

The Cat's Table Study Guide

The Cat's Table by Michael Ondaatje

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Plot Summary

Michael Ondaatje's 2011 novel, "The Cat's Table", is the coming-of-age tale of an 11 year-old boy named Michael who takes a 21-day sea journey in the 1950s. Leaving his home on the island state of Ceylon (now called Sri Lanka), just south of India, Michael boards a passenger ship called the Oronsay bound for England, where he will be reunited with his mother. Michael's parents are divorced and have left him in the care of an uncle in Ceylon. He is traveling alone, but he meets two other Ceylonese boys who also are unaccompanied by an adult. Cassius, who was a year ahead of Michael at the same boarding school, has a reputation for trouble-making that he upholds on the Oronsay. Ramadhin is a quiet and studious boy with asthma and a weak heart, but he participates nevertheless in most of the mischief, which becomes increasingly serious as the voyage continues. Also on board is a luminous 17 year-old named Emily de Saram, who is a distant cousin of Michael. The novel is an ensemble piece, and many of its characters sit at the same table as Michael in the ship's dining room. This is the Cat's Table, so called because it is the least prestigious table in the room. Even so, its adult members prove to be among the most interesting and resourceful people on board. The story, told entirely through the eyes of Michael, often jumps years forward to the present, when he has become a well-known writer who is recalling this voyage of his youth to write a book about it.

For a good while, the novel appears to be a series of quirky and interesting character sketches of the passengers, interspersed with stories of Michael's life both before and after the voyage. Gradually, the backgrounds and the on-board activities of numerous characters begin to affect each other, and an intrigue emerges. It concerns a prisoner on board named Niemeyer, who is being brought from Ceylon to England for trial after allegedly murdering an English judge in the Ceylonese city of Colombo. Several people on board are participating in a plot to help Niemeyer escape custody, while others are engaged in efforts to ensure his arrival in England. Through a romantic attachment, Emily becomes involved in this plot, which ends in the death of a policeman and in Niemeyer jumping overboard with a young woman, his daughter, who was part of the plot to free him. The fate of the father and daughter is undetermined, although it is likely they drowned. During the journey, young Michael comes to realize that many of the people on board have secrets to conceal. After the voyage, he has a close friendship with Ramadhin, who dies at age 30 of heart failure, and he has a short-lived marriage to Ramadhin's sister. He does not see Cassius again, but years later he meets Emily, on whom he had an innocent crush during the voyage. He learns that the events on board the Oronsay left a deep mark on her soul. As for Michael, by the time his mother meets him when the ship docks, it is clear that the voyage has marked a rite of passage for him from the naiveté of childhood to a stage of awareness that precedes the entry to adulthood.



Pages 3-22

Pages 3-22 Summary

"The Cat's Table" by Michael Ondaatje is the story of a passenger ship journey from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to England in 1954. The adventures of several children on board, told through the eyes of one boy, are interspersed with tales of what happened to them later in life. The novel opens with the eleven year-old protagonist, as yet unnamed, sitting in the back of a car going through the city of Colombo in Ceylon. Two adults are whispering in the front seat, but he pays little attention to them. When the car reaches the harbor, the boy boards a ship called the Oronsay. He finds his cabin and sleeps, not even waving goodbye to whomever brought him. He awakens to a disturbance, caused by the drunken tugboat captain. The ship is towed to sea, and the passengers cheer. In a section titled, "Departure," the boy marvels at the size of the ship, which has seven floors and holds more than 600 people. He meets a woman named Flavia Prins, whose husband was an acquaintance of the boy's uncle. Flavia is traveling First Class, but says she will look after him. He recalls having said goodbye to two people in Colombo named Narayan and Gunepala, and being told that his mother would meet him at a pier in England, which amazes him.

He receives a note under his door that assigns him to Table 76 for meals. There are nine people at the table, including two other boys his age. A woman named Miss Lasqueti says they are at the "cat's table," which is the least privileged seating in the dining room. But the boy is happy that the table has a botanist, a tailor, and a down-on-his-luck pianist named Mr. Mazappa, who plays with the ship's orchestra and gives lessons. Also at the table is a Mr. Nevin, retired from a career dismantling ships for salvage and now doing safety work for the Orient Line. The boy also learns that a distant cousin, a beautiful teenager named Emily de Saram, is aboard. They had been neighbors for several years, although he has not seen her for two years. The boy remembers Emily's father as dangerous, and none of the two children's parents were reliable. The two other boys at the table are Cassius, who is rambunctious, and Ramadhin, who is studious. The three quickly become friends. Late at night, they are fascinated to see a prisoner in chains brought on deck for a walk. The protagonist visits Flavia Prins, who tells him it is rumored that the prisoner killed a judge. The boy's uncle, his guardian in Colombo, is a Ceylonese judge. That night, the boy writes in a notebook about what he has experienced so far on the ship. On the third night, a man named Mr. Hastie appears in the boy's cabin and takes the spare bunk. The keeper of the ship's kennels, he is polite and quiet, although he brings friends to the cabin frequently to play whispered games of cards at night.

Pages 3-22 Analysis

Early in this novel, a boy boards a ship for a long journey. In literature, such a trip for a young person is symbolic of a rite of passage, signaling a coming-of-age story,



otherwise known as a bildungsroman. The adults in the car with him are not identified and he does not even bother to wave goodbye to them, a situation that elicits questions about the child's parents and why he is traveling alone. Interestingly, the author does not immediately give the boy a name, although the story is being told from his viewpoint. One reason for this tactic could be that a number of characters are introduced quickly, which taxes the reader's ability to keep everyone straight, but the main reason is probably to add another element of mystery to the narrative. The first small mystery, about where his parents are, is partially solved with the information that he will meet his mother in England at the journey's end. Even so, it remains unclear where his father is, and why his mother is so far away. The early introduction of many members of the Cat's Table suggests that the novel will have a large cast of characters whose personal stories might interlock, which turns out to be the case. In these first pages, the characters are merely sketched, yet a number of them seem interesting and even a bit mysterious. The overall effect is that the child has found himself in the midst of potentially fascinating company at the start of a voyage that most boys his age would regard as a wonderful adventure, with only the stranger, Flavia Prins, as a kind of distant chaperone.



Pages 23-42

Pages 23-42 Summary

The three friends arise each morning before sunrise. Ramadhin usually knocks to awaken the protagonist, who has been nicknamed "Mynah." The three swim in the First Class pool and then pilfer breakfast set up on the Sun Deck, eating it in a lifeboat hung above the deck. Cassius produces a cigarette he found but Ramadhin refuses it, because of his asthma, which everyone has noticed. Thinking back to his youth, the narrator recalls that Ramadhin was still sickly several years later, when they met again. He remembers spending most of that time with Ramadhin's sister, Massoumeh, with whom he had a tentative romance. As the boys return to Tourist Class, Mynah reflects that they already have agreed to do one forbidden thing each day. He thinks about his parents' divorce, which he does not believe had a huge impact on him, although it was not good. He boarded at St. Thomas College, Mount Livinia, where he loved to swim in a culvert. He felt like the first time in his life that he was in close proximity to adults was when he stepped aboard the Oronsay. In a section titled, "Mazappa," Mynah expresses his liking for Mr. Mazappa, although his language is risqué. Mazappa says the way to remember how to spell "Egypt" is to think of, "Ever Grasping Your Precious Tits." Even so, he also talks to the boys about music. His stage name is Sunny Meadows, which does not suit his untamed personality. He tells about the clarinetist Bechet, who had a duel in 1928, and later left Duke Ellington's jazz band because Bechet's dog would come on stage and growl when he was playing. Bechet had an unruly love life, which Mazappa admired.

In a section titled, "C Deck," Mynah sits in his muggy cabin in late afternoon, the only time and place he can find to be alone and feel safe, even though he's at sea. At twilight, he sometimes is alone on C Deck, where the sight of the vast water petrifies him. He recalls seeing a passenger ship being burned in Colombo harbor once, and he asks Mr. Nevil if the Oronsay is safe. Mr. Nevil says the greatest ancient warship was the Greek trireme, but it was made entirely of wood, and not a scrap of one remains. The Oronsay is safer, he concludes. That night, Mynah thinks a different sound in the waves suggests they are passing islands, but he does not know where they are. Waking earlier than usual one morning, the three boys see an Australian girl on roller skates racing around the top deck. She crashes into a railing, cuts her knee, but keeps going. After many laps, she gets into the outdoor shower fully clothed. The boys are enthralled. In a section titled, "Cassius," the protagonist describes his young friend as anti-authoritarian. It turns out that Cassius was a year ahead of Mynah at St. Thomas' College, where he was famous for once locking the boarding-house master in the bathroom and getting a week's suspension. He suggested that the three boys on the ship should not discuss their family histories, and Mynah knew nothing of Cassius' parents. The protagonist says he lost touch with Cassius after the 21-day ship voyage, although he heard or read about his career over the years. A one-page section called "Examination Booklet: Overheard Conversations" quotes several statements Mynah heard during his first 11 days on shipboard.



