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THERE'S A TRICK WITH A MYTH I'M LEARNING TO DO:

THE CREATION OF MYTH

IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S PROSE

by

Jennifer Anne Cole

A Thesis  
submitted to the  
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
through the Department of  
English in Partial Fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Degree  
of Master of Arts at  
the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

1988

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ISBN 0-315-43736-7

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1988



ABSTRACT

THERE'S A TRICK WITH A MYTH I'M LEARNING TO DO:

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It is paradoxical that many of the critics who analyse Ondaatje's prose choose to present an interpretation of the imagery as it relates to theme. However, these same images relate directly to Ondaatje's creation of myth, which critics often mention but rarely discuss. Another difficulty posed by Ondaatje is that he freely admits to using fact to create fiction but the line between where fact leaves off and fiction begins is blurred. This study of the techniques Ondaatje uses to create myth will elucidate the symbiotic relationship between fact and fiction and demonstrate how myth enhances the fictionalizing process.

The focus of this thesis will be how Ondaatje creates myth as it appears in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), *Running in the Family* (1982), and *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987). Some of the most consistent narrative techniques that Ondaatje uses to create myth are paratextual devices such as photographs which bridge fact and fiction to substantiate myth, repeating images and conversations which take on symbolic value, a familiar landscape, and surreal episodes which intensify the mythic quality of the narrative. In his first

two prose works, *Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*. Ondaatje relies on cultural heroes to suggest myth. However, *Running in the Family* and *In the Skin of a Lion* represent a departure from this technique as Ondaatje creates a mythic structure around his family and fictional characters, respectively. There is also a brief discussion on autobiographic criticism of *Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* which I interpret as a simplistic attempt by critics to deal with Ondaatje's unique combination of fact and fiction.

This thesis does not attempt to explain Ondaatje's four prose works as a progression but rather as individual experiments in form, each with its own merit. While the techniques he uses to create myth are identifiable, they vary from book to book. Ondaatje continually modifies, expands and uses combinations of previous techniques which suggests an organic relationship between the works.



For my parents, Keith and Lillian Cole,  
and my husband, Nelson.

## AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Richard Hornsey, Dr. Louis K. MacKendrick and Dr. Adrian van den Hoven for their efforts in helping me write a comprehensible thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Peter Stevens for the use of several of his books on jazz and Storyville, New Orleans which provided the information necessary to trace Ondaatje's creation of Buddy Bolden. Many thanks to the professors, fellow students and friends in the English department at the University of Windsor for providing the sense of community and support necessary for me to be able to complete this project.

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INTRODUCTION

I am interested in myth. Making it, remaking it, exploding. I don't like poems or works that cash in on a cliché of history or a personality. I don't like pop westerns and pop Billy the Kids. Myths are only of value to me when they are realistic as well as having other qualities of myth.

Ondaatje's recorded interest in myth dates back to his Masters of Arts thesis done at Queen's University in 1967: "Mythology in the Poetry of Edwin Muir," and is continued in his article on Howard O'Hagan's novel *Tay John*: "O'Hagan's Rough-Edged Chronicle" (1974). Ondaatje's creation of myth in his own prose is accomplished by applying some of the techniques to which he accredits the success of *Tay John*. Considering Ondaatje's recorded preoccupation with mythic forms it is unusual that several critics only mention Ondaatje's use of mythology but no one has looked exclusively at how Ondaatje synthesizes fact and fiction to create a mythic form. Instead, most critics who deal with Ondaatje's prose works concentrate on interpreting imagery in relation to thematic concerns.

One of the difficulties encountered in studying Ondaatje's prose works is his adeptness at integrating facts with fiction to create a narrative which exists on a different level. For example, in *Coming Through Slaughter* Ondaatje combines paratextual devices such as photographs and interviews and then subverts the factual nature of these by including equally believable fictitious interviews with actual people and uses the photograph to convince us that

Buddy Bolden and Bellocq were acquainted.<sup>3</sup> The fiction does not supersede the fact, but rather the two exist in a symbiotic relationship. A variation of this technique can be found in *In the Skin of the Lion* which is Ondaatje's first prose work in which he does not reproduce any photographs. However, the textual descriptions of photographs function as documents and Ondaatje uses these intangible photographs to link fictional characters with the real events and people of the city of Toronto.

Ondaatje's creation of myth further removes the narrative from its factual point of reference. The idea of myth may suggest an archetypal interpretation. However, in *Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* Ondaatje is relying on cultural heroes and popular legend as the basis for his narratives. Ondaatje retains some of the details from the legend but orders his narrative with imaginatively created symbols and images and adds invented details.

In *Running in the Family* Ondaatje takes the idea of myth one step further and explores the possibility of mythologizing the Ondaatje family. Ondaatje's success in convincing us that we should be interested in his family in Sri Lanka in *Running in the Family* is entirely dependent on his ability to impose a mythic structure on his own family. *In the Skin of a Lion* gathers its strength from Ondaatje's experiment in *Running in the Family* and for the first time we are presented with fictional, working class characters

who are more important and interesting than the fact-based characters.

A survey of this kind, where the books are studied in chronological order, may suggest that some kind of progression is apparent. However, I would like to suggest that each work has individual merit and one work should not be considered better than a previous one simply because Ondaatje demonstrates in it a facility with different techniques. In Ondaatje's case, it is difficult to pin his writing down to a fixed set of rules, as every work is a new experiment with form and ideas. Ondaatje uses the dry facts of history as a point of departure and blends them with the vibrant oral tradition of legend to create a work in which "a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts" (RTF 206).

Several critics have attempted to interpret *Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* in an autobiographical manner. I believe that this response is partly based on Ondaatje's portrayal of Billy and Bolden as artists. Some critics cannot restrain themselves from interpreting the sensibilities of Ondaatje's characters as representing Ondaatje. These critics may also be responding to a narrative where it is difficult to determine where fact and fiction exist separately. Ondaatje admits that to create these narratives "I put myself into the characters' situations for a long period of time....A lot of my own world gets into their stories. It's probably a major illness." It is evident that autobiographical incidents are

incorporated in the prose but a trend toward interpreting Ondaatje's novels in a purely autobiographical manner is severely limiting to the other possibilities that the prose suggests. Ondaatje himself states: "Nothing is more irritating than to have your work translated by your life."<sup>4</sup>

Ondaatje and Sam Solecki discuss the meaning of the epigraphs to Ondaatje's poetry which can be likened to the disclaimers that he prints at the end of his prose. Solecki asks, "Are these lines/epigraphs warnings to the reader?"<sup>5</sup> Ondaatje responds by stating

Yes, but to myself as well. There's a great deal of lying in poetry, by necessity. It's not a case of being tactful or misrepresenting something but of making art; art is, to a certain extent deceit. And what disturbs me in having my work interpreted as either physically or biographically right or wrong is that there's an emotional or psychological rightness which, for me, is more important than the other two..

The reader must understand that he is not about to read a factual novel, but rather, a creative improvisation of the facts which may result in something closer to the psychological truth than the actual historic facts.

Ondaatje is searching for a new form for the novel, one that will accomodate his vision of invention, poetry and myth.

## Notes

1 "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje." *Manna: A Review of Contemporary Poetry* No. 1 (March 1972) 21.

2 All subsequent references to Ondaatje's prose works will be placed in the text of the thesis and the titles shortened: *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*: (BTK), *Coming Through Slaughter*: (CTS), *Running in the Family*: (RTF), and *In the Skin of a Lion*: (SQL).

3 Adele Freedman, "From Gunslingers to Jazz Musicians," *The Globe and Mail* [Toronto], 22 December 1979. Sec. Entertainment, 1.

4 Mark Abley, "Home is Where the Hurt Is," *Maclean's*, 23 April 1979, 2.

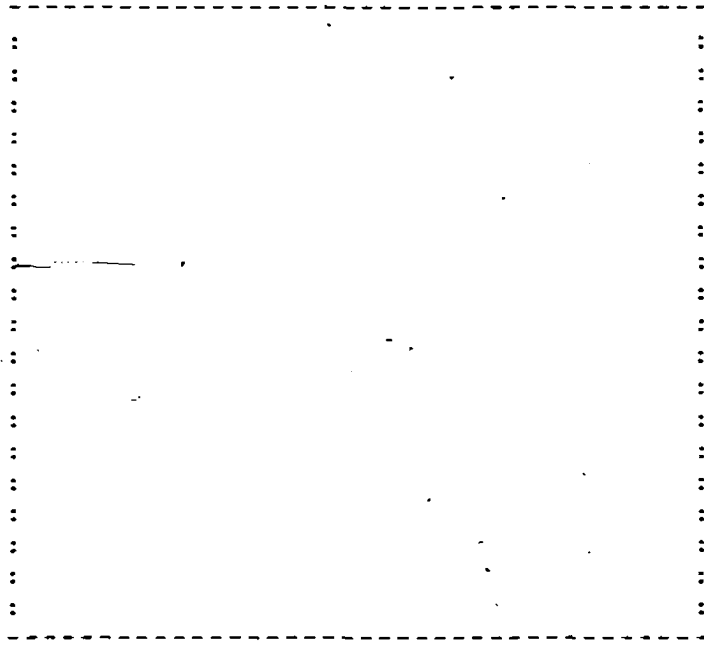
5 Sam Solecki, "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje" *Rune* No. 2 (Spring 1975): 49.

6 Solecki 49.



CHAPTER ONE

*The Collected Works of Billy  
the Kid: An Experiment in Form*



I send you a picture of Billy made with the Perry shutter as quick as it can be worked -- Pyro and soda developer. I am making daily experiments now and find I am able to take passing horses at a lively trot square across the line of fire -- bits of snow in the air -- spokes well defined -- some blur on top of wheel but sharp in the main -- men walking are no trick -- I will send you the proofs sometime (BTK 5).

The enigma of the framed blank space where a photograph is expected is the first clue that *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: left handed poems* is not a conventional biography. David Donnell states that Ondaatje's choice of quoting the western photographer L.A. Huffman on the first

page indicates the experimental direction *The Collected Works* will take: "Huffman," using a different medium than Ondaatje. "was interested in the dynamic of western images and the development of a new explorative artistic method."

*Billy the Kid* also represents a new direction in Ondaatje's writing. Besides being his first long work, *Billy the Kid* functions as a bridge between his earlier poetry and his later prose works. The implicit violence in some of the images in *Billy the Kid* is reminiscent of *The Dainty Monsters* and *The Man With Seven Toes*, but the experiments in form found in *Billy the Kid* also exert their influence on the structure of Ondaatje's later writings. For example, Ondaatje's interest in using historical or legendary figures as a basis for his fiction begins with *The Man with Seven Toes* and is continued with his portrayal of William H. Bonney in *Billy the Kid*. *Coming Through Slaughter*, *Running in the Family* and *In the Skin of A Lion* also have their basis in fact, but Ondaatje creates a unique narrative structure for each to express the fusion of fact and fiction. *Billy the Kid* allows Ondaatje to experiment at length with appropriate narrative devices, images and characterization to complement a fictional form that encompasses fact, fiction and myth.

*Billy the Kid* represents Ondaatje's first sustained attempt to fictionalize a historical character. However, an examination of where fact leaves off and fiction begins is hampered by the lack of facts about William H. Bonney's life

as well as their incongruity. Fortunately, Ondaatje identifies his major source of information. It is Walter Noble Burns' 1926 novel, *The Saga of Billy the Kid*. Burns' work is of questionable historical accuracy since it is a compilation of the legends about Billy the Kid and in that respect represents common knowledge. Burns is careful to point out that "the history of Billy the Kid already has been clouded by legend. Less than fifty years after his death it is not always easy to differentiate fact from myth."<sup>2</sup>

Stephen Scobie points out that the book by Burns is important for the "rehabilitation of Billy's reputation."<sup>3</sup> Burns is among the first who turned from portraying Billy as "a paragon of evil" to presenting him as a "poor misunderstood kid."<sup>4</sup> The following is a typical example of the romanticized image of Billy that Burns creates:

The boy who never grew up has become a kind of symbol of frontier knight-errantry, a figure of eternal youth riding for ever [sic] through a purple glamour of romance.... A boy is its hero: a boy when the tale begins, a boy when it ends; a boy born to battle and vendetta, to hatred and murder, to tragic victory and tragic defeat and who took it all with a smile.

Ondaatje's interest in idealized portrayals of Billy is confirmed when he provides us with a photograph of the cover of *The True Life of Billy the Kid* courtesy of The Five Cent Wide Awake Library (BTK 98). In the cover sketch Billy is portrayed as a dashing, well dressed and well armed man posed in front of a rock outcrop. The story, "Billy the Kid and the Princess," which follows, depicts Billy as a gallant

hero. It is no coincidence that the comic book story mirrors Paulita Maxwell's statement about Billy: "He was a nice boy, at least to me, courteous, gallant, always respectful" (BTK 96). Ondaatje states in the credits that "the comic book legend is real" (BTK 110). Like Burns', Ondaatje's recreation of the life of Billy the Kid is imaginative, but Ondaatje is the first writer to allow Billy to tell his own story. Billy draws attention to this point when he says, "Not a story about me through their eyes then. Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. Here then is a maze to begin, be in" (BTK 20).

In an interview for *Manna* in 1970 Ondaatje responds to the question, "Did you add much or create new things in your mythifying of Billy the Kid?":

Most of the book. Charlie's death is pretty close. O'Folliard's ambush moves from roughly a similar situation, tho there was no Mr. Wild. I pretty well limited myself to one book, *The Saga of Billy the Kid* which I refer to in the notes at the end. The found poems, in italics in my book, come from there..

