

Running in the Family Study Guide

Running in the Family by Michael Ondaatje

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Plot Summary

Running in the Family is written by a Sri Lankan-born Canadian novelist and poet, Philip Michael Ondaatje. He is best known for writing *The English Patient*. But this book is not a work of fiction; instead, it is something of a memoir from his youth in Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon). It is partially fictionalized. The book is written in close to postmodern style, with stream of consciousness writing, writing from the perspective of different real-life individuals and refraining from stringing narrative together in an orderly fashion.

The focus of the book is Michael's family. The Ondaatje family had lived in Ceylon for centuries, so he has a large number of relatives who live there. The main focus of the book is on his alcoholic father, Mervyn Ondaatje. He also focuses on his outrageous grandmother Lalla.

In the acknowledgments, Michael notes that his book is a "composite," or a mixture of his two return journeys to Sri Lanka in 1978 and 1980. He stayed for months each time, first travelling alone and then with his family. He and his sister Gillian also researched around the island. Gillian, his sister Janet and his brother Christopher helped him to recreate the era. His raw material came from numerous friends, family and acquaintances across the island.

The book explores a variety of themes, among them are family, social expectations, addiction, the memory of youth, and loneliness. Ondaatje is focused primarily on exploring his family and these themes; as a result, the book is not structured around a single narrative. It is comprised of seven large chapters that contain various sketches of memories, interviews and reports that are separated as sub-chapters. For instance, Chapter 1, "Asian Rumours" has two sub-chapters, "Asia" and "Jaffna Afternoons." The first sub-chapter covers Michael's return trip to Sri Lanka and the second mostly discusses the old governor's house on the island.

The other six chapters cover more general topics. Chapter 2, "A Fine Romance" discusses his parents' meeting and their marriage along with a variety of other small but related matters. Chapter 3, "Don't Talk to Me About Matisse" explores Ceylon, its history, geography, flora and fauna. Chapter 4, "Eclipse Plumage" is about Michael's grandmother, Lalla. Chapter 5, "The Prodigal" outlines his father's alcoholism and his outrageous antics as a young man in Ceylon.

Chapter 6, "What We Think of Married Life" explains his parents', Doris and Mervyn's marriage and the problems they faced, largely due to Mervyn's drinking. And in Chapter 7, "The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society", Michael covers Mervyn's sad decline into depression and obesity, lamenting the fact that his father would never let him and his family into his emotional life.

While the book is fictionalized, Ondaatje notes that, "In Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts." The reader must approach the book knowing this ahead of time, understanding the author is drawing a "portrait" or making a "gesture" towards his youth

in Ceylon and his family. The point of the book is to draw out the themes from his youth, not necessarily to record his history as it truly was.



Chapter 1, Asian Rumours

Chapter 1, Asian Rumours Summary and Analysis

Michael wakes up at a friend's house in winter near Lake Ontario, but had been dreaming of his return to his home of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). He was planning his journey back there in his mind and was doing the same two months later. Michael would return to the family he grew up with, having realized that his childhood had passed him by and he didn't understand it.

In "Jaffna Afternoons", it is 2:15 in the afternoon. Michael is in the old governor's home in Jaffna. The house was built in 1700, a prize building in Northern Ceylon. He had spent the morning with his sister and Aunt Phyllis to trace their ancestry. He loves his aunt because she was close to his father. The afternoon will proceed in much the same way, with stories of Michael's family, the Ondaatjes.

That night, Michael sees the repeating image of himself as part of a human pyramid in his mind. The pyramid is composed of his family members.



Chapter 2, A Fine Romance

Chapter 2, A Fine Romance Summary and Analysis

"The Courtship": Michael's father finished school and went to university in England, and so Mervyn Ondaatje wrote home that he had been admitted to Queen's college. But nearly three years later his parents discovered that he had not passed the entrance exam, and had been living off of their money in England, reading and studying, but only what interested him.

When his parents heard, they decided to confront him and leave for England with his sister Stephy. He avoided terrible retribution however, as he had become engaged to Kaye Roseleap, Stephy's closest friend in England, and when his parents visited he behaved perfectly.

Mervyn returned to Ceylon while his parents arranged the wedding and after two weeks there he told his parents he was engaged to Doris Gratiaen. His parents were furious and social problems immediately erupted. Mervyn didn't know what to do, so he joined the Ceylon light infantry. Doris would be Michael's mother; Michael had been friends with Noel Gratiaen, his mother's brother.

Noel and Mervyn married Dorothy (Doris's friend) and Doris soon after meeting them and both joined the Ceylon light infantry. The second engagement was unpopular with Mervyn's parents. He had nothing to do in Kegalle, where they were at the time. His life was quiet until Doris broke off the engagement. So he had to drive to Colombo to discover what happened, with a car borrowed from his uncle Aelian. But a few days later the problems were solved, the engagement reestablished. The two were married one year later, on April 11th, 1932.