Pages 23-42 Analysis

After the author establishes how quickly the three young friends settle into a pattern of mild mischief on board, he acknowledges that the protagonist is looking back upon this time from the vantage point of many years. So far, the boy has been identified only as Mynah, the nickname given to him by his two friends. When he mentions Ramadhin's ill health, he says it continued for years after the voyage, which not only reveals that Mynah and Ramadhin remained friends following the trip, but that the narrator is now much older and is recollecting all this. Mention of the divorce of the boy's parents and his school years fill in a bit of his background. The focus then shifts to other passengers, beginning with Mr. Mazappa, whom Mynah obviously sees as romantic and a little wild. Mynah's fear of the vast ocean and his concerns about the safety of the ship are reminders that he is only 11 years old, and must rely on adult strangers, such as Mr. Nevil, for advice and emotional support. The vignette concerning the Australian girl on roller skates is almost surreal or dream-like, which seems appropriate to memories of an exotic voyage long ago. The section on Cassius establishes him as a daring boy, which foreshadows his role in getting the boys into trouble during the trip. Again, the narrator leaps forward in time, to look back at the life of Cassius after the voyage, during which he apparently achieved a measure of renown in his work. The quotations in Mynah's notebook are the first of several such sections that provide a brief break from the main narrative and give the opportunity for the author to add funny or telling details to the story of the voyage.



Pages 43-69

Pages 43-69 Summary

In a section titled, "The Hold," Mynah describes Larry Daniels, the botanist at the Cat's Table. He is from Ceylon, and had done much fieldwork in Indonesia, but this is his first trip to Europe. He has a crush on Emily, and plies Mynah for information about her at every opportunity. Mynah makes up some of his replies, such as that Emily wants to become an actress. Daniels arranges for Emily to meet the members of the Jankla Troupe, traveling acrobats who perform on board. Among them, Mynah likes most The Hyderabad Mind, who "finds" missing objects that troupe members have stolen earlier from passengers. Cassius likes the troupe most, but when Daniels introduces Emily to the Hyderabad Mind, the protagonist says that the encounter changes her life. Daniels keeps a huge garden of botanical specimens deep in the ship's hold. He says he saw the boys smoking cane from a chair, so he gives them betel leaves to chew, which he notes is healthier for Ramadhin. Back on deck, Daniels imitates the motions of trees in the wind, which makes the boys laugh. In the section, "The Turbine Room," Mynah says the boys try to take afternoon naps, so they could stay up later at night, but the adjoining cabins are noisy. A woman practices violin next to Mynah. One late night, the boys randomly follow a man whom they recognize as The Hyberadad Mind. Surprisingly, he has a rendezvous on deck with Emily.

The protagonist notes that he always thought the sea voyage was calm until, years later, his children prompted him to recount it, and he realized it was a rite of passage. On board, he missed the insects, birds, and reptiles of his hometown, Boralesgamuwa. He recalls being awakened early in the morning by Narayan, a tall man who would take him to a shed while he started the generator. Narayan would then take him shopping in town, where they would have breakfast. His regular companions in his youth were Narayan and the cook, Gunepala. The latter was an argumentative man, but lively and interesting. Years later, the protagonist finds novels in a bookstore written by a man named Narayan, and convinces himself they were written by the man he once knew. One day, on the ship, Mynah is drawn to a cabin by the smell of burning hemp. He meets a teacher named Mr. Fonseka, and Mynah introduces himself by his real name, Michael. Foneska's room is full of books, and he never comes on deck. Michael does not keep in touch with him after the voyage. By now, the boys are familiar with every part of the ship, even where the poisonous plants are in Mr. Daniel's collection. They still like to watch the prisoner on deck late at night. The most famous person on board is a rich philanthropist, Sir Hector de Silva. He is very ill and is going to England for medical treatment. One day in Colombo, Sir Hector saw a holy man walk by and made a tasteless pun on the man's name, so that it sounded like "urinating dog." The monk cast a curse on Sir Hector, who soon was bitten by a rabid dog, which was the cause of his current illness. He is traveling with two doctors and an ayurvedic or Hindu healing practitioner. The ayurvedic tells the story of Sir Hector's illness to the boys, who introduce him to Daniels.



Pages 43-69 Analysis

The seemingly innocent crush that Larry Daniels has on Emily will have an indirect effect on a central event in this book's plot. That effect is foreshadowed when the narrator says that Emily's meeting with The Hyberdad Mind will change her life. It is significant that Daniels arranges for Emily to meet the Jankla Troupe only after Mynah tells him the lie that Emily wants to be an actress. This role that Mynah unwittingly plays in Emily's later troubles is not mentioned again, but it shows how mischief that is innocent-seeming sometimes will compound to serious consequence. Several other events in these pages also will figure later in the story. One is the botanical garden in the hold. Another is the woman playing violin in the neighboring cabin, although her role will be minor. A third event is the meeting between Emily and The Hyberdad Mind, which quickly develops that plot thread. The narrator adds more information about his later life when he reveals that he has written this story in response to a request from his children. By now, it has become apparent that the narrator will skip forward years in time, to give him the advantage of looking back at the 1950s, in which most of the novel is set. By offering details about his adult caretakers in Colombo, the protagonist begins to shape his own "back story" that took place before the voyage. When he introduces himself to Mr. Fonseka, the narrator reveals without comment that his first name is the same as that of the author. This complicates the story through the intimation that autobiography could be heavily intermingled with fiction. In that regard, it is interesting that Mr. Fonseka represents the sort of person who is so immersed in the world of literature that he allows himself to miss out on real life. The curse cast on Sir Hector is another exotic twist in the story, like that of the roller-skating Australian, but this event will develop into a major plot thread.



Pages 70-88

Pages 70-88 Summary

In the section, "Afternoons," the protagonist explains that Cassius is an expert at chewing betel leaves and spitting the red fluid with great accuracy. Mr. Daniels also has given the boys "white beedi" to smoke, which appears to be some form of marijuana. Under its influence, they invade the pool, from which they have been banned for three days. Later, in the turbine room, Cassius reflects on how dirty the restrooms were at the school, and tells Mynah his resolve before leaving the ship is to defecate in the captain's porcelain toilet bowl. Mr. Nevil shows Michael lower levels of the Oronsay, and talks about how dismantling ships is satisfying, because their parts are reborn in other useful mechanisms. In the section, "Miss Lasqueti," Michael says the Cat's Table member was thought to be a spinster, but the boys think the lithesome and pale woman probably has a high sex drive. She smokes and consorts with Mr. Mazappa, and occasionally makes witty responses to his risqué remarks. She has trouble staying awake, and is a sleepwalker. Later, the boys learn that she keeps about 30 pigeons on board. Flavia Prins says Miss Lasqueti has been seen around Whitehall in London, intimating that she is a spy. Michael thinks the ship's real excitement is not at the captain's table, with its self-congratulatory dignitaries, but at the unremarked Cat's Table.

The section, "The Girl" introduces Asuntha, a deaf, fragile and pale Singhalese girl. She appears to be unaccompanied, although The Hyberadad Mind watches over her, and after Cassius realizes she is afraid of water, he also treats her kindly. She can hear only when someone speaks directly into her left ear. She sits at the same dining table as the lovely Emily, who takes her under her wing. In the morning, when rain makes the decks slick, the boys slide the length of the wood, colliding with whomever happens to get into the way. The protagonist thinks about a color-scheme of crossing lines that would describe the regular movements of various passengers. He laments that nobody had a camera then, and the only images that exist years later of that voyage are in memory. Nothing was permanent. In the section, "Thievery," a man named Baron C. cajoles Michael into the window at the top of his cabin door. He cannot fit, but then the Baron tells Michael to wear a swimsuit, and smears his body with motor oil, and he slips through. The Baron gets Michael to climb into a stateroom and unlock the door, allowing the Baron to steal things. One day, they break into Sir Hector's stateroom. Michael tries to take a bust of Sir Hector, but it is too heavy. The Baron disembarks prematurely, at Port Said. The ship continues northwest. One evening they watch a film on deck, the first movie the boys have ever seen. The first reel is shown in First Class and then brought to the Tourist Deck, while the second reel plays in First Class. The boys can hear both reels at once. A storm hits the deck, and the cloth screen is ripped loose and disappears into the sea.



Pages 70-88 Analysis

The shenanigans of the boys slowly become more dangerous. They move from smoking cane to chewing the mildly narcotic betel leaf to smoking marijuana, and then they invade the pool, from which they already have been banned. Even so, the narrator's youth is underscored by his fear of the sea and his worries about the ship's safety. The revelations that Miss Lasqueti keeps pigeons that can be used to send communications and frequents Whitehall, the center of diplomacy in Great Britain, indicate that she leads a clandestine life, which makes her an intriguing character to the boys as well as to the reader. Similarly, the introduction of Asuntha brings a mysterious character into the story, particularly because she is mostly deaf, just a teenager, and appears to be traveling alone. The author adds a third shadowy character in the Baron, who initiates a willing Michael into burglarizing the cabins of fellow travelers. Now the boys' mischief has morphed into outright crime. The author jumps ahead in the story to reveal that the Baron will depart prematurely from the voyage, which suggests that someone is suspicious of his activities on board. The film, two reels of which can be heard simultaneously before the on-deck screen is ripped into the sea by a storm, is a surreal scene that seems to swirl up from the depths of memory. Such touches of surrealism will reappear periodically in the novel.



