

The Cat's Table

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In the early 1950s, an 11-year-old boy in Colombo boards a ship bound for England. At mealtimes he is seated at the "cat's table"-as far from the Captain's Table as can be-with a ragtag group of "insignificant" adults and two other boys, Cassius and Ramadhin. As the ship makes its way across the Indian Ocean, through the Suez Canal, into the Mediterranean, the boys tumble from one adventure to another, bursting all over the place like freed mercury. But there are other diversions as well: One man talks with them about jazz and women, another opens the door to the world of literature. The narrator's elusive, beautiful cousin Emily becomes his confidante, allowing him to see himself "with a distant eye" for the first time, and to feel the first stirring of desire. Another cat's table denizen, the shadowy Miss Lasqueti, is perhaps more than what she seems. And very late every night, the boys spy on a shackled prisoner, his crime and his fate a galvanizing mystery that will haunt them forever.

As the narrative moves between the decks and holds of the ship and the boy's adult years, it tells a spellbinding story-by turns poignant and electrifying-about the magical, often forbidden discoveries of childhood and a lifelong journey that begins unexpectedly with a spectacular sea voyage.

Amazon Best Books of the Month, October 2011:

Michael Ondaatje's finely wrought new novel chronicles a young boy's passage from Sri Lanka to London onboard the Oronsay, both as it unfolds and in hindsight. Glancing off the author's own biography, the story follows 11-year-old Michael as he immerses himself in the hidden corners and relationships of a temporary floating world, overcoming its physical boundaries with the expanse of his imagination. The boy's companions at the so-called cat's table, where the ship's unconnected strays dine together, become his friends and teachers, each leading him closer to the key that unlocks the Oronsay's mystery decades later. Elegantly structured and completely absorbing, *The Cat's Table* is a quiet masterpiece by a writer at the height of his craft. --Mia Lipman

Guest Reviewer: Abraham Verghese on *The Cat's Table* by Michael Ondaatje

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One means by which I have kept track of the passage of time is by the appearance of a new Michael Ondaatje book. I've loved his poetry (and I still know long passages from *Secular Love* by heart). I love the way his books of poetry or prose, fiction or nonfiction (and some of his books are hybrids that seem to be all those genres in one book) are so carefully crafted. I must have read *In the Skin of a Lion* 10 times, disassembling it to see how this magic alchemy came about.

You can imagine my excitement when *The Cat's Table*, Ondaatje's latest, arrived on my desk. I found myself reading aloud with a loved one, savoring, just a few pages a day that

were carefully rationed. Reading aloud was a way to make every morsel last longer, have it linger on tongue and ear. I can't think of a book I've read where the sense of a journey—in this case, a ship going from Ceylon to England via the Suez Canal—is so carefully mirrored in the reader's experience. I had the sense of movement, of a big ship inching away from the shore, and of seeing one's former life recede. At the assigned dinner table (from which the title derives), one meets fellow travelers and the brief bios they present to the world. With each passing day, the narrator finds that these constructed selves give way to something deeper, something overstated, or something dark and ominous, or at other times they modestly conceal a being that is incredibly beautiful and heroic. As the journey progresses, the many characters and the flavors each adds begin to meld together, and I had a sense of the narrative soup thickening, the pace increasing. Indeed, by the last few pages it was as though we had arrived all too soon at the bottom of a most delicious cioppino or bouillabaisse. The fleshy items were dispensed with, the shells all removed, leaving only those last few spoonfuls, and in them a wise world, a complete world, a world distilled. When it was over, I had that sense one lives for as a reader: the feeling of having discovered a truth not just about the imagined world of the novelist, but also about oneself, a truth one can now carry forth into the world, into the rest of one's life....

Make haste to get this book, then do what I did: Fill up the tub, ration yourself to a few pages a day, read aloud, preferably to someone as crazy about Ondaatje as you are. Be disciplined. Don't exceed your ration. It is a long voyage but it will go by too soon. So relish. Enjoy!

Abraham Verghese

is the author of the internationally best-selling novel *Cutting for Stone*, which has been translated into 23 languages and spent over a year on the *New York Times* best-seller list. He is also the author of *My Own Country*, a 1994 NBCC Finalist and a *Time* Best Book of the Year, and *The Tennis Partner*, a *New York Times* Notable Book. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, he has published essays and short stories in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Esquire*, *Granta*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and elsewhere. He is currently Professor and Senior Associate Chair for the Theory and Practice of Medicine at Stanford University and lives in Palo Alto, California.

Michael Ondaatje is the author of five previous novels, a memoir, a nonfiction book on film, and several books of poetry. *The English Patient* won the Booker Prize; *Anil's Ghost* won the Irish Times International Fiction Prize, the Giller Prize, and the Prix Médicis. Born in Sri Lanka, Michael Ondaatje now lives in Toronto.

www.michaelondaatje.com

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