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COVER DETAILS

The Glyde River, Arnhem Land
Photo credit: Djon Mundine

FRONT:

David Malangi, Glyde River mouth, bark painting
Courtesy Bulabula Arts

BACK:

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moments when we are required simply to shut up and listen. *True Country* does not offer itself as a *tabula rasa*, waiting to be written upon by its readers. Nor does it offer itself as a preconstituted structure of foreign meanings which reviewers must explore, and readers journey through like tourists consuming some exotic literary commodity. As well as providing occasion to consider the forces—economic, political, ideological, and institutional—that affect the position of Aboriginal literature in mainstream culture today, *True Country* suggests that for non-Aboriginal readers of Aboriginal writing, the danger may well be that,

You might see your shadow falling upon this page. And maybe that's all you'll ever see and understand....

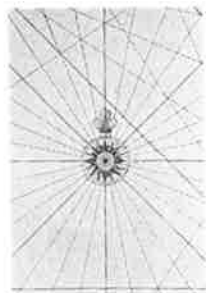
You listen to me. (13)

NOTES

- 1 Kim Scott, letter to Penny van Toorn, 4 August, 1994.
- 2 Kim Scott, letter to Penny van Toorn, 4 August, 1994.
- 3 Kim Scott, letter to Penny van Toorn, 4 August, 1994.
- 4 See, for example, Mudrooroo (1985) and van Toorn (1990).

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GERRY TURCOTTE "THE GERM OF DOCUMENT": AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL ONDAATJE*

Michael Ondaatje is a lecturer in English Literature, at York University in Toronto; he is an anthologist and critic, but he is chiefly known for his major books of poetry, including The Collected Works of Billy the Kid and There's a Trick With a Knife that I'm Learning to Do, both of which have won the Canadian Governor General's Award. Since 1976 he has been making his mark as a novelist. His novels include Coming Through Slaughter about the legendary jazz cornetist Buddy Bolden, and two not unrelated novels, In The Skin of a Lion and the recent Booker Prize co-winner The English Patient.

Gerry Turcotte: Could I begin by asking you about a project of yours which goes back more than twenty years. It's very possibly one of your first involvements with Australia. I'm referring to a long poem entitled *the man with seven toes*, which deals with the Eliza Fraser story. I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about how you came to work on that topic?

Michael Ondaatje: Well that was quite by accident. When I was at university I had seen some paintings by Sidney Nolan called, "The Convict and the Lady" or something like that, and this was a story about Bracefell and Mrs Fraser. *The man with seven toes* is a book I don't really like very much any more but I began this long poem or this sequence of poems about this convict and Mrs Fraser and in fact I did a lot of research on the whole convict situation in Australia. I had a whole prose document, or section to that poem, which I left out at the end. It

was my first attempt at writing a long poem and it was obviously, for me, more of a mental landscape than a real one because I had never been to Australia (as one can probably tell by reading that poem). And it didn't work for me although it was published and you know I have sort of kept it hidden in the closet.

GT: Did you follow the subsequent versions of the Mrs Fraser story written by people like Patrick White or André Brink?

MO: No. I haven't read either one. In fact, I didn't realise André Brink had written a version.

GT: It's called *An Instant in the Wind* where he has transposed the entire episode to South Africa.

MO: No I haven't read that. I think there was a film with Susannah York too wasn't there?

GT: There is a dreadful one directed by Tim Burstall with a screenplay by David Williamson. It was the cause of a rift between writer and producer.

It's often been said that your work is incredibly poetic and indeed, despite your novel *Coming Through Slaughter* and the non-fictional *Running in the Family*, you're on record as saying that *In the Skin of a Lion* is really your first novel, a comment which I think got you into trouble in Canada if I'm not mistaken. Can I ask firstly why you got into trouble for saying this and secondly whether you feel inhibited at all by the differences between poetry and prose? Do you really think that they ought to be kept apart?

MO: When I said that about *In the Skin of a Lion* I'd already won the first novel award for *Coming Through Slaughter*. So it seemed rather brutal to say five years later that I was writing my first novel.

GT: They thought you were trying to win the prize again.

MO: Yeah, I said the same thing with *The English Patient* actually. But, no, I think *Coming Through Slaughter* is my first novel.