Pages 89-116

Pages 89-116 Summary

The protagonist mentions that he now lives in Canada, where he sometimes awakens during a storm, thinking he is in mid-air. This perception, he says, is rooted in an experience he and Cassius had on the ship after the movie ended prematurely. The sky cleared momentarily, and Cassius decided that he and Mynah should be tied to the Promenade Deck by Ramadhin. When the storm returned, the two almost drowned during the terrifying night. After ship's officers spotted and rescued them, Cassius whispered to Mynah to say that someone did this to them. They were brought before the furious Captain, which did not believe their story. Unfazed, Cassius tried and failed to get permission to use the Captain's porcelain commode. Later, when Flavia Prins asks what happened, Michael tries to blame it on a rogue sailor named Mr. Peters, but she angrily dismisses this as a blatant lie. The scene shifts to Sir Hector, who is taking a medication called datura, which has a side effect like that of a truth drug. His wife, Delia, has always found him maddeningly secretive, but now he tells her all about his difficult youth and his shady business dealings. Many things have been pick-pocketed or lost during the storm, but in its aftermath one good development for the boys is the reappearance on deck of the prisoner, who looks happy.

In the section, "Landfall," the ship's first port of call will be the ancient harbor of Aden, after which the vessel will enter the Red Sea. Six hours of shore leave are permitted for male passengers. Children must be accompanied by a responsible adult, and females are not allowed to leave the ship. The boys enlist Mr. Daniels as their chaperone, and while he negotiates for plants, they explore the interesting public markets and the city's aquarium, which is disappointing. They revisit merchants at the market, and then meet Daniels at the wharf. He and two slight-looking men are carrying small palm trees. As they approach, Mynah sees that the two helpers are Emily and Miss Lasqueti disguised in men's clothes. On the ship, Ramadhin displays a small dog he has smuggled aboard, given to him by one of the merchants. The boys leave the dog in Ramadhin's cabin and go upstairs for dinner. The next day, the dog escapes and bolts toward First Class. Eluding stewards, he slips through a half-open door in a stateroom, jumps onto a bed, and bites Sir Hector in the throat. Sir Hector dies, completing the curse cast upon him by the insulted monk in Colombo. Emily wants to know if the boys brought the dog on board. Mr. Mazappa seems upset about something, but Michael does not know what it is. The next day, Michael spends a pleasant morning in Emily's room. They cuddle in her bed, and he feels happy and a little disconcerted. At the next stop, Port Said, Mr. Mazappa leaves the ship, never to be seen again. Years later, the protagonist thinks about his interlude with Emily, and he thinks she let him get into the bed with her out of kindness.



Pages 89-116 Analysis

By moving years ahead in time, the author establishes a link between his adult dreams during storms and the worst storm he ever endured, which was on the ship. This linkage technique also further blurs the line between autobiography and fiction for anyone who happens to know that Michael Ondaatje traveled by ship as a child from his home in then-Ceylon to England, and that he now lives in Canada. The character of Cassius is further developed when he is unfazed by the Captain's chastisement, and is really interested only in the Captain's marvelous porcelain commode. The anger of Flavia Prins toward Michael for lying to her shows that she is incapable of sympathy for the young boy alone on this long voyage. More character development is provided for Sir Hector, who is shown to be grasping and secretive, and his wife is introduced. Also, the prisoner is shown to be strangely happy after the storm. In these small ways, various characterizations are significantly deepened. The rather cavalier attitude of Mr. Daniels is emphasized by his failure to watch the boys when he takes them ashore and his complicity in allowing the two women to sneak ashore disguised as men. A sudden turn in the plot toward darkness occurs when the dog smuggled aboard by Ramadhin escapes and kills Sir Hector. Michael's silence when Emily asks if the boys brought the dog on the ship is an eloquent admission of complicity. His time with Emily in her cabin is a scene of innocent sexual awakening for the boy, which suits the novel's overall theme of a rite of passage.



Pages 117-142

Pages 117-142 Summary

Years later in London, Emily tells Michael her dreams are full of danger and darkness. Earlier, she had confessed to him that she likes danger, and Michael thinks she is a secretive person. In a section called "Kennels," Mr. Hastie tells Michael he has been fired from his job taking care of the passenger's dogs, because it is believed that one of the dogs got away and killed Sir Hector. Ramadhin's dog has not been found, and Michael says nothing. Later, as the boys search for the dog, they come across the assistant kennel keeper, Invernio, who is playing with a passenger's Weimaraner. The two obviously love each other. This reminds Michael of Gunepala, who was always surrounded in the kitchen by dogs. During the stopover in Aden, the boys had not seen the prisoner, but now his night walks begin again. Emily says his name is something like Niemeyer, although he is obviously Asian. The protagonist notes that most of the regular entertainment on the ship, such as lectures, is quite boring. Sir Hector's widow decides that the corpse should be buried at sea. Everyone comes on board for the ceremony, and even Mr. Fonseca leaves the books in his cabin to speak a few lines from Kipling. Later, Flavia Prins sees Michael but does not speak to him.

The ship enters the El Suweis Canal en route to Port Said. After it docks, the boys stay up all night, watching things being loaded and unloaded. The protagonist says this night turns out to be the clearest one in their later memories of the voyage. The ship continues down the canal at daybreak, reaching Port Said and the Mediterranean in morning light. The protagonist reflects that for a while in his late-twenties he had wanted to reunite with Cassius. During that period, he sees an announcement of an exhibition in London gallery of Cassius' paintings. Michael goes to the gallery, but discovers that Cassius was there only on opening night. His large paintings, which are almost abstract, are all about that night at El Suweis. Michael goes through the log book, finds a nice note from Miss Lasqueti, and writes a line that he signs, "Mynah." He leaves no address. In the section "Ramadhin's Heart," Michael says Cassius always wanted privacy but he feels he could have helped Ramadhin. On Michael's thirtieth birthday, he is in America in the 1970s and he receives a cable. He quickly goes to London and meets Ramadhin's sister, Massoumeh, whom he calls Massi. They go to her parents' house. Ramadhin has died of heart failure. Michael must return to America, but will return in a month. Massi walks with him to the train station, during which they renew their old attraction to each other, despite their desolation over Ramadhin's death. When the train arrives, they kiss, which is a silent promise that their romance will be renewed.

Pages 117-142 Analysis

Once again leaping ahead in time, the narrator relates that Emily has frightening dreams, which suggests that perhaps whatever happened to her on the Oronsay has played a role in her mental or spiritual health later in life. When Mr. Hastie is fired,



Michael once again remains silent about Ramadhin's dog, which is his wrongdoing. Invernio's fascination with the Weimaraner sets up a later development concerning this dog. This also gives the author the opportunity to send the narrator back in his thoughts to the years before this trip, when he spent happy days with the cook and his dogs. Another piece of information is added about the prisoner's name, and the story of Sir Hector ends with his burial at sea, as the plot threads develop bit by bit. The description of the Port Said stopover seems strangely detailed until the author moves forward in time to describe the paintings of Cassius, which are all about that day. Now that he is in the future, the author continues by describing his relationship after the voyage with Ramadhin and his sister, Massi and their family. The kiss he and Massi exchange after the funeral clearly foreshadows a re-invigoration of their old romance.



Pages 143-169

Pages 143-169 Summary

Looking back, the protagonist decides he married Massi because he wanted to stay close to a family and friends of his youth, and Ramadhin's family readily accepted him as a close friend of their dead boy. Mr. Fonseka writes a letter of condolence to the family, in which he praises Ramadhin's intellectual curiosity. Cassius becomes a well-known artist whose work and public persona have an anti-authoritarian flair. Michael thinks of his teenaged years with Ramadhin and Massi and the places they frequented, to which he and she now have returned as husband and wife. He also reflects that Ramadhin and Cassius were the only two people who ever called him "Mynah," probably because he repeated whatever he heard on the ship. He thinks about the dog on the ship, and Ramadhin's later infatuation with a fourteen year-old girl named Heather Cave whom he was tutoring. She had a crush on a boy named Rajiva who had rejected her. She talked Ramadhin into pleading to Rajiva on her behalf. At a bar, Rajiva pulls a knife, puts it in Ramadhin's pocket and says he can give it to Heather. A few years after Ramadhin's death, Michael later tracks down Heather. He asks her what Ramadhin was like in those days. She is kind but guarded. He mentions he is married to Ramadhin's sister, and she asks if that is why he sought her out. He says no, it was because Ramadhin was his best friend.

