (note the title of this part of the novel). He was also influenced by Buddhism and Hindu myth in his works. Even though born to a wealthy family, Keyt rejected their wealthy, European-focused perspective.

Lakdasa Wikramasinha (85) = a contemporary of Ondaatje, Wikramasinha wrote in both English and Sinhala. He was politically active and had to publish his books in other countries because of censorship. The name of one of his popular poems was “The Cobra.”

Anuradhapura stone (87) = Anuradhapura is one of the oldest most consistently inhabited places in the world; one of the ancient capitals of Sri Lanka, it still holds some of the most well-preserved stone ruins; it is now a UNESCO World Heritage site.

kurumba (90) = green, young coconut.

Sigiri graffiti (92) = poem verses written on the smooth rock surface of Sigiriyu; Sigiriyu is in central Sri Lanka, a massive column of rock nearly 200m high. According to an ancient chronicle, it was chosen by King Kasyapa in the fifth century to be his new capital. He built his palace on the top of this rock and decorated its sides with colorful frescoes. On a small plateau about halfway up the side of this rock he built a gateway in the form of an enormous lion. The name of this place is derived from this structure (Sigiriyu means “the Lion Rock”); it is a UNESCO World Heritage site and is the most visited site in Sri Lanka.

cinnamon peeler (95) = one who harvests the bark of the cinnamon tree using a highly skilled, traditional technique, handed down almost unchanged from ancient times. In Sri Lanka it is still the exclusive occupation of the Salagama caste. Twice a year the shoots of the tree are cut and in an intricate difficult process, using the distinctive tool of the trade, a small curved knife called a kokathitha, the peeler deftly marks two parallel slits on the stick and eases the bark free in one piece. Experienced peelers do this swiftly and precisely, making clean and true cuts without fragmenting the bark.
TITLE PAGE (61): What does the image on the title page of this section suggest?

Tabula Asiae
What are the various meanings of the title of this chapter?
Why does the narrator refer to his brother’s “false maps” at the opening of this section? And what does he mean that they vary so much they seem like “translations”?
The narrator notes that these maps are “growing from mythic shapes to eventual accuracy” (63). How is this a metaphor for what Ondaatje seems to be attempting?
What clichéd images of the exotic does Ondaatje use in this chapter, and with what effect?
What does the narrator mean when he says “this pendant … became a mirror”? (64)
What effect do the final three fragments in this chapter have?
Why does the Ondaatje repeat the word “rumour” in this chapter? How does it relate to the rest of the work thus far?

St. Thomas’ Church
What is the narrator’s tone when he sees his name in the church’s floor? What reveals this attitude?
What other metaphors in the chapter suggest that time destroys facts?
Why does Ondaatje relate the story of the four brothers?
How might the reference to snakes relate to Mervyn? (68)
Looking at the final line of this chapter, how might it be metaphorical?

Monsoon Notebook (i)
How does the writing structure change in this chapter and what effect does it have?
What are the references to water in this chapter? Why does Ondaatje use this motif at this point in the novel?
What does Ondaatje mean when he says “I witnessed everything”? (70)
What does it mean to have an experience so rich that one has to “select senses”? (71) Have you ever had this experience?

Tongue
How does the story of the thalagoya tongue further develop the character of Lalla?
The final line of the chapter is ambiguous: does “it” refer to the atlas, or to Michael’s mother’s view of kabaragoyas “in copula”?
What is Ondaatje suggesting about memory here?
What ties to metalanguage can you make in this chapter?

Sweet Like a Crow
Why do you think Ondaatje has shifted the genre, from prose to poetry?
How is the title of this poem paradoxical? How is the poetic form paradoxical?
What is the effect of the catalogue of similes?
How does the poem shift in tone?
How does this poem relate to what Ondaatje has been suggesting about the foreign views of Sri Lanka?
The Karapothas
All the epigraphs on page 78 are by British men who had little patience with Ceylon. How do they contrast with Ondaatje’s descriptions of the island’s “intricate arts and customs” (82) and the passage exploring the beauty of the Sinhalese alphabet (83) in this chapter? What statements about culture, language, and colonialism is Ondaatje making?

