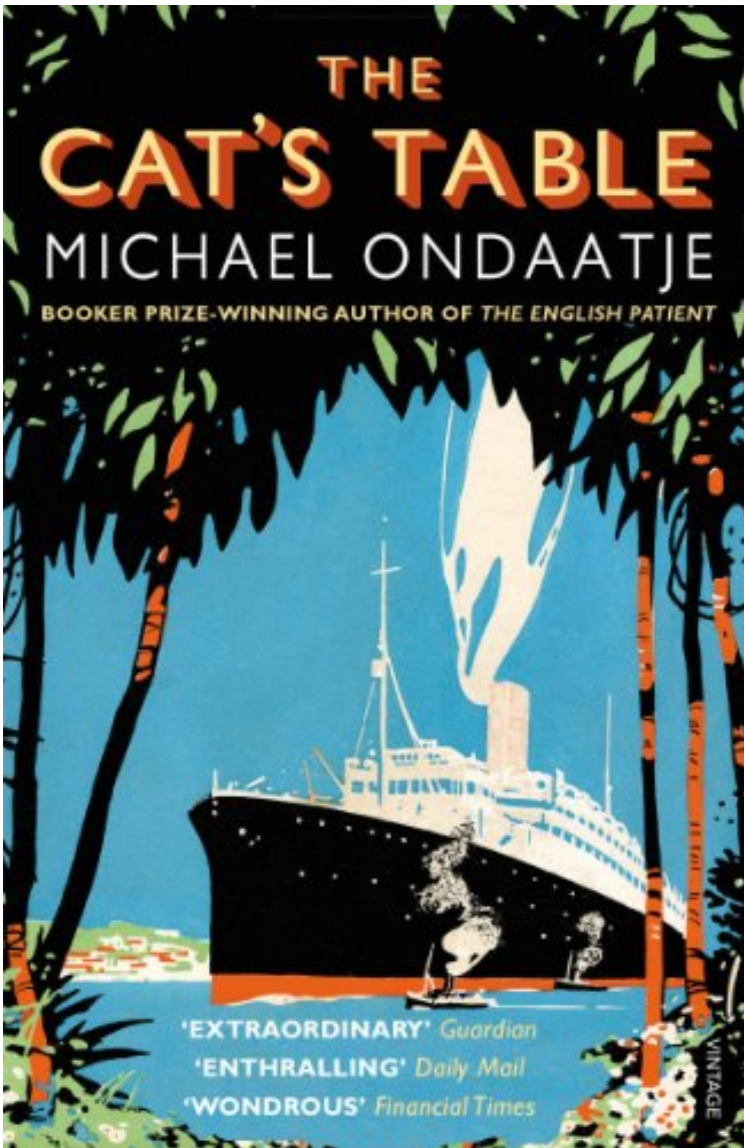


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The Cat's Table



Par Michael Ondaatje
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Par Michael Ondaatje : The Cat's Table before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Cat's Table:

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur'What had there been before such a ship in my life? A dugout canoe on a river journey?

A launch in Trincomalee harbour? There were always fishing boats on our horizon. But I could never imagine the grandeur of this castle that was to cross the sea'.In the early 1950s, an eleven-year-old boy boards a huge liner in Colombo bound for England. At mealtimes he is seated at the lowly 'cat's table' - as far from the Captain's table as can be - with a ragtag group of adults and two other boys, Cassius and Ramadhin. As the ship crosses the Indian Ocean the boys tumble from one adventure to another,and at night they spy on a shackled prisoner - his crime and fate a mystery that will haunt them forever...ExtraitTHE CATS TABLE by Michael Ondaatje He wasnt talking. He was looking from the window of the car all the way. Two adults