One evening at a party in the flat of Michael and Massi, he sees her dancing with a friend and knows that the spark between the two dancers is gone between Massi and him. They break up, and do not see each other again. Michael recounts the time someone explained to him that in medieval heraldry, a sun on the family crest signified a saint in the family. It made him think of Ramadhin, the human saint in his family. In the section, "Port Said," the ship docks for loading and off-loading, while workers repaint the hull, whose paint as been worn away by desert sands along the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. In "Two Violets," two bridge-playing friends of Flavia Prins, both of them named Violet, would lure a man into a four-handed game in hopes of finding a husband for one of the Violets, but the men always managed to escape the snare. In "Two Hearts," Mr. Hastie has been assigned to drudgery after losing his job in the kennels. He tells the boys about marrying a woman while on shore leave in Balboa. He left her, but she followed and stabbed him. In the hospital, she tried to stab him again, but he had contracted typhoid, which frightened her away. Mr. Hastie tells Michael he was saved from death by stabbing because he has two hearts, as all men do. Later, Flavia tells Michael that Hastie is renowned as a great bridge player. At Port Said, the Baron leaves the ship, accompanied by Sir Hector's daughter. Mr. Mazappa also leaves at Port Said, and Michael never does figure out what changed Mazappa from lively and impish to morose after the death of Sir Hector. Miss Lasqueti takes to reading crime novels on deck, twice becoming so irritated by them that Michael sees her throw the books overboard.



Pages 143-169 Analysis

The author moves immediately into the story of Michael's marriage to Massi, filling in details about their teenaged years together in London with Ramadhin. He keeps the main plot alive by having passengers on the Oronsay write notes of condolence to Ramadhin's parents, thus tying the past to the present. The unrequited and illicit love of Ramadhin for his pupil ends with Ramadhin's death from heart failure, echoing the broken heart of a failed romance. The dissolution of the marriage between Michael and Massi follows this tale of a broken heart, and then the author tells a third such story, in the failure of one of the Violets to find a suitable mate. Continuing his usual pattern in this novel of setting similar events side-by-side without openly comparing them, the author has Mr. Hastie tell his story of a short-lived marriage and his near-death at the hands of his enraged bride. Hastie's comment about men with two hearts suggests that male natures have two sides, acquisitive aggression and romanticism. Finally, the author ends his string of romantic comparisons with the doleful Mazappa's departure, which irritates Miss Lasqueti, indicating that men are not the only gender with two personality sides.



Pages 170-194

Pages 170-194 Summary

Sunil, *The Hyderabad Mind*, becomes increasingly close to Emily, but by the time the ship reaches Port Said, Michael sees that her interest in Sunil is waning. Michael continues listening to snippets of conversation on the ship and writing them in his notebook, following general advice from Miss Lasqueti that it is best to keep one's ears and eyes open. The section "Examination Booklet: Overheard Conversations" gives a few examples of things Michael wrote that he heard from day 12 to day 18 of the voyage. For instance, someone advises that strychnine can be swallowed safely if not chewed. Mr. Daniels organizes a dinner for the Cat's Table members and a few others, including Emily, Asuntha, and the ayurvedic, to commemorate the departure of Mr. Mazappa. They go down to the garden in the hold and have an exotic dinner there. Michael overhears Emily asking in quiet amazement if someone is Asuntha's father, to which the girl nods affirmatively. In the section, "Asuntha," it is revealed that the deaf girl's father is Niemeyer. A thief, he is jailed when she is eleven. Asuntha's mother deserts her. Eventually, Asuntha goes searching for her mother, but cannot find her. Asuntha heads south, toward her father's sister, Pacipia, an acrobat in a circus troupe, who takes in the girl. Asuntha becomes an acrobat, traveling with the troupe from town to town. Niemeyer gets out of jail but Asuntha stays with the circus as her father drifts deeper into crime. At age 17, Asuntha has a fall during rehearsals, strikes her head and loses her hearing. She leaves the troupe, but appears at a trail for Niemeyer, who tells her to get on the Oronsay with Sunil and the others. She obeys.

In the section, "The Mediterranean," Cassius and Michael are hiding in a lifeboat while Ramadhin stands in the shadows. All three are listening to Sunil wooing Emily nearby. They hear more people arrive, strangers, who begin talking about the prisoner. Emily sounds frightened. Sunil wants her to meet someone named Perera, who he says will be eager to see her. In the section, "Mr. Giggs," a high-ranking English army officer on the ship named Mr. Giggs is rumored to be in charge of the prisoner, along with a shadowy figure from the Colombo police. Michael asks Miss Lasqueti for details, and she says if the prisoner actually did kill an English judge, he would be tried in England. Miss Lasqueti questions Giggs and then tells the Cat's Table members that Giggs and Perera had canvassed the ship carefully before anyone had come on board, and they had hired guards from the Maldives to help ensure control of the prisoner. In "The Blind Perera," nobody knows who Perera is. They call him "blind" because he spells his surname without an "i", as in "Pereira." Miss Lasqueti says an undercover agent can be either very friendly and open to everyone, or very quiet, as this one probably is. A rumor arises that Perera once told a young criminal to dig a grave for an execution, which prompted the young man to trust Perera and to reveal his own criminal connections.



Pages 170-194 Analysis

When the author goes forward slightly in time to reveal that the romance between Sunil and Emily has waned before the ship reaches England, it is a foreshadowing that the story will reveal some development in their connection that is perhaps dangerous or criminal. Michael's continuing entries in his notebook add color and humor to the narrative but also are a reminder that both the narrator and the author are writers named Michael. During the dinner in the hold, the main development is when Asuntha reveals her father identity to Emily. This person is soon shown to be Niemeyer, which leads into the story of Asuntha's youth and how she arrived on the Oronsay, told economically and powerfully. The eavesdropping by the hidden boys on the conversation between Sunil and Emily is a time-tested device for advancing plot, regularly used by Shakespeare and others. The introductions of Mr. Giggs and of Perera, who spells his name in the "blind" fashion and is invisible to all, significantly add to the mounting sense of intrigue on board. Miss Lasqueti's information about types of undercover agents further strengthens the notion that she is skilled in clandestine work. The story about how Perera gets close to criminals foreshadows his own fate at the hands of those who would help Niemeyer.



Pages 195-216

Pages 195-216 Summary

In the section, "How Old Are You? What Is Your Name?" the protagonist recalls that the Captain kept asking the boys how old they were after the incident on the deck in the storm. What he meant, they realized, was that they were foolish. The Captain also has obvious distaste for Asians, which begins Michael's distrust of authority. He recalls stealing the bust of Sir Hector, with the help of Cassius, and throwing it overboard after the funeral. This is when he begins to prefer the quiet people, such as Mr. Daniels, and Miss Lasqueti, who wears a jacket with many pockets to carry her pigeons. In "The Tailor," Mr. Gunsekera is described as the quietest person at the Cat's Table. He always seemed interested in others, and smiled and nodded, but he never said a word. Once, when Emily was hit above the eye by a badminton racquet, the tailor's nimble fingers delicately explore the injury, which moves Emily. Eventually, Mr. Nevil notices a scar on Gunsekera's throat, which is always covered by a scarf. Nobody ever asks why he is going to England. Michael reflects that the sources of much of what he learned during the voyage later became confused in his mind, such as where he first heard about a museum in Genoa called the Palace of Ship Owners, the top floor of which holds many paintings of Madonnas. He remembers Miss Lasqueti saying that Madonnas always have a certain expression that reveals they know their son will die young, although perhaps that look is not portrayed by the artist so much as anticipated by the viewer. Michael thinks he saw that expression on the face of Ramadhin's mother when her son was a teenager.

Years after Michael and Massi separate, he has his first dream of her. He is hiding and sees her outside with a man. She is pregnant. They hear something and move toward him. He runs, hearing the sound of workmen's tools, which sounds like weapons, and then like music, and then he realizes Massi is the one running, trying to dodge the dangers of life and have a safe pregnancy. He thinks the two of them parted too casually, and that he was not ardent enough about their love. After the ship leaves Port Said, the Weimaraner that Mr. Invernio loved apparently jumps overboard, although Mr. Hastie hints that Invernio probably hid away the dog, so he could keep it. One night, a classical music concert is given by the orchestra on the Promenade Deck. A red-haired woman plays solo violin, and Miss Lasqueti thinks it is the musician Michael had heard practicing in the cabin next to his. In the section, "Examination Book Entry #30," Michael lists alleged crimes of the Captain. Most of them are untrue or unfair, such as misplacing the bust of Sir Hector and losing the Weimaraner.