What do the opening contradictory statements mean about the narrator? (“I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner.”)

How does the invasion of nature that Ondaatje describes in the first paragraph relate to colonialism?

Why does the narrator offer these pieces of Ceylon’s history at this point in his story?

What do you make of the allusion to Othello on page 81?

What is the role of the indented paragraph on page 82? What do you note about its imagery and tone?

What is the contrast between the Sri Lankan and foreign views of the country’s natural elements?

On page 83, Ondaatje refers to his study of Sinhalese. What is the meaning and effect of this mix of language, both in content and form (on the page)? Do you find any irony in the fact that Running in the Family is written in English?

What does poetry represent in both the situations noted on page 84?

Looking at Wikramasinha’s poem on pages 85-6, why does Ondaatje choose to title this entire section “Don’t Talk to Me about Matisse”?

High Flowers
What or who is the subject of this poem? How would these characters relate to Ondaatje’s ancestors? How do they factor into his story?

What diction catches your eye here? Why? How does it establish a mood?

Read aloud the following line: “her discreet slow moving his dreams of walking / from tree to tree without ropes” (88). How does it have different meanings depending on where you put the emphasis?

What is notable about the connection between father and son (e.g. “the curved knife / his father gave him,” and so on.) referred to on pages 88-89?

How does the theme of men and women being foreign to one another and inhabiting completely different spaces developed in this poem? What images are connected to men, to women?

To Colombo
In what ways does Ondaatje’s use of caesura and other structural devices (lack of punctuation, stanza breaks) create meaning?

What effect do the typographical breaks for the words “pass” and “remove” have? (90)

What effect does the typographical separation of the final three nouns have on the poem’s closing?

Women Like You
Why does Ondaatje use the famous Sirigiya verses (“the communal poem”) in this part of his book? Why is it notable that the verses are ancient “graffiti”?

What is the effect of Ondaatje’s personification of Ceylon as a woman in this chapter, and early in his reference to his brother’s “false maps” (63)?

How does this poem relate to Matisse’s painting “L’Asie”?

What is the effect of repetition in this poem?

The Cinnamon Peeler
Ondaatje begins this poem with the conditional (“If I were… I would…”; stanzas 1-3): his love would coat his future wife like spice. He builds eroticism as he moves from the general to the specific. And the phrase “ride your bed” is surprising and sexually “loud,” but not nearly as sensuous as the “smaller” details that follow. Stanza 2 is what would happen when his future wife went out in public (presumably dressed, but still sensuous): even a monsoon can’t rid her of his scent. Why does he present this scene in the conditional?
To what extent are these lovers a metaphor for something else related to Ondaatje’s journey?

What is the impact in the third stanza of the subject’s anatomical inventory?

What is the purpose of the ellipses at the end of stanza 4?

Why is the speaker proud of his scent?

In what ways is the woman defined by the man in this poem? (Note how he dehumanizes the woman in the first line: “ride” suggests what’s ridden is an animal, and the phrase “your bed” doesn’t acknowledge the woman or her body.)

This poem has several references to the caste system of Sri Lanka; Grass Cutters, Cinnamon Peelers, and Honey Gatherers were all different castes. What is Ondaatje suggesting with these references to social class?

Kegalle (ii)
Remember that earlier in the book, in the chapter “Honeymoon,” we learn that in Africa, cobras were declining, and here they are referenced in the first line. How do the two narratives relate?

What is revealed about Ondaatje’s father in this chapter?

What do we learn about the 1971 Insurgency here?

Why is this chapter called “Kegalle (ii)”?
Notice that the first “Kegalle (i)” (55-60) is about Michael’s grandfather. What is the subject of this one? What might Ondaatje be trying to track?