in the front seat spoke quietly under their breath. He could have listened if he wanted to, but he didn't. For a while, at the section of the road where the river sometimes flooded, he could hear the spray of water at the wheels. They entered the Fort and the car slipped silently past the post office building and the clock tower. At this hour of the night there was barely any traffic in Colombo. They drove out along Reclamation Road, passed St. Anthony's Church, and after that he saw the last of the food stalls, each lit with a single bulb. Then they entered a vast open space that was the harbour, with only a string of lights in the distance along the pier. He got out and stood by the warmth of the car. He could hear the stray dogs that lived on the quays barking out of the darkness. Nearly everything around him was invisible, save for what could be seen under the spray of a few sulphur lanterns watersiders pulling a procession of baggage wagons, some families huddled together. They were all beginning to walk towards the ship. He was eleven years old that night when, green as he could be about the world, he climbed aboard the first and only ship of his life. It felt as if a city had been added to the coast, better lit than any town or village. He went up the gangplank, watching only the path of his feet nothing ahead of him existed and continued till he faced the dark harbour and sea. There were outlines of other ships farther out, beginning to turn on lights. He stood alone, smelling everything, then came back through the noise and the crowd to the side that faced land. A yellow glow over the city. Already it felt there was a wall between him and what took place there. Stewards began handing out food and cordials. He ate several sandwiches, and after that he made his way down to his cabin, undressed, and slipped into the narrow bunk. He'd never slept under a blanket before, save once in Nuwara Eliya. He was wide awake. The cabin was below the level of the waves, so there was no porthole. He found a switch beside the bed and when he pressed it his head and pillow were suddenly lit by a cone of light. He did not go back up on deck for a last look, or to wave at his relatives who had brought him to the harbour. He could hear singing and imagined the slow and then eager parting of families taking place in the thrilling night air. I do not know, even now, why he chose this solitude. Had whoever brought him onto the Oronsay already left? In films people tear themselves away from one another weeping, and the ship separates from land while the departed hold on to those disappearing faces until all distinction is lost. I try to imagine who the boy on the ship was. Perhaps a sense of self is not even there in his nervous stillness in the narrow bunk, in this green grasshopper or little cricket, as if he has been smuggled away accidentally, with no knowledge of the act, into the future. He woke up, hearing passengers running along the corridor. So he got back into his clothes and left the cabin. Something was happening. Drunken yells filled the night, shouted down by officials. In the middle of B Deck, sailors were attempting to grab hold of the harbour pilot. Having guided the ship meticulously out of the harbour (there were many routes to be avoided because of submerged wrecks and an earlier breakwater), he had gone on to have too many drinks to celebrate his achievement. Now, apparently, he simply did not wish to leave. Not just yet. Perhaps another hour or two with the ship. But the Oronsay was eager to depart on the stroke of midnight and the pilot's tug waited at the waterline. The crew had been struggling to force him down the rope ladder, however as there was a danger of his falling to his death, they were now capturing him fishlike in a net, and in this way they lowered him down safely. It seemed to be in no way an embarrassment to the man, but the episode clearly was to the officials of the Orient Line who were on the bridge, furious in their white uniforms. The passengers cheered as the tug broke away. Then there was the sound of the two-stroke and the pilot's weary singing as the tug disappeared into the night.

What had there been before such a ship in my life? A dugout canoe on a river journey? A launch in Trincomalee harbour? There were always fishing boats on our horizon. But I could never have imagined the grandeur of this castle that was to cross the sea. The longest journeys I had made were car rides to Nuwara Eliya and Horton Plains, or the train to Jaffna, which we boarded at seven a.m. and disembarked from in the late afternoon. We made that journey with our egg sandwiches, some thalagulies, a pack of cards, and a small Boys Own adventure. But now it had been arranged I would be travelling to England by ship, and that I would be making the journey alone. No mention was made that this might be an unusual experience or that it could be exciting or dangerous, so I did not approach it with any joy or fear. I was not forewarned that the ship would have seven levels, hold more than six hundred people including a captain, nine cooks, engineers, a veterinarian, and that it would contain a small jail and chlorinated pools that would actually sail with us over two oceans. The departure date was marked casually on the calendar by my aunt, who had notified the school that I would be leaving at the end of the term. The fact of my being at sea for twenty-one days was spoken of as having not much significance, so I was surprised my relatives were even bothering to accompany me to the harbour. I had assumed I would be taking a bus by myself and then change onto another at Borella Junction. There had been just one attempt to introduce me to the situation of the journey.