The notes to which Ondaatje refers state that, "the death of Tunstall, the reminiscences by Paulita Maxwell and Sallie Chisum on Billy, are essentially made up of statements made to Walter Noble Burns in his book" (BTK 110). Ondaatje also mentions the book by L.A. Huffman and his source for the dialogue between Garrett and Poe before disclosing that "With these basic sources I have edited, rephrased, and slightly reworked the originals. But the emotions belong to their authors" (BTK 110). These disclosures about how

little of *Billy the Kid* is factual emphasizes that the major part of the book is Ondaatje's own creation. The idiosyncrasies of Billy the Kid and Pat Garrett, the memorable images that unify the ~~action~~ and the realistic settings, are products of Ondaatje's untrammelled imagination. Stephen Scobie concurs by suggesting that knowing which parts of *Billy the Kid* are factual is

important, of course, only to the ~~very~~ limited extent to which Ondaatje's book is concerned with giving an accurate historical view of the Kid. Clearly, this is not his intention, although some passages do appear quite accurate, and the general tone of many of the descriptions, the wealth of detail and the intensity of the images' realization must appear very convincing to the unwary reader.,

Despite Ondaatje's admission that he reworks and edits original sources to create a fictional work critics still find it necessary to comment on where he strayed from the facts. David Donnell points out that Ondaatje glosses over unflattering accounts of Billy as a ruthless killer:

The fact that Bonney's own murders (6) are hardly recorded in the book allows the deep persona to register the events around him with the uninterrupted quality of a camera. Billy's reaction to scenes like Charlie Bowdre's death show Billy as a compassionate friend. But this is partly because we never see Billy shooting the five Indians from "behind a rock."

Similarly, Andreas Schroeder finds fault with Ondaatje's portrayal of Billy as a perceptive human being:

Frankly, if Billy the Kid had ever really managed to describe a fever-ridden week in an abandoned barn in the way Ondaatje has him describe it on Page 17 of this book...he had no business being a gunman in the first place, and probably would have known it..

it seems that gunmen cannot escape their stereotypical presentation as cold-blooded, vulgar killers. In light of this it is appropriate to point out that Frank James was "an avid reader of Shakespeare and Francis Bacon;" Butch Cassidy "abjured the homicidal use of weapons - as befitted the grandson of a Mormon bishop;" and John Wesley Hardin, the son of a Methodist minister, enjoyed a ten year career as a gunslinger before being convicted and sent to prison where he "studied algebra, theology and the law."<sup>10</sup> After he was pardoned, Hardin, not bothering to wait for someone else, wrote his own autobiography. Remarkably, Ondaatje's fictional portrait of Billy combines the same paradoxical elements of the cold-blooded killer and the civilized gentleman as the factual accounts of other noteworthy outlaws.

*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is also the first work where Ondaatje uses photographs as part of the text. Robert Kroetsch cautions that Ondaatje's use of photographs is unusual:

He's [Ondaatje] tricky with the photographs - they are backwards and that kind of thing - and, you're right, he does talk film, he's interested in filmic motion. But I think there's a predominance of actual snapshots. One could say, Alright snapshots are interesting because they're unprofessional. Bang, you get it!!!

Although Kroetsch makes this comment in 1982 and is not referring directly to *Billy the Kid*, much of what he says is relevant. Ondaatje presents us with a real image by reproducing photographs and placing them within the text.

which, in traditional biographies, would act as factual evidence. Because of their expected purpose, the photographs in *Billy the Kid* at first appear to be diametrically opposed to the fictional nature of the text. However, their reality is minimized by the missing photograph of Billy the Kid and the fact that Ondaatje does not identify or label any of the photographs. Dennis Cooley makes an interesting comment on the indeterminacy of this format:

The actual photos sit alone. Uncaptioned. For good reason. Captions would too surely capture the photographs (the words -- caption, capture -- come from the same root: to seize, take). They would insist on overly determined readings. Ondaatje wants an uncertainty, openness in the text that will allow the pieces to float inside the text. unweighted by subtitles that would invest them with fixed meaning.12

To interpret the images we must resolve the information provided by the text and the image in the photograph. Even this is a challenge because in some instances the text and the photograph to which it alludes may be pages apart. One example is Billy's description of his keen senses and his guns: "My head and body open to every new wind direction, every nerve new move and smell. I look up. On the nail above the bed the black holster and gun is coiled like a snake, glinting also in the early morning white" (BTK 71). Corresponding to this image is the photograph on page forty-five, a detail of which is reproduced on page ninety-one. The first photo is placed immediately after Billy has demonstrated his keen sense of smell and stalking ability by shooting through the floor of the Chisum house to kill

Sallie's poisoned cat, Ferns. The enlarged detail of the photograph on page ninety-one focuses on the guns above the bed and a rifle leaning against the bed. This ominous detail is inserted in the text after Billy's entrance into Pete Maxwell's foreshadowing his impending death by Garrett's "oiled rifle" (BTK 93).

The photograph acts as a reminder to us that in this episode Billy does not reach for his guns and that it costs him his life. Billy notices "that breathing, not Maxwell's but *the other's*" (BTK 90), but because he mistakes at first the form in bed with Pete Maxwell as Pete's sister Paulita, and then feels the boots of a man, Billy begins to "move back a couple of yards in amazement" (BTK 93). Ondaatje, using both photograph and text, sets up Billy's death as an accident that happens because Billy's mental and physical reflexes are numbed by the unusual circumstances. We remain convinced that if Billy and Garrett had met on equal terms Garrett would have been outmatched.

Ondaatje even uses the absent photograph of Billy to link sections of the text. Ondaatje never provides the reader with the photograph of Billy, even though there is sufficient evidence to suggest that one exists. Initially, this is frustrating but by the time we complete the work we realize that the written text allows for a more intimate glimpse of Billy than any number of static pictures could provide. However, while we may not have the photo of Billy we are not allowed to forget that it exists. The missing



photograph of page five is linked to a similar blank space on page nineteen. On page nineteen of the work there is a description of the photograph by Paulita Maxwell:

In 1880 a travelling photographer came through Fort Sumner. Billy posed standing in the street near old Beaver Smith's saloon. The picture makes him appear rough and uncouth (BTK 19).

This is a description of what the static picture shows. It is followed immediately by Paulita Maxwell's emotional recollection of Billy. Ondaatje, by using the word "really," cleverly indicates that this is the more truthful picture:

The expression of his face was really boyish and pleasant. He may have worn such clothes as appear in the picture out on the range, but in Sumner he was careful of his personal appearance and dressed neatly and in good taste. I never liked the picture. I don't think it does Billy justice (BTK 19).

The photograph surfaces again later in the book and this time it is discussed by Billy. Interestingly, Billy is not concerned with how truthful the picture is to him, but instead he focuses on the unrecorded movement that surrounds the moment his static image was caught:

I was thinking of a photograph someone had taken of me, the only one I had then. I was standing on a wall, at my feet there was this bucket and in the bucket was a pump and I was pumping water out over the wall. Only now, with the red dirt, water started dripping out of the photo (BTK 50).

Later, Billy's perspective changes and he recalls what occurred just down the road from where the photograph was taken:

I remember when they took a picture of me there was a white block down the fountain road where somebody had come out of a building and got off the porch onto his horse and ridden away while I

was waiting standing still for the acid in the camera to dry firm (BTK 68).

Perry Nodelman interprets Billy's concern with the camera's ability to record a static image as an attempt to "distance himself either with his gun or with the camera of his distancing eye, and to stop their movement." Ondaatje's experiment with incorporating photographs into the text of *Billy the Kid* is a device he will continue in his next two prose works. *Billy the Kid* is proof that photographs can enhance the fictional quality of the text.

Another device which Ondaatje uses to fictionalize the story of *Billy the Kid* is the creation of myth. In his article, "O'Hagan's Rough-Edged Chronicle," Ondaatje describes how Howard O'Hagan takes the legend of Tay John and makes it myth:

myth is achieved by a very careful use of echoes -- of phrases and images. There may be no logical connection when these are placed side by side but the variations are always there setting up parallels....In any case the use of echoes is crucial to the myth in the book for the action in the novel turns in on itself, is incestuous. O'Hagan is aware that legend needs only two or three images to sustain it; myth breeds on itself no matter what the situation or landscape..

Ondaatje has culled legends and recorded stories for their useful images, names and conversations, and combined them with his own. Ondaatje integrates echoes of phrases and images, conversations and geography to create a cosmos and mythic structure where none existed before.

The sun and its strong overexposing light also play an important part in Billy's cosmos. Perry Nodelman suggests

that Billy is most at ease in the dim light of the barn and in the cool darkness of the Chisum house.<sup>12</sup> The image of "suns coming up everywhere out of the walls and floors" and "lovely perfect sun balls/breaking at each other click" occurs as Billy experiences his own death (BTK 95).

The image of the sun as a precursor of death reminds us of the vivid imagery surrounding the episode where Billy suffers a severe case of sunstroke:

On the fifth day the sun turned into a pair of hands and began to pull out the hairs in my head. Twist pluck twist pluck. In two hours I was bald. my head like a lemon. It used a fingernail and scratched a knife line from front to back on the skin...With very thin careful fingers it began to unfold my head drawing back each layer of skin and letting it flap over my ears (BTK 76).

This paragraph is only the beginning of a barrage of violent and bizarre images that evoke Ondaatje's other description of myth as "biblical, surreal, brief and imagistic."<sup>13</sup> The sunstroke episode is certainly surreal and imagistic, and culminates in violence as Billy perceives that he is being raped by the sun. Even brief images are memorable, such as the chicken who tugs at Gregory's vein "till it was 12 yards long/As if it held that body like a kite/Gregory's last words being/Get away from me yer stupid chicken" (BTK 15).

Sheila Watson attempts to describe the effect of the narrative of *Billy the Kid*:

In his work Ondaatje expresses no moral outrage. He dwells on paradox in the dangerous cognitive region which lies between reportage and myth -- or again, somewhere in the expanse which separates Bunuel's *Lé Chien Andalou* from the sardonic and neutral romanticism of Howard Hawkes...<sup>14</sup>

The region which lies between reportage and myth is an area which Ondaatje is only beginning to explore. In *Coming Through Slaughter* and *Running in the Family* and his latest novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*, Ondaatje will explore variations, elaborations and modify the elements of myth, which are successful in *Billy the Kid*.

By trying to accommodate the elements of fact, fiction and myth Ondaatje searches for an appropriate form in *Billy the Kid*. John McDermid lists the narrative devices used by Ondaatje in *Billy the Kid* as "prose narrative, documentary material, interviews, photographs, ballads, memoirs and lyrics."<sup>14</sup> Ondaatje suggests that in some ways the unique nature of the legend of Billy the Kid (and also Buddy Bolden) suggests the form of the work:

It wasn't a narrative from A to Z, and so I had to shape it. At that point it was a matter of how you make a collage; how you make the collage understandable with a narrative line as well...You've got to convince the reader to trust you that it's going to look good in the end...<sup>15</sup>

When referring to the narrative structure of *Billy the Kid* the notion of collage provides an appropriate analogy.

Collage is

a kind of surrealist art in which bits of flat objects, as newspaper, cloth, pressed flowers etc., are pasted together in incongruous relationship for their symbolic or suggestive effect.<sup>16</sup>

*Billy the Kid* at first glance may seem like a melange of genres and unreconciled story lines with a very loose narrative structure. But its structure permits a flexibility

of style which allows Ondaatje to present a multifaceted narrative which is by no means random. We might recall that Billy refers to the work as a "maze." Just as the placement of items in a collage or maze enhance the overall effect, so does Ondaatje's placement of images, photographs, found poems, dialogue and setting add to the cohesiveness of the story.

Many of these devices show up in Ondaatje's later prose works, but in them they undergo slight modifications or their focus is changed. Ondaatje comments on the relationship of one work upon its successor as he remarks that

With each of the longer works I was simply doing what I was able to do at the time. I could not have written *Running in the Family* before *Billy* or *Slaughter* although it would seem to come first logically.<sup>21</sup>

However, Ondaatje also points out that while his later prose works may owe a debt to the earlier ones he "tries to start each new book with a new vocabulary, a new set of clothes. Consciously or subconsciously we burn the previous devices that got us here but which now are only rhetoric."<sup>22</sup>

Ondaatje's ever changing experiments to incorporate interviews into his writings, a device he finally discards in his recent novel *In the Skin of a Lion*, is an example of this "new set of clothes." By comparing Ondaatje's use of textual interviews we can see the difference between the humorous "The Kid Tells All 'Exclusive Jail Interview'" in *Billy the Kid* and the real and equally believable imaginary

interviews found in *Coming Through Slaughter*. In *Running in the Family* the interview becomes an integrated part of the text disguised as dialogue or monologue. Ondaatje is never content to leave the role of the interview unchanged because he does not allow the form to dictate content. Instead, it seems that Ondaatje allows the form of each new work to emerge organically and be suggested by the content.

## Notes

- 1 David Donnell, "Notes On *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*," *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*, ed., Sam Solecki (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1985) 240.
- 2 Walter Noble Burns, *The Saga of Billy the Kid* (New York: Garden Publishing Co., 1926) 68.
- 3 Stephen Scobie, "Two Authors in Search of a Character," *Canadian Literature* No. 54 (Autumn 1972): 38.
- 4 Scobie 38.
- 5 Burns 53.
- 6 "An interview with Michael Ondaatje," *Manna: A Review of Contemporary Poetry* 1 (March 1972): 22.
- 7 Scobie 39.
- 8 Donnell 241.
- 9 Andreas Schroeder, "Poet as Gunman," rev. of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* by Michael Ondaatje, *Canadian Literature* No. 51 (Winter 1972): 82.
- 10 Paul Trachtman, *The Gunfighters* eds., Time Life Books (Alexandria, VA: Time Life Books inc., 1974) 56, 91, 182.
- 11 Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson eds., *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982) 127..
- 12 Dennis Cooley, "'I am Here on the Edge:' Modern Hero/Postmodern Poetics in *The Collected Works of Billy the*

Kid." *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje* ed. Sam Solecki (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1985) 237.

