

ondaatje running in the family

ondaatje running in the family is a compelling novel by Michael Ondaatje that delves into the complexities of family dynamics, identity, and the haunting legacy of the past. This literary work explores how secrets, cultural heritage, and personal histories intertwine within a family, shaping the lives of its members across generations. The narrative masterfully blends themes of memory, trauma, and reconciliation, making it a significant contribution to contemporary fiction. In this article, we will examine the novel's plot, characters, themes, and literary significance, providing a comprehensive understanding of Ondaatje's exploration of familial ties. Additionally, we will analyze the critical reception and the broader cultural context that surrounds the novel. The following sections outline the key aspects of "Running in the Family" to guide readers through its intricate storytelling.

- Overview of "Running in the Family"
- Major Themes in the Novel
- Character Analysis
- Literary Style and Narrative Techniques
- Critical Reception and Impact
- Cultural and Historical Context

Overview of "Running in the Family"

"Running in the Family" is a semi-autobiographical novel by Michael Ondaatje, first published in 1982. The book is a vivid memoir that traces Ondaatje's return to Sri Lanka, his birthplace, after many years abroad. Through a blend of prose and poetry, the narrative reconstructs the lives of his family members, particularly focusing on his father and the complex history they share. The work is notable for its lyrical style and non-linear storytelling, which mirrors the fragmented nature of memory and identity. Ondaatje's reflections reveal the intersections of personal and national histories, capturing the colonial and post-colonial tensions of Sri Lanka.

Plot Summary

The narrative unfolds as Ondaatje returns to Colombo to reconnect with his roots and uncover the stories of his ancestors. The book recounts tales of his father's youthful escapades, the eccentricities of family members, and the cultural landscape of Sri Lanka during the mid-20th century. The author intersperses anecdotes with family photographs and poetic passages, creating a rich tapestry of memories and impressions. The story is less about a chronological sequence of events and more about evoking the atmosphere and emotional truths of the family's past.

Structure and Format

"Running in the Family" defies traditional memoir conventions by blending genres and styles. It incorporates:

- Prose narrative
- Poetry and lyrical passages
- Photographic images
- Fragmented storytelling

This hybrid form enhances the themes of memory and identity, emphasizing the elusive nature of family history and personal recollection.

Major Themes in the Novel

The themes present in "Running in the Family" are central to understanding Ondaatje's exploration of family and identity. The novel addresses universal concepts through the lens of a specific cultural and familial experience.

Memory and Identity

Memory serves as a foundation for identity in the novel, with Ondaatje examining how personal and collective memories shape the understanding of self and family. The fragmented, sometimes unreliable recollections highlight the difficulty of capturing the true essence of the past.

Family Legacy and Secrets

The novel reveals how family secrets and legacies are passed down through generations, influencing behavior and relationships. Ondaatje portrays the tension between honoring family history and confronting its darker aspects.

Cultural Heritage and Post-Colonialism

Set against the backdrop of Sri Lanka's transition from colonial rule to independence, the novel explores the impact of cultural heritage on individual identity. Ondaatje reflects on the hybridity of colonial legacy and its effects on his family's social status and personal narratives.

Character Analysis

The characters in "Running in the Family" are richly drawn and essential to understanding the novel's exploration of familial relationships and identity.

Michael Ondaatje (Narrator)

The narrator serves as a conduit for the reader's journey into the family's past. His perspective is introspective and inquisitive, revealing his struggle to reconcile the mythicized family stories with reality. Through his observations, the novel interrogates the nature of memory and storytelling.

Philip Ondaatje (Father)

Philip, Michael's father, is portrayed as a charismatic and flawed figure whose exploits form much of the narrative's core. His rebellious spirit and eccentric lifestyle symbolize the tensions between tradition and modernity, freedom and responsibility.

Other Family Members

The extended family features prominently, each member contributing to the mosaic of memories. Their diverse personalities and histories underscore the complexity of family dynamics and cultural identity.

Literary Style and Narrative Techniques

"Running in the Family" is distinguished by its innovative literary style and narrative approach, which enhance its thematic depth.

Lyrical Prose and Poetry

Ondaatje's use of poetic language and imagery creates a vivid and evocative atmosphere. The lyrical quality of the prose invites readers to engage with the emotional resonance of the family's stories rather than just their factual content.

Non-Linear Narrative

The novel's structure eschews chronological order, instead employing a fragmented approach that mirrors the workings of memory. This technique allows for multiple perspectives and temporal shifts, enriching the reader's understanding of the family's history.

Use of Photographs

The inclusion of photographs serves as a visual complement to the text, grounding the narrative in tangible reality while also emphasizing the themes of memory and loss.

Critical Reception and Impact

Since its publication, "Running in the Family" has garnered critical acclaim for its originality and emotional depth. It is considered a landmark work in Canadian and post-colonial literature.

Literary Acclaim

Critics have praised Ondaatje's ability to blend memoir, poetry, and history into a cohesive and compelling narrative. The novel's innovative form and insightful exploration of identity have been highlighted as key strengths.

Influence on Contemporary Literature

"Running in the Family" has influenced numerous writers exploring themes of diaspora, memory, and family. Its hybrid style has inspired experimentation with genre boundaries in memoir and fiction.

Cultural and Historical Context

Understanding the cultural and historical context of Sri Lanka during the time period depicted in "Running in the Family" is essential for appreciating the novel's nuances.

Sri Lanka's Colonial History

The novel is set against a backdrop of British colonial rule and the subsequent emergence of independent Sri Lanka. This historical framework informs the social and political tensions experienced by the Ondaatje family.