In "Miss Lasqueti—A 2nd Portrait," Michael discusses a class he attended recently, in which a filmmaker said that audiences should not make the mistake of believing they know all about the characters in his movies. Michael says at first the boys thought Miss Lasqueti was a careful, unmarried lady, but when they later learned of her passenger pigeons and her alleged contacts with Whitehall, she became much more interesting. He remembers being too fascinated by her flirtations with Mr. Mazappa to recognize her



growing interest in the prisoner and his escorts. One day, she invites Michael to her cabin, where he also finds Emily. Miss Lasqueti says her first name is Perinetta. She says she almost got in trouble when she was young. Emily asks what happened, but Miss Lasqueti only warns Michael about the Baron. Later, Michael realizes she must have made the Baron leave the ship at Port Said. Once, it looks like she is cleaning a small pistol on deck, near the rail. Much later, Ramadhin finds a newspaper article that mentions Miss Lasqueti's excellent marksmanship. The boys do not think her beautiful, but they find her attractive. Sometimes she tells astonishing stories, such as one about a group of hikers she knows in England, who always walk totally naked except for socks and boots. Michael recalls receiving papers from her a few years ago, forwarded to him by his publisher. They include her sketches of various passengers on the voyage and a letter. In the letter, she says she would like to get in touch with Emily, to tell her a story from her youth that might help her.

Pages 195-216 Analysis

As Michael's growing distrust of people in authority leads him to prefer quieter types, such as Daniels and Miss Lasqueti, it is natural that his attention should turn to the quietest person at the Cat's Table, Mr. Gunsekera. When Mr. Nevil notices a scar on the tailor's neck, the implication is that his silence is because of an injury to his vocal chords, and perhaps he is traveling to England for medical treatment. This proves to be a red herring. Mr. Gunsekera's fate is intimated in the conversation about Madonnas, when Miss Lasqueti mentions that Mary knew her child destined for an untimely death. This also provides another opportunity for a shift in time, when Michael looks back from the vantage point of the future to think about the grief of Ramadhin's mother upon her boy's death. In turn, that leads to him thinking about a dream in which Massi was about to become a mother, and the dangers of that prospect in her mind. More plot threads are developed in the disappearance of the Weimaraner, which might have been stolen by Invernio, and the appearance of the violinist, who may be the woman who was practicing in the cabin adjoining Michael's. His notebook entries show his still-growing anti-authoritarian and rebellious nature. The section on Miss Lasqueti prepares her role as a major influence on the main plot. She is made a warmer and more accessible character by being given a first name, her warning to Michael about the Baron demonstrates that she is on the side of good conduct, and her expertise with weaponry is firmly established, which will figure prominently in the next chapter. Also, her desire to counsel Emily foreshadows the long letter she later sends to the younger woman.



Pages 217-237

Pages 217-237 Summary

The papers from Miss Lasqueti include a package to be sent to Emily, which Michael opens, confessing that writers have no shame, and anyway, he has not seen Emily for many years. He knows she married a man named Desmond. Inside the package, he finds the story Emily had asked about, concerning an event in Miss Lasqueti's youth that helped her to save herself. She writes that in her twenties, she went to Italy to study the language. There, she works as a translator for a wealthy American couple who own an art institute. They have a seven year-old boy who waves at her each day when she arrives by bicycle, but she also sees someone behind a curtain in an upstairs window, watching her. This turns out to be the father, Horace Johnson. The villa is full of tapestries and frescoes. She stays three seasons, gradually falling under Horace's insidious but charming spell, not realizing that he is a ruthless manipulator. At a fancy-dress party, she comes as Marcel Proust, and he offers to paint her. This is the beginning of their affair. Miss Lasqueti writes that when she invited Emily to her cabin, she thought the young woman was entering a dangerous relationship with Sunil, but instead of warning her, she warned Michael about the Baron. During her affair with Horace, she tells him about a cute incident when she saw his young son petting an image of a dog in the corner of a tapestry on the wall. Their rule is that nothing between them should leave the room, but a few days later, she hears the child crying and discovers he has been punished for touching the tapestry. Enraged, she rushes to Horace and screams her anger at his betrayal of their trust. Seeing his indifference, she attacks him with a pair of scissors, but he forces her fist back and stabs her in the stomach. She walks out, and he does not follow.

She walks a long way to a chemist for supplies to dress the wound, which is bleeding heavily. In two days, she goes to a long-planned summer solstice celebration at the institute. She sees Horace staring at a cellist performing with a pianist. At first, she thinks he is sexually interested, but then she realizes her talent fascinates him, and she understands that this is something he will never have. At the end of the letter, Miss Lasqueti asks Emily where she is and says she often has wondered if everything turned out all right for her. Two years after Michael reads this letter, he is in Canada briefly and receives a call from Emily. She wants him to visit her on Bowen Island. He has not seen her for 15 years. In "The Overheard," the scene shifts back to the Oronsay, which is still a few days from England when Emily volunteers to join the top layer of a human pyramid during a Jankla Troupe performance. Hours later, Cassius and Michael are in the lifeboat again, having previously heard that Emily would meet someone here. It is Lucius Perera, but Michael cannot recognize the voice. They whisper about something, but she is not cooperative. There is a scuffling. When the boys finally leave the lifeboat, they see a body on the deck, which they think is Perera. They run away. Ramadhin tells them to talk to Emily, but when Michael goes to her cabin, she is groggy and unclear. Cassius and Michael return to where they saw the body, but it is gone and the deck is clean.



Pages 217-237 Analysis

Miss Lasqueti's story of her affair with Horace Johnson establishes how she became aware of the potential for manipulation and selfishness in men beneath an educated and sophisticated exterior. This is her own coming-of-age experience, through which she lost her naiveté and perhaps began to develop secrecy in her own nature that eventually was turned to whatever clandestine work she apparently does. It is significant that her angry attack on Horace is sparked by his betrayal of their trust of secrecy, because this shows that Miss Lasqueti believes in loyalty and honesty. Such higher principles can be turned to the production of beauty by artists, which she sees is beyond Horace as he gazes with fascination at the musician. Her letter, which she belatedly hopes will help Emily, provides the author with the opportunity to renew the long-lapsed relationship between Michael and Emily. In turn, this offers a way to go back to the ship and to the involvement of Emily in an event from which Miss Lasqueti had hoped to protect her. The death of Perera occurs under unclear circumstances, creating a small mystery that generates added interest in the novel's concluding pages.



Pages 238-265

Pages 238-265 Summary

The boys stay in their cabins throughout the next day, as Michael worries about what will happen to Emily. In the evening, the three eat dinner apart from the others and then wait on the Promenade Deck for nightfall. The prisoner is taken for his walk, but this time, he grabs a guard and threatens to break his neck if his chains are not unlocked. Asuntha appears from the shadows. A guard unlocks Niemeyer's feet but his hands are still chained when a night watchman comes upon the scene and blows his whistle, causing the prisoner to flee with his daughter. A shot is fired, lights go on, people appear, and Niemeyer jumps onto the railing, with Asuntha in his arms. The lights of France are on the horizon. A spotlight goes on, and Mr. Giggs is on the bridge, pointing a pistol at Niemeyer, telling him to climb down. A shot is fired and Mr. Giggs drops the gun, holding his arm. Michael turns just in time to see Miss Lasqueti throw something into the ocean. Niemeyer, holding his daughter, and with hands still in chains, leaps into the sea. Michael reflects that after this event, in which the two surely leapt to their deaths, Emily never says a word about her involvement. Even Cassius, sobered by the tragedy, turns away from Michael's approach. In the section, "The Breaker's Yard," Michael arrives by ferry at Bowen Island from Vancouver. At the dock, he sees no one, but then he spots her leaning against a tree in a small park. They greet, and she drives them to a remote cottage overlooking the sea. Over sandwiches and beers, they begin talking about their lives. Emily had divorced some years ago. She talks about having lived with him in Central and South America, and then Michael asks if she remembers the Oronsay voyage.

They have never discussed it, but she says she remembers it well. They go for a walk, and she says she has lived on the island since her divorce, about three years ago. She says she sometimes sees a man, who has had a hard life. He tells her he has to leave tomorrow. She mentions that her father died, and that she was afraid of him her whole life. Michael says he overheard her conversation with Perera that night on the ship. She does not remember talking with him afterwards. She says Sunil and Asuntha were there, too, but claims she is confused about who killed Perera. She reveals that Perera was Gunesekera, the silent tailor at the Cat's Table. She admits that she thinks she killed him, but Michael says he does not think so, although she was trying to help Niemeyer escape. Emily says Asuntha was holding the key to Niemeyer's chains in her mouth. The next morning, Michael thinks Emily looks beautiful, and realizes he is still attached to her. In "The Key in His Mouth," she says goodbye to him at the ferry. Going away, he thinks about Niemeyer and Asuntha struggling in the water to get free of the chains and escape. He images her swimming for shore while her father sinks. "Letter to Cassius" is a short lament that Michael never had anything much to offer his friend, who did not really need him. Michael never did speak to him after the voyage. In "Arrival," the Oronsay reaches port in England in the dark. On the gangplank, Michael loses sight of Cassius and Ramadhin. He is approached by a woman, his mother, and as they hug,



Emily walks past and touches his hand. He looks up, and she waves before disappearing in the crowd.