13 Perry Nodelman. "The Collected Photographs of Billy the Kid." *Canadian Literature* No. 87 (Winter 1980): 71.

14 Michael Ondaatje. "O'Hagan's Rough-Edged Chronicle." *Canadian Literature* No. 61 (Summer 1974): 25-26.

15 Nodelman 71.

16 Ondaatje 25.

17 Sheila Watson. "Michael Ondaatje: The Mechanization of Death." *White Pelican* 2 no. 4 (Fall 1972): 64.

18 John McDermid. "Lyric Technique as Narrative Structure in Michael Ondaatje." Thesis (M.A.) University of Calgary (1980): 115.

19 Tom Shapcott. "An interview with Michael Ondaatje." *Westerly* 1 (March 1962): 69.

20 Jean L. McKechnie et al., eds., *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1983) 354.

21 Sam Solecki "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje (1984)." *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje* ed. Sam Solecki (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1985) 324.

22 Solecki. "An Interview" 325.





## CHAPTER TWO

## Fact and Fiction - A

## Non-Traditional Biography

Just recently there's another book on Bolden that's come out in the States. I have absolutely no desire to read the thing. Even if it gives me all kinds of new material about Bolden. I'm not at all interested in it. For me, Bolden is a character who is important to me only as I knew him. He's there now and I still like him, and now and then I'll see something in the street that I will see the way he saw it.

Michael Ondaatje  
*Twelve Voices* Interview 1978

Ondaatje makes clear here that he is creating a fictional character and not a factual biographical portrait of Buddy Bolden. Even so, one persistent criticism of *Coming Through Slaughter* is that it is not factual. I will use this criticism of *Coming Through Slaughter* as a method of comparison to determine the value of Ondaatje's fiction. To accomplish this I will compare *Coming Through Slaughter* with the book which Ondaatje refers to and which purports to give a factual representation of Buddy Bolden, Donald Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz*.

In 1978, two years after Ondaatje published *Coming Through Slaughter*, Donald Marquis published his biography of Buddy Bolden. Marquis makes clear in the opening chapter of his book that his search for Bolden is primarily a search for facts. Ironically, Marquis finds few supporting documents although he is able to disprove that Bolden was

ever a barber or that he edited a scandal-sheet called *The Cricket*, as was commonly accepted up to the time of his publication. Marquis' main intent is to defictionalize Bolden. In the first chapter entitled "Exposing the Legend," Marquis indicates that the mythologizing of Buddy Bolden's life had already progressed to the extent that no one knew "where reality stopped and myth began." Similarly, Marquis states that "he [Bolden] was not fiction, but after thirty or more years he had become fictionalized." Bunk Johnson, whose interviews have been printed by several jazz historians, is one of the main perpetrators of some of the myths about Bolden, inventing and changing facts. For example, he predates his own birth date to substantiate that he played in Bolden's band. Marquis acknowledges that oral reports are often exaggerated and full of invention yet he relies heavily on Louis Jones (the owner of the shaving parlour which Bolden used to frequent) to validate information about Bolden. Unfortunately, key people who might refute or validate Jones' information are either dead or unwilling to discuss Bolden. His information may be no more reliable or any less invented than Johnson's. Marquis seems to suggest that because Jones was a "friend" of Bolden's it would follow that he is reliable. I believe that Jones' account of Bolden may be fictionalized to the same extent as some of the other accounts. Due to the conflicting collection of facts available Marquis had to base his account of Bolden on an eyewitness and almost by

default he had to present Jones's account as the most credible.

However, in his attempt to strip away the fictional stories that have arisen around Bolden, Marquis must first present us with these. In many cases these fictitious accounts of Bolden are more interesting, more colourful and perhaps in some ways more 'truthful' to the Bolden era than the sparse facts that Marquis unearths. In spirit, Ondaatje's own fiction closely resembles some of these invented and colourful stories about Bolden. Some critics have difficulty with the documented facts that Ondaatje does present later in the novel (the transcripts, the fact sheet on Bolden etc.), viewing them as an unnecessary or awkward addition. Ondaatje cleverly juxtaposes this documentation with the climactic and fictional episode in which he describes Bolden's breakdown. The reader cannot but realize just how dry and unilluminating the factual evidence is. The public documents of a person's life such as birth certificates, census records or statistics cannot provide insight into the 'truth' of that person's private life.

As Naomi Jacobs suggests in her article, Marquis' book, for all its endeavor to present the truth of facts, does not invalidate Ondaatje's fiction:

these inaccuracies do not discredit this book [*Coming Through Slaughter*] as they would a traditional biographical novel, for the author clearly establishes in the book itself that biographical accuracy is not his goal - and indeed, given the scarcity of information, is not even possible.

Ondaatje concurs with this statement when he remarks that "what disturbs me in having my work interpreted as either physically or biographically right or wrong is that there's an emotional or psychological rightness which, for me, is more important than the other two."<sup>3</sup> Within its own fictional boundaries, Ondaatje's creation of the character of Bolden is consistent. Ondaatje's use of fact as a point of departure quickly becomes secondary as the evolution of Bolden's character is reliant on fiction which Ondaatje creates. Jacobs hypothesizes that Ondaatje finds the few facts that are known about Bolden "restrictive or irrelevant."<sup>4</sup>

While I am not sure that Ondaatje finds the facts about Bolden 'irrelevant,' I believe that he uses them as only a starting point for his fiction and attempts to synthesize fact and fiction by not allowing fact to limit the scope of his fiction. The commonly accepted facts about Bolden as Marquis reports them are dry and sparse: "Bolden...was an important early jazzman; he blew a loud cornet, drank a lot, ran a barbershop, edited a scandal sheet, and died in a mental institution."<sup>5</sup> Ondaatje is able to transcend these few facts and provide a glimpse of Bolden not only as artist, but as father, husband and friend. Ondaatje's ability to improvise upon fact is reflected by a comment made by Robert Kroetsch in a comparison of Rudy Wiebe and Michael Ondaatje:

Dear Novelist. Please give us the courage to be afraid. Wiebe: the fear of fiction. Ondaatje:

the fear of fact. In both, necessarily, a subsumed eroticism. In each: the courage to say that the name doesn't stick. The courage to say we are not at-home. Both furiously engaged with the language that at once announces and subdues their fear. Both, curiously, tempted by the myth of reality as it adheres to the story.

The insistence upon historical fact goes against the possibility of the post-modernist conception of an open-ended work of literature. When one reads the oral accounts of Buddy Bolden's reign as King of Jazz there are more variations, more elaborations and more themes than a single set. Just as Bolden, according to Ondaatje, did not play the same bar the same way twice, so Ondaatje refuses to write a novel that reflects the standard form of biography. As Ondaatje remarks to Tom Shapcott in an interview, "in *Slaughter* I tried to juxtapose the intensity of prose with a documentary coldness. Bolden interested me a great deal as a historical figure, but there was very little information about him so I had to improvise a lot of material on him." Improvisation is a feature unique to jazz and it is appropriate that the form of *Coming Through Slaughter* mirrors Bolden's art:

there was a discipline, it was just that we didn't understand. We thought he was formless, but I think now he was tormented by order, what was outside it....You were both changing direction with every sentence, sometimes in the middle, using each other as a springboard through the dark (CTS 37).

The characters of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden are improvised and created by applying imagination to fact or

rumour. Ondaatje will continue to use this technique in *Running in the Family* and *In the Skin of a Lion*.

Rather than being intimidated by the limits of historical fact Ondaatje creates a form which moves away from fact to a point where past and present, fact and fiction, prose and poetry merge to create an innovative and fragmented form. It is this fragmentation that forces the reader to fill in the gaps between parallel narrative lines, just as it is ultimately the reader who comes to realize that Ondaatje's fiction is not about separating fact from fiction but about the possibilities of combining them into a unique literary form.

While *Billy the Kid* features photographs as a predominant part of the text, *Coming Through Slaughter* contains only one photograph (see below) which is presented as evidence of Buddy Bolden's existence:

Buddy Bolden



Ondaatje's treatment of this single photograph reproduced on the cover and the title page of the novel, but not discussed until page fifty of the text, is quite different from his use of the photograph in *Billy the Kid*. In an interview with Sam Solecki Ondaatje discusses this change in his use of the photograph as a paratextual device:

By the time I wrote *Slaughter* I guess I was also reacting against myself because I was determined not to put pictures or photographs in -- even though the book had a photographer, Bellocq.<sup>10</sup>

However, Ondaatje uses this photograph to link two characters about whom there exists no historical evidence proving that they knew each other. Ondaatje convincingly presents Bellocq as the photographer of the only known photograph of Bolden's band as well as portraying him as a close friend of Bolden's. It is only after looking through books on jazz and Donald Marquis' book that we notice that the reproduction of the photo of Bolden's band is not credited to any photographer.

Ondaatje's fictionalized account of the origin of the photograph is persuasive enough that several critical articles written after Ondaatje's book credit the historical Bellocq with taking the photograph of the band. Ondaatje includes excerpts from an actual interview with Willy Cornish, but the exchange of information between Cornish and Webb regarding the photograph is fiction: "But Cornish, didn't have one though he said a picture had been taken, by a cripple that Buddy knew who photographed whores. Bellock or

something" (CTS 50). Ondaatje provides the reader with a description of Bellocq (a commercial photographer who lived in New Orleans around the same time that Bolden did) developing the negative of the photograph:

In the thick red light the little man tapped the paper with his delicate fingers so it would be uniformly printed, and while waiting cleaned the soakboard in a fussy clinical way. The two of them watching the pink rectangle as it slowly began to grow black shapes, coming fast now. Then the sudden vertical lines which rose out of the pregnant white paper which were the outlines of the six men and their formally held instruments. The dark clothes coming first, leaving the space that was the shirt. Then the faces. Frank Lewis looking slightly to the left. All serious except for the smile on Bolden. (CTS 52)

in what is a complicated yet convincing process. Ondaatje presents the reader with the fictional character Webb who learns from a fictionalized conversation with an actual member of the band, Willy Cornish, that a photographer named Bellocq took the photograph of Bolden's band.

The reader is convinced of the credibility of the history of the photograph as presented by Ondaatje, not only due to the inclusion of actual people such as Bellocq and Cornish, but also because Ondaatje reproduces the photograph of the band. For example, Linda Hutcheon believes that Bellocq took the photograph:

in *Coming Through Slaughter* Michael Ondaatje reproduces paratextually the one surviving photograph of his protagonist, the early jazz musician, Buddy Bolden, a photo actually taken by Bellocq...

It is possible that Hutcheon came to believe this not only from the novel itself but also from Jon Kertzer's review of



*Coming Through Slaughter*, "The Blurred Photo," in which he states:

In contrast, tempting Bolden to disorder is Bellocq, a crippled photographer and artist in his own field. He provides us with the only surviving picture of Bolden, a blurred clue to his identity.

It requires a very careful study of the background provided by Ondaatje to find out which facts have been kept and which have been invented. Ondaatje even presents details regarding the sorry state of the photograph (CTS 66) and has the fictional character Webb give the photo to Cornish, its actual owner. Ondaatje waits until after the ending of the novel to notify the reader that the connection between Bellocq and Bolden is his interpretation imposed on the history of New Orleans via the credit line, "E.J. Bellocq's photographs in *Storyville Portraits* (Museum of Modern Art)...were an inspiration of mood and character. Private and fictional magnets drew him and Bolden together" (CTS 158). Even after the reader knows that Ondaatje has created the Bellocq-Bolden connection the reader would like to believe that these two unusual men were acquainted. This indeed is a possibility, as Ondaatje, being careful to never close the door, chooses Bellocq as another person about whom there is little recorded history. Since there is no recorded photographer of the photograph in question, Ondaatje may be historically correct without knowing it. In any case it is his creation of the fictional relationship between these two men which allows the reader to glimpse two

portraits of creativity and violence linked to self destruction. The photograph is a tangible and persuasive paratextual device which allows him to bring Bellocq and Bolden together.

Stephen Scobie, a most astute critic, is tricked into believing that one of Ondaatje's "private jokes" is a fictional creation. Scobie points out, correctly, that Ondaatje ante-dates Isadora Duncan's death by twenty years. However, Scobie is incorrect in assuming that "the inclusion of Canadian literary critics Geddes and Moss as a firm of New Orleans undertakers and embalmers" is merely a private joke.<sup>12</sup> A careful reading of one of Ondaatje's sources, Al Rose's book *Storyville, New Orleans*, finds funeral directors Geddes and Moss mentioned in an interview by a Storyville resident.<sup>13</sup> The role of Geddes and Moss is expanded upon by Marquis who states that "Bolden's body left the morgue at Parker Hospital...and was shipped to Geddes-Moss Undertaking and Embalming Co., 2120 Jackson Avenue, New Orleans, at the direction of his sister, Cora Bolden Reed."<sup>14</sup> Ondaatje also provides this information on page 137 of *Coming Through Slaughter*. It is an ironic coincidence that the Canadian critics share their name with a New Orleans Undertaking firm.

In *Coming Through Slaughter* the line between fact and fiction has become even less discernible than it was in *Billy the Kid*. Ondaatje still relies on gossip and orally recorded legends to lead his narrative away from factual

history. However, there are more obvious narrative clues in *Billy the Kid* which point to the fictional nature of the text: the "exclusive jail interview" with its gritty sense of humour and the first person narration by Billy which increases the reader's awareness of the fictionalizing process. In *Coming Through Slaughter*, Ondaatje has refined these techniques to the point where details and characters supplied by his creative imagination coalesce with the actual facts.