In "Honeymoon", Michael describes various important events of the day in April 1932, but Charlies Chaplin was in Ceylon, avoiding publicity. People were fighting in Manchuria. In "Historical Relations", Michael relates that the early twenties were a busy time for his grandparents. In April and May they moved to Nuwara Eliya, a different world at an elevation of 6,000 feet. Many outdoor activities could be pursued at the lower temperature.

Michael describes some of the activities. All the people there were distantly related, racial mixtures of Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher. The transient English were seen as racists, separated from the colonists who had settled there and intermarried. Michael said his father claimed to be a Ceylon Tamil, which was more true three centuries before.

In "The War Between Men and Women" the reader is introduced to Lalla Ondaatje, Michael's grandmother, an extravagant woman who told him that she and other members of the family had spent the twenties tired because they were so busy.



Michael's father's best friend, Francis de Saram, drank himself into an early grave. His whole life was chaotic. He and his friends (Noel and Mervyn, among others) bought alcohol on ships, where it was duty free. They often spent time at Gasanawa, the rubber estate where Francis worked and where they would host parties. The parties rose to mythic proportions in memory. The parties ended at the end of the twenties, when Francis lost his job.

In Ceylon, almost any member of the leisured class gambled, and they would gamble over anything, any animal, and race. Michael discusses some examples. Everyone, apparently, was interested in racing; many of his relatives owned a horse or two. Races lasted all year long. Everyone was involved, everyone drank and everyone had a good time.

In "Tropical Gossip", Michael notes that most of his family members at one point were attracted to someone they shouldn't have been. Marriage, in some ways, was the greater infidelity. Until World War II, they could all act like children, wild and spoiled. But they formed strong relationships in this earlier time. And gossip pervades their memory.

Michael's father's father, Philip, was strict and aloof. Not everyone liked him. He was a lawyer and made huge amounts of money in land deals; he retired at forty, building a family home, "Rock Hill" on a space of land near the center of the town of Kegalle. Philip lived there most of his life and ignored most people in social circles. Michael and others called him "Bampa"; their whole family was afraid of him and often pretended to be more English than he was. He would visit England often. He died before the war, September 12th, 1938; the funeral was a tragedy of family drama.

The next decade, Rock Hill was rarely used by the family. Michael's parents had divorced and his father lost jobs. Bampa left the land to his grandchildren, but Mervyn would often sell or give away land for money or favors.

By 1950, Mervyn had taken up a simple farming life and had married Maureen and fathered two children, Jennier and Susan. He would fade in and out of alcoholic bingers for periods covering months. He talked to few people when he was drunk and would die soon from his cycle of bingeing. Later, a Sinhalese family would occupy Rock Hill. As a young man, Michael remembered his father's bingeing, realizing that the days of his grandfather were long gone.



Chapter 3, Don't Talk to Me about Matisse

Chapter 3, Don't Talk to Me about Matisse Summary and Analysis

Ceylon has been sought after by many of the great European empires and the settlers that came from them. Michael's ancestor arrived in 1600, a doctor who healed the residing governor's daughter and was given land, along with a new name, Ondaatje. The long history of Michael's family is impressed upon him at an early age during a visit to a church where his family's names are inscribed on plaques along the church. Michael then discusses Simon Ondaatje, the last Tamil Colonial Chaplain of Ceylon.

In "Tongue", Michael is leading a group of children on the beach when they encounter a crocodile. It is a kabragoya, and it is dead. The creature is common in Ceylon and is rarely found elsewhere in the world, but the size of an average crocodile. The thalagoya is a small version of it and one can eat the tongue but it must be eaten quickly after the animal dies. This is supposed to produce verbal brilliance. It is also thought to have other uses.

In "The Karapothas", Michael is sitting in a house on Bulgger's Road, a foreigner, but the prodigal who hates the foreigner. He is in Colombo during the hottest month of the year. This heat drove Englishmen crazy and often disgraces foreigners. Michael's family often thought Ceylon had too many foreigners.

The island has many unique plants and animals, and many of the plants are poisonous. William Charles Ondaatje, one of Michael's ancestors, catalogued many of the poisons. The island held great knowledge, apparently. And Michael thinks the Sinhalese have the most beautiful alphabet; he had learned to write it when he was five.

Michael was interested in Ceylon writers, and he spent hours talking with the librarian at Peredeniya, Ian Goonetilleke, about them. Ian showed him some censored writing written by Ceylonese insurgents, writing in their late teens. Michael discusses some cases along with some artists. He then reprints some of his favorite poems.

In "Kegalle (ii)" Michael reports that Rock Hill was full of snakes, especially cobras, often attracted by chicken eggs. The family was often harassed. The last incident took place in 1971, a year before it was sold and the year of the Insurgence. Rebels against the government rose up to take over due to hunger. They were well-organized but they failed due to uncoordinated dates.



Chapter 4, Eclipse Plumage

Chapter 4, Eclipse Plumage Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4 begins with a conversation over lunch, telling a story about Michael's family. His mother was nine at the time and the story features his grandmother Lalla. A group of friends and relatives were at a wedding, and many of them were drunk. But the story splits into three different stories. But during the wedding, David Grenier drowns and Hilden and Trevor cannot retrieve him. Michael's nine year-old mother saw the whole thing while they were in Negombo.