PART 4:
ECLIPSE PLUMAGE
Lunch Conversations; Aunts; The Passions of Lalla

aspersions (106) = slander; defamation of someone’s character.
Negombo (107) = a major city on the west coast of Sri Lanka.
Miss Havisham (111) = a key character in Charles Dickens’ 1861 novel Great Expectations. Miss Havisham is old, decrepit, confused, self-centered woman—a symbol of a wasted life.
The Mikado, A Midsummer Night’s Dream (111) = The Mikado is an 1885 Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera considered especially exotic when it premiered in London because it was set in Japan; A Midsummer Night’s Dream is Shakespeare’s 1595 comedy about exchanging identities and the shifting nature of love.
Boralesgamuwa (111) = a suburb of Colombo on Sri Lanka’s west coast.
chrysalis (113) = the pupa stage of the butterfly.
Rinderpest Fever (115) = an infectious viral disease of cattle.
Italian prisoners during the war (121) = because of Egyptian instability, Italian prisoners of war who were captured in 1941 during the North Africa campaign were evacuated to India, Ceylon, South Africa and Australia.
mastectomy (123) = surgical removal of one or both breasts.
Wandering Jew (124) = a legend of a Jew who taunted Jesus on the way to the Crucifixion and was then cursed to walk the earth until the Second Coming; also, the name for a prolific plant that grows well indoors and outdoors.
Rudyard Kipling (124) = British short story writer, poet, and novelist born in Bombay in 1885; well known for his poems about British soldiers in India. At the age of 5 he was sent to live with foster parents in Britain, where he was unhappy. Kipling travelled all around the world and went back and forth from India to Britain. (Note that this situation has a parallel to Ondaatje, who was born in Ceylon but lived his childhood in Canada)
“bucket shops” (125) = fraudulent or scam businesses.
Mahaveli (126) = the longest river in Sri Lanka, over 335km long.
Moon Plains (126) = an area in the south-central highlands of Sri Lanka, rich in biodiversity; it is near Nuwara Eliya; there are rivers, waterfalls, grasslands, and mountains. It is now a protected national park that attracts tourists.
Jesus lizards (128) = small lizards known for their ability to run across water, over a distance of 4m.
sicmitar-babblers (128) = birds typically found in tropical jungles in Asia. Due to their rather short wings, they do not fly well; they are loud, with long, curved bills and strong legs.

TITLE PAGE (103): The photograph that opens this chapter is referred to on page 112. What does it illustrate?

Lunch Conversation
This dialogue has no punctuation and no speakers are attributed. The conversation is confusing not only because of this, but also because there is a jumble of time and event references. Why does Ondaatje do this? What would you call this genre? How might this form of storytelling relate to Michael and his journey?

How does Lalla deal with conflict (109)?
In what ways is Michael always trying to get at the facts?

Aunts
What does Ondaatje mean in his opening line: “How I have used them”? (110)
How does Ondaatje relate a narrative story to a narrative image here?
What does Dolly’s choice of plays demonstrate about her?
What might the constant hammering in the house illustrate? (111-112)
Look closely at the final sentence of this section. What is Ondaatje saying about memory and people?

Passions of Lalla
Ondaatje focuses on Lalla in this chapter, and often connects her to nature. What is the significance of Lalla’s ability to “read thunder”? In what ways is Lalla related to a butterfly? (113)

Ondaatje often uses gesture to develop character. Noting the gestures of Lalla—such as, to choose just two, when she “threw herself on and pounded various beds” and her “loud laughter” (114)—what traits are illustrated?

What paradoxes of character and behavior are associated with Lalla in this chapter?

What does the anecdote of the cows and Rinderpest Fever reveal about Lalla? (115)

Why did children flock to Lalla most of her life? In what ways did she use children?

What do Lalla’s responses to her daughter’s choice of husband and Michael’s choice of profession reveal? (118, 119)

After she is forced to sell Palm Lodge, Lalla becomes a bit of a nomad. We learn that Lalla often stole flowers and “ravaged some of the best gardens in Colombo and Nuwara Eliya.” What does this mean? What does it illustrate about her? In what ways is she related to a flower? (Note, too, the short sentence, “This overbearing charmed flower” on page 125.)

What does it mean that Lalla is a “lyrical socialist”? (122)

Why was Lalla “loved most by people who saw her arriving from a distance like a storm”? (119)

We finally get a direct connection between Ondaatje’s mother, Doris, and his grandmother, Lalla. What does he mean when he writes “both carrying their own theater on their backs”? (125)

How would you characterize Lalla’s relationship with her brother, Vere?