*Coming Through Slaughter* - Myth, Creativity  
and Destruction

Besides combining fact with fiction, Ondaatje uses the fictionalizing powers of myth to create a compelling portrait of Buddy Bolden. Ondaatje begins with the accepted legendary accounts of Buddy Bolden and allows his mythmaking to grow out of these. Like the various accounts of the exploits of Billy the Kid, the Bolden story is surrounded by false leads and stories based on gossip and conjecture. In both instances, the knowledge of a person's life is limited to a few facts, but they have nonetheless generated many apocryphal stories, which accommodates the fictionalizing process better than persons about whom there is a wealth of recorded facts.

Ondaatje is building upon popular mythology and is searching for an appropriate literary term which will capture the extemporaneous quality of this mixture of fact, fiction, poetry and prose. As mentioned previously, Ondaatje, in his article on *Tax John*, suggests that the repetition or layering of events and symbols helps to create myth. Not surprisingly in *Coming Through Slaughter* there are the recurring images of the circulating fan, self-mutilation, and the struggle between order and chaos which

become echoic and symbolic. Sam Solecki interprets such images as follows:

Ondaatje is examining critically both the complex nature of his own creativity and three problematic notions central to modern art: the relationship between self-destructiveness and creativity, the influence of the audience upon the artist, and, by implication, the concept of the avant-garde...

Stephen Scobie takes a different approach. For him "the real action takes place at the level of the poetic image," and to him many of these images are "extensions or parallels of images that he [Ondaatje] has used in his poetry."

In *Coming Through Slaughter*, we are presented with a myriad of voices interwoven with the main narrative thread involving Webb's search for Bolden which together present different perspectives of Bolden's personality. Like O'Hagan's presentation of Tay John, Ondaatje allows Bolden's voice to be heard only infrequently throughout the novel. Ondaatje, by limiting the number of first person narrations by Bolden, allows the mystique that has been created around him to remain intact and enhances the mythic qualities which Ondaatje brings to the story.

As well as developing an intricate narrative, Ondaatje uses an additional method to introduce even more characters into the novel by including what appear to be documented interviews. This device is common to many metafictional works and in this case includes "found" or real interviews interspersed with interviews originated by Ondaatje. It attests to Ondaatje's skill that both types of interview successfully add to, rather than detract from, the

convincing quality of the narrative. It is only by carefully reading the credits at the end of the novel that we learn, by the process of elimination, that the excerpts from "interviews" with Frank Lewis (CTS 37), T. Jones (CTS 155), Brock Mumford (CTS 76) and Willy Cornish (CTS 145), are products of Ondaatje's imagination. The excerpt presented under the name of Willy Cornish cues us to its fictional quality by Willy's reference to the picture of Euddy that Webb gave to him. These collective voices presented through real and imagined interviews as well as fictional narrative episodes lend to *Coming Through Slaughter* the self-perpetuating power of storytelling and myth.

Ondaatje considers *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* to be poetry. In *Coming Through Slaughter*, he seems to be attempting a juxtaposition of forms without jeopardizing the integrity of the story. While the poetry sections of the novel, such as "Nora's Song" (CTS 17) and "Train Song" (CTS 85) are immediate and imagistic and retain their autonomous quality, they seem to function as complementary counterpoints to the main narrative. For example, the phrase "Passing wet chicory that lies in the field like the sky" (CTS 60), is set apart on a separate page dividing two episodes of Bolden and Robin's lovemaking. Chicory, which is blue in colour, evokes in Bolden's mind not only the colour of the open sky but also Robin, perhaps because robin's eggs are the same bright blue colour. With variations, this same phrase reoccurs later in "Train Song"

and, again, as Bolden is taken from the House of Detention to the Louisiana State Hospital (CTS 139). Ondaatje continues to use this integrative method of overlapping common images between the prose and poetry sections of his next novel, *Running in the Family*.

In addition, Ondaatje indulges in detailing the landscape and lives of his characters. In his M.A. thesis on the poetry of Edwin Muir, Ondaatje makes the following statement regarding how geography functions in myth:

Myth needs a landscape in which the story takes place and where the heroes can display themselves. If the landscape seems real there is more chance that we will believe in the people and events. Myth therefore needs a particular or localized setting which, by being made symbolic becomes universal...

In the first section of *Coming Through Slaughter* entitled "His Geography" it is evident that Ondaatje is setting up the New Orleans of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. We are introduced to the streets and places which become the background for Bolden's activities and which in some cases become symbolic. It might be fruitful to trace the thematic importance of specific places. The most important geographical locations are the parade locations, the shaving parlour in which Bolden took refuge from his music, and the places where Bolden played. We are also introduced to song titles, names of jazz bands and music halls in which Bolden supposedly played. Without overwhelming the reader with superfluous detail Ondaatje captures the ambience of New Orleans during the jazz era.

Solecki suggests that Ondaatje grounds *Coming Through Slaughter* in myth in another way: through the merging of the past and present. While Ondaatje uses historical persons, Solecki notes that "his characters tend to be disconcertingly contemporary in their language and manners."<sup>19</sup> Solecki states that "this deliberate merging of past and present, while presenting an ostensible historical distance, is his means of freeing his vision from time and history in order to ground it more definitely in psychology and myth."<sup>20</sup> Solecki's remark also reinforces Ondaatje's concern with the psychological rightness of his characters and his disinterest with historical facts. And while the language of his characters may seem quite contemporary, the poetic language and imagery allows for a smooth transition between past and present.

As mentioned earlier, Ondaatje presents Bolden as the mythic artist who appears *in media res*: "Where did he come from? He was found before we knew where he had come from. Born at the age of twenty-two. Walked out into a parade one day with white shoes and red shirt" (CTS 37). We can infer from this quotation that Bolden became important only when he became a recognized artist. Ondaatje does not create in succession a fictional Bolden the child, the youth musical genius or the citizen. Instead, we are presented with a portrait of Bolden as artist, and we are provided with his internal thoughts, his outward reactions and his personal



relationships. In one way or another all eventually reflect some aspect of his music.

In his book *Michael Ondaatje: Word, Image, Imagination* Leslie Mundwiler emphasizes that there is an inherent danger in limiting our reading of *Coming Through Slaughter* to a mythic one and Mundwiler criticizes Dennis Lee's attempt in *Savage Fields* to prove "certain absolutes that are not there."<sup>21</sup> *Coming Through Slaughter* reflects Ondaatje's interest in the re-creation of myth as it should be invigorated to reflect his concern with the figure of the modern artist. However, this mythic structure should not limit our interpretation of the novel, but rather, complement and enhance the indeterminacy of the text.

Bolden and Ondaatje - Mirror image?

Stephen Scobie is the first critic who attempts to establish an autobiographical relationship between Ondaatje and the characters of his prose. Scobie states that the result of the title "'The Collected Works of Billy the Kid by Michael Ondaatje' is in fact a composite figure: Billy the Kid, outlaw as artist, and Michael Ondaatje, artist as outlaw, meeting in one person, which is part history, part legend, part aesthetic image, part creator of images."<sup>22</sup> Scobie also points to the photograph at the end of *Billy the Kid* and states: "that small boy is Michael Ondaatje, poet."<sup>23</sup> Twelve years later in the postscript to his reprinted essay, Scobie comments that his view of Billy as a composite figure was "slightly idealized" and "may be too pro-Billy."<sup>24</sup> In any event Scobie's article seems to have precipitated the autobiographical approach to Ondaatje's prose.

Although Scobie may be the first critic to propose indirectly that *Billy the Kid* should be viewed as a vehicle for the reflection of Michael Ondaatje's artistic sensibilities, other critics view Buddy Bolden as the artist figure who allows Ondaatje to parade his ideas along with those of the cornetist. This interpretation results from the fact that Bolden is more overtly an artist than Billy, <sup>25</sup> as in *Coming Through Slaughter*, Ondaatje, as the

writer/narrator, compares himself directly to Bolden in one section of the novel. Several critics interpret this as a confession of Ondaatje, revealing that for him Bolden is an embodiment of his own sensibilities. However, I question this interpretation and would suggest that even though Ondaatje may have included autobiographical incidents in *Coming Through Slaughter*, the whole novel should not be subjected to an autobiographical interpretation.

Alice Van Wart hints at the idea that Bolden represents Ondaatje: "*Coming Through Slaughter* reenacts the process of the imagination caught by contradictory needs as the process expands to include the author as its subject."<sup>23</sup> Sam Solecki is more explicit in his view that Bolden and Ondaatje are closely linked:

But *Coming Through Slaughter*, even granting that it is fiction, and not autobiography or even confessional poetry, is the story of Michael Ondaatje; it is the work in which he most explicitly declares that a fictional character created by him is really a self-portrait. Bolden's *metier*, or craft, may be jazz but there are enough parallels between Ondaatje's writing and Bolden's playing to make a comparison inevitable.<sup>24</sup>

Later, citing the passage from *Coming Through Slaughter* in which Ondaatje looks into the mirror, Solecki states "here the distance between character and author collapses as Bolden becomes the mirror image of Ondaatje."<sup>25</sup> It seems contradictory that Solecki acknowledges that *Coming Through Slaughter* is not confessional or autobiographical yet cannot help but draw parallels between Ondaatje and Bolden.

Naomi Jacobs works too hard to find more links between Bolden and Ondaatje. She suggests that because the dustjacket of her copy of *Coming Through Slaughter* shows Ondaatje wearing a collarless shirt it proves that he is identifying with Bolden. Jacobs bases her theory on textual descriptions of Bolden wearing collarless shirts: "Nora's habit of biting the collars of his shirts made him eventually buy them collarless" (CTS 49). As Eugene McNamara has pointed out, the choice of the photograph for a book's dustjacket is often out of the writer's hands and under the editor's control. Jacob's hypothesis is further weakened by the fact that a recent copy of *Coming Through Slaughter* shows Ondaatje wearing a collared shirt. Jacobs also suggests that "the fictional Bolden shares Ondaatje's 'well-known love of dogs' picking up a stray while he is staying at Webb's cabin: the historical account mentions no dogs in any context." Ondaatje often includes animals in his writing both in his poetry and in longer works such as *Billy the Kid*, and in any case there are so few facts about Bolden that it is highly unlikely and less than noteworthy that dogs are not mentioned in documents. Although Jacobs points out that these are minor manipulations of fact she goes on to suggest, with little supporting evidence, that "Ondaatje had begun to conceptualize the life, to perceive Bolden as the victim of a game Ondaatje himself was resisting."

In contrast to Van Wart, Solecki and Jacobs, Stephen Scobie sees Ondaatje and Bolden as opposites: "Ondaatje may write about, and be fascinated by, white dwarfs, self-destructive artists; but he is not one himself."<sup>30</sup> Scobie, somewhat more realistically than Jacobs and Solecki, views Ondaatje's role as narrator as similar to that of Webb's, the detective who is trying to locate Bolden. Leslie Mundwiler takes a view similar to Scobie's and suggests that

it is somewhat unfortunate that the books [*Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*] have been read as concerning themselves with the plight of the artist. The fault is not the writer's; not all his characters are artists.<sup>31</sup>

To substantiate the interpretation that Bolden's personality corresponds to Ondaatje's, the passages referred to most often are on the pages that follow directly after the account of Bolden's breakdown in the middle of the parade: "When he [Bolden] went mad he was the same age as I am now;" and a few paragraphs later, "When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of memory. For I had done that" (CTS 133). It would seem to me that Ondaatje is identifying with one aspect of Bolden's character. Bolden's habit of standing in front of mirrors and cutting himself may be another one of Ondaatje's inventions. Ondaatje's former wife, Kim, recognized that the window breaking incident in *Coming Through Slaughter* was drawn from an actual happening. She admits to Urjo Kareda that

she knows and recognizes much of the background of what Ondaatje writes about. The startling passage

early in *Slaughter*, in which an enraged Bolden, seated across from his wife, knocks out a window with his open palm and then finds 'his hand miraculously uncut,' was a recreation of an incident in the Ondaatje's own kitchen...

Ondaatje goes only as far as admitting that he has used "more personal pieces of friends and fathers" (CTS 159) to help create *Coming Through Slaughter*. When he admits that he uses 'pieces' from real life Ondaatje is more truthful than some authors. However, I do not believe that because some incidents are autobiographical that Bolden's characteristics and perspectives must be read as a self-portrait of Ondaatje. Ondaatje admits that he wanted to write about Bolden as a musician and that in his imaginative recreation of Bolden's character he has added intimate details from his own life.

Ondaatje makes explicit the distance between himself,

Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden:

Some people have interpreted *Billy* as an artist, and on some level - on an intrinsic level - he is an artist. But he isn't a portrait of the artist for me: I didn't intend to make a statement about the artist in *Billy*. In *Slaughter* I probably was - so I guess that's the only reason why I hesitate to answer questions about the role of the artist in society, because in a way I spent four years writing a book about the artist. But I can't make a general statement like that through an individual and obviously the statement about Bolden is not a statement about you or me or about John Newlove. Every artist is different, every artist begins with a different smell from the fridge. You can't generalize from one person. Obviously, Bolden is a certain individual and I wanted to keep that...

There is an inherent danger in interpreting *Coming Through Slaughter* on a simplified level. There seems to be a trend

among critics to focus on a single thematic meaning which can be determined from either the imagery or the possible autobiographical elements of the novel. Both types of criticism are limiting. In any attempt to interpret literature, it is difficult to admit that perhaps there are one or more pieces of information which defy interpretation. In *Coming Through Slaughter* the challenge is for the reader to be an active interpreter and enjoy Ondaatje's synthesis of myth, fact, fiction, poetry and prose.