In "Aunts", Michael notes that he once had great aunts who told great stories. His aunt Dolly is introduced; she is eighty when he recounts the story. She and her brother Arthur were close friends with Michael's father for his entire life. Michael speaks to her in her old house and she tells him that his grandmother Lalla, had many boyfriends.

In "The Passions of Lalla," Michael discusses his grandmother, Lalla. She died in a jacaranda tree during a thunderstorm, apparently struck by lightning. She claimed that she was born outside, but Michael cannot locate much about Lalla's upbringing. When she was twenty, she was living in Colombo. A man, Shelton de Saram, had just broken her heart. She married Willie Gratiaen on the rebound.

Willie was a broker, among the first Ceylonese to work for E. John and Co. Willie and Lalla bought a large home in Colombo. Willie then fell ill and died, leaving Lalla with two children and not yet thirty. She had to run their dairy by themselves. Michael discusses her duties and related anecdotes. During her lone dairy-farm managing, she raised Michael's mother and Dorothy Clementi-Smith.

The name of their home was Palm Lodge and it attracted a steady stream of young people for years, flocking to Lalla, as she was an irresponsible chaperone. Lalla was a dramatic women and used her children, Noel and Doris, in her daily theatres. When Michael's mother announced that she was going to marry his father, Mervyn Ondaatje, Lalla was excited because he was a Tamil.

Apparently Lalla, because she was an eccentric, was difficult to live with. Michael's mother never spoke of Lalla to him, but she was beloved from afar.

One her children were grown up, Lalla became more involved with her sisters and brothers. Dickie, her sister, remarried after her first husband, David Grenier drowned. Her brother Vere tried to remain a bachelor. She tried to marry him to a woman who had planned to be a nun but their marriage fell apart on their wedding night.

Apparently Michael's relatives often were trouble for the local Catholic church, tempting church members sexually and misbehaving themselves.



By the mid 1940s, Lalla was broke and drunk. But Lalla is best remembered for this time. She based her social life out of Palm Lodge but had to sell it, next travelling the country, doing whatever she wanted. She organized parties and became notorious. Michael claims that she was in her prime. One reason she became well-known is because she was the first woman in Ceylon to have a mastectomy but it was unnecessary. She lived out her life with a false breast.

Michael next notes that Lalla often horribly embarrassed her daughters. In her last years she sought a great death. She took risks and her freedom grew. She would often read thunder and go out during lightening storms. Lalla received a small inheritance in 1947 and went travelling with the money in hand. A few weeks later, she deliberately stepped off her front porch into flood waters and was hauled away by the current. It was her "last perfect journey." Eventually she drowned.



Chapter 5, The Prodigal

Chapter 5, The Prodigal Summary and Analysis

When Michael was growing up, animals always found their way into his house, bats, snakes, birds, etc. Often they would eat portraits and wedding pictures. He recorded the sounds and would listen to them elsewhere.

In "How I Was Bathed", Michael and his family are having dinner, his favorite meal, full of Ceylonese dishes. Gillian starts to describe how Michael was bathed when he was five, having heard the story from a prefect at Bishop's College for Girls.

Michael's first school was a girls' school in Colombo that accepted boys of five or six for a few years. A small nurse (or ayah) was in charge of them; her name was Maratina. After a day of dirt-covered playing, Maratina would herd the boys into a bathroom, order them to strip and fill a bucket with water. She would then fling the water at them over and over again, then grabbing the children by the hair and scrubbed them with carbolic soap and then do it to everyone. Finally, she dried them off and sent them to bed.

In "Wilpattu", Michael is an adult, travelling through Ceylon with his daughter. When they reached Wilpattu, a guide is assigned to them to the middle of the jungle. Eventually they reached Manikappolu Utu, where they stop at a large wooden house on stilts. The house is deep in the jungle and surrounded by animals. Michael and his daughter are staying with a large group of people, who are a strange mixture of ethnicities.

After six days, they prepared to leave Wilpattu, packing everything up. They watch a crocodile kill a deer and Michael's soap is stolen by a wild pig; this frustrates him.

"Kuttapitiya" was the name of the last estate Michael and his siblings lived on as children. It was famous for its gardens. Michael's mother and father lived there for the longest period of their marriage. It was a great place for children to go wild. Lalla would visit every other week and ransack the garden.

In the years before Michael's father died, he was a founding member of "The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society." This means he began to cultivate prickly plants, which would also stop Lalla's garden ravaging. It worked. The family was then alone, in the most beautiful place in the world.

In "Travels in Ceylon", Michael notes that Ceylon looks like a single tear falling off the tip of India. One can drive ten miles and the landscape changes entirely. Strange roads were built in earlier centuries across the island; this includes railways. Michael's father hated riding the train when he was in the Ceylon light infantry. This was because he was often drunk and would often cause trouble, particularly with his gun. Sometimes family would have to pick him up. One time he even jumped off the train naked.