On page 125, there is a significant line: “In her last years she was searching for the great death.” What does this mean?

How does Ondaatje grant Lalla her “great death”?

PART 5:
THE PRODIGAL
Harbour; Monsoon Notebook (ii); How I Was Bathed; Wilpattu; Kuttapitiya; Travels in Ceylon; Sir John; Photograph

TITLE PAGE (132): What does the image on the title page of this section suggest?
To whom or what does the chapter’s title page photograph refer?

“Harbour Lights” and “Sea of Heartbreak” (133) = Both songs express nostalgia for childhood. In “Harbour Lights” the line “you were my rock, but never my stepping stone” could connect to Ondaatje’s search for his family history and identity. A line from “Sea of Heartbreak” is used in the chapter (“the lights in the harbour don’t shine for me.”); the song expresses nostalgia for the land from the perspective of being at sea.

string hoppers, egg rulang, papadams, date chutney, seeni sambol, mallung, brinjals, buffalo curd, jaggery sauce (137) = typical Sri Lankan dishes.

carbolic soap (138) = a mild disinfectant soap that used to be used in hospitals.
Pears Transparent Soap (143) = the first translucent soap on the market, made by the British.
Rumi (143) = Rumi wrote poetry in 13th-century Persia. He has been widely translated and continues to be quite popular today; his poetry focused on mystical and spiritual journeys.

Merwin (143) = W.S. Merwin is an American poet known for his prose-narrative style; he is also a respected translator of literature written in Spanish, French, Latin, Italian, Sanskrit, Yiddish, Middle English, and Japanese. Ondaatje refers carrying Merwin’s translations with him to Sri Lanka, which is interesting, given the reason he travels to his home country.

val oora (141) = a wild boar.
pakispetti box (145) = is a small and fragile wooden box

Joseph Conrad (149) = Ondaatje writes about Doris entering the tunnel’s “darkness” to talk to Mervyn as “a moment only Conrad could have interpreted”. Conrad, a Polish writer who spent most of his life in England but always considered himself a Pole, wrote Heart of Darkness in 1899, one of the most famous novels in English, which deals with European colonialism of Africa, themes of savagery/civilization, sanity, imperialism, and racism.

Tennyson and early Yeats (149) = Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was an English poet. W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) was an Irish poet. Both poets are known for their lyricism.
Prime Minister of Ceylon assassinated by a Buddhist monk (151) = A dramatic story in Sri Lankan history. On September 26, 1959, the fourth Prime Minister of Ceylon (S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike) died in the hospital after being assassinated by a Buddhist monk (Talduwe Somarama). The monk had entered the private residence of the PM and since he was a member of the Buddhist clergy, he was not searched for weapons. Hence, when the Bandaranaike went to greet him, Somarama took out a revolver and shot the PM. Somarama was hanged in 1962.

the D.T.’s (157) = abbreviation for the Delirium Tremors, the shaking suffered by alcoholics from alcohol withdrawal.

hopper (158) = called aappa in Sinhalese; similar to a crepe, made from a fermented batter of rice flour, coconut milk and a dash of palm toddy, which lends a sour flavor.

Camelot (159) = the castle and court of the legendary King Arthur.

Harbour
Where and how has Ondaatje been developing the motif of a harbor? Consider also the various connotations (for the noun as well as the verb.)

What is notable about the repetition of certain words (e.g. “dusk”)?

What does Ondaatje mean when he writes, “There is nothing wise about a harbour, but it is real life”?

Why and to what effect does Ondaatje repeat the idea of anonymity?

Why does Ondaatje italicize the last four words of the chapter?

Monsoon Notebook (ii)
How does this passage relate to the previous “Monsoon Notebook” on page 69?

What kinds of invasions does Ondaatje chronicle here, and how do they relate to invasions he’s noted elsewhere in the book?

What do the silverfish do? (135-136), and why it is notable? (Note that Ondaatje will reference this again later on page 189.)

What is significant about the final sentence of this chapter?