A lady named Flavia Prins, whose husband knew my uncle, turned out to be making the same journey and was invited to tea one afternoon to meet with me. She would be travelling in First Class but promised to keep an eye on me. I shook her hand carefully, as it was covered with rings and bangles, and she then turned away to continue the conversation I had interrupted. I spent most of the hour listening to a few uncles and counting how many of the trimmed sandwiches they ate. On my last day, I found an empty school examination booklet, a pencil, a pencil sharpener, a traced map of the world, and put them into my small suitcase. I went outside and said good-bye to the generator, and dug up the pieces of the radio I had once taken apart and, being unable to put them back together, had buried under the lawn. I said good-bye to Narayan, and good-bye to Gunepala. As I got into the car, it was explained to me that after I crossed the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, and gone through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean, I would arrive one morning on a small pier in England and my mother would meet me there. It was not the magic or the scale of the journey that was of concern to me, but that detail of how my mother could know when exactly I would arrive in that other country. And if she would be there. I heard a note being slipped under my door. It assigned me to Table 76 for all my meals. The other bunk had not been slept in. I dressed and went out. I was not used to stairs and climbed them warily. In the dining room there were nine people at Table 76, and that included two other boys roughly my age. We seem to be at the cats table, the woman called Miss Lasqueti said. Were in the least privileged place. It was clear we were located far from the Captains Table, which was at the opposite end of the dining room. One of the two boys at our table was named Ramadhin, and the other was called Cassius. The first was quiet, the other looked scornful, and we ignored one another, although I recognized Cassius. I had gone to the same school, where, even though he was a year older than I was, I knew much about him. He had been notorious and was even expelled for a term. I was sure it was going to take a long time before we spoke. But what was good about our table was that there seemed to be several interesting adults. We had a botanist, and a tailor who owned a shop up in Kandy. Most exciting of all, we had a pianist who cheerfully claimed to have hit the skids.

From the Hardcover edition. *Revue de presse* The Cats Table is just as skillfully wrought as Ondaatjes magnum opus *The English Patient*, but its picaresque childhood adventure gives it a special power and intimacy . . . He is a master at creating characters, whom he chooses to present, memorably, as individuals. This choice is of a piece with the freshness and originality that are the hallmarks of *The Cats Table*. *Wall Street Journal* A joy and a lark to read . . . Within a few pages of the books opening, *The Cats Table* has done a miraculous thing it has ceased to be a book, or even a piece of art. It is merely a story, unfolding before the readers eyes, its churning motor a mystery about what it is exactly that happened on this boat . . . Told in short bursts of exposition so beautiful one actually feels the urge to slow the reading down, the novel shows us how the boy assembles the man. *Boston Globe* *The Cats Table* is an exquisite example of the richness that can flourish in the gaps between fact and fiction . . . Ondaatje has an eerily precise grasp of the immediacy of a child's world view, and an extraordinary sense of individual destiny . . . It is an adventure story, it is a meditation on power, memory, art, childhood, love and loss. It displays a technique so formidable as to seem almost playful. It is one of those rare books that one could reread an infinite number of times, and always find something new within its pages. *Evening Standard (UK)* This book is wonderful, offering all the best pleasures of Ondaatjes writing: his musical prose, up-tempo; his ear for absurd, almost surreal dialogue, which had me laughing out loud in public as I read; his admiration for craftsmanship and specialized language in the sciences and the trades; and his sumptuous evocations of sensual delight . . . In many ways, this book is Ondaatjes most intimate yet. *Globe and Mail (Canada)* A treasure chest of escapades from a pitch-perfect writer, an immaculate observer of the dance of humans, giving us an intoxicating mix of tenderly rendered boys eye perspective and the musings of the older narrator looking back on this intensely formative voyage . . . It is a classic, perfect premise for a novel packed with possibilities. Put it in the hands of one of the most subtle and surprising masters of world writing, Michael Ondaatje, and unalloyed joy lies latent in every sentence and sensuous quirk of the narrative. This is simply blissful storytelling . . . Think the seafaring Joseph Conrad, with an invigorating infusion of *Treasure Island*, a touch of Mark Twain. *The Scotsman (UK)* Ondaatjes best novel since his Booker Prizewinning *The English Patient* . . . [An] air of the meta adds a gorgeous, modern twist to the timeless story of boys having an awfully big adventure . . . As always, Ondaatjes prose is lyrical, but here it is tempered; the result is clean and full of grace. *Publishers Weekly* (starred) A graceful, closely observed novel that blends coming-of-age tropes with a Conradian sea voyage . . . Beautifully detailed, without a false note: It is easy to imagine, in Ondaatjes hands, being a passenger in the golden age of transoceanic voyaging, amid a sea of cocktail glasses and overflowing