Michael's mother was a strong and gracious woman, putting up with Mervyn for fourteen years. It wore her down.

The resthouse is traditional in Ceylon. Roads are poor in Ceylon, so one can be found every fifteen miles. One can stop to relax, have a drink, food or stay the night. Michael's father liked the resthouse at Kitulgala.

While traveling on these roads, Michael's father "waged war". Sammy Dias Bandaranaike was a close relative of the future Prime Minister of Ceylon, who was assassinated by a Buddhist monk. A feud had broken out between them when they tried to visit the Kitulgala resthouse at the same time. Sammy was a complainer, and wrote half a page of complaints in the resthouse guest book. Mervyn responded with, "No complaints. Not even about Mr. Bandaranaike." The line became well-known and Sammy was angry.

The two ran into each other a few months later at the Avissawella resthouse, and ignored each other. But Sammy wrote a half-page attack on Mervyn in the guest book. Then Mervyn responded with a page and a half of "vindictive prose" about the entire Bandaranaike family, subtly implicating them for insanity and incest. The literary feud continued and pages had to be removed from the guestbooks.

Mervyn was banned from Ceylon Railways after 1943, but his last train ride went out with a bang. During the war, Mervyn became paranoid that the Japanese were about the attack and kept everyone on alert. He drank constantly and had to be hospitalized. On the way to the hospital, he was accompanied by the future Prime Minister, John Kotelawala, and had stashed gin on the train. Mervyn's drunkenness was hard for him to handle.

After John was distracted, Mervyn took over the train and made it shunt back and forth. He got the train driver drunk as well. Apparently one carriage was full of high-ranking British officers and further, Mervyn had brought bombs on the train.

In "Sir John", Michael and his sister Gillian go to visit Sir John Kotelawala, now a millionaire and retired ex-Prime Minister. He is surprised to see them, give their notorious father. They discuss Mervyn and John returns to the story of the train three times. Sir John then serves them a wonderful breakfast, for which he was famous.

Sir John claims that one reason he lost elections was due to his grand house and the parties he had there.

In "Photograph", Michael's aunt pulls out a photograph of his father and mother together in May, 1932. They were on their honeymoon and were making hideous faces. The photo was put on postcards and reads "What we think of married life." It is the only photo that Michael has of them together.



Chapter 6, What We Think of Married Life

Chapter 6, What We Think of Married Life Summary and Analysis

After Michael's parents were married, Mervyn brought 'Mum' to Tea country, which "held her captive." Michael came to the area forty years later to visit his half-sister Susan and her husband Sunil. They had car trouble on the way and had to walk the last bit of distance. Lighting struck the house when they arrived. The next day long quiet mornings began. They prepare for monsoon season. The silence represents the marriage of Michael's parents.

Mervyn loved books, as did Michael's mother. But Mervyn made his books his own. Her mother was a story-teller, and an excellent one at that. Mother was outgoing but Mervyn was private. He couldn't stand Lalla for her boisterousness. He also had a secretive, sly sort of humor that Michael's mother loved long after they were divorced. The humor bound them together. Mother had instilled a love for theater in them all; she trained them to cry tearfully in front of their father and beg him not to drink anymore.

It was the alcoholism that broke them apart. Mother would try to manipulate Mervyn to stop drinking and when he got sober he would browbeat her for it. But afterwards, she would relent and they would be fine until he started drinking again.

After the divorce, she got a job as a housekeeper-manager at hotels in Ceylon and kept it until she died. The easy life of the tea estate was over. Fourteen years ago they were among the wealthiest families in Ceylon; now it was all over. Michael's mother left for England in 1949.

In "Dialogues", Michael records a series of conversations and anecdotes from his siblings and mother about his father and his alcoholism. Mervyn constantly lost jobs and spent money. Moving back to England was difficult for their mother. The sub-chapter is filled with tales of their tensions, Mervyn's attempts to keep drinking and Michael's mother's attempts to get him to stop. It also tells of the sad lives they lived after the divorce.

Michael believes that he and his family's lives have been terribly shaped by what came before. He never knew the sense of love, passion and duty his father felt, having died before he could think of such matters.

In "The Bone", Michael admits that he cannot accept one of the versions of the train escapade. In this version, he jumped naked from the train and his friend Arthur chased him. When he caught up, he saw Mervyn walking towards him with five dogs on five ropes he was holding. They were probably strays but Mervyn loved dogs. However, the scene contained nothing gentle and the dogs were dangerous to him. Arthur cut the

ropes and the dogs escaped; he then guided Mervyn back to the road. He held onto the ropes the whole time.



Chapter 7, The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society

Chapter 7, The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society Summary and Analysis

In "Thanikama", Mervyn is driving to Colombo after meeting with Doris. He can't remember where his children are. But when he sobers up, he can remember everyone. Doris never finds him and he spends the day milling about, talking to people and drinking. The year is 1947. Afterwards he drove around and eventually left Colombo. Eventually he reached Kegalle and drove to Rock Hill. He stared at the house, seeing it empty. He could not see the moon. He was alone with the bottle.