## Notes

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- 2 Donald Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man or Jazz* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978) 1.
- 3 Marquis 2.
- 4 Naomi Jacobs, "Michael Ondaatje and the New Fiction Biographies," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 11 (1985): 7.
- 5 Sam Solecki, "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje," *Aune* no. 2 (Spring 1975): 49.
- 6 Jacobs 7.
- 7 Marquis 1.
- 8 Robert Kroetsch, "Contemporary Standards in the Canadian Novel," *Essays on Canadian Writing* No. 20 (Winter 1980-1981): 15.
- 9 Tom Shapcott, "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje," *Western* No. 1 (March 1982): 60.
- 10 Sam Solecki, "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje (1984)," *Spider Blues*, ed. Sam Solecki, Montréal: Véhicule Press (1985) 325.
- 11 Linda Hutcheon, "Postmodern Paratextuality and History," *Texte: Revue de critique et de Théorie littéraire*, Trinity College, Toronto, 1986/87, 5/6: 311.



12 Jon Kertzer. "The Blurred Photo: A Review of *Coming Through Slaughter*." *Spider Blues*, ed. Sam Solecki. Montréal: Véhicule Press (1985) 298.

13 Stephen Scobie. "Coming Through Slaughter: Fictional Magnets and Spider's Webbs." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 12: 6.

14 Al Rose. *Storyville. New Orleans* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1974) 180.

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16 Sam Solecki. "Making and Destroying: Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* and Extremist Art." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 12: 6.

17 Stephen Scobie. "Fictional Magnets and Spider's Webbs." 27.

18 Michael Ondaatje. "Mythology in the Poetry of Edwin Muir." thesis (M.A) Queen's University (1967): 14.

19 Solecki. "Making and Destroying." 34.

20 Solecki. "Making and Destroying." 34.

21 Mundwiler. 98.

22 Stephen Scobie. "Two Authors in Search of a Character." *Canadian Literature* No. 54 (Autumn 1972): 45.

23 Scobie. "Two Authors." 55.

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25 Alice Van Wart. "The Evolution of Form in Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming*

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26 Solecki. "Making and Destroying." 32.

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29 Jacobs 12.

30 Stephen Scobie. "Fictional Magnets and Spider's Webbs." 19.

31 Mundwiler 93.

32 Urjo Karedo. "An immigrant's Song." *Saturday Night* (December 1983): 49.

33 Pearce. *Twelve Voices*. 140.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Running in the Family*

Making Family Fiction: "A well-told lie  
is worth a thousand facts"

In June of 1981 in an interview with Tom Shapcott, Ondaatje briefly discussed the book that he was then working on: "this is the book about my family in Sri Lanka. I'm not sure whether it's a Memoir - that sounds rather 'staid' to me; so it's going to be semi-fictional, biographical." It is apparent from his comment on *Running in the Family* that Ondaatje had not decided on any one specific term that could capture the essential spirit of this multifaceted work. However, when *Running in the Family* was published in 1982, Ondaatje commits himself to a further explanation of what the book is, and what it is not:

while all these names may give an air of authenticity, I must confess that the 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 (RTF 206).

In this disclaimer featured at the end of the book, Ondaatje explicitly emphasizes the fictional nature of *Running in the Family*. It is not meant to be read as a conventional history, or a social/political statement. It is defined by the qualities inherent in a portrait or gesture.<sup>2</sup>

Ondaatje chooses these terms purposely because of the implications of their definitions. The word portrait immediately indicates a subjective point of view, and the

word gesture alludes to a type of drawing of an object that has been captured in lines quickly and freely sketched. Ondaatje's acknowledgement of this subjective point of view is intensified by the fact that unlike *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* or *Coming Through Slaughter*, he is for the first time also the narrator of his fiction. Ondaatje incorporates his own voice late in the text of *Coming Through Slaughter*, but in *Running in the Family* he allows us access to his voice from beginning to end. As George Woodcock explains in his article "Don't Ever Ask for a True Story: or, Second Thoughts on Autobiography," the author who chooses to speak as narrator experiences an inherent limitation: "the narrator is also the protagonist and therefore cannot conceivably be objective."

The type of fiction which Ondaatje creates in *Running In the Family* is distinct from his previous two longer works. While Ondaatje represents the book's controlling narrator, it possesses a chorus of multiple narrative voices and juxtaposes a self-reflexive narrative style with techniques which are more objective and factual. These include using actual conversations and interviews of family and friends, photographs, and journalistic descriptions of places and people. This last technique falls under what Leslie Mundwiler terms Ondaatje's "observation language." The series of three sections entitled "Monsoon Notebook" epitomizes this type of technique as Ondaatje describes such subjects as the weather, his dreams, and his rediscovery of

the Sri Lankan landscape, comments on the actual process of writing and makes various personal observations.

One of the most notable techniques that Ondaatje uses in his fiction is that of multiple narrators. To some extent, Ondaatje explores the possibilities of this technique in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, but exploits its potential more fully in *Coming Through Slaughter*. In *Coming Through Slaughter* Ondaatje places transcripts of actual interviews alongside the convincing imaginary ones. It seemed to take only a small leap of imagination for Ondaatje to create what people would have said about Bolden if only they had been interviewed.

In *Running in the Family* Ondaatje continues to experiment with and modify this technique of using multiple narrators. His reliance on using various narrators springs from necessity. Michael is the youngest Ondaatje and relies on his older siblings, friends and relatives to provide relevant background information. While these secondary narrators are often identified in some cases they remain unidentified voices. In the instance of his immediate family Ondaatje makes sure that we understand the communal nature of this book: "A literary work is a communal act. And this book could not have been *imagined*, let alone conceived without the help of many people" (RTF 205). Ondaatje then explains how he returned to Sri Lanka with his immediate family and was able to piece together the history of the Ondaatje family:

The book is a composite of two return journeys to Sri Lanka, in 1978 and 1980....My sister, Gillian, took many of the journeys of research with me all over the island. She, and my other sister, Janet, and my brother, Christopher, were central in helping me recreate the era of my parents. This is their book as much as mine (RTF 205).

While Ondaatje may be the controlling narrator, many of the episodes are dependent on the voices of his brother, two sisters, and half sister.

To introduce the various identified and sometimes unidentified speakers within the text, Ondaatje makes sure that the reader is aware of the contributions these people make. He lists these fifty-odd names in the acknowledgements section at the end of the book, following the statement that "raw material came from many sources; and I would like to thank a larger group of relatives, friends and colleagues who helped me in my inquisitiveness" (RTF 205).

An example of the presentation of unidentified narrators is found in the section entitled "Dialogues." In this section, it appears that eleven different voices (identified by roman numerals) relay information and snippets of conversation pertaining to Ondaatje's father.

Once he nearly killed us....He was driving the Ford and he was drunk and taking the corners with great swerves - ... Finally on one corner he almost went off the cliff....We were in the back seat and once we calmed down, we looked in the front seat and saw that Daddy was asleep. He had passed out. But to us he was asleep and that seemed much worse. *Much too casual* (ATF 173).

(v)

To us he was an utterly charming man, always gracious. When you spoke to him you knew you were speaking to the real Mervyn....But none of us knew what he was like when he was drunk (RTF 175).

(x)

You know what I remember best is how sad his face was. I would be doing something and suddenly look up and catch his face naked. And full of sorrow (RTF 177).

Part of Ondaatje's success in *Running in the Family* is his ability to intersperse these vignettes about his father among the fictional ones without awkwardness or a sense of being contrived. Ondaatje's fictional pieces do not jar with the real stories and as a result the section entitled "Thanikama" is believable even though we are cued by the narrative to be aware that it is a product of Ondaatje's creative imagination.

Just as the interviews in *Coming Through Slaughter* are included in the text without any prefatory remarks or indications of the author's bias, so too in *Running in the Family* are the interviews presented as if capturing the immediacy of unmediated conversation. This is not to say that Ondaatje may not have "interfered" by selectively editing some remarks. Ondaatje explores the potential of presenting these varying remarks and opinions, this layering of voices, alongside each other without any authorial comments. This technique is almost Cubist in its intent: to present the same person from different perspectives without placing more emphasis on one account than another. We are not asked to make a choice and believe some and not other

narrators; we can believe them all.' Ondaatje wants us to experience the same process of being saturated with information, gossip and rumour that he experienced upon his return to Sri Lanka.

One of the most confusing narratives in the book is in the section entitled "Lunch Conversations" in which Ondaatje, listening to the same story told simultaneously by Barbara, Hilden and Tory, suggests exactly what we may well be thinking at this point: "there seems to be three different stories that you're telling" (ATF 105). The response which Ondaatje receives is "no, one, everyone says laughing" (ATF 106). Ondaatje explains why he went through this process:

I wanted to write it [*Running in the Family*] like a novel, like the social book I have always longed to write, something told from numerous points of view. I also had a very real fear that it would be uninteresting to anyone but myself. So when I went back to Ceylon and spoke with people I very intentionally believed everything that anyone said.

The personal subject matter of *Running in the Family* presents a problem, as Ondaatje suggests, due to its limited appeal. Ondaatje rectifies this situation by developing within the structure of his ordinary family, the myth of the Ondaatje's. While they may not be exceptionally famous, the Ondaatje family is interesting. By interviewing people who knew his parents and grandparents Ondaatje provides proof that some of the extraordinary happenings are not biased by his own invention.



Just as Ondaatje creates a slightly different narrative structure for each of his longer works, his use of photographs is also slightly different in each. In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* Ondaatje used photographs to evoke the spirit of the "wild West" without reproducing a photograph of Billy himself. On the other hand, the sole photograph in *Coming Through Slaughter* is of Bolden and his band. Ondaatje uses this photograph as a document of Bolden's physical existence as well as providing a textual link between Bolden and the photographer, Bellocq.

As we might expect, Ondaatje's photographs of family and Sri Lanka in *Running in the Family* do not follow the traditional use of the photograph in biographies. They are not placed in the expected positions in the text, they are not captioned or dated, and they are not always discussed in the text itself. If we want to understand the significance of these photographs we must concentrate on obtaining the necessary information from Ondaatje's narrative. Even on the credits page where Ondaatje identifies the source of two of the photographs in the book, the "1947 Nuwara Eliya flood" and "Sensation Rock," he does not indicate on which pages they are reproduced (RTF 207). He places the onus upon us to make our own connection between the text and the photographs. This is only one characteristic of his own special fiction which begins with document or fact but requires the reader to complete the connection.

Linda Hutcheon makes an insightful comment about the relationship of text to photograph which illustrates how tricky and playful Ondaatje is in his use of paratextual devices. Ondaatje indicates the importance of finding a certain photograph of his parents by saying "My Aunt pulls out the album and there is the photograph I have been waiting for all my life. My mother and father together. May 1932" (RTF 161). However, Hutcheon comments on the redundancy of the placement of this photograph:

"We too have been waiting. It's not all our lives, at least for 135 pages of fragments for this look at the couple. After describing the photo in detail, only then, on the next page, does he actually reproduce it. By then, of course, it is redundant: words can be as real as photographic reproductions..

For those who may not be familiar with the photograph to which Hutcheon refers, I have reproduced it below together with a small amount of the text which precedes it:

My father sits facing the camera, my mother stands beside him and bends over so that her face is in profile on a level with his. Then they both begin to make hideous faces.

My father's pupils droop to the south-west corner of his sockets. His jaw falls and resettles into a groan that is half idiot, half shock. (All this emphasized by his dark suit and well-combed hair.) My mother in white has twisted her lovely features and stuck out her jaw and upper lip so that her profile is in the posture of a monkey. The print is made into a postcard and sent through the mail to various friends. On the back my father has written "*What we think of married life*" (RTF 161-162).



Ondaatje plays with the reverse procedure of this technique by placing the photograph first and makes the reader wait some one hundred odd pages for it to be identified. The photo which Ondaatje uses as the cover photo and places under the chapter heading "Eclipse Plumage" on page one hundred and three is not discussed until page one hundred and twelve of the book. In this case the description of the photograph comes after the visual image. Ondaatje provides only a brief and rather vague second-hand description of the people in this photograph as they are identified by his Aunt Dolly:

Before I leave, she [Aunt Dolly] points to a group photograph of a fancy dress party that shows herself and my grandmother Laila among the crowd. She has looked at it for years and has in this way memorized everyone's place in the picture. She reels off names and laughs at the facial expressions she can no longer see (RTF 112).



It seems unusual that Ondaatje does not identify his grandmother Laila in the photo because by the end of the book Laila is mythic and memorable. Yet in this photograph we cannot identify Laila even after having studied the textual descriptions of her. Perhaps Ondaatje omits this information because our expectations based on textual descriptions of Laila's flamboyant nature far exceed the static image of a photograph. This technique derives from the missing photograph in *Billy the Kid* where we had a blank space and no photograph. Here we have the photograph but Laila is not identified.

Ondaatje makes us wait until the final page of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* to reveal a picture of himself. In *Running in the Family* he also waits until the final frame to show a photograph of himself with his brother and sisters, posed in their swimsuits at the base of a small waterfall. We know that Michael is the youngest Ondaatje son, therefore he can be identified at the bottom right of

the photo. Interestingly, the composition of this family portrait echoes the imagery of the pyramid that Ondaatje dreams about at the beginning of the work.

The two other types of factual information which Ondaatje uses as points of departure in his making of fiction are music and geography or landscape. Just as *Coming Through Slaughter* contained titles, lyrics and descriptions of jazz songs and musicians, so Ondaatje continues this technique in *Running in the Family*. Ondaatje's plan to lure the reader to trust him in a what otherwise might be perceived as a rambling narrative is to provide recognizable songs and lyrics.