The other part of the question about prose and the poetry is more complicated. I'm not really quite sure why or how I slipped from poetry into prose but it sort of happened gradually. I mean, it happened first with *Billy the Kid* in the sense that it was during the writing of that book that I needed to write prose to get the poem out of doors essentially. To take or to move out from the lyric into something with a



larger scope. And I remember when I started on the prose of that book after about a year of writing the poems, it felt very freeing and it felt quite exciting. There wasn't much rewriting of the prose in that book. And it was the poems that were re-written and re-written and it became very tight and that kind of contrast I think was quite good for the book.

GT: At the time of *Coming Through Slaughter*, how did you see it as not being a novel?

MO: No, I think it's a novel.... I mean, I'm not quite sure what these labels mean any more, you know? I think there is just as much fiction in *Running in the Family* as there is in *Coming Through Slaughter*. In a way, both those books were sort of based on historical figures, one being a semi-well-known figure like Buddy Bolden and *Running in the Family* being about my father. But all my books have begun with kind of the germ of document, with the rumour or incident that one reads about in the newspaper, or some paragraph in a biography. You become obsessed with that small paragraph and then that becomes something you take back, like yoghurt, and put in the closet and then it will grow.

GT: I was planning to ask you about what seems to be an obsession on your part with the documentary. In fact, you've worked as a documentary film-maker? How does this sit with your even greater obsession with blurring and deliberately troubling that line between fiction and fact?

MO: Well, I'm not intentionally blurring anything. I suppose I don't really like someone to ask me, "Is that scene true or not?" Like, "Did the nun fall off the bridge", and this kind of line.

GT: Well, did she?

MO: I can't remember now. (Laughter) I guess I don't want to say it because I think that it doesn't do any good to the story to know the truth or not. So, in that sense, the novel becomes a kind of performance and it's like saying, "How did you get that guy to walk on one leg across the stage covered with broken glass?" If you explain it then it becomes a technical thing as opposed to part of the magic quality.

But, certainly I have done documentary films and I don't think that's really related to my use of document and fiction because I think that is a very different kind of thing. But what documentary film taught me, I think, was how to edit. I edit a documentary film the same way I edit books. I'm not quite sure which came first. I think that that method of

writing for three or four years or filming for three or four months and then collecting all the pieces, and then you have to make a shape out of it that is the right organic shape for that book or the film.... I think there is a close connection between the way I work in prose and the way I have worked in documentary film.

GT: I think it's fair to say that the final shape that you arrive at is usually fairly complicated as in *In the Skin of a Lion*, and again with *The English Patient*. You experiment considerably either with point of view or with shifts in time and place. And you make great demands on your readers. Do you consider yourself a risk-taker in this area and do you have any sympathy for the reader who might say, "Look, I don't know where you are going any more", other than to say, "Well, nick off and read something easier".

MO: (Laughter) No. I respect the reader a great deal, because I am a poet and because I wrote poetry and write poetry where the relationship between reader and writer is pretty close. And almost at the same level that the reader is discovering and putting things together the way that the writer is leaving those clues behind; and I think that is how I see what prose writing can be as well. So I don't see myself as taking risks in a way. I don't for instance believe that I am an experimental writer and I don't want to be called an experimental writer in the sense that it means I am trying to be difficult. You know, I'm not trying to be difficult, I'm just trying to make the story fall on the page the way it should and that would make it the most powerful. So whether you could make it more powerful by moving the story backwards or for instance in *The English Patient* retelling the story again and going further so the patient's story moves from the first to the end of his story where he crashes to what happens before that.

GT: Even a shift in identity in fact.

MO: Yes! Here is this guy who won't even call himself Almàsy, if he *is* Almàsy. He talks about himself in the third person. All those things are carefully shaped and made and placed by me, in the way that a detective thriller is shaped and made and placed. So that it is not perverse, but it is there to make the story as haunting as possible and for the end to be as suggestive as possible.

GT: One of the greatest risks that you take of course is in bringing three of your characters from *In the Skin of a Lion* and placing them in *The English Patient* and in fact not really re-contextualising them all

that much. Which, as I say, is a move that has certain risks. One Australian reviewer, for example, clearly hadn't read the earlier book and criticised *The English Patient* for vagueness. Were you conscious of this dilemma before you set off or even at the editing stage?