In "Final Days Father Tongue", Michael introduces some memories transcribed from his family. Jennifer notes how large the poultry farm was back in Mervyn's day. She had designed a poster for it. Mervyn kept everyone busy, with Jennifer doing correspondence and Susan collecting eggs. Jennifer and Susan worked hard and Mervyn loved their gullibility. He would often play tricks on them and in this way got them to behave.

Jennifer notes that she was probably closest to him in his final years. She says he could always laugh at himself, particularly as he got so large before he died. When Mervyn drank, Jennifer would stay away and avoid him. His last days were quiet, she notes.

V.C. de Silva says he was brilliant when it came to selling chickens. V.C. didn't know how he pulled it off. But whatever he made he spent. People thought V.C. was one of his closest friends; he was also Mervyn's medical advisor and lived with Mervyn for a month, taking flowers to Michael's mother in Colombo. Mervyn was coughing blood at the time.

V.C. and Archer Jayawardene became friends and never drank with Mervyn. V.C. sedated him when he got sick; he died of a cerebral hemorrhage. Only a handful of people were close to him. Maureen and V.C. were two of them. V.C. said Mervyn had a lot of faith in him and so he loved him too.

Archer Jayawardene tells Micheal that Mervyn founded the Cactus and Succulent Society; they had one hundred members and would have a yearly luncheon at the Kandy Garden Club. Mervyn enjoyed organizing them and suggested that Archer, he and Maureen take dance lessons.

Mervyn spent his spare time reading or listening to the radio. He lived in another world. A year before his death, he became depressed and mostly stopped speaking. Mervyn's funeral was a tragic comedy. The coffin was too small and so a new one had to be built in the house. But they couldn't get it out, so the doors had to be broken down. It rained



the day of the funeral and Mervyn had bought a plot on the top of a hill. The pallbearers slipped on the way up.

Mervyn was content before he died. Archer and V.C. were impatient with him. Archer was with him two days before he died, alone in the house. They were happy, sitting together, silent.

Michael begins to narrate again, saying that Mervyn swung wildly between calmness to depression. He was shy and kept it to himself; he also pretended to be better than he was. But his depressions would reveal an awful paranoia. When the stress of keeping things to himself became too much, he started to drink. And the year before he died, he simply broke down.

That same year, he was taken to a Colombo nursing home and when his children visited he was distant but was happy to see them. After two weeks he came home happy and explained himself to his friends. It is hard to guess what was going on inside of him, which was hard for those who loved him. Mervyn kept diaries about four hundred varieties of cactus and succulents, however.

At the end of his life, he was made happy by small things, visits from friends, made-up songs, cacti and so on. Michael's brother tells him that he has to get the book right, that he can only write it once. But Michael says the book is incomplete. He expresses remorse to his father that they could not understand him. He wishes his father had shared with them, his love and his fear.

In "Last Morning", Michael has returned to Ceylon, after having left at age eleven. He wakes up and decides he must remember every detail for his book. He wanted to experience the empty room. He imagines his mother looking out of her window in Colombo imagining divorce and his father waking up after three days of alcohol. He remembers the morning scenery with his sister and her children. He stood like this in his childhood and remembered his long days there.



Characters

Michael Ondaatje

Michael Ondaatje is perhaps the main character in the book. He is also its author. Ondaatje is a well-known novelist and poet who currently lived in Canada. He is best known for writing *The English Patient*, but *Running in the Family* is a partly fictionalized memoir of his life growing up in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and his family members who lived there.

The book is compiled from records Ondaatje collected and memories from his youth revived during two trips to Sri Lanka later in his life, one in 1978 and the other in 1980. He deliberately cobbled together these stories in a non-chronological often stream-of-consciousness style in order to paint a "portrait" or make a "gesture" towards the reality of his family life and the depth of the themes he wanted to explore.

For the large majority of the book, Michael is a young boy; since he left Ceylon at eleven, all of the discussions either take place during his life or before save the few times when he flashes forward to the present day. He figures into the stories that predate his birth as a narrator and commentator, but he is actually a character in the book at some time periods. Ondaatje tells the reader very little about himself, save a few of his childhood activities and memories and his longing to know his father.

Mervyn Ondaatje

Mervyn Ondaatje is Michael's father. If which characters are most important are determined by how often they feature in the book, then Mervyn is the book's main character. Most of the book is structured around telling his life story through a series of brief glimpses, stories from friends, images, poetry, memories and attempts by Michael to imagine himself as his father to see into his father's soul.

In Chapter 2, Mervyn is introduced. Here he is largely a young man. His courtship with Doris, Michael's mother, is explained. He had left Ceylon for school and had become engaged to a socially high-ranked woman there, but when he returned to Ceylon he quickly broke off the engagement and became engaged to Doris. Doris was from a high social-rank within Ceylon. They were quickly married and they lived at Rock Hill, the Ondaatje family estate.