Pages 238-265 Analysis

These closing pages begin with the novel's most rousing action scene. During Niemeyer's attempted escape, he holds his daughter as a kind of shield or as a captive but also in an embrace that could be parental. In the same way, Asuntha's relationship to her father is both that of an obedient and willing daughter and of a young person held in thrall by an older, more powerful personality. It seems appropriate that the secretive Miss Lasqueti would shoot the gun from the hand of Mr. Giggs and be noticed only by Emily and Michael, both of whom she has taken under her wing. When the scene moves forward again in time and Michael visits Emily in Canada, she mentions the death of her father, which shows that his violent nature made a permanent impact on her life. The suggestion is that her dark side, including her fascination with danger, stems from early experiences with her father. She reveals that Perera was Gunesequera, a man of the law who was kind to her on the ship, and yet she participated in some way in his death. Next to these events the author places the revelation that Asuntha, the silent girl, held the key to her father's chains in her mouth. The key in the mouth is a symbol of Asuntha's ability to set her father free with the right words, which would also set her free. But in imagining the actual escape of Asuntha, Michael sees that her father was too deeply mired in wrongdoing to ever escape it. Michael's lament that he never saw Cassius again is not too heartfelt, because he knows both he and Cassius are self-sustaining. His reunion with his mother at the close of the novel is broken only by the passing of Emily, the person in the story who meant the most to him.



Characters

Michael

Michael is the novel's narrator and protagonist. When the story opens, he is an eleven year-old boy about to take a sea voyage by himself to be reunited with his mother. Initially, no name is given for him. He soon meets two other boys his age, who nickname him Mynah but eventually it is revealed that his real first name is the same as that of the author. He thinks his nickname is inspired by an ability to parrot what he overhears on the ship, and by the slight untrustworthiness of the mynah's mimicking. He keeps a journal of what people say, displaying excerpts from it throughout the novel. Michael is a bright but wounded boy, whose parents separated and left him in the care of an uncle in Colombo. He feels emptiness in his life, and fears that he is emotionally cold. On the ship, he is drawn into various high jinks by one of his friends and by a shady adult. To avoid getting into trouble, he lies readily and profusely, and during the voyage he develops a strong dislike of authority figures. Much later, in thinking back on the voyage as an adult, Michael has many insights into himself and other passengers that he admits were beyond him as a boy. He develops into a well-known writer, as is the author of *The Cat's Table*, and the novel's depiction of Michael as an adult becomes difficult to separate from the author, Michael Ondaatje. But an author's note at the book's end says it is entirely fictional, although some locations and details are drawn from memory and real events.

Ramadhin

Ramadhin is the quiet and contemplative one among the three boys on the ship. He has a weak heart and asthma, which prevent him from engaging in some of their youthful pranks, such as smoking the cane from a deckchair. Ramadhin is the one who ties the other two boys to the deck in the midst of a storm while he stays below. He is a studious boy, well-read and sensible. Several of the adults on board take a liking to him, particularly the schoolteacher, Mr. Fonseka. When the other two boys witness what they think is a murder, they go to Ramadhin for advice about what to do, and his suggestion that they speak to Michael's cousin Emily is sensible. After the voyage, Michael and Ramadhin keep their friendship alive in their teenaged years in London. When Ramadhin is 30, he tutors a 14 year-old girl and develops a fascination for her, which appears to be innocent. He tries to help the girl in her relationship with a boy, but fails. On that same night, he has a heart attack and dies. When Michael returns to London for the funeral, he sees the enormous impact his friend's death has had on his family. Several adults from the sea voyage write letters of condolence to the family that praise Ramadhin's sensitivity and intelligence. Michael reflects that Ramadhin was a saintly presence in the life of those who loved him.



Cassius

Cassius is one of Michael's two friends on board the Oronsay. No surname is given for him, and Cassius decides early in the story that the boys should divulge nothing of their family life, to enhance their sense of freedom on the voyage. Cassius was a year ahead of Michael at the same school in Colombo, and he had a reputation as a rogue. His most famous exploit was to lock the school master in the restroom for several hours, which earned Cassius a whipping and a week's suspension. On the ship, he often instigates adventures that are unwise, the most dangerous of which is when he and Michael are tied to the ship's deck in the midst of a terrible storm. He leads the boys in mischief such as stealing food and alcohol from First Class, swimming in the First Class pool in the early morning, and wandering the deck late at night, looking for the prisoner who is brought up for a stroll. Cassius is self-sufficient and contemptuous of foolish behavior among adults. When he grows up, he becomes a well-known painter, but even then, his public pose remains that of a rebel. He and Michael never meet again after the voyage.

Emily de Saram

Emily de Saram is a distant cousin of Michael. On the sea voyage, she is 17 and luminously lovely. She is friendly with Michael, but does not spend too much time with him, wanting to have her freedom during the trip. Like Michael, she has had a difficult childhood. Her father is violent, and frightens her. She has a kind nature, but also has a tendency to drift away mentally from people or situations. She is naïve and impressionable as a teenager, and she becomes romantically involved with a dangerous man during the voyage. The result is a murder, in which Emily plays an indistinct role. Once during the trip she invites Michael to her cabin and he cuddles in bed with her, which makes a huge impact on him. The two meet years later, after Emily has married and divorced. It is their first reunion in 15 years, and the first time they discuss the murder. Emily admits that she has always thought she was responsible for it, but Michael does not agree. When they part, Michael reflects that of all the people on the sea voyage, Emily was the most important one to him.

Perinetta Lasqueti

Perinetta Lasqueti is one of the adults at the Cat's Table. At first, the boys are not too interested in her, because she strikes them as a pale spinster, but they soon change their opinion. They learn that she is keeping perhaps 30 passenger pigeons in the hold, and rumor has it that she is connected to Whitehall in London, two pieces of information that suggest she does undercover work. She is intelligent and has a sharp, sometimes risqué, sense of humor. The boys are fascinated by her flirtation with a musician, Mr. Mazappa, whom they regard as an interesting man. Miss Lasqueti is a smoker, a sleepwalker, and a reader of crime novels, which occasionally irritate her so much that she throws them into the sea. At one point, she invites Emily and Michael to her cabin. Her intention is to warn Emily about the dangerous Sunil, with whom Emily is



romantically involved, but instead Miss Lasqueti warns Michael about a thief named the Baron with whom the boy has been cooperating. One evening, the boys spot Miss Lasqueti cleaning a small pistol on deck. When the prisoner tries to escape and Mr. Giggs is about to shoot him, Miss Lasqueti shoots the gun out of the hand of Giggs, although only Emily and Michael are aware that she did this. Years later, Miss Lasqueti writes a long letter to Emily that Michael reads, in which she tells of her seduction as a young woman by a manipulative businessman, which is what she wanted to tell Emily on the ship, when she was planning to warn her about Sunil.

Max Mazappa

Max Mazappa is a pianist who describes himself as having fallen on hard times. He plays in the ship's orchestra and gives private lessons. Mazappa often regales the Cat's Table with colorful stories of the misadventures of musicians, and he plays jazz tunes with naughty lyrics that delight Michael and his friends. He also can talk beautifully about music, and has a strong affinity with the other arts. He and Miss Lasqueti stroll the deck and smoke together, and the boys wonder if a love affair is blossoming between them. Mazappa has had plenty of romances and appears to be married. At one point, he admits to having children. Midway through the voyage, Mr. Mazappa suddenly becomes morose, which mystifies Michael. It seems that he has been rejected by Miss Lasqueti, although this is never directly addressed in the novel. Mazappa leaves the ship at Port Said, and nobody on board ever sees him again. A special dinner for the Cat's Table members is held in his honor.

Larry Daniels

Larry Daniels is a biologist who is in charge of a large garden of herbs and other plants kept under grow-lights deep in the ship's hold. He turns out to be an amusing occasional companion to the boys, taking them into the hold to see his plants, some of which are poisonous and other medicinal. He gives them the mildly stimulating betel leaf to chew instead of smoking cane from the deckchair and he provides cigarette that appears to be marijuana. When the ship docks at the ancient port of Aden, he takes the boys onshore under his unreliable custodianship, and they quickly strike off on their own. When they meet Daniels again before re-boarding, they realize that he has smuggled Emily and Miss Lasqueti off the ship disguised as men, because women are not allowed shore leave. Daniels organizes a special dinner in the hold for the Cat's Table members to commemorate the disembarkation at Port Said of Mr. Mazappa.

Flavia Prins

Flavia Prins is a wealthy woman who knew Michael's father some time ago, and who also knew Michael's mother slightly. She promises to watch over Michael during the voyage, but she proves to be censorious and rather disinterested in him. When he gets in trouble, he lies to her, and rather than trying to understand the boy, she simply



becomes disgusted. Her only uses to Michael are as a source of on-board gossip and as an occasional entrée to the First Class section, where various goodies are to be had.

Mr. Hastie

Mr. Hastie is Michael's cabin mate. He is keeper of the ship's kennels, until a death caused by a dog bite is blamed on Mr. Hastie's incompetence, and he is reassigned to menial tasks. Mr. Hastie frequently brings friends into the cabin for late-night card games, but he is polite to Michael and everyone speaks quietly during the games, to avoid disturbing the boy in his bunk. Outside the cabin, he proves to be much more boisterous and full of interesting yarns about his days at sea and particularly about a woman he married during a drunken shore leave, whom he abandoned and who chased and stabbed him, almost killing him.