How I Was Bathed
What is the atmosphere in the beginning of this passage? How are meals and memories and stories related?

What is interesting about the story Gillian tells of five-year-old Michael being cleaned?

How does this event lead to a greater question that Ondaatje has been asking about memory?

How does the Ondaatje use metalinguistic reference at the bottom of page 138?

Wilpattu
Why does this story follow the last? How do they relate?

“All of us are in our solitude” (141) How does this line relate to other parts of the fictional memoir?

What is the paradoxical description in this passage? Why does Ondaatje do this?

At the end of the April 8th entry, Ondaatje uses polysyndeton. What effect does this have on the sentence’s meaning?

Why the comparison of Pears Transparent Soap to Rumi poetry? (143)

Why does Ondaatje use italics when he writes, “My wild pig”? (143) In what ways is the pig a metaphor of Michael’s feelings for Sri Lanka?

Why is Michael “irritated” about his loss of the soap? (143)

Kuttapitiya
How do the “walls of flowers” serve as a metaphor?

What is the tonal shift in this chapter?

What is interesting about the following sentence? “And daily arguments over Monopoly, cricket, or marital issues that blazed and died on the privacy of this mountain” (143).

What does Ondaatje mean when he writes the simple sentence, “We had everything”? (145)

What is revealed about Lalla and Mervyn’s relationship in this chapter? Is there any irony?

What does the final exchange between Michael and his daughter signify? (146)
**Travels in Ceylon**
Consulting the map of Ceylon at the front of the book across from the epigraphs (8), look at the diction in the first paragraph of this chapter. What kind of attitude does it reveal about Ceylon?

How does Ondaatje once again bring up the motif of invasions when discussing Ceylon’s landmass?

How does Ondaatje’s oxymoron “casual obsession” relate to what he wrote earlier about “casual tragedies” (40)?

How does the tunnel serve as an extended metaphor throughout this section?

What does the allusion to Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness* suggest about this experience for Doris?

Up to this point, Ondaatje has conveyed stories about his father with humor. How does that change here? What is Michael’s tone in this chapter? What diction, punctuation, and sentence structure reveal this tone?

What impact does Ondaatje’s use of zeugma have at the top of page 150?

Considering the subtext, what is revealed through the dialogue between Doris and Mervyn?

Why does Ondaatje use handwriting as a metaphor of his mother’s changed perspective? (Consider, too, that he is a writer.)

What is the tradition of the Visitors’ Book? What is the nature of the “literary war”? How might it relate to the rest of the text?

Ondaatje makes a very direct comparison between Mervyn and the train. In what ways is the train a metaphor of Mervyn?

Why is Mervyn’s sister Stephy a part of this final narrative?

How does Ondaatje characterize the English on page 154? How does this relate to a theme he has been developing throughout?

What is the meaning of the pots of curd? And what is interesting about the diction choice in the final sentence of the section “witnessing”?

What are the “Travels in Ceylon” that are chronicled in this chapter? Why does Ondaatje include these particular vignettes here?

**Sir John**
How does Sir John Kotelawala feeding his animals scones connect to Sri Lanka’s history of colonialism? Thinking about the significance of food and culture, how are scones different from hoppers?

Considering that bones is one of the novel’s motifs, how does Ondaatje use the term at the top of page 158 (“certain bones”)?

What do we learn about Mervyn’s belief that the Japanese were coming? What theme does this relate to?

Ondaatje comments, “I could have lost a toe during one of these breakfasts searching for my father” (158). What is the significance of this thought?

In the visit to Sir John’s estate, Ondaatje further illustrates the motif of intermingling of outside and inside. In what ways are they confused in this passage?

The story Ondaatje tells about the couple being photographed on Sir John’s lawn is funny. What is notable about what happens to the perception of the photograph, and the rumors and story that emerges? How does this anecdote transition us to the final short passage in this chapter? Is Ondaatje ironically warning us that people can misinterpret and manipulate photographs? And does he do this in the next passage?

**Photograph**
What does Michael reveal to us in the first paragraph? What is his tone toward the subject?

What does this photograph reveal about Mervyn, Doris, and their marriage? Is “everything there” in the photograph? If not, what does it not tell us?