MO: I was very conscious of it. I mean, it worried me a great deal. I didn't know I was going to do this in this book. In fact, it wasn't until I was already into the novel that I realised that Hana was the nurse.

One of the things I did was to try and make the nurse anonymous. She is not named in the first section of the story, so that the reader can get close to that character without being given the label. You know, if I said, "Oh this is Hana", they may have stopped interpreting her as a new person. So that was one way I thought I could solve that problem—by not immediately naming her. And she's a wild child at the beginning of the story anyway; she is kind of nameless and it doesn't matter who she is exactly.

But it was a problem and I didn't know what to do about it and I had to go back and forth. How much do I say about the past? You know, I was dying for those books like *The Saint Goes to Miami* where there will be a reference to some character and an asterix and at the bottom of the page which reads, "See *The Saint Goes to Miami* for the adventures of Lord So and So", that kind of thing. I love those old books which could do that but I didn't want to do it. Not in 1992.

One of the things I really wanted for this book, actually, was to have a page of illustrations in the book and have those old-fashioned kind of drawings for the novel. I think it would have fitted in very well.

GT: And you had to settle for one drawing.

MO: Yeah, my drawing, which I just knocked off quickly. I thought later on I'd do the drawing properly. But when I came to do it they said, "No. No, this is so bad, it's right". (Laughter)

GT: Did maintaining a connection with Canada have any role in bringing these characters into the novel? Was that any part of the process at all?

MO: It wasn't done for any nationalistic reason or anything like that. I like the fact that people from the earlier book were in some way represented in this book because there seemed to be a huge leap in a way from a kind of more hopeful era which was there before the war too at the time. Which has devastated these characters. So in that sense to see how the kind of hopefulness at the end of *In the Skin of a Lion* ... which

has been absent in this book. ... I think in that sense it helped to bring those two characters into this book.

GT: All of your novels deal with characters who are on the edges of power or on the edges of society, outlaws of one sort or another—Billy the Kid, Buddy Bolden, Mervyn Ondaatje—the artist figure who is unappreciated, or in the case of the later novels you have the so-called migrants of a community which of course means the ones who just don't have social or economic power. How consciously do you set about to deal with these sorts of issues? Do you sit down and say, "O.K., now I'm going to expose the injustices of white imperialism", or do these themes manifest themselves as you go.

MO: Those themes really come up pretty well near the end of the book. I sort of realise that. I remember when I finished *In the Skin of a Lion* I gave it to a friend and he said, "Oh this a book about immigrants", and I said, "No it's not", and I looked at him and I realised that everyone was practically an immigrant in this book. So I was sort of surprised by that. Now, of course, I talk about it as an immigrant novel. (Laughter) So, no, those themes are the sort of things that just emerge. I mean, I'm not very interested in them when I'm starting a book. The last thing I'm worrying about is the theme or message. I don't even know what the story is. I'm worried about the story, I'm worried about who is going to be in the book, who are the characters and how you build a character bit by bit? You just know nothing about the people at the beginning of the story and what is going to happen. So that is the preoccupation. It is a very realistic, ear to the ground, kind of writing in the sense that you're trying to find something which wasn't there before and building small atoms, and putting them together.

GT: Do you find that because your prose is very "poetic"—and because you lean towards a denseness of imagery and so forth—that this occasionally results in characters who are sometimes overly diffuse or shadowy. Patrick, for example, never really becomes an individual in some ways—he is somewhat of a cypher, someone that people work through.

MO: I sort of wanted that quality. I didn't set out to do that, but when I was half way through the novel I realised that that was the nature of Patrick—and it was the nature of some people I knew in Canada. You know, certain individuals who are watchers, people who are not major participants. People who would kill themselves before they would read

an Ernest Hemingway novel. I like that sense of a central character who is taught by the people around him as opposed to one who goes around brandishing an axe and trying to change the world. And there haven't been too many characters like that for me in fiction. So once I realised that quality was there in Patrick, I went with it. He is an unmade person—he is an unfinished man in a way—and he is only finished by coming into contact with much stronger people.

GT: That's an interesting observation because I seem to remember you also saying that in your eyes, Patrick was almost a quintessential Canadian figure.

MO: Yes, I think he is. There are about three or four people whose certain qualities I kind of merged, and that person became Patrick. I mean, I like him a lot—I'm very fond of Patrick.