ashtrays, if in this case a setting more worthy of John le Carr than Noel Coward . . . Elegiac, mature, and nostalgic fine evocation of childhood, and of days irretrievably past. Kirkus s (starred) Ondaatje is justly recognized as a master of literary craft . . . The novel tells of a journey from childhood to the adult world, as well as a passage from the homeland to another country, something of a Dantean experience. Annie Proulx, The Guardian (UK) Ondaatjes wondrous prose feels more alive to the world than ever before . . . This is a simpler story, more simply told, than Ondaatje has accustomed his readers to . . . Yet The Cats Table is no less thrilling in its attempts to capture beauty in its various and terrifying forms. Financial Times (UK) Richly enjoyable, often very funny, and gleams like a really smart liner on a sunny day . . . The magic of this fine book is in the strange inventiveness of its episodes. Ondaatje is really the master of incident in the novel, and the enchantments wash over the reader in waves . . . The beauty of Ondaatjes writing is in its swift accuracy; it sings with the simple precision of the gaze. Daily Telegraph (UK) The Cats Table is Ondaatjes most accessible, most compelling novel to date. It may also be his finest . . . Ondaatjes prose is, as always, stunning . . . The Cats Table is a breathtaking account not only of boyhood, but of its loss. It is a novel filled with utterly unique characters and situations, but universal in its themes, heartbreakingly so, and a journey the reader will never forget. Vancouver Sun (Canada) An eloquent, elegiac tribute to the game of youth and how it shapes what follows . . . One of the strengths of the novel is the sheer brilliance of characterization on show. The bit players on board the Oronsay are almost Dickensian in their eccentricity and lovability . . . In The Cats Table, he has not only captured with acute precision the precarious balance of his characters existence on the move but also the battle that adults wage for the retention of the awe and wonder they once took for granted in their childhood. Ultimately, Ondaatje has created a beautiful and poetic study here of what it means to have your very existence metaphorically, as well as literally, all at sea. Independent on Sunday (UK) A novel superbly poised between the magic of innocence and the melancholy of experience. Economist (UK) Is there a novelist who writes more compellingly about tenderness than Ondaatje? . . . The Cats Table is a voyage of discovery for the reader as well as for its narrator. I loved the book, was dazzled by its language, and looked forward to turning each page to learn what would happen next. Montreal Gazette (Canada) The Cats Table deserves to be recognized for the beauty and poetry of its writing: pages that lull you with their carefully constructed rhythm, sailing you effortlessly from chapter to chapter and leaving you bereft when forced to disembark at the novels end. Sunday Telegraph (UK) So enveloping and beautifully rendered, one is reluctant to disembark at the end of the journey . . . The best novels and poetry possess a kind of bottomlessness: each time a reader revisits a masterful work, she finds something new. Though the ocean journey in The Cats Table lasts a mere 21 days, it encapsulates the fullness of a lifetime. This reader will undoubtedly return to it and unearth new treasures from its depths. Quill and Quire (Canada)