

Running in the Family, by Michael Ondaatje, McClelland and Stewart, 1982, 207 pages, \$16.95 cloth.

Michael Ondaatje somehow manages to produce near-flawless books. Each of his major works, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *Coming Through Slaughter*, *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do: Poems 1962-1978*, and now *Running in the Family* have been carefully compacted and brilliantly presented. They re-define the limits of what can be done with words, while exploring the truth of fiction and the fictive possibilities of autobiography. Ondaatje himself is never very far from the speaker's voice in his books and in *Running in the Family* we see more of the "real" Ondaatje than we have ever seen before. From the chapter "Don't Talk to Me About Matisse," here is his voice:

I still believe the most beautiful alphabet was created by the Sinhalese. The insect of ink curves into a shape that is almost sickle, spoon, eyelid. The letters are washed blunt grass which betray no jaggedness. Sanskrit was governed by verticles, but its sharp grid features were not possible in Ceylon. Here the Ola leaves which people wrote on were too brittle. A straight line would cut apart the leaf and so a curling alphabet was derived from its Indian cousin. Moon coconut. The bones of a lover's spine.

Throughout the book (I'm still not sure whether it's poetry or prose and the distinction seems to matter less and less) one can smell cinnamon and saffron; there is a hot, baking sun and the bursting of monsoon clouds. There is also geneology, myth, history, laughter, sadness and a multitude of facts which become elaborate lies after a few new tellings. And there are maps, all sorts of maps:

On my brother's wall in Toronto are the false maps. Old portraits of Ceylon. The result of sightings, glances from trading vessels, the theories of sextant. The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations—by Ptolemy, Mercator, François Valentyn, Mortier, and Heydt—growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy. Amoeba, then stout rectangle, and then the island as we know it now, a pendant off the ear of India. Around it, a blue-combed ocean busy with dolphin and sea-horse, cherub and compass. Ceylon floats on the Indian Ocean and holds its naive mountains, drawings of cassowary and boar who leap without perspective across imagined 'desertum' and plain.

Simply put, the book is a must. The problem comes in trying to explain the things that Ondaatje has done, in getting in the way of *his* words. Here is Ondaatje speaking of his Grandmother Lalla:

In her last years she was searching for the great death. She never found, looking under the leaves, the giant snake, the fang which would brush against the ankle like a whisper. A whole generation grew old or died around her. Prime Ministers fell off horses, a jellyfish slid down the throat of a famous swimmer... She carried everything she really needed with her, and a friend meeting her once at a train station was appalled to be given as a gift a huge fish that Lalla had carried doubled up in her handbag.