However, Mervyn suffered from dipsomaniac, a form of alcoholism where one is irresistibly drawn to alcohol for month long periods but then retreats and becomes sober in others. Naturally a quiet man, when Mervyn was drunk he would often engage in bizarre behavior. This quickly created great tension within the Ondaatje household and ultimately forced Doris to leave and take the children.



Mervyn lived out his years with his addiction, spending all of his money and remaining unable to keep jobs. He became obese and depressed towards the end of his life and died of a cerebral hemorrhage. Mervyn never let anyone into his emotional life, something that hurt Michael very much.

Doris Gratiaen

Michael's mother and Mervyn's first wife, she was a strong, sociable woman who could only take Mervyn's drinking for so long.

Lalla

Michael's eccentric maternal grandmother who lived a wild life similar to Mervyn's, but spent most of her days alone. Chapter 4 focuses on her life.

Philip Ondaatje

Mervyn's father and Michael's grandfather, Philip bought Rock Hill.

Gillian Ondaatje

Michael's sister who helped him research for the book; she also features in the book from time to time.

Noel Gratiaen

Doris's brother and Lalla's son, he plays minor roles in the book, often dealing with Lalla and Mervyn.

Phyllis

One of Michael Ondaatje's aunts.

Maureen Ondaatje

Mervyn's second wife, who was the mother of Susan and Jennifer, Michael's half-sisters. They grew up for a longer period of time with Mervyn and feared his alcoholic binges.



V.C. and Archer

V.C. and Archer were good friends of Mervyn's in the years before his death. V.C. was his medical advisor. They recount their memories of Mervyn for Michael.

Michael's Siblings

Michael has two half-sisters, Susan and Jennifer, two full sisters, Gillian and Janet, and a brother, Christopher. Most suffered in one way or another from their father's destructive life and their mother's pain.

The Ondaatje Family

The Ondaatje Family had lived in Ceylon for generations; originally Dutch, they intermarried with the native Tamil population.



Objects/Places

Ceylon

Modern Sri Lanka, it is the setting of the entire book.

Jaffna

A city that Michael travels through early in the book.

Kegalle

The city where Michael's family lived; Rock Hill was located in Kegalle.

Rock Hill

Bought by Philip Ondaatje, Mervyn and Doris came into possession of it. When they divorced, Doris left everything behind. Mervyn lived out his days there.

Palm Lodge

Palm Lodge was the estate of the Graetiens.

Resthouses

The roads in Ceylon were poor, so many resthouses existed along the way. Mervyn gets into a feud with another man of high social standing at these resthouses.

The Train

The major railway of Ceylon was the sight of one of the major events in the book, Mervyn's drunken binge that finally got him banned from using the train.

The Ceylon Light Infantry

Mervyn was a member of the Ceylon Light Infantry, eventually rising to the rank of Major. He worked with the Allied Troops during World War II.



Ceylon Animals

Ceylon has many unique animals that constantly infested the homes where Michael grew up. However, this seems to have been a regular phenomenon, so it was rarely surprising.

Dipsomania

A type of alcoholism that generates months-long binge periods for those with the disease contrasted with months of sobriety.

Gin

Mervyn Ondaatje's alcoholic beverage of choice.

Ondaatje History

Michael spends some time studying the Ondaatje history in Ceylon, which dates back to the seventeenth century.

Tea Country

Ceylon is known for several unique exports, among them rubber and tea. When Doris and Mervyn were married, they produced tea.

The Monsoon

Ceylon endures seasonal rains known as monsoons. They feature at several important moments in the book.

Michael's Parents' Postcard

Michael only has one picture of his parents together, which is found on a postcard they sent out during their honeymoon.

The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society

Mervyn founded this society which was devoted to the study of Ceylon cacti and succulents. Apparently he initially started it to plant prickly plants so that Lalla would stop ransacking his garden. But late in life his interest in these flora bloomed, and he kept a

diary concerning many species of cacti. He also organized wonderful yearly luncheons for his group, which numbered over one hundred.



Themes

Memory

Michael Ondaatje wrote *Running in the Family* as a memoir and composed it from material he collected during two return trips to Sri Lanka in 1978 and 1980. He was born there in 1943 and left when he was eleven. As a result, everything in the book is a memory of someone or another, and not just an immediate, short-term memory but memories from decades before.

Ondaatje often focuses on the wistfulness and magical quality of memory at many points throughout the book. He is forthright that the book is partly fictionalized and it must be, as Michael will occasionally write from perspectives that he has no access to, such as his father's. But he notes that in Sri Lanka, a well-told lie is better than a thousand truths.

The aim of the book is not to give an impartial record of what occurred but instead to paint or portrait or "gesture" to what life was like growing up in Ceylon and the important relationships in Michael's life. For this reason, memory plays an even more important role, not only because it records some information accurately and misrepresents other elements but because it helps to paint this wistful image of Ceylonese life and Michael's Ceylonese youth.

Thus, Ondaatje uses memory, his memory of youth, his family members' memories of his grandmother, mother and father, pictures, old writings, and so on to construct a picture that communicates more than the words themselves.