Sunil

Sunil is a young man who becomes romantically involved with Emily during the voyage. He works with the traveling circus performers called the Janklar Troupe. His stage name is The Hyberadad Mind, and his main trick is to tell passengers where items they have lost are located, although Michael discovers that these items have previously been stolen by troupe members. Sunil draws Emily into a plot to help a prisoner to escape the ship, during which a murder is committed.

Niemeyer

Niemeyer is the prisoner on board. He is Asian, and his surname is a mystery to Michael. Niemeyer is reputed to have killed an English judge in Colombo, and is being brought in chains to England for trial. Later in the novel, it is revealed that Niemeyer is a longtime criminal whose sister is an acrobat with the Janklar Troupe. It is also revealed that Niemeyer's daughter is a deaf girl on board named Asuntha. Eventually, Niemeyer wraps Asuntha in his arms and jumps overboard with her, hoping to escape. In all likelihood, the handcuffed Niemeyer drowns.

Asuntha

Asuntha is a deaf girl befriended on the ship by Emily. Asuntha can hear partially out of one ear if a person speaks directly into it, but she herself seldom speaks. She turns out to be the daughter of the prisoner, Niemeyer. Asuntha lost her hearing in a fall, when she was working as an acrobat with the Janklar Troupe. She left the troupe but was coaxed to rejoin them when Niemeyer was to be sent to England for trial, and she participates in the plot to help him escape. It is uncertain if she swims to shore when the two go overboard, or if she drowns.



Massoumeh

Massoumeh, known familiarly as Massi, is Ramadhin's sister. Michael meets her after the voyage, when he spends time during his teen years with Ramadhin and his family. He has a tentative, innocent romance with Massi. Years later, when Ramadhin dies, Michael and Massi meet again for the funeral and their relationship renews. They marry, but it does not last. Massi moves with a fast crowd during her youth, while Michael lives a more reserved life. After their separation, they do not see each other again.

Sir Hector de Silva

Sir Hector de Silva is a wealthy and well-known man on the voyage who is going to England to be treated for rabies after being bitten by a dog in Colombo. The rumor is that he was cursed by a monk he insulted, and Sir Hector is very ill. Later in the voyage, a dog smuggled aboard by Ramadhin bites Sir Hector in the neck, killing him, and completing the monk's curse.

Mr. Fonseca

Mr. Fonseca is a school teacher who hardly ever leaves his cabin. Michael visits him there and is impressed by Fonseca's many books and his learning.

The Captain

The Captain is a gruff man whose main part in the story is to berate the boys for lashing themselves to the deck during a storm. He is a symbol of their contempt for authority figures.

Mr. Giggs

Mr. Giggs is an army officer from Ceylon who has been entrusted with guarding Niemeyer during the voyage. When Niemeyer tries to escape, Giggs threatens to shoot him, but his gun is shot out of his hand by Miss Lasqueti.

Lucius Perera

Lucius Perera is a Ceylonese policeman working undercover on the ship. His job is to help Giggs to guard Niemeyer. Perera is disguised as one of the members of the Cat's Table, a tailor named Mr. Gunsekera who never speaks and is thought to have an injury to his vocal chords.



Baron C.

Baron C. is a passenger who enlists Michael in burglary of other passengers' cabins. He leaves the ship before it reaches England.

Mr. Invernio

Mr. Invernio is the assistant kennel-keeper, who is appointed head of the kennels after Mr. Hastie is demoted. The boys suspect Invernio of stealing a prize dog belonging to one of the passengers.

Heather Cave

Heather Cave is a 14 year-old pupil of Ramadhin. He develops a crush on her, but it is unrequited. Michael meets and speaks with her years after Ramadhin's death.

Gunepala

Gunepala is the cook at the house of Michael's uncle in Ceylon. He owns many dogs, and Michael is fond of him.

Narayan

Narayan is another employee of Michael's uncle. He takes Michael to town, and is another friend to the boy during his isolated youth. Later, Michael convinces himself that Narayan is the author of novels by a man with the same name.

Mr. Nevil

Mr. Nevil is another member of the Cat's Table, a retired dismantler of ships who has been employed by the shipping line to check on safety. He assures a worried Michael that the ship is quite safe.



Objects/Places

Colombo

Colombo is the largest city in Ceylon, the island country now known as Sri Lanka. Michael embarks from Colombo's port on the passenger ship bound for England. Niemeyer's pretrial hearing also is held in Colombo.

The Oronsay

The Oronsay is the seven-level passenger ship on which Michael and the others travel from Ceylon to England. Much of the novel's action takes place aboard the Oronsay.

The Cat's Table

The Cat's Table is a table in the ship's dining room where Michael, two of his young friends, and a number of adult passengers sit. "Cat's Table" is a nickname for the lowest-prestige table in the ship's dining room.

Boralesgamuwa

Boralesgamuwa is a village in Ceylon where Michael spent his young years. He reminisces about it occasionally during the novel.

St. Thomas' College

St. Thomas' College is a boarding school in Ceylon that was attended by both Michael and Cassius. Neither of them liked it very much, although Michael enjoyed swimming there.

Canada

Canada is where Michael lives in the present, as he is writing down the story of the ship's voyage.

London

London is where Michael, Ramadhin, and Massi live during their teenaged years. Michael returns there after Ramadhin's death, and reunites with Massi. He also sees a exhibition of Cassius's art in a London gallery.



Aden

Aden is an ancient port in Yemen where the Oronsay docks during its crossing to England.

The Suez Canal

The Suez Canal is the trade waterway in Egypt that links the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea. The ship goes through the canal en route to Port Said.

Port Said

Port Said is a city in Egypt on the Mediterranean coast where the Oronsay docks. Michael goes ashore with Cassius and Ramadhin at Port Said, where they have memorable adventures and smuggle a dog back onto the ship.

Florence

Florence is the Italian city where Perinetta Lasqueti works as a young woman for a wealthy American couple who own an art institute. She is seduced by the manipulative husband.

Bowen Island

Bowen Island is an island west of Vancouver in Canada, where Emily is living years after the voyage on the Oronsay. Michael visits her there, after the two have not seen one another for 15 years.



Themes

The Rite of Passage

Among the classic genres of novels is the coming-of-age story. In it, a young person goes through trials and tribulations, often in the course of a journey, and emerges with new information or awareness that is central to a successful transition from childhood to adulthood. Such rites of passage have been enacted in ceremonies and rituals of societies throughout recorded history, and coming-of-age stories go back to ancient times. When Michael leaves Ceylon at the age of 11, he embarks on a sea voyage unaccompanied by an adult. He and his two friends have almost free rein on the ship, and they involve themselves in mischief that progresses from innocent to serious. They manage to avoid being caught and punished for the worst things they do, but they also must deal with the guilt of realizing that their actions have contributed to an accidental death, and they also are present during an altercation between adults that ends in murder. By the time Michael is reunited in England with his mother, who seems a virtual stranger to him, he has developed a strong distrust of authority figures, has learned much about deceit and disloyalty among adults, and clearly has begun to recognize the qualities that distinguish people of strong and weak character. The boy has begun to realize what it takes to be a good man. His misdeeds on the ship have not been for nothing. The journey and all its adventures have amounted to a rite of passage for him. When he arrives in England he is still far from being an adult, but neither is he any longer a naïve little boy, and lessons he has learned on the voyage will continue to affect his development over the coming years.

Disguise and Deception

Frequently in "The Cat's Table", people are not what they seem to be. This ancient theme, which explores the differences between appearance and reality, is played out in many of the novel's characters and events. Emily and Miss Lasqueti avoid the rule that women may not go ashore at Port Said by disguising themselves as men. Asuntha turns out to be the daughter of Niemeyer and an accomplice in his escape attempt. Eventually, it is revealed that Sunil has been secretly working to help the prisoner. Emily plays a role in this central plot development, but never confesses to anyone during the voyage. Mr. Gunesekera is not a quiet tailor at all, but an undercover policeman assigned to keep watch over the prisoner. At first, Miss Lasqueti appears to be a rather dismal spinster, but she is shown to have connections to the world of espionage and turns out to be an excellent shot with a pistol. Even Mr. Hastie, a relatively minor character, is not entirely the polite fellow he seems to be, but a rascal who was almost stabbed to death by a woman he married and attempted to abandon during a drunken shore leave. Flavia Prins, another minor character, purports to be interested in watching over Michael during the voyage, but actually is a self-involved, censorious person of no use to him. The voyage is Michael's first prolonged exposure to the world of adults, and he spends much of his time trying to analyze and understand the other passengers.



Obviously, it does not help his efforts that so many of them have secrets to hide, but one thing he does learn is how markedly different appearance and reality can be. This lesson is fundamental to his own development as a social being.