The songs in *Running in the Family* act as a bittersweet counterpoint to a story filled with tragedy. For the most part the lyrics of the twenties are romantic, while the relationship between his parents is not. In the chapter appropriately titled "A Fine Romance" we are provided with descriptions of decadent dance parties in which Ondaatje's mother and father and their "set" participated. At the end of this section Ondaatje remarks: "'A Fine Romance' was always my mother's favourite song. In her sixties I would come across her in the kitchen half singing, 'We should be like a couple of hot tomatoes/But you're as cold as yesterday's mashed potatoes'" (RTF 46). These songs evoke not only the end of the Roaring 'Twenties, but the end of his parents' carefree way of life:

"The parties lasted until the end of the twenties when Francis lost his job over too splendid a

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road. He was lost to them all by 1935....The waste of youth. Burned purposeless. They forgave that and understood that before everything else. After Francis died there was nowhere really to go. What was to follow was a rash of marriages" (RTF 47).

As Ondaatje supplies more details about his parents' life the title, "A Fine Romance," becomes an ironic comment on an unusual courtship and a stormy marriage.

Contrary to the incorrect geography in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje admits that the geography in this book is accurate and even provides a map of Ceylon in the introductory pages. Ondaatje discusses this with Kareda: "It's [*Running in the Family*] very accurate about mood and tone...and a certain kind of spirit. It's the most accurate book in terms of geography that I've written so far." While the geography may be accurate it is the descriptions and the effect of the tropical landscape which make an impression on us. From the beginning of *Running in the Family* to the end, the rain forest, the insects and the intense heat are portrayed in terms of living and moving natural forces which take on mythic qualities as they take over many of Ondaatje's childhood homes. In this book, more than the previous two, Ondaatje's departure from fact into fiction leads directly into the exaggerating and culminating images of myth.



The Ondaatje family: "You Have To Create  
Your Own Mythology"

In an interview with Ondaatje in 1975 Sam Solecki remarked to the writer that he seemed to have discovered an indigenous mythology in Clinton, Ontario, during the filming of *The Farm Show*. Ondaatje responded by stating,

I think it does and perhaps that's why I got interested in it in the first place. Not so much of saying this is an important form of mythology, but, highly subconsciously the idea of making stories, you know, out of normal incidents and making them mythic."

Seven years later, with the publication of *Running In The Family*, the book about his family in Sri Lanka, Ondaatje presents the reader with exactly the kind of mythology that he had discussed with Solecki. We become aware very quickly that Ondaatje's family is being swept into the arena of myth.

What Ondaatje creates in *Running In The Family* is a complex world of personal mythology interwoven with the myths that are already part of Ceylonese culture. The myths that Ondaatje creates are personal in the sense that they originate from the everyday, intimate details and normal events of his family's life in Ceylon. Just as Ondaatje had discovered an indigenous mythology in Clinton, there appears a similar wealth of possibilities to inspire myth in his own family. The stories which are more national in their scope, such as the legend/myth of the Thalagoya tongue, are related as they involve certain members of the

Ondaatje family. As Linda Hutcheon remarks, "Not surprisingly, the people of this land have developed their own set of myths - both national (the thalagaya [sic] tongue as key to verbal brilliance) and familial (the grey cobra as shade of Mervyn Ondaatje)."

The creation of this myth of the Ondaatje family functions as a method of further fictionalizing these people. Note that unlike Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden we hesitate to call these people "characters" because of Ondaatje's unique status in the book. Ondaatje is writing about his family, and to an extent himself, and he is presenting a factual portrait of these people. However, once we recognize the elements of myth and exaggeration which Ondaatje uses to structure his family history his tendency to fictionalize becomes evident. The description of Ondaatje's mother points to a family tradition:

She belonged to a type of Ceylonese family whose women would take the minutest reaction from another and blow it up into a tremendously exciting tale, then later use it as an example of someone's strain of character. If anything kept their generation alive it was this recording by exaggeration. Ordinary tennis matches would be mythologized to the extent that one player was so drunk that he almost dies on the court. An individual would be eternally remembered for one act that in five years had become so magnified he was just a footnote below it (RTF 169).

The implication of "running in the family" is that exaggeration is a natural talent of the Ondaatje family.

Many of the episodes about Ondaatje's father involve animals, hence it is appropriate that one of the opening images of *Running in the Family* is a surreal dream image of



Ondaatje's, so real that it wakes him: "What began it all was the bright bone of a dream....I saw my father, chaotic, surrounded by dogs, and all of them screaming and barking into the tropical landscape. The noises woke me. I sat up on the uncomfortable sofa and I was in a jungle, hot, sweating" (RTF 21). This is one of the first indications that a large part of the book will be devoted to exploring the myth of Mervyn Ondaatje. Mervyn is at the centre of many family legends and although the story of his wife, Doris Gratiaen, also is incorporated, Mervyn emerges as the stronger figure. Many of the episodes involving Mervyn revolve around his drunken escapades: the most notable among these are his adventures on the Colombô train route. While these episodes take on mythic proportions and are more exaggerated, Ondaatje contrasts these accounts with glimpses of his father as a troubled and withdrawn man. Mervyn was also a man so meticulous that "he kept journals about every one of the four hundred varieties of cactus and succulents - some of which he had never seen, others of which he had smuggled into the country via a friend" (RTF 200).

The image with which he opens the book is the same as the one that reappears in the section entitled "The Bone." Ondaatje admits that he is not able to reconcile himself with the image of his father surrounded by dogs. What begins as a bad dream is magnified to mythic proportions and is imbued with a sense of the supernatural. This is one example of how in the later parts of *Running in the Family* the

elements of exaggeration and mythologizing which have already governed many of the stories in the book take on a new momentum. In this section, narrated by Arthur, and introduced as "one of the versions of his train escapades," Ondaatje's father is a powerful figure, larger than life:

My father is walking towards him, [Arthur] huge and naked. In one hand he holds five ropes, and dangling on the end of each of them is a black dog. None of the five are touching the ground. He is holding his arm outstretched, holding them with one arm as if he has supernatural strength...The dogs were too powerful to be in danger of being strangled. The danger was to the naked man who held them at arm's length, towards whom they swung like dark magnets....He had captured all the evil in regions he had passed through and was holding it (RTF 181).

It is significant that the number of dogs corresponds to the number of Mervyn's dependents. This image of holding five dogs out at arms' length may be symbolic of Mervyn's struggle to maintain his position as head of the family. Leslie Mundwiler interprets this section as a kind of purifying myth:

The next section, "Bones," returns to the dream at the beginning of the book, presenting it this time as "a story" of archetypal or mythic dimensions; at this level he broaches an interpretation of his father...

Ondaatje admits that "my loss was that I never spoke to him [his father] as an adult" (RTF 179). This revelation of Ondaatje's comes just before the section "Bones" and is appropriately accompanied by a comparison to the relationship between Edgar and Gloucester in *King Lear*: "And why of Shakespeare's cast of characters do I remain most curious about Edgar? Who if I look deeper into the metaphor

torments his father over an imaginary cliff" (RTF 179). The mythology of the Ondaatje family which has been highly personal up to this point, now moves on to a more universal level.

What *Running In The Family* is not, is the myth of Michael Ondaatje. He is ever present as the first person narrator and, for the most part, what he writes is very real. Fortunately, he makes no attempt to perpetuate the myth of the writer as a temperamental and tortured person. Only in the section entitled "Prodigal Son," and in the sections dealing with his relationship with his father are we allowed a closeup of Michael.

Ondaatje can be accused of perpetuating a third kind of myth, one which we might call the myth in process. The most memorable example of this type of myth is the episode with the wild boar and the bar of Pears Transparent Soap. What begins with the small matter of a missing bar of soap coupled with the cook's explanation that a wild pig has taken it, causes Ondaatje to produce one of the most light hearted moments in the book:

That repulsively exotic creature in this thick black body and the ridge of non-symmetrical hair running down his back, this thing has walked off with my bar of Pears Transparent Soap? Why not my copy of Rumi poetry? Or Merwin translations?.... What does this wild pig want soap for? Visions begin to form of the creature returning to his friends with Pears Transparent Soap and then all of them bathing and scrubbing their armpits in the rain in a foul parody of us. I can see their mouths open to catch drops of water on their tongues, washing their hooves, standing complacently under the drain spout, and then

moving in Pears fragrance to a dinner of Manikappolu garbage (RTF 143).

It is easy to imagine the "wild boar episode" continually being retold and embellished until some thirty years from now it too will become another Ondaatje family myth. The type of imaginative exaggeration practised in this instance lends new meaning to the word "mythomaniac" who, by definition, is one who exhibits "an abnormal tendency to lie or exaggerate."

The second important myth is that of Ondaatje's maternal grandmother, Lalla. Early in the novel Lalla is associated with the blue jacaranda blossom which as an evocative symbol appears in several different episodes. Lalla is an extraordinarily high-spirited and independent woman. The stories which Ondaatje weaves around her are full of humorous escapades which, because they are not surrounded by the tragic aura as is the case with Mervyn, create a certain amount of comic relief. Although many of the Lalla stories are merely everyday happenings enlivened with details supplied by an unbridled imagination, she is associated with the supernatural.

Lalla's connection with the supernatural is indicated by Ondaatje as he states "My Grandmother died in the blue arms of a jacaranda tree. She could read thunder. She claimed to have been born outdoors, abruptly, during a picnic, though there is little evidence for this" (RTF 113). Lalla claims many things and takes advantage as one of the elder Ondaatjes to recreate her own history. One of the

most important episodes in Lalla's life is related to Ondaatje in the confusing section entitled "Lunch Conversation": "Lalla nearly drowned too. You see, she was caught in a current and instead of fighting it she just relaxed and went with it out to sea and eventually came back in a semi-circle. Claimed she passed ships" (RTF 106-107)., Ondaatje uses this supposedly factual account as a point of departure for his creation of the myth of Lalla's death by drowning:

It was her last perfect journey. The new river in the street moved her right across the race course and park towards the bus station. As the light came up slowly she was being swirled fast, "floating" (as ever confident of surviving this too) alongside branches and leaves, the dawn starting to hit flamboyant trees as she slipped past them like a dark log, shoes lost, false breast lost. She was free as a fish, travelling faster than she had in years" (RTF 128).

Ondaatje's creation of his grandmother's final journey is too perfect to be real. Every event or symbol from Lalla's life reappears just in time to play a role in this fantastic description of her last journey. From the four decks of cards which float in front of her, the race course, her lost (sponge) breast, to the fir tree maze that she used to lose her grandchildren in, each parades through this fictional journey truly as if, in her final moments, her life passed before her eyes.

Finally, a minor myth which acts as a unifying theme for *Running In The Family* is the myth of the decay and decline of the Ondaatje family estates. The Ondaatjes and Gratiaens who, during the nineteen twenties, were

representative of the monied and genteel society of Sri Lanka, have in Ondaatje's absence fallen into a state of decline. Many of the passages in which Ondaatje describes the homes of his various aunts or Rock Hill, his childhood home, are suffused with vegetation and destructive insects, all encroaching for the inevitable takeover. The homes of the now elderly relatives of his parents' generation mirror the state of their owners' fragility:

As I prepare to leave she [Aunt Dolly] walks with me, half deaf and blind, under several ladders in her living room that balance paint and workmen, into the garden where there is a wild horse, a 1930 car splayed flat on its axles and hundreds of flowering bushes... There is very little now that separates the house from the garden. Rain and vines and chickens move into the building (RTF 112).

These images of decay and of the inexorable force of the jungle as it invades the architecture are repeated and as they accuqulate create an echoic effect.

This type of description, although realistic nevertheless evokes Gabriel Garcia Marquez's book *One Hundred Years Of Solitude*, a novel that influenced Ondaatje: "The book that really affected me in the last year was Marquez's *A Hundred Years Of Solitude*."<sup>13</sup> Even the ants that parade through the Ondaatje home are reminiscent of the ants which take over the house at the end of Marquez's novel. However, Ondaatje's ants are somewhat less ferocious than Marquez's, but they participate in what seems to be a sly joke of Ondaatje's own making:

"In the bathroom ants had attacked the novel thrown on the floor by the commode. A whole battalion was carrying one page away from its source, carrying the intimate print as if rolling a table away from him [Ondaatje's father]. He knelt down on the red tile, slowly, not wishing to disturb their work. It was page 189. He had not got that far in the book yet but he surrendered it to them (RTF 189)

As Ondaatje's father is watching a battalion of well organized ants carry away page 189, the reader is reading this description on page 189 of *Running in the Family*. As a further twist to this unusual novelistic practice it should be noted that Ondaatje's father could not have been reading from the same novel as we are, since he predeceased the publication.

All of these myths and mythologized incidents are realized by techniques Ondaatje has explored in *Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*. Interestingly, the identity of the individual is never lost as Ondaatje's myths are rarely archetypal or moral in their intent. Instead, they find their beginnings in the everyday event which, combined with the element of the supernatural and exaggeration, transforms legend into myth. The retelling of a story by multiple narrators, the echoic effect of repeating images and symbols, allows a certain spontaneity to remain.

In retrospect, Ondaatje appears to be moving towards creating the unique combination of fact, fiction and myth which exists in the lives of individuals. Ondaatje begins by experimenting with existing legendary figures such as Billy

the Kid and Buddy Bolden and then he moves to a more challenging situation and creates this balance of fact, fiction and myth using people about whom there exists no general knowledge. An examination of *Running in the Family* proves that Ondaatje's own family history has, over the span of two generations, been recorded and undergone transformations similar to the stories of Billy and Bolden. In each case the qualities that set these people apart are perpetuated and exaggerated by friends and relatives who have created the myths. Ondaatje continues this experiment in his latest work, *In The Skin of A Lion*. In this book Ondaatje is concerned with exploring the previously neglected story of the immigrant working class and its struggle for equality.