Post-Colonial Identity

Ondaatje's narrative reflects the complexities of post-colonial identity, including the negotiation between Western influences and indigenous traditions. The family's status and experiences embody the challenges of this cultural transition.

Social and Cultural Traditions

The novel also highlights various Sri Lankan social customs, family structures, and cultural practices, providing readers with insight into the rich heritage that shapes the characters' lives.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of Michael Ondaatje's 'Running in the Family'?

The main theme of 'Running in the Family' is the exploration of family history and identity, blending memoir and fiction to depict Ondaatje's return to Sri Lanka and his attempts to understand his family's past.

Is 'Running in the Family' a novel or a memoir?

'Running in the Family' is a memoir that combines elements of fiction, poetry, and history to tell the story of Ondaatje's family and their life in Sri Lanka.

How does Michael Ondaatje structure 'Running in the Family'?

The book is structured non-linearly, incorporating fragmented narratives, anecdotes, photographs, and poetic passages to create a vivid and layered portrayal of family and place.

What role does Sri Lanka play in 'Running in the Family'?

Sri Lanka serves as both the setting and a character in the memoir, reflecting the cultural and political backdrop against which Ondaatje explores his family's story.

Who are some key family members featured in 'Running in the Family'?

Key family members include Ondaatje's father, Mervyn Ondaatje, a controversial and charismatic figure, and other relatives whose stories illuminate the family's complex history.

Why is 'Running in the Family' considered a significant work in postcolonial literature?

'Running in the Family' is significant in postcolonial literature because it addresses themes of colonial legacy, identity, and displacement through the lens of a Sri Lankan family's experience.

How does Ondaatje blend fact and fiction in 'Running in the Family'?

Ondaatje intentionally blurs the lines between fact and fiction, using imaginative reconstruction and poetic license to evoke emotional truths rather than strict historical accuracy.

What literary techniques are prominent in 'Running in the Family'?

The memoir features techniques like fragmented narrative, lyrical prose, vivid imagery, and interspersed photographs to create a rich, multi-dimensional reading experience.

Has 'Running in the Family' received any notable awards or recognition?

While it has not won major awards, 'Running in the Family' is widely acclaimed by critics and readers for its innovative style and deeply personal storytelling.

How does 'Running in the Family' compare to Ondaatje's other works?

Unlike Ondaatje's novels such as 'The English Patient', 'Running in the Family' is more autobiographical and experimental, focusing on personal history rather than fictional narratives.

Additional Resources

1. *Running in the Family* by Michael Ondaatje

This semi-autobiographical memoir explores Ondaatje's return to Sri Lanka, blending memory, myth, and history. The narrative delves into the eccentric characters and complex heritage of his family, painting a vivid picture of colonial and postcolonial Ceylon. Ondaatje's lyrical prose captures the essence of place and identity in a deeply personal way.

2. *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* by Michael Ondaatje

Though stylistically different, this experimental narrative shares Ondaatje's poetic approach to storytelling seen in **Running in the Family**. It interweaves fact and fiction to recount the life and legend of the infamous outlaw Billy the Kid, reflecting themes of memory and myth-making. The fragmented structure invites readers to piece together the story much like Ondaatje reconstructs his family history.

3. *In the Skin of a Lion* by Michael Ondaatje

This novel complements **Running in the Family** by exploring themes of identity, migration, and history, centered around immigrant workers in early 20th-century Toronto. Ondaatje's lyrical style and focus on marginalized voices offer a broader context to his exploration of personal and cultural heritage. The book's rich narrative layers echo the complexity of Ondaatje's family saga.

4. *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje

Best known for its poetic narrative and exploration of love and loss during World War II, this novel also reflects Ondaatje's fascination with history and memory. Like **Running in the Family**, it blends fragmented stories and perspectives to uncover deeper truths about identity and human connection. The evocative prose and intricate storytelling make it a complement to Ondaatje's memoir.

5. *My Family and Other Animals* by Gerald Durrell

This humorous memoir recounts the eccentricities of Durrell's family life on the Greek island of Corfu, much like Ondaatje's vivid portrayal of his Sri Lankan family. Both books use rich, descriptive language to bring to life the quirks and warmth of family dynamics. It provides a lighter, yet similarly affectionate, exploration of familial bonds and cultural setting.

6. *A House for Mr Biswas* by V.S. Naipaul

Naipaul's novel explores themes of identity, colonial legacy, and family struggles in Trinidad, resonating with Ondaatje's examination of postcolonial Sri Lanka. The protagonist's quest for self-definition amidst social and familial pressures parallels Ondaatje's reflections on heritage and belonging. The book offers a profound look at family and cultural history in a postcolonial context.

7. *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy

This Booker Prize-winning novel delves into family secrets, memory, and the impact of history on personal lives in India. Like **Running in the Family**, it blends lyrical prose with a nonlinear narrative to explore complex emotional landscapes and cultural identity. Roy's rich storytelling complements Ondaatje's exploration of family and place.

8. *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith

Smith's debut novel explores multicultural family dynamics and identity in contemporary London, reflecting themes of heritage and belonging similar to Ondaatje's memoir. The interwoven stories of immigrant families highlight the ongoing negotiation of past and present, tradition and modernity. Its vibrant characters and social commentary provide a modern parallel to Ondaatje's family narrative.

9. *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi

This multigenerational saga traces the descendants of two half-sisters from Ghana, exploring themes of diaspora, memory, and family legacy. Like **Running in the Family**, it examines how history shapes personal identity across time and geography. Gyasi's sweeping narrative offers a powerful perspective on heritage and the enduring impact of family histories.

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