Family

The Ondaatje family has lived in Ceylon for generations. Originally Dutch immigrants, the Ondaatje's settled in Ceylon, but rather than resist the local culture, they intermarried, particularly with Tamils. As a result, the Ondaatje family is racially mixed and is large, with a proud history. They are also one of the most prominent families in Ceylon, both socially and economically.

The backdrop of this family lineage is important early in the book. Michael's young life is full of relatives, family gatherings, and so on. Further, there are plenty of family members around later to help Michael reconstruct a picture of his Ceylonese youth. Michael spends many short sub-chapters of the book introducing this or that aunt, a cousin, a grandmother, grandfather and even discussing ancestors from far generations before.

However, the most important aspects of family in *Running in the Family* derive from Michael's immediately family, from his siblings and his mother, and especially his maternal grandmother, Lalla, and his father, Mervyn. He focused on his grandmother's



eccentricities, odd life, and deliberate death. But most of all he covers how his parents met, why they married, and what their early marriage was like, and so on.

Ondaatje focuses in particular on his father's alcoholism and how it drove his mother away, and ultimately his children. The most important character thread that weaves throughout the book is Michael's description of his father's wild antics but who is an otherwise shy character who refused to share his emotional life with anyone. As the book ends, Michael uses his father's friends to recount his final days and expresses great remorse that his father never bothered to get to know him or his other family members, that he never opened himself up, despite loving them all.

Loneliness

A less obvious theme of *Running in the Family* is loneliness. Many of Michael's family members end up facing loneliness in one way or another. Doris, his mother, had to leave her popular social life to live on a tea plantation while her husband, Mervyn, worked. She was isolated and had to do what she could to fight her husband's alcoholism. She was alone again when she was forced to leave and take her children with her. Her pain isolated her.

Michael's grandmother, Lalla, was left alone when her husband died. She had to raise them herself, and while she surrounded herself with men and friends for the rest of her days, she remained an eccentric and maverick who never remarried.

Mervyn was the greatest and loneliest, however. Despite being surrounded by an enormous family, with many generations, Mervyn was always emotionally isolated. Even as a young man he was shy and would engage in bizarre behaviors without explaining himself to anyone. For instance, he left home for college and spent two years in Britain doing as he pleased until his parents found out. He then became engaged but dropped the engagement once he returned to Ceylon. Again, he never explained himself.

Mervyn's alcoholism was perhaps both a cause and effect of his loneliness. In all probability, Mervyn ran to alcoholism to fill a hole in his life that was left by a lack of emotional connection, connections he was unable to establish perhaps due to a childhood trauma or at least his natural shyness. While he had friends and a wife, no one really connected with him. This comes out most clearly towards the end of Mervyn's life where he becomes so depressed that he cannot even speak to friends and lives alone in Rock Hill with his bottle of Gin.



Style

Perspective

The perspective of *Running in the Family* is that of Michael Ondaatje, the famed author of *The English Patient*, and writer of this memoir. Nothing political or religious arises out of the pages of the book. Instead, Michael is focused on close social relationships. Despite the fact that Ceylon was a colony of various imperial powers, and Ondaatje's postmodern style of writing, he does not take up a discussion of colonialism at any time. So these typically larger biases in other writers are indiscernible in the text.

Ondaatje's perspective is that of a middle-aged man reconstructing his youth in a far-off and often magical-seeming place, Ceylon or modern-day Sri Lanka. He also writes from the perspective of a child wounded by his parents' divorce and his father's addiction to alcohol.

Because Michael's father was too proud to let anyone into his emotional life, he found comfort in his drinking binges. But these drinking binges only led to further isolation, such as the break-up of Mervyn's first marriage and the awful second marriage that followed it, where his daughters with Maureen, his second wife, were terrified of him.

Ondaatje is wounded because he never got to know his father, because his father could never reach out for help and pushed his mother away. He writes not only as a man but as a boy, who loves and adores his father, but finds him a distant mysterious. He also writes as a boy who carries a deep-seated sense of rejection and anger but as a man, he understands it from a broader perspective.

Tone

The tone of *Running in the Family* is, for the most part, akin to a man taking a friend through photo albums from his youth. Again, *Running in the family* is partly fictionalized. Ondaatje is trying to paint a portrait of his life, not give a precise record. As a result, he writes in sketches, two to four page sub-chapters, though sometimes more. He gives us glimpses of his life, of his thought processes, of half-memories and testimony from others.

Much of the book is told without any apparent emotional connection to the events. Michael writes as someone attempting to convey important events. But his valuation of the events is never far removed the text or the tone. It is clear that Michael thinks his youth in Ceylon was magical and special, not only because Ceylon is a special place - to be sure, Michael thinks that it is - but because his family has a long history there, and is deeply intertwined with Ceylon's geography and its social and political institutions.

His family is viewed with great pride. He loves to tell stories, apparently and greatly enjoyed his grandparents, particularly Lalla. He loved his aunts as well.