## Notes

1 Tom Shapcott. "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje," *Westerly* no. 1 (March 1982) 69.

2 Consequently, I cannot consider seriously Arun P. Mukherjee's article, "The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje and Cyril Dabydeen: Two Responses to Otherness," (*Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 20 no. 1 (1985) 49-67). Mukherjee classifies Ondaatje as belonging to the "connoisseurs of chaos," (along with Wallace Stevens and Yeats) and berates him for what *Running in the Family* excludes: "We do not hear about the Ondaatje family's exploitative relationship to Sri Lanka....Ondaatje mentions Leonard Woolf's novel about Sri Lanka but glosses over the sordid realities created by centuries of colonial exploitation" (57). Mukherjee exploits Ondaatje's writing to accentuate the social merits of Cyril Dabydeen's writing.

3 George Woodcock. "Don't Ever Ask For A True Story: or. Second Thoughts on Autobiography," *Essays on Canadian Writing* No. 29 (Summer 1984): 17.

4 Leslie Mundwiler. *Michael Ondaatje: Word, image, Imagination* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1984) 36.

5 Urjo Kareeda. "An immigrant's Song," *Saturday Night* December 1983. 50.

6 Linda Hutcheon, "Running in the Family: The Postmodernist Challenge," Ed. Sam Solecki, *Spider Blues:*

*Essays on Michael Ondaatje* (Montréal, Véhicule Press, 1985)

305.

7 Kareda 49-50.

8 Sam Solecki, "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje."

*Rune* no. 2 (Spring 1975): 44.

9 Solecki 44.

10 Hutcheon 308.

11 Mundwiler 144.

12 Jean L. McKechnie et al., *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1983)

1101.

13 Solecki 52.)

## CHAPTER FOUR

*In The Skin Of A Lion: Creating Order (Fiction)  
out of Chaos (Fact)*

Only the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events. Only the best can realign chaos to suggest both the chaos and order it will become.

*In the Skin of a Lion*, 146.

The narrative structure of *In the Skin of a Lion* mirrors the above statement of principle and I think that Ondaatje accomplishes what he says the best art should do. Beginning with fact, "the chaotic tumble of events," Ondaatje creates order using "the best art," fiction, to create a unique narrative form that imitates and suggests the unpredictable nature of life. Ondaatje suggests a method by which we can comprehend *In the Skin of a Lion* by embedding in the narrative the dictum: "The first sentence of every novel should be: 'Trust me, this will take time but there is order here very faint, very human.' Meander if you want to get to town" (SOL 146). Human order is indeed faint, but in the cleverly written *In the Skin of a Lion* it is reproduced in the subtlety of the images and the tentatively forged links between the characters.

The first textual clue in *In The Skin of A Lion* which suggests that it will be in some way different from Ondaatje's previous works is the unusual wording and inconsistent positioning of the disclaimer: "This is a work of fiction and certain liberties have at times been taken with some dates and locales" (SOL iv). This disclaimer is:

placed before the main text of *In the Skin of a Lion*, unlike *Billy the Kid*, *Coming Through Slaughter* and *Running in the Family*, where an explanation, notes and credits are consistently placed at the end of the work. Also, other than the references for the few quotations and the epigraph, gone are any notes providing specific sources which we have come to expect. Ondaatje is intentionally directing our attention away from facts by emphasizing the fictional nature of *In the Skin of a Lion* at its beginning. But, by mentioning that certain dates and locales have been changed he cannot help but hint that some facts remain.

Further, specific information contained in the book makes it evident that in order to recreate the era of Toronto between the wars Ondaatje did a substantial amount of research and on the history of the building of the Prince Edward Viaduct, R.C. Harris, Ambrose Small, and on the social conditions in Toronto and Eastern Ontario. In the summer of 1982 there was an exhibit at the Market Gallery of the City of Toronto Archives entitled "The Architecture of Public Works - R. C. Harris 1912-1945." Ondaatje may have seen this exhibition which was a tribute to Harris' foresight in planning the Prince Edward Viaduct and the Filtration Plant. The details regarding the building of the Viaduct and the Filtration Plant and the description of Harris which Ondaatje provides correspond to the information contained in this booklet. For example:

the R.C. Harris Filtration Plant sits majestically  
in extensive landscaping addressing both Queen

Street and Lake Ontario. The sumptuous interiors with finished detailing of brass and marble were considered excessive when completed. They remain unparalleled in Toronto architecture and even today the filtration plant is referred to as a "Palace of Purification."

Ondaatje appropriates the phrase "Palace of Purification" to mark the first part of "Book Two" of *In the Skin of a Lion*. Ondaatje contrasts the idea of purification with the ironic reality of the immigrants who dig through the clay under Lake Ontario and who "have all imagined the water heaving in, shouldering them aside in a fast death" (SOL 106).

The exhibition catalogue also contains the fact that Harris' mother was a caretaker at City Hall, a point which Ondaatje uses in the fictional confrontation between Patrick and Harris (SOL 235).<sup>2</sup>

Ondaatje takes more liberties with dates and locales in his presentation of the story of Ambrose Small than he did with Harris. Ondaatje is able to manipulate the facts about Small more easily than Harris because to this day the disappearance of Small remains a bizarre and unsolved mystery. The Small story is similar to that of Billy the Kid because it provides Ondaatje with the same combination of meager facts and popular legends. Another reason for Ondaatje's more liberal approach to the Small story is because he uses Small as a bridge between the factual portrait of Toronto in the 1920's and fictional world of Patrick, Ciara and Alice. Ondaatje leaps at the challenge to create a credible, fictitious solution to Small's disappearance. Once Ondaatje has accurately established the

geography of Toronto and key events such as the disappearance of Small and Commissioner Harris' role in the construction of the Bloor Street Viaduct and the Filtration Plant. the fictional characters interact and affect the direction of the lives of the fact-based characters. It is appropriate to note here that *In the Skin of a Lion* is the Ondaatje's first work of prose where the major characters are the fictional ones and in that sense it represents a new direction.

Ondaatje's solution to the Small case is appropriately dependent on presenting the most important facts entirely opposite to what they actually were:

On December 16, 1919, Ambrose Small failed to keep an appointment. A million dollars had been taken from his bank account. He had either been murdered or was missing. His body, alive or dead, was never found (SOL 58).

The facts of the actual case are that Ambrose Small failed to show up for supper on December 2, 1919 after depositing one million dollars in his bank account that day. Small did have a girlfriend, Clara Smith, who was described as "a pretty girl, perhaps not over thirty, with a quick lilting laugh, and a sharp retort ready for any searching question." Ondaatje's character, Clara Dickens, physically approximates Clara Smith but in actuality Smith was never contacted by Small after his disappearance. Ondaatje is able to provide a clever solution to the case merely by changing the fact that Ambrose withdrew one million dollars on the

day that he disappeared and that he later sent for Clara (Smith) Dickens.

The details which Ondaatje provides about the Ambrose Small case appear to be the product of an unrestrained imagination. However, public reaction to the case was extraordinarily bizarre not only because of the fifty thousand dollar reward but because the officer in charge, Detective Austin Mitchell, "believed in teacup reading, ~~playing~~ card manipulations, star signs and mysticism" and prepared "a national advertisement asking for the help of the occult scientific world."<sup>3</sup> Without this kind of background knowledge on the Small case, the contents of the newspaper clippings which Ondaatje inserts in the text on page fifty-six of *In the Skin of a Lion* seem too bizarre to be anything but fiction. However, the article which Ondaatje provides headlined "IOWA DETECTIVE IS CERTAIN HE HAS FOUND A.J. SMALL" and which he attributes to the *Mail*, August 16, 1921, can be substantiated by an article printed in *The Globe* on August 15, 1921. The *Globe's* headline is "AMBROSE SMALL FOUND IN IOWA SLEUTH CLAIMS" and the copy that follows contains nearly the same information that Ondaatje provides: "'I am John Dougherty and I came here from Omaha.' The man, emaciated, and suffering from privations and wounds, had in some manner lost both legs just below the knee."<sup>4</sup> The article in *The Globe* is perhaps even slightly more unbelievable than the clipping Ondaatje provides because the injured man remembers his name and it is only detective

Brophy who insists that he is Small. This is the only instance in the novel where we are presented with enough information to actually trace a newspaper article. The articles which Patrick reads in the Riverdale library are identified only as "the newspapers and journals he needed" and information that he finds about the nun falling off the Viaduct and the photograph of Nicholas Temelcoff are created by Ondaatje (SOL 143-144). The line where fact leaves off and fiction begins is as difficult to determine in *In the Skin of the Lion* as it is in *Coming Through Slaughter*.

Ondaatje emphasizes the fictional nature of the story in the prologue: "This is a story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning....She listens to the man as he picks up and brings together various corners of the story, attempting to carry it all in his arms. And he is tired, sometimes elliptical" (SOL ix). None of Ondaatje's previous prose works have succumbed to the usual expectations of the reader and *In the Skin of A Lion* is no exception. The prologue acts as a description of the type of prose the reader can expect. That the man will bring together "corners of the story" and that he is "tired and sometimes elliptical" are cues that the connections of the story will not be as evident as they might be in a more conventional chronologically ordered narrative. This technique is also illustrated by the elusive quality of the prologue, for we must wait until the final pages of the book



for Ondaatje to reveal the identities of the man (Patrick) and the young girl (Hana).

The inherent elliptical nature of *In the Skin of a Lion* requires patience and attentiveness to find order and a certain flexibility to accept when it cannot be found. William French is quick to find fault, calling it "tree-fall fiction," and suggests that order in the novel is "very faint indeed." Ondaatje asks the reader to maintain the same willing suspension of disbelief that the young girl shows in the prologue: "Outside the countryside is unbetrayed, the man who is driving could say, 'in that field is a castle,' and it would be possible for her to believe him" (SOL ix). Ken Adachi reacts more positively toward the unique narrative style of *In the Skin of a Lion* but does not entirely succeed in defining it:

Whatever larger narrative movement it possesses is constantly fragmented. The novel's momentum is supplied not by sustained action but by the style which vivifies its ideas - a style that is rich and generous in its range and subtlety, allusive and highly literate. It's the one constant we can always expect from Michael Ondaatje.

While it may be subtle, the order of the narrative is not as faint as William French suggests. For example, the image of feldspar occurs just three times in the novel but it is effective enough to evoke a sense of uneasiness in us when it suddenly reappears later in the book. It is first mentioned as "a piece of feldspar in his [Patrick's] pocket that his fingers had stumbled over during the train journey" (SOL 53). Later we learn that Patrick's father was

killed by a cave-in in a feldspar mine because "the company had tried to go too deep" (SOL 74). These two details might slip unnoticed by the inattentive reader, but their presence greatly enhances the dramatic impact of the scene when Patrick enters Commissioner Harris' office: "Patrick leaned over and rubbed his cut fingers over the smoothness of the desk. - Feldspar, he murmured" (SOL 253). The fact that Harris' desk is composed of the material which killed Patrick's father generates an uneasy response in us as we expect a violent reaction from Patrick. It is the order of presentation and sparseness of the image that is clever and it is a challenge for the us to discover and bring life to this inert order. We expect to find something close to art but is instead presented with a structure that is closer to life and which has the potential to become art only through our active participation with the text.

While Ondaatje recreated the effect of improvisational storytelling in *Billy the Kid* and *Running in the Family*, the storyline of *In the Skin of a Lion* is the most improvised and precarious. Events are not presented chronologically and images are subtle and appear coincidental but are, in fact, carefully developed and take on a symbolic life of their own. Ondaatje's ability to "realign chaos" is also apparent in the tenuous and sometimes incomplete connections created between characters. For example, the identity of the red haired writer who Carravagio meets in the Muskokas is never revealed. It is perplexing that these loose ends are

never woven in but in some ways this mirrors a facet of life. Patrick continually laments the difference between art and life but it is not important that we never know whether or not this red haired woman writer is connected in any way with anyone else. The sentence from the letters of Joseph Conrad, whispered by Alice, "Let me now re-emphasize the extreme looseness of the structure of things," haunts both Patrick and the reader (SOL 163).

We are tantalized by characters who at first appear to be superficial only to later propel the narrative towards its conclusion. For example, the thief, Carravagio, is mentioned early in book, as he and his russet hound pass by Patrick's window. Almost two hundred pages later the connection between Patrick and Carravagio is finally revealed to us. The process of unveiling the identity of the nun who falls off the Prince Edward Viaduct is also excruciatingly slow. It is not until Patrick identifies Nicholas Temelcoff from a picture given to him by Hana that he (and we) realize that it was Alice Gull who was blown off the Viaduct and caught by Nicholas (SOL 144). Meanwhile, Ondaatje has dropped all sorts of clever hints in the text by comparing the farmhouse to being "like the quarters of a monk" (SOL 65) and by allowing Alice to give a toast to "holy fathers" (SOL 74). Again, while some loose ends are woven in, others are never answered; for example, Alice never reveals where she came from or what her previous name was.

The dramatic quality of the narrative also enhances the fictional nature of the text. *Billy the Kid* may have been Ondaatje's way of making the film he could not afford and it is noteworthy that both it and *Coming Through Slaughter* have been made into plays. *In the Skin of a Lion* may represent the next logical step: the incorporation of as many dramatic conventions within the text as possible. Characters are presented like actors who are revealed one by one or who go offstage for a few scenes only to reappear later. First, we are presented with Hazen and Patrick Lewis, then Nicholas Temelcoff and Alice Gull: Patrick and Clara: Patrick, Clara and Alice: Patrick, Alice and Hana: Carravagio: Carravagio and Patrick: Patrick and Roland Harris: Clara and Ambrose and finally Patrick, Hana and Clara. It cannot be a coincidence that Alice and Clara are actresses and that there is a play within the drama of the book. Ken Adachi also remarks that "it [*In the Skin of a Lion*] has a passion for set-pieces: the rescuing of a cow from an icy river, a nun falling off the half-finished Viaduct and being miraculously rescued in mid-air." The scene where Ambrose Small sets Patrick Lewis on fire was dramatized on CBC's *The Journal*. It also cannot be coincidence that on the final page of the book, which sends the reader back to the prologue, the last word is "lights."