What do you think is significant about Ondaatje re-introducing us to the idea of his family making “theatre”?

**PART 6:**
**WHAT WE THINK OF MARRIED LIFE**
Tea Country; “What We Think of Married Life”; Dialogues; Blind Faith; The Bone
J.M. Barrie and Michael Arlen (169) = Barrie was the writer and dramatist who created Peter Pan. Arlen is an Armenian writer from the 1920s most known for his satirical romances set in England.

“kiss me once…” (174) = lyrics from the popular WWII song, “It’s Been a Long Long Time,” written by Sammy Cahn; the song is from the perspective of a lover welcoming home a soldier from war.

End of Jacobean tragedies... “with the mercy of distance” write the histories. (179) = The Jacobean tragedies are revenge plays or tragedies full of gruesome and often darkly comic violence. Hamlet is an example: the curtain closes with a pile of dead bodies on the stage. In his histories, Shakespeare loosely adapts historical figures and events.

Fortinbras (179) = Fortinbras is the Norwegian prince in Hamlet; he seeks revenge for his father’s death, by attempting to reclaim the land his father lost.

Edgar (179) = Edgar is a character in Shakespeare’s tragedy King Lear; he is the son of one of the kingdom’s most powerful men, easily tricked by his illegitimate brother, and falsely accused of plotting to kill his father, Gloucester. He then disguises himself as a beggar to evade his father’s men, then by his impersonation he helps his father and avenges his brother’s treason.

“I am the son who…” (180) = another reference to father/son relationships, connecting to the Biblical parable of The Prodigal Son and to Edgar from King Lear [both allusions explained earlier].

“Sweet Marjoram” (180) = an aromatic plant used to heal wounds; the phrase appears in King Lear, as it is Edgar’s password to his father Gloucester to confirm his identity as his son.

Tea Country
From the voice of Michael's half-sister, Susan, what do we learn about his father Mervyn's second marriage? How is Mervyn’s life different with his “second” family?

How does the atmosphere change, pre- and post-monsoon? How might the setting change be metaphoric?

How does Michael describe the landscape that surrounds the house and his parents' marriage?

“What We Think of Married Life”
Now we learn more about Mervyn and Doris’s marriage. How does Michael characterize them individually?

Despite their differences, what do Mervyn and Doris have in common?

Ondaatje tells the story of some of the arguments his parents would have. What characteristics are revealed in each of them during these fights?

How did Doris use her children to manipulate her husband? What were their “plays”?

On page 172, how does Ondaatje use syntax and diction to convey his family dynamic?

What does Ondaatje mean by the final phrase, “The north pole”?

Now that you finished the chapter, what would be your response to the title’s prompt? What do they think of marriage”?

Dialogues
This is a series of anecdotes that Michael is told about his father Mervyn. What traits are revealed in each? What are the feelings expressed by the speakers about Mervyn?

How does Ondaatje use metalinguistic technique on page 178?

Why does the final anecdote end with an ellipsis?

Blind Faith
In “Jaffna Afternoons,” Ondaatje describes how he and his aunt “trade anecdotes and faint memories, trying to swell them with the order of dates and asides, interlocking them all as if assembling the hull of a ship.” (26). Now, Ondaatje begins this section explaining the challenge he faces in writing this text: “to keep the peace with enemy camps, eliminate the chaos at the end of Jacobean tragedies, and with the ‘mercy of distance’ write the histories.” Has he been successful so far in “writ[ing] the histories”?

How does Ondaatje use the allusions to Fortinbras and Edgar as a parallel to his family and himself? (Consult the allusion.)

What does Ondaatje admit was his “loss”?

On page 180, Ondaatje uses two examples of anaphora (“I am...I am...I am...” and “Give...Give...Give...”) Why? What effect does this technique have?

Who is the “you” that is suddenly introduced here?

The Bone
What is the significance of the motif “bone”?
Why can’t Michael come to terms with this particular anecdote about his father?

How might the five dogs be metaphorical?

