



## Michael Ondaatje (1943–)

Michael Ondaatje is a contemporary poet and novelist whose experimental postmodern fiction has often been read through the theoretical framework of post-colonialism. He was born in Sri Lanka, but educated in England from the age of 11 after his parents' divorce. Later, as an adult, Ondaatje moved to Canada where he works as an academic and writer.

### The title

Anil Tissera, the protagonist, is drawn back to her native country, Sri Lanka, as she is haunted by her ethnic origins. When she is there, she feels like a foreigner. She speaks a little Sinhalese, but during the times when she feels socially isolated, she comforts herself by thinking about old friends and remembering sentences from classic European novels such as *The Man in the Iron Mask* and *Les Miserables*. She leaves Sri Lanka after conducting a futile investigation into a mysterious death that occurs during a turbulent period in Sri Lankan history: the civil war (1983–present).

### The story of the investigation

Ondaatje engages with the convention of a detective dominated investigation and subverts it by giving the main detective protagonist a local assistant, and then fragmenting the protagonist's perspective through foregrounding the point of view of three main local characters.

### Detective paradigm

Anil is a forensic anthropologist sent to Sri Lanka on a human rights investigation as a representative of the United Nations. She is a character struggling with her Sri Lankan past, fragmented sense of self and the uncertain present.

Anil rejects her history, for example her swimming success, saying that a lot of blood has flowed under the bridge since then. She longs to ride a *bajaj* and to drink toddy. Through the character of Anil, Ondaatje may be seen to explore elements of his own childhood in Sri Lanka, as well as illuminate aspects of Sri Lankan culture. Using a series of flashbacks, we learn how Anil fought to acquire her name. Later, she searches for her nanny among the Sri Lankan people and speaks tenderly about her.

While in Sri Lanka, Anil is employed by the Sri Lankan government to conduct an investigation into the death of Sailor, by examining his skeletal remains. Facts, not hunches or speculation, are sought. The reader is given details of forensic methods of