The Use of Authority

Up to a certain point in a child's life, the authority of adults is unquestioned. Children might complain about decisions that place restraints on them, but their sense of injustice derives simply from not getting what they want. Only later do they begin to wonder about fairness. By then, a child's response to perceived unfairness might well be controlled by the powerful adult, which turns the child toward conformity. But in some cases, the child will rebel. Herein lies the seed of the anti-authoritarian adult. Michael Ondaajte's novel suggests that the child who rebels against the unfair exercise of power by adults is likely to become the grown-up who refuses to blindly follow the senseless rules society can construct, which dampen creativity and individuality. On the other side of the equation, people who exercise such authority can do so judiciously or thoughtlessly. In this novel, power used to dubious ends is equated with a thirst for prestige, as symbolized by the well-known personages who sit at the Captain's table. On the other hand, some of the adult characters exercise authority for the good of everyone, rather than for personal aggrandizement. Such good deeds are done quietly by members of the overlooked Cat's Table. The young protagonist notes that the most interesting and useful things seem to be done by quiet people, whom he comes to prefer over the showy ones. He recognizes that people in power often seem bent on preventing others from achieving their goals. Such observations are vital to development of the boy's discernment concerning when authority is or is not well-used.



Style

Point of View

The opening pages of "The Cat's Table" are told in third person, from the viewpoint of an unnamed 11 year-old boy who is about to take a sea voyage. But the viewpoint quickly shifts to first person, when the narrator looks back at himself on the ship from the vantage point of years in the future. The rest of the novel is told in first person, but initially the narrator remains unnamed. Eventually, he is given the nickname "Mynah" by two other boys on the ship, and not long after that, it is revealed that his true name is Michael. This gradual sharpening of the viewpoint, from third to first person, from anonymous to nicknamed to a true name, creates the impression that the novel could be significantly influenced by actual events, since the author's name also is Michael. As the story progresses, the author intensifies this impression by parceling out bits of information about Michael that correspond to Michael Ondaatje's life history. The advantage of this unusual manipulation of point of view is that even as it helps to build a sense that the story is not fictional, it simultaneously strengthens the novel's believability. In particular, the blurring of distinction between the author and the protagonist through these point-of-view techniques makes it possible to imagine that even the violence and intrigue that occur late in the story, which normally would seem quite fictional, might actually have happened.

Setting

The principal setting in "The Cat's Table" is on board the passenger liner Oronsay as it journeys from Ceylon (now called Sri Lanka) to England. The characters explore many parts of the seven-level ship, and the action shifts frequently among these areas. On board, probably the main setting is the dining room, and especially the so-called Cat's Table, occupied by a group of passengers who are important characters in the story. Other settings enter the novel through the protagonist's memory of events before and after the sea voyage. The island of Ceylon, the village of Boralessgamuwa, where Michael lived as a boy, and the capital city of Colombo all figure as settings for events that occurred before the Oronsay sailed. England, particularly parts of London, and Canada, especially Bowen Island, are the settings of events in the protagonist's life following the sea voyage. Ports of call during the Oronsay's passage also figure as settings. The ancient port of Aden in Yemen, the Suez Canal, and Port Said in Egypt are all described during the ship's stopovers. Most important of these is Port Said, where Michael and his friends have an on-shore adventure that later affects other passengers on the ship. The various settings on land are evoked with fondness and, in the cases of the two ports of call, a sense of wonderment. Even so, most of the novel's action takes place at sea, and the ship as a world in itself is the focus of the author's efforts in terms of creating a sense of place.



Language and Meaning

This story presents ample opportunity for the author to use colloquial language, because most of the characters are from Ceylon, but little dialect is employed. In the rare instance when it is used, such as the description of an herb the boys and Mr. Daniels smoke, which is called "white beedi," the term is placed in quotation marks, as if to emphasize its foreignness. Similarly, the author could have used semi-technical terms to describe the Oronsay, especially because its structure and functions are examined in the book, but he prefers relatively plain language. If he does use any unusual word concerning the sea-going life, such as "trireme," he immediately explains what it means. The most likely explanation for this straightforward language is that the main plot unfolds on board the Oronsay, as narrated by an 11 year-old boy. Another possible reason for the author to avoid complex or obscure language is that he has many characters and the story goes back and forth in time, even as new details are added to the lives of the characters, all of which places demands on the reader. Direct and precise language helps to clarify the complex plot. Also, jargon and semi-technical language often are used to create atmosphere, but this novel is already richly atmospheric, and it is likely the author decided that more would be lost than gained by making the language less approachable. Accordingly, the language is a sturdy but relatively invisible aid to meaning in the novel.

Structure

Probably the most innovative aspect of this novel is its structure. The story is told almost entirely in past tense, yet the very rare passages in present tense are essential to the placement of the tale in time. The novel begins with a journey taken by a boy in the 1950s. Very soon, the boy reflects back on the story from the vantage of an adult. Most of the novel unfolds aboard the Oronsay during the voyage, but the protagonist frequently moves forward in time to his adulthood, giving him the chance to look back at events of his boyhood before the journey and events following it, from his teenaged years up to the present. This interweaving of various periods in Michael's past is bolstered by occasional mentions in present tense that he is now remembering all this and writing it down. Another, related layering of the novel's structure involves the stories of other passengers on the ship. In their case, each of the many characters is given a small but telling characteristic or action that makes the character memorable, even though little has been revealed. Several such bits of information are provided consecutively for different characters, which is rather reminiscent of different-colored threads or stitches placed in a fabric. Sometimes, a large chunk of a character's story will be told in one space, like a patch in the pattern. The actions of the passengers on the ship, provided in these snippets and blocks, often affect each other and the development of the plot. "The Cat's Table" is a virtuoso ensemble piece, the key to which is its cleverly planned structure.



Quotes

"What I held in my right hand never got revealed to my left. I had already been trained in cautiousness." Page 12.

"If I had to invent one photograph of myself from childhood, it would be of a barefoot boy in shorts and a cotton shirt, with a couple of friends from the village, running along the mildewed wall that separated the house and garden in Boralesgamuwa from the traffic on the High Level Road." Page 27.

"But he had a serenity that came with the choice of the life he wanted to live. And this serenity and certainty I have seen only among those who have the armor of books close by." Page 59.

"What is interesting and important happens mostly in secret, in places where there is no power." Page 75.

"So we can understand that small and important thing, that our lives could be large with interesting strangers who would pass us without any personal involvement." Page 129.

"Although I know now that the world is not divided that simply into two natures. But in our youth we think that." Page 138.

"It was Ramadhin who he must have assumed had the natural sensitivity and intelligence to be an artist. I do not believe those are necessary requisities, but I half believed it then." Page 144.

"A boy of eleven, like any experienced dog, can read the gestures of those around him, can see the power in a relationship drift back and forth." Page 170.

"Perhaps we had by then outgrown our curiosity about the powerful. We were preferring the gentle Mr. Daniels, after all, obsessed with the care of his plants, and the pale figure of Miss Lasqueti, who wore her pigeon jacket replete with cushioned pockets for the transporting of her birds." Page 196.

"She'd been aloof at first only from a guarded shyness. Then it was as if you had come across a box of small foxes at a country fair." Page 212.

"In the great centers of power, you see, competition is based not so much on winning but on stopping your enemy from achieving what he or she really wants." Page 222.

"You won't make me understand all this. I don't think you can love me into safety." Page 250

"We slipped into England in the dark. After all our time at sea, we were unable to witness our entrance into the country." Page 263.



Topics for Discussion

Why is Michael not given a last name in the novel? He reveals a great deal about himself during the course of the story, and he is the main character. What is the point of not giving him a surname?

What do you think of the curse that the monk in Colombo puts on Sir Hector, which causes him to die from dog bites? What is the author exploring or demonstrating by making Sir Hector's story turn out this way?

After Ramadhin's death, Michael concludes that his friend was a kind of everyday saint. Such high praise might seem to conflict with the story of Ramadhin's crush on his 14 year-old pupil when he was 30. What's more, Ramadhin also was the one who smuggled the dog aboard the Oronsay that killed Sir Hector, but he never owned up to it. Do you think Ramadhin is a saintly character, or not? Defend your position.

Toward the end of the sea voyage, after Perera is killed, Cassius seems sobered by the event. His reaction is to avoid contact with Michael. The boys overheard the scuffle in the dark that led to the killing, they had an idea of who was involved, but they did not do the deed. Why do you think Cassius would shun Michael?

Emily has a fascination with danger, which might be what pulled her into the intrigue that ended with the death of Perera. Emily's father was a violent man, who frightened her. Explore the connection the author is drawing between Emily's difficult childhood and the mess she got into at age 17 on board the Oronsay.

Mr. Mazappa, an outgoing and entertaining man, suddenly grows morose and permanently leaves the ship when it docks at a port of call. Michael never discovers the reason. Explain what you think transpired, and why it happened.

Why do you think Miss Lasqueti shoots the gun from the hand of Mr. Giggs when he is about to shoot at Niemeyer? Whose side is she on, and what do you think her role might be in the entire drama?