However, the primary tone comes through when Ondaatje speaks of his father, Mervyn. Michael clearly admires his father but sees him as somewhat shrouded in mystery. His father's life seems like a fairy tale, particularly because most of what he knows about his own father comes from others and broken pieces of memories from his earliest years. Towards the end of the book, Michael speaks of his father with a tone that represents his pain and alienation from the man who was supposed to express love towards him but instead loved his alcohol more.

Structure

Running in the Family is not merely structured as a memoir; instead, it features a highly postmodern form of writing. First, postmodernist literature is rarely chronological, but instead will often skip around because postmodernism as a philosophy holds that it is only perspectives that generate reality, and nothing more. There is no "real" structure of events, only the structure that derives from the meaning assigned to it by others. For the same reason, Ondaatje has written a partly fictionalized novel, but the portrait, the perspective is what is closest to the truth, not the impartial record of actual events.

Also true to postmodern form, Ondaatje writes in a stream-of-consciousness style, often not explaining settings until later in a sub-chapter, stringing together sub-chapters into a single picture that are not all obviously united, and so on. As a result, the book's main seven chapters are composed of a wide-ranging host of sub-chapters, some as short as two or three pages.

Chapter 1, "Asian Rumours", sets up the book, covering Michael's return trip to Ceylon/Sri Lanka and where he is staying during his visit. The next six chapters get into the heart of the book. Chapter 2, "A Fine Romance" introduces many of his family members, particularly his parents; it discusses how his parents met, their marriage and other related matters. Chapter 3, "Don't Talk to Me about Matisse" paints a broad portrait of life in Ceylon, including descriptions of its geography, plant and animal life, and so on.

In Chapter 4, "Eclipse Plumage", Ondaatje discusses and describes his maternal grandmother, Lalla, at great length. And in Chapter 5, "The Prodigal", Ondaatje reveals his father's alcoholism and his outrageous behavior as a young adult. Chapter 6, "What We Think of Married Life" concerns Doris and Mervyn Ondaatje's married, their marital problems and the effect of Mervyn's drinking on their marriage. Finally, in Chapter 7, "The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society" Ondaatje paints a sad picture of his father's last years, his depression and obesity, and so on. He also expresses his pain that his father died without opening himself emotionally to Michael and his family.



Quotes

"What began it all was the bright bone of a dream I could hardly hold onto." Chap. 1, Asian Rumors, P. 21

"I remember the wedding ..." Chap. 2, A Fine Romance, p. 36

"The Wall Street crash had a terrible effect on us. Many of the horses had to be taken over by the military." Chap. 2, A Fine Romance, p. 48

"Mervyn has dropped dead. What shall I do? Maureen." Chap. 2, A Fine Romance, p. 59

"The Sinhalese are beyond a doubt one of the least musical people in the world. It would be quite impossible to have less sense of pitch, line or rhythm." Chap. 3, Don't Talk to Me about Matisse, p. 76

"How is David? Is he alright?' 'Quiet well, darling,' Lalla says. 'He is in the next room having a cup of tea.'" Chap. 4, Eclipse Plumage, p. 109

"My Grandmother died in the blue arms of a jacaranda tree. She could read thunder." Chap. 4, Eclipse Plumage, p. 113

"It was her last perfect journey." Chap. 4, Eclipse Plumage, p. 128

"If I am to die soon, I would choose to die now under his wet alphabet of tusk, while I am cool and clean and in good company." Chap. 5, The Prodigal, p. 142

"If we lived here it would be perfect.' 'Yes,' I said." .Chap. 5, The Prodigal, p. 146

"What we think of married life." Chap. 5, The Prodigal, p. 162

"The thing about Mum was—she was a terrifically social person. And he came down to Colombo and swooped her up and took her to the tea estate. OK. They were in love, happy with each other, they had kids. But later there was nothing for her to do there." Chap. 6, What We Think of Married Life, p. 165

"During certain hours, at certain years in our lives, we see ourselves as remnants from the earlier generations that were destroyed." Chap. 6, What We Think of Married Life, p. 179

"He saw himself with the bottle." Chap. 7, The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society, p. 188

"You must get this book right. You can only write it once." Chap. 7, The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society, p. 201

"During the monsoon, on my last morning, all this Beethoven and rain." Chap. 7, The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society, p. 203



Topics for Discussion

Where is Ceylon? Describe some of the main historical events that transpired from the time the Ondaatje's arrived in Ceylon until Michael's day.

Why do you think that Michael writes in a post-modern narrative style? Does this make the book clearer or more confusing?

Describe Michael's portrait of Lalla, his grandmother. What is she like? What does Michael think of her? How does she fit into the story?

Describe Michael's portrait of Doris, his mother. What is she like? What does Michael think of her? How does she fit into the story?

Why does Michael include short chapters that are brief descriptions of memories or scenes? What do they add to the book? Pick three such chapters and discuss them accordingly.

Describe Michael's portrait of Mervyn, his father. What is he like? What does Michael think of him? How does he fit into the story?

Why is Mervyn's story tragic? Mention more than just his alcoholism in your answer. And why does Michael lament his relationship with his father most?

What features of Mervyn and Doris brought them together? What forced them apart?