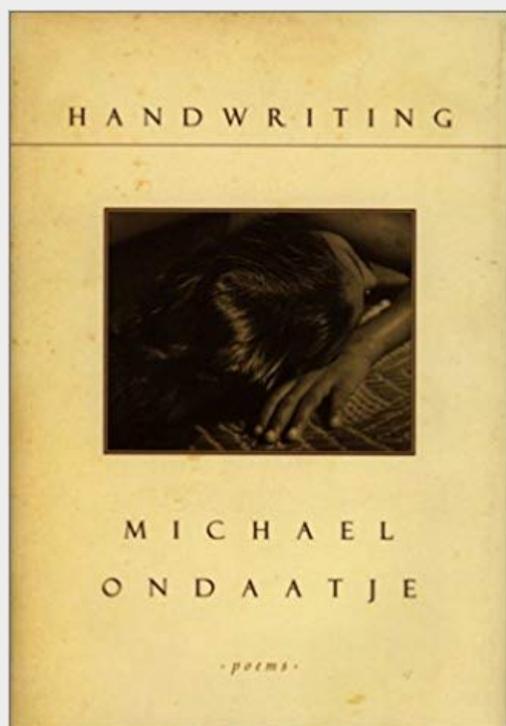


HANDWRITING *by* Michael Ondaatje



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Reviews of the **HANDWRITING** *by* Michael Ondaatje

1. Rrd

Michael Ondaatje walks with you into his Sri Lanka where the richness there inspires the lush lingering prose that issues from his pen.

In "THE SIYABASLAKARA" he begins....

"In the 10th century, the young princess
entered a rock pool like the moon

with a blue cloud

Her sisters
who dove, lit by flares,
were lightning

Water and erotics

The path from king to rainmaking".....

It is indeed a rich and luminous landscape that he portrays.

Follow him there!

This captivating, powerful little book will both delight and seduce at the
same time!

2. Vispel

Ondaatje did a fabulous job with this collection of poems. It was the first
of his that I ever read, and I was amazed. (I'm still amazed two weeks
after I finished it.) Ondaatje has a style all his own, and I love it! The
poetic language that seemed so pretentious to me in *The English Patient*
held me spellbound.

I'm hooked.

3. krot

Michael Ondaatje is a major poet. There are no two words about it. He
brings his poetic vision and unique signature of lyricism again to words

with his latest collection of poems, 'Handwriting'. This is Ondaatje's latest book of poetry since *The Cinnamon Peeler* published in 1991.

'Handwriting' contains a collection of well-crafted poems reminding us that Ondaatje is undoubtedly among one of the best living poets today. Most of the poems of this excellent anthology are set in Sri Lanka. Some images and references crafted by Ondaatje come from Sri Lanka where he has ancestral roots. Similar to his classic novel, 'Anil's Ghost' Ondaatje demonstrates his intimate knowledge of the history, art, friends and recent events of Sri Lanka in this collection of poems.

For me, there is also a very personal appeal to the poems in this collection. As a person who grew up in Sri Lanka, I am familiar with places and historical references he brings into his works in 'Handwriting'. However, anyone without any knowledge of Sri Lanka could also understand and appreciate Ondaatje's poems as they have a universal appeal despite the fact he leaves the reader with place or location names such as Galapitigala Road, Mahaweli and Kataragama etc. Even when Ondaatje writes on specific locations or on historical facts he writes about life, love, war and death which has a universal appeal to any reader whether they have an understanding of locations, place names or historical nuances appearing here. Even if you don't have a personal knowledge of Sri Lanka's history or its culture you can still appreciate Ondaatje's poems.

Ondaatje is indeed very different to ancient poets of Sri Lanka who "wrote ... on rock and leaf / to celebrate the work of the day, / the shadow pleasures of the night." But we can still read and appreciate these ancient poems centuries after they were written "on rock and leaf". In 'Handwriting', Ondaatje achieves a similar goal; he shares his poetic gift with us like donating a precious gem that we can keep and appreciate as long as we live and pass on to the readers of next generation.

4. Anarius

If there is a central image in these three sequences of poems it is one of burial, unearthing and renewal - of statues of the Buddha, of water, of emotions, memories, a life that counts. Ondaatje starts us on this road of memories from his childhood home of Sri Lanka with a series of historical anecdotes and detail, a different place where "We believed in the intimate life, an inner self" and "3am in temples, the hour of washing the gods" led to a God being dragged from temples "by one's own priests" to be buried while wars, treasure hunters and fifty year feuds went by, so that "roots/like the fingers of a blind monk/spread for two hundred years over

his face."

In the third and most anecdotally direct, least oblique sequence the image of the dug up Buddha reappears transformed:

"In the sunless forest/of Ritagala...nine soldiers on leave/strip uniforms off/and dig a well.../In the sunless forest/crouched by a forest well/pulling what was lost out of the depth." And immediately before that anecdote, in one of the achingly simple lyrics that litter this thatch of stories and semi-parables, Ondaatje tells of "the last Sinhala word" which he lost, "the word for water" and the wet nurse "a lost almost-mother in those years/of thirsty love" who he has no photograph of, has not seen since age eleven, whose grave he can find no trace of. He now wonders who abandoned who.

Now and then the concerns of a writer surface and you realise these are the meditations of a writer returning to buried wounds and springs to be renewed: the poets who "slept, famous, in palace courtyards/then hid within forests when they were hunted/..and were killed and made more famous." Or in the second sequence "The Nine Sentiments", which corresponds to the nine sentiments of Indian love poetry (romantic/erotic, humorous, pathetic, angry, heroic, fearful, disgustful, amazed and peaceful - as I'm sure you knew) there comes this very modern, writerly unease: "Where is the forest/not cut down/for profit or literature.." and lines later "Where is there a room/without the damn god of love?" These poems are of the haunted and of the haunting, of what you cannot escape from and when Ondaatje uses techniques of Indian poetry, even language and references you do not as a Westerner quite own, such is the sensual certainty of his grasp that you take them on faith. He will talk of what you do not know and then of "gold ragas of longing/like lit sequin/on her shifting green dress". The notes at the back did not explain what a "raga" was but, frankly, I don't need to know. I will fall under Ondaatje's daze as he recalls what was lost in his own half dreaming sleep.

Where the poems take longest to work their magic is in the opening, where you do not have a framework of emotions to connect all these anecdotes to and the details may seem merely colourful. As the book progresses he unpacks before you both the good and the bad memories, the pains of history and personal loss and the quick, effortless watercolours capturing exotic scenes like some British traveller of the last century or the one before - of "women of the Boralesgamuwa" singing "songs to celebrate the washing/of arms and bangles...the three folds on their stomachs/considered a sign of beauty" on afternoons when they "try out all their ankle bracelets". And in some pure love lyrics his style becomes that of the imitated so there is no more than a hair's breadth between him and the model, not a crack to see light through between him and the heights of say Arthur Waley's classic Chinese poetry translations in lines like: "her fearless heart/light as a barn owl/against him all night."

A central poem of the first section starts simply with the line: "What we lost." This he continues to catalogue in some detail as a whole way of life, of civilisation and love and ways of loving "burned or traded for power and wealth". In the closing poem "Last Ink" Ondaatje closes in on what remains:

"the dusk light, the cloud pattern,
recorded always in your heart
and the rest of the world - chaos,
circling your winter boat."

The rest, he concludes, is only love. And momentary, sought out opportunities for leaps and bowing, in the darkness.

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