The English Patient

Hauntingly Beautiful

Haunting and harrowing, as beautiful as it is disturbing, The English Patient tells the story of the entanglement of four damaged lives in an Italian monastery as World War II ends. The exhausted nurse, Hana; the maimed thief, Caravaggio; the wary sapper, Kip; each is haunted by the riddle of the English patient, the nameless, burn victim who lies in an upstairs room and whose memories of passion, betrayal, and rescue illuminate this book like flashes of heat lightning. In lyrical prose informed by a poetic consciousness, Michael Ondaatje weaves these characters together, pulls them tight, then unravels the threads with unsettling acumen. A book that binds readers of great literature, The English Patient garnered the Booker Prize for author Ondaatje. The poet and novelist has also written In the Skin of a Lion, Coming Through Slaughter and The Collected Works of Billy the Kid; two collections of poems, The Cinnamon Peeler and Theres a Trick with a Knife Im Learning to Do; and a memoir, Running in the Family.

My Personal Review:
This was the book that helped me find my voice as a writer. The intense, unique, exquisite, seemingly random details Ondaatje uses to convey characterization, motivation, and mood continue to amaze me each time I read his works, but THIS novel has the ring of poetry in every sentence.

The movie is an entirely different animal, and it HAS to be, because Ondaatjes power lies in his descriptions; his similes and metaphors; his own private way of viewing the human experience--not in the beats of the plot or the wit of the dialogue. This book is not driven by action but by the heart-wrenching ache of slowly unfolding details that peel back the layers of each characters past until they are completely bare.

The meat of this work is found in what is NOT being said, but always implied; a casual reader will miss the depths of Ondaatjes meaning. (And perhaps I myself have misunderstood his intentions--who knows?) But here are a few samples of passages Im sure are profound enough to make a wary buyer an avid reader:

Water is exile, carried back in cans and flasks, the ghost between your hands and your mouth.

His hands held together like a human bowl.
She paused after each set of notes as if bringing her hands out of water to see what she had caught, then continued, placing down the main bones of the tune.

Read him slowly, dear girl, you must read Kipling slowly. Watch carefully where the commas fall so you can discover the natural pauses. He is a writer who used pen and ink. He looked up from the page a lot, I believe, stared through his window and listened to birds, as most writers who are alone do. Some do not know the names of birds, though he did. Your eye is too quick and North American. Think about the speed of his pen. What an appalling, barnacled old first paragraph it is otherwise.

I wanted to touch that bone at your neck, collarbone, its like a small hard wing under your skin. I wanted to place my fingers against it. I've always liked flesh the colour of rivers and rocks or like the brown eye of a Susan, do you know what that flower is? Have you seen them? I am so tired, Kip, I want to sleep. I want to sleep under this tree, put my eye against your collarbone. I just want to close my eyes without thinking of others, want to find the crook of a tree and climb into it and sleep.

She sits on the bed hugging nakedness. He slides his open palm along the sweat of her shoulder. This is my shoulder, he thinks, not her husbands, this is my shoulder. As lovers they have offered parts of their bodies to each other, like this.

Everywhere she touches braille doorways. As if organs, the heart, the rows of rib, can be seen under the skin, saliva across her hand now a colour. He has mapped her sadness more than any other.

Sometimes, I feel like the only one who can describe the mastery of Ondaatje's style is Ondaatje himself, but he seems far too humble for that. I've learned so much from him, from this story; I wish I could afford to give a copy to everyone I meet, just to show them that even the most horrific and agonizing of situations, real or imagined, can be expressed beautifully, and therefore, transformed.

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