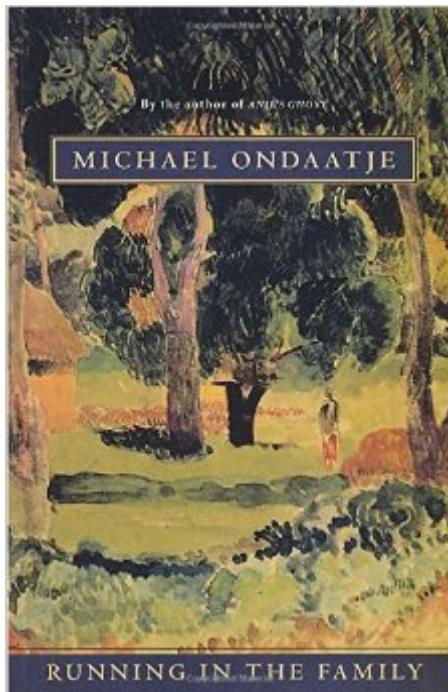


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# Running In The Family



## Synopsis

In the late 1970s Ondaatje returned to his native island of Sri Lanka. As he records his journey through the drug-like heat and intoxicating fragrances of that "pendant off the ear of India," Ondaatje simultaneously retraces the baroque mythology of his Dutch-Ceylonese family. An inspired travel narrative and family memoir by an exceptional writer.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Best known for his novel *The English Patient*, Ondaatje wrote this 1982 memoir after returning to his native Ceylon. His experiences led to a "you can go home again" reflection on his family and country. "For the outsider, this memoir offers a poignant vision exotic in cultural particulars, familiar in intimate human feelings" (LJ 11/15/82). Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

"Brightly coloured, sweet and painful, bloody-minded and otherworldly, [this book] achieves the status of legend." Margaret Atwood  
"Eloquent, oblique, witty, full of light and feeling." Ondaatje's knowledge of the fragility and luck of life is very clear. So, too, is the grace and originality of his prose.  
"The New Yorker" "Ondaatje has produced a remarkable book." "Shimmering through the haze of heat and memory is an impressionistic, sometimes surreal portrait of an exotic time and place now gone, a colonial paradise that had its own rhythms and imperatives." "Globe and Mail" "A beautiful, luscious book. Michael Ondaatje has depicted his extraordinary family, who delighted in masks and costumes and love affairs that "rainbowed over marriages" in the kind

of language that makes glory of their lives. He has gone on a poet's journey to Sri Lanka (Ceylon), and the reader who travels with him enters a truly magical world. Maxine Hong Kingston's "It sparkles with the intensity and vividness of its multifaceted tales of romance and intrigue." Fort Worth Star-Telegram "A brilliant, charming, poetic, hyperbolic holiday of a book." Ondaatje walks the line between fact and fiction with a delicately rendered delight. Vancouver Province "the brilliant and moving book he has written is original in every way that matters." W. S. Merwin "A beautiful, luscious book of discovery and remembrance." Hamilton Spectator "With a prose style equal to the voluptuousness of [Ondaatje's] subject and a sense of humor never too far away, *Running in the Family* is sheer reading pleasure." Washington Post "It dazzles with its range of imagination, richness of language and the consistently involving changes of mood and tempo." Toronto Star "This is an intriguing, funny, dream-like book, impossible to put down." Winnipeg Free Press "Brief, vivid scenes, moments revived out of remote memories, pictures of the intensities lived by his passionate parents amid the lush flora, the predatory fauna, and the old-fashioned life of the British colonies. This is great story-telling." Leon Edel From the Hardcover edition.

The writing is beautiful. Oondatje skillfully uses vivid language that makes the memoir engaging and poetic (not purely for the language, but also for actual poems Ondaatje chooses to include). He manages to engage all of the reader's senses and create world that often feel too appetizing to leave. For instance, Ondaatje brings us in to his replaying of sounds from a recorded Sri Lankan night: "In this silent room (with its own unheard hum of fridge, fluorescent light) there are these frogs loud as river, gruntings the whistle of other birds brash and sleepy, but in that night so modest behind peacocks they were unfocussed by the brain--nothing more than darkness, all those sweet loud younger brothers of night." He is constantly using such lovely details to bring the reader into this foreign world, and it was his skill with language that kept me reading to the end. And furthermore, there is such an intimacy in Oondatje's writing about family members. The minutest details, such as the way he noticed the changes in his mother's handwriting, display to a reader how well he does know these people, and how much he cares about them. For all the stories he tells, there is never a sense of bitterness or wanting to shame anyone. He tells very good things and he tells very bad things. He brings the people alive in his retelling of family history. In one instance,

Ondaatje writes with humor the story of his father's multiple casual engagements and, later, his father's alcoholism. But he never laments that he's been psychologically ruined. There isn't bitterness. Instead, the only lament seems to be that he never knew his father as well as he'd wished he had. Near the end of the memoir he includes an anecdote of being with his father two days prior to death. Ondaatje writes, "You know it is a most relaxed thing when you sit with a best friend and you know there is nothing you have to tell him, to empty your mind." It's when he writes statements like these that one feels the genuine nature behind the memoir. Ondaatje brings the reader into both a foreign country and foreign family, yet makes us feel affection for them just as well as he does.