What does Ondaatje mean when he says “but this scene had no humor or gentleness in it”? How does his diction reference the extended metaphor of theater, which was developed in the previous section?

Earlier Michael calls his father the “the north pole” (172); how does he extend this image here, on page 182?

“Thanikama”

What is the point of view here? Who is the “he” in this section? Does the point of view change? Where, why?

How does Ondaatje’s style change?

What do you make of the personification of animals?

What is the significance of translators and how does that relate to both Ondaatje’s objective and his motif of the foreigner?

What stylistic techniques does Ondaatje use on page 188, beginning with “For about ten minutes he sat...”? What is the mood in this paragraph? What diction reveals this to you? How does “lost ship on a white sea” relate to “Harbour”? Why does Ondaatje refer again to Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream on page 188 (e.g. Nick Bottom’s “ass’s head”)?

Directly after that he adapts a line from the Wikramasinha poem from the section “Don’t Talk to Me about Matisse” (85) when he writes “Don’t talk to me about Shakespeare” Why? What similar themes appear in both RITF and the Shakespeare play?

Note once again that nature is advancing. What are the various meanings of “nature”? Is he just talking about wildlife here?

What happens in the final paragraph? What is the impact of the metalanguage (“It was page 189.”)?

What is the symbolic meaning of the mirror here?

What is the “duty” he writes of?

What do you think he means when he wrote, “he saw the midnight rat” (180)?

Monsoon Notebook (iii)

How does this notebook relate to the other two?

What are “grahayas”? How might the reference be significant here (and other parts of the story)?
Ondaatje reveals here that his previous section, “Thanikama” means “aloneness”. Why does he reveal that here? Who does it describe? He also uses a fragment, “Birdless.” He has associated birds and bird sounds with his family (see “Jaffna Afternoons” and “Sweet Like a Crow”), so what is he saying here with this series of fragments?

What does Ondaatje mean when he writes, “Carry some metal, An iron heart. Do not step on bone or hair or human ash” (190)?

Ondaatje refers to shapes and the shape of things when writing about “false maps” in “Tabula Asiae” (63-68), again he brings that up on page 190 and throughout this section (“the shape of an unknown thing”). What is the meaning here? What is the “unknown thing”?

What are the elements of metalanguage in this chapter?

How does final phrase “so it is difficult to breathe” (191) relate to his onomatopoetic description of the word Asia as “breathless” (22)?

**Final Days / Father Tongue**

What is the meaning of the title of this section? What are the various connotations of “tongue”? Consider Ondaatje’s comments about silence, “noisy solitude,” and the section entitled “Tongue” as well.

How is Michael’s half-sister Jennifer’s portrayal of Mervyn different from what he knew of him?

What do we learn about Mervyn from his friend V.C. de Silva? What is his tone toward Mervyn?

What do we learn from Archer Jayawardene? What is his tone toward Mervyn?

How was his funeral a tragi-comedy? How does this relate to the overall tone of this autobiographical novel?

Presumably this last section is Michael’s perspective. Do detailed annotations of pages 198-201. What does Michael reveal to us here? About himself and his father? What is the effect of the metalinguistic techniques he uses? How does poison play symbolically in this passage?

What does he mean on page 199 when he writes, “When the children came to visit him he was distant with them because he thought they were imitations”? What is the guilt that cursed his first family?

What is revealed in the paragraph at the top of page 200 when Mervyn is quoted directly, but without quotation marks?

What does Ondaatje mean when he portrays Mervyn as a “miniaturist”? (201)

Who is he speaking to in the final paragraph of this section? Why the shift?

**Last Morning**

What are the metalinguistic qualities of this passage?

What is the effect of repetition in this section?

Considering that the first word of the book is “drought” and the last word of the book is “rain,” what might Ondaatje be suggesting?

Once again, Ondaatje alludes to Neruda, Lawrence, and Keyt. Why?

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

“For my papers ware…” (206) = a line from Englishman Robert Knox’s account of his captivity in the Kingdom of Kandy. (See the page 81 allusion in the chapter, “The Karapothas.”)

Do you find anything interesting here?

What do you make of Ondaatje’s confession and apology on page 206?