While the narrative structure of *In the Skin of a Lion* is flexible enough to accommodate Ondaatje's emphasis on fiction it is not without its problems. The main narrative

of *In the Skin of a Lion* is presented by a third person narrator and in many ways it is more flexible than the first person narration which Ondaatje used at times in *Billy the Kid*. By using the third person narrator Ondaatje can present facts, conversations and descriptions as well as the inner thoughts of the characters. However, there is a dislocating effect on our response to the narrative when the text becomes self referential. For the most part the narrator remains omniscient and presents the characters to us as they are revealed to each other. However, in the sections concerning Patrick and Alice there is a dislocating effect when we are presented with insights, such as the following, which the characters are not, nor ever will be, aware of:

But Patrick would never see the great photographs of Hine, as he would never read the letters of Joseph Conrad. Official histories, news stories surround us daily, but the events of art reach us too late, travel languorously like messages in a bottle (SQL 145-6).

Another example involves a description of a game in which Patrick, Hana and Alice participate: "Hana has to try and push them off [the bed], putting her feet against the wall and her shoulders against them. Then they are on the floor and Hana falls on top" (SQL 146-147). On the next page Patrick realizes that

he wants everything of Alice to be with him here in this room as if she is not dead. As if he can be given that gift, to relive those days when Alice was with him and Hana, which in literature is the real gift. He turns the page backwards. Once more there is the image of them struggling and tickling Alice...All these fragments of memory...so we can retreat from the grand story and stumble accidentally upon a luxury, one of

these underground pools where we can sit still  
(SOL 148).

We, along with Patrick, can retreat from the "grand story" by turning back one page to rediscover the image of Alice and Hana. The fact that Patrick turns back the same page of the book we are reading may be no more than a display of Ondaatje's clever wit. However, at this point in the narrative it is somewhat unexpected and poses new problems for the reader to solve regarding the narrator.

### Making Myth out of the Ordinary

I do feel now that I am a Canadian... And I feel more comfortable about writing of Canada. I had to do *Running* first; I needed to catch a world. The advantage of writing about Canada is that you are dealing with a myth that has not been fully created yet.... I'd like to write about Toronto as a city of immigrants, whose history has remained unvoiced....

Interview with Ondaatje  
December 1983

Ondaatje's ability to "catch the world" of his family in Ceylon in *Running in the Family* was an important exercise for the success of *In the Skin of A Lion*. Ondaatje demonstrates his ability to create a mythology about people who previously had gone unrecognized, but he perceives that the advantage of writing about a young and unmythologized country such as Canada is the freedom that it allows him:

The difference is something to do with the horizon... in Ceylon, you don't look up and see the sky: the landscape is too crowded.... What was great about Canada was that it showed you your horizon -- to be in a new country at an age when you are also remaking yourself...

Interestingly, in *In the Skin of a Lion*, almost all of the characters, from the immigrant workers to Patrick Lewis, are defined in terms of the word horizon. The rural and urban locations described in *In The Skin Of A Lion* are important because it is around them that Ondaatje centres his new myth of Canada.

Ondaatje's creation of myth in *In the Skin of a Lion* is perhaps his most successful and his most sophisticated.

Instead of beginning with a predetermined mythic or legendary figure as he did in *Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, he achieves something closer to the familial atmosphere he created in *Running in the Family*. However, unlike the inherently personal tone and subject matter which limits the story of Ondaatje's family, *In the Skin of a Lion* is a tribute to the immigrant working class who laboured to build Canada. The major characters are the fictional ones, the everyday working men, who built the bridge and tunnelled under Lake Ontario, as well as the leather dyers and slaughterhouse workers. Patrick discovers how history has passed these people over and how they have gone unnamed and unnoticed: "the article and illustrations he found in the Riverdale Library depicted every detail about the soil, the wood, the weight of concrete, everything but information on those who actually built the bridge" (SOL 145). Carravagio, the thief, is similarly described as being anonymous and his contribution is never recorded or recognized:

He was anonymous, with never a stillness in his life like this woman's....the houses in Toronto he had helped build or paint or break into were unmarked. He would never leave his name where his skill had been. He was one of those who have a fury or a sadness of only being described by someone else. A tarrer of roads, a housebuilder, a painter, a thief - yet he was invisible to all around him (SOL 199).

Carravagio's anonymity is shared by Nicholas Temelcoff, Patrick Lewis and the men with whom they work. Interestingly, it is Patrick, an alien in his own country,



who is able to discover the truth about these people only because he works alongside, and is accepted by them.

Ondaatje agrees with Sam Solecki who suggests that perhaps his writing is taking a new direction when he says

Maybe in the next book [*In The Skin of A Lion*] some guy will open the door for somebody. I think it also has to do with the landscape. The props. I can't wait to write a book where I have people talking on the telephone. You don't know how frustrating it has been for me to have books set in the desert, the Australian outback, early New Orleans. . .

Just as *Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* revolved around a particular landscape, Ondaatje's myth in *In the Skin of a Lion* is enhanced by the accurate description of the urban and rural landscapes. The action of the story is concentrated within a radius of approximately fifteen miles in the south eastern part of Toronto with Union Station on the west, the Prince Edward Viaduct to the north and the R.C. Harris Filtration Plant to the east. The geography is accurate enough that it could act as a tour guide of this part of Toronto: the markets on Eastern Avenue, Alice's apartment on Verral Avenue, and the tannery where Patrick works on Cypress Street. Ondaatje accurately describes the atmosphere of Toronto before World War II which is highlighted by specific dates such as the building of the Viaduct from 1914 to 1919, and Patrick's release from prison in 1938. The geography also becomes symbolic. For example, Patrick returns once to both Depot Creek and Union Station and each visit increases his awareness of the importance of his past.

Ondaatje retains from his earlier prose works the use of repeating images and conversations to create new meanings within the text and to suggest a mythic structure. The snippets of conversations which are repeated in the text act as threads linking the disparate moments of the narrative. Patrick is constantly reminded of Alice and is haunted by things she has said such as "I don't think I'm big enough to put someone in a position where they will hurt another." (SOL 125 and 160) and "Then when we meet again we can talk...we can say hello" (SOL 89 and 153). There are at least nine examples of repeated bits of conversations which weave their way through the narrative and mirror the organizing web which Patrick envisions:

His own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural, which was a falling together sometimes of accomplices. Patrick saw a wondrous web - all of these fragments of a human order, something ungoverned by the family he was born into or the headlines of the day. A nun on a bridge, a daredevil who was unable to sleep without a drink, a boy watching a fire at night, an actress who ran away with a millionaire - the detritus and chaos of the age was realigned (SOL 145).

The unforgettable images which weave through *In the Skin of a Lion* are poetic, brief and imagistic and more subtle than the images which sustained *Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*. The colour blue, which becomes a symbol of liberation for Carravaggio, is progressively associated with his person. The gradual layering of the imagery involving the colour blue begins with Carravaggio being painted: "Buck and Patrick painted him, covering his hands and boots and hair with blue. They daubed his clothes

and then, laying a strip of handkerchief over his eyes, painted his face blue, so he was gone -- to the guards who looked up and saw nothing there" (SOL 180). From this point on the colour blue "follows" Carravagio as the woman writer in the Muskokas points to the aquamarine paint on his neck. Patrick traces him through his Blue Cellar Cafe compatriots and Carravagio and his wife make love among a cascade of broken blue and red crockery.

Ondaatje uses the imagery of blindness as an ironic comment on the events in the narrative. Much of the narrative is presented through the sensibilities of Patrick Lewis, who is a man blind to his own country. The images of blindness and sight are so subtle that until their cumulative effect is noticed they are easy to miss. These images of blindness involve only Patrick: it is he who looks after Clara's blind iguana; he wipes away the makeup from around Alice Gull's eye; he is temporarily blinded in one eye by Ambrose Small and he seeks refuge in the Garden of the Blind. Patrick's role as a searcher becomes more mythic and symbolic when we understand it in terms of his blindness and limitations:

Patrick has clung like moss to strangers, to the nooks and fissures of their situations. He has always been alien...Clara and Ambrose and Alice and Temelcoff and Cato - this cluster made up a drama without him. And he himself was nothing but a prism that refracted their lives...all his life Patrick had been oblivious to it, a searcher gazing into the darkness of his own country, a blind man dressing the heroine (SOL 157).

Ondaatje is also preoccupied with portraying characters who have the ability to move with ease through their world even though they are blindfolded. As early in the novel as Hazen Lewis we are presented with someone who is so attuned to his universe and sure of himself that "he could assemble river dynamite with his eyes closed" (SOL 18). Similarly, Nicholas Temelcoff "does not really need to see things, he has charted all that space, knows the pier footings...it does not matter if it is day or night, he could be blindfolded. He knows his position in the air as if he is mercury slipping across the map" (SOL 35). Alice says "You could blindfold me now, Patrick, and I would be able to take you there, fifty yards off the road, across a creek-lots of mud here, turn right" (SOL 140). Patrick too is able to move blindfolded: "Sometimes when he is alone Patrick will blindfold himself and move around a room, slowly at first, then faster until he is immaculate and magical in it" (SOL 79). Yet Patrick's greatest achievement in moving through darkness like a blind man, occurs not when he has artificially forced the talent by practising in a room but when he swims instinctively through the dark tunnels of the Filtration Plant. Ondaatje hints at the value and security of being able to perfect this instinct, in a passage entitled "Her House," found in *Secular Love*: "when you can move through a house blindfolded it belongs to you. You are moving like blood calmly within your own body."<sup>13</sup>

*In the Skin of a Lion* is also imbued with an aura of the supernatural. For example, as a young boy, Patrick sees the Finns skating at night on the ice: "it seemed for a moment that he had stumbled on a coven, or one of those strange druidic rituals - illustrations of which he had pored over in his favourite history book" (SOL 21). Later we find out that Cato, who is Finnish, has a body which will not ignite and at his funeral a solar eclipse darkens the earth (SOL 159).

Patrick is not openly superstitious, yet the moon becomes associated with him in its various states of waxing and waning. The prologue mentions a drive to Marmora "under six stars and a moon" and this same combination had appeared earlier on the evening when Patrick set fire to the Muskoka Hotel (SOL 171). Clara and Alice (who asks "are we witches?") bay towards an absent moon pointed to by the moonflower (SOL 76). Patrick recalls his time with Alice as "the days that really belonged to the moon," a phrase which recurs twice. (SOL 129 and 159). Ideal conditions occur the night of Patrick's attempt to sabotage the Filtration Plant because there no moon. The absence of a moon is regarded as good by thieves and Carravagio is blessed by the "a sliver of a new moon that gave off little light. A thief's moon" as he makes his escape from jail (SOL 180).

*In The Skin of A Lion* represents a departure from previous works, and it illustrates that Ondaatje is still searching for a unique narrative form to express the

intricate relationship between fact, fiction and mythology. *In the Skin of a Lion* owes a debt to Ondaatje's earlier prose works. While there are no actual photographs reproduced in the text the photograph which exists only by description provides Patrick with the link between Alice and Nicholas Temelcoff and thereby functions in the same manner as the real photo which Ondaatje uses to create a fictitious link between Bolden and Beilock. Ondaatje provides us with a number of documentary photographs which also exist only as descriptions. These photographs provide us with background information on the Viaduct and the working conditions faced by the immigrants. There are no real "interviews" per se yet Patrick Lewis is almost detective-like in his personal relationships. He wants constantly to know about people's pasts, particularly Clara and Alice. The only obvious paratextual device is the inclusion of newspaper reports on solutions to the missing Ambrose Small. However, *In the Skin of a Lion* is Ondaatje's first prose work that does not combine poetry sections with prose but he replaces this by creating poetic images and magical descriptions. He also inserts some Italian and Macedonian words which add authenticity to the book. It is as if Ondaatje culled through *Billy the Kid*, *Coming Through Slaughter* and *Running in the Family* to see what techniques worked best and was hesitant to abandon them entirely. In this latest novel Ondaatje continues to explore the possibilities of myth not by exploring cultural heroes but stressing the inherent

nobleness and persistent nature of the immigrant working class and by emphasizing the social awakening of a Canadian who attempts to understand them. Ondaatje is still searching for a unique narrative form and so far, *In the Skin of a Lion* is the closest reflection of the organic method out of which all his works have grown.

## Notes

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- 2 *Architecture of Public Works* 4.
- 3 Fred McClement. *The Strange Case of Ambrose Small* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1974) 22.
- 4 McClement 42.
- 5 McClement 26 and 31.
- 6 "Ambrose Small Found in Iowa Sleuth Claims." *The Globe* 15 August 1921: 1.
- 7 William French. "Free-fall Fiction." book review *The Globe and Mail* 23 May 1987: C5.
- 8 Ken Adachi. "Fact and Fiction Make an impressive Novel." book review. *The Toronto Star* 30 May, 1987: M4.
- 9 Adachi M4.
- 10 Ujjo Kareda. "An Immigrant's Song." *Saturday Night* December 1963: 51.
- 11 Kareda 51.
- 12 Sam Solecki. "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje (1984)." *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*. ed. Sam Solecki (Montréal, Véhicule Press, 1985) 325.
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