Michael Ondaatje make place come alive like no other writer I have read. This books makes me see colors, it's that good. Funny, honest, grave, exaggerated tall tales of family truth that sometimes read like poems, sometimes like confessions, sometimes like a kaleidoscope. Beautiful, strange memoir...my favorite kind.

GautamiPutra Satakarni

This book by Michael Ondaatje takes us back to Ceylon, the Sri Lanka of today, where he feels his roots are. The roots-Dutch and Sinhalese. He takes us on travels around the country- giving us a feeling for the weather and landscape. And personalities of his family. Lyrical at times and also at times I feel a sense of magic realism. I don't know if anyone else feels that, but I will bring it up when my book club meets next.

"Running in the Family" is an impressionistically written and reflective memoir of Michael Ondaatje's eccentric Ceylonese family. The book begins with a series of disjointed stories about Ondaatje's parents and grandparents. I found this part somewhat hard to get through as Ondaatje drops into the stories without providing the reader with the necessary information to understand who the players are and why they are important. However, since the book is highly impressionistic in style, perhaps this approach works. After all, most of us learn about our family history in bits and pieces; we don't pick up yarns and memory bites in chronological order. The third section, "Don't Talk to Me about Matisse" is a literary treasure! Ondaatje weaves a travel journal with childhood memories. Ondaatje's journey through Sri Lanka and memory land is depicted with great passion and reflection: "I witnessed everything. One morning I would wake and just smell things for the whole

day, it was so rich I had to select senses. And still everything moved slowly with the assured fateful speed of a coconut falling on someone's head, like the Jaffna train, like the fan at low speed, like the necessary sleep in the afternoon with dreams blinded by toddy."Ondaatje generously included several of his poems in the middle of the book. "The Cinnamon Peeler", with its strong sensuality, serves as a fitting metaphor for the stories about romantic interludes in the author's family. "The Cinnamon Peeler" is so beautiful, I plan to commit it to memory.Ondaatje dwells on the salient qualities of his relatives and homeland. If this book were a painting, it would be a mostly green wash of color with bright, blood red splashes. The red splashes could represent the tragedy so inherent in Ondaatje's family history. Alcoholism and mental illness rule the house in this family. There are many humorous moments, however, and Ondaatje delivers them with great bravado: "Lalla's great claim to fame was that she was the first woman in Ceylon to have a mastectomy. ... She kept losing the contraption to servants who were mystified by it as well as to the dog, Chindit, who would be found gnawing at the foam as if it were tender chicken." These hilarious memories give the reader a reprieve from the underlying tragedy like a much-needed downpour during a drought.In the final sections, Ondaatje slowly reveals the many layers of his father's sad, but remarkable life. One chapter, called "Dialogues" merely consists of bits and pieces of conversations about his father. Whether Ondaatje imagined these conversations or actually heard them retold is not important. They give homage to his father in a unique and poignant way.If you're looking for a travel journal on Sri Lanka, don't look here. But, if you want unforgettable impressions of an exotic land and a remarkable family, if you yearn for a memoir rendered with the finest of literary care, "Running in the Family" will surely please.

An engaging insight into Ondaatje's family background. With the backdrop of Sri Lanka and two generations of his family and their engaging eccentricities to draw on, it is written with great warmth and humour.

Years after immigrating to Canada, Michael Ondaatje is awakened by a wild, intense dream of Asia. The dream inspires him to return to the childhood home he left at age 11 to fill in the gaps of what he remembered as a wonderful, mystical place. He and present family members make two return journeys to Sri Lanka in 1978 and 1980, interviewing, questioning, and wading through long lists of genealogies.Their first stop is an aunt's 1700's residence nestled within an 18th century Dutch fortress in Northern Ceylon. This is just the beginning of the wonders he and family members encounter as they continue to visit old places and family members, amplified by the fantastical

escapades of his ancestors that their childhood eyes and ears hadn't known. Given the dense, sensitive prose of Michael Ondaatje, this book is a wonder of both the personal and historical.

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