

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 investigation, such as soil analysis techniques, which are used to trace the pupae-encagle glue of 'shout and die' *cicadas amis*. Anil is able to date and examine the bones to ascertain how the murder was committed, and when and where it took place. She learns that Sailor was beaten, shot and burnt. Through palynology tests used to identify the type

of pollen that had fused to the bone, she is able to locate the area where he was killed. She can also piece together the last moments of Sailor's life by examining wounds on his bones.

Although Anil uses advanced forensic techniques, she is not presented solely as a clinical investigator. At the beginning of the book, we see that she empathises with the victims from an earlier investigation into the deaths of a woman's husband and a son. An anecdote about Anil's affair with a married man, Cullis, further develops our understanding of her.

Western methods of forensic investigation are supported by local knowledge which is provided to Anil by Sareth Diyasena, an assistant archaeologist who is assigned to her by the government. Sareth is often anxious about his political comments being tape-recorded. Anil's fear of approaching the corpse is shown by the way that she whispers while at the walkway. Even students examining the corpse seem nervous. The constant sense of danger Anil and Sareth feel as investigators mirrors the constant state of emergency in which the Sri Lankan population live.

If the murder investigation is seen as a microcosm, Anil is representative of the global, while Sareth is representative of the local. The dynamic relationship between them enables the author to raise questions about the nature of justice and truth. Anil may be seen to hold a Western liberal perspective. She staunchly believes that the circumstances of the individual's death should be laid bare, and that by exposing the murderer justice will eventuate.

In principle, Sareth believes that the truth should be uncovered, despite saying, 'Most of the time in our world, truth is just an opinion'. He holds that exposing the truth during a crisis is as dangerous as a 'flame against a lake of petrol', a belief later illustrated by his own painful death. Ondaatje may be seen to criticise corrupt Sri Lankan institutions: 'every political opinion supported its own army' and 'sometimes law is on the side of power not truth'. Anil is unsettled by the disrespect shown for truth in Sri Lanka and the way that in everyday reality 'Truth bounced between gossip and vengeance'. As the novel progresses, Anil abandons her obsession with the investigation and identifies with Sri Lanka in crisis.