GT: Are Canadians watcher figures? Are they people who are acted upon?

MO: I think that quality of watching is very common in Canada. We are always watching what is happening across the border, for example.

GT: Since we've strayed into the area of nationalism or nationality let me ask you this. A few years ago Bharati Mukherjee complained about Canada before she left and became an American citizen. She criticised Canada very heavily for being a racist nation generally and more specifically towards Asian peoples. Do you agree with such ideas—do you share this perception of Canada.

MO: I'm sure you know that all you need to do is be in some way witness to a racist act, either against yourself or your children, at least once or even twice, either on a subway or at home, for example, which I think happened to her, and you're never going to forget that. It doesn't have to happen more than once really. I think what I disagree about in terms of what Bharati was saying is that the alternative is America. She saw it as the land of no racism and total hope which stunned me.

GT: It's extraordinary, the country which celebrates the erasure of identity through the Melting Pot philosophy....

MO: Exactly. I think that is where I disagree with her. I'm sure that there is racism, but I just couldn't put Canada next to the United States with the latter as a kind of role model—that is something which is a bit ridiculous.

GT: I really have to ask you about this prize that you have just won. The Booker, as it's known. But I'm going to ask you about it with a sort of slant to the question. For someone who is resoundingly critical of imperial legacies and so forth....

MO: (Laughter)

GT: ...And even the value of awards.... It is clear that you're very pleased about this award. Has this put you in a sticky position, say, politically?

MO: Politically! No, it hasn't. I mean, in some odd way I don't know if I'm ignoring it or not. I did hear from a friend that John Berger said, "They should never have given him that rotten award". (Laughter) Of course, when he got it he turned it down with huge anger. The thing with the Booker is, on one level it is ridiculous to try and pick one book out of five or six—of course this time they picked two. But I don't really see it as a symbolic thing, quite honestly. One can take it with a certain sense of irony because, you know, a lot of luck comes into it. Who the jury is, what the books are in the year. So that's the way I see it.

GT: This is probably a peculiar question but do you think *The English Patient* is the book of yours which should have won?

MO: Well, I don't know....

GT: If you had the choice....

MO: If I had a choice. (Laughter) Well, I think any of the books from *Coming Through Slaughter* onwards. I guess any of the three novels.

GT: You would have suffered the award.

MO: Any of my "first" novels. (Laughter)

GT: Last year I interviewed Phyllis Webb and one of the points that she focused on was how important the Canadian Literary community was to her, despite the fact that she is also a very solitary figure. Is this the same for you? Are you very conscious of this supportive network?

MO: Yes, I think so. In fact, going back to the Booker thing, what was nice about winning was not just that I won it for me but I took it as recognition of that community. The reaction from that community was

great and I talked about that in my brief speech. It is very important to me. It was there when I first came to Canada in the early '60s and you know it was that community that I think made me a writer and made me a certain *kind* of writer.

It was a community that was based on the small presses and the small presses which allowed you to discover whatever talent you had quite privately because you knew you would never get reviewed, or that you would get reviewed about six months down the line and you know there would be eighteen other books reviewed at the same time so you'd get two lines. "A promising first novel or first book by...."

What was good about that was that I had about ten or fifteen years to go my own way without being influenced by a public, which may have happened to Jay McInerney who gets suddenly thrown into the limelight at the age of four or something like that. (Laughter) So I was very lucky. I think that saved me. By the time the novels came out I knew what I wanted to do and knew how I wanted to write. It wasn't governed by fashion perhaps.

GT: One of the things we were talking about earlier, was this (not necessarily unique) Australian phenomenon called *The Tall Poppy Syndrome*. Have you found any similar syndrome in Canada, where once you hit a certain rank you are treated with disdain or cynicism.

MO: I think it is probably very similar in Canada. Maybe it's not. I don't really know what it is like here. I think Atwood went through all of that and I think that when *In the Skin of a Lion* came out in Canada initially, the first three reviews were all terrible attacks. I didn't quite know why—if it was the book or if it was me.

GT: I wonder if I can ask you by way of ending the interview, what's next in the Ondaatje Pantheon. What's coming along?

MO: I have no idea what's next. I don't have a clue. It usually takes me a while. I have to start all over again—find a pencil somewhere. I really don't have any idea. I don't know what I'm going to do. It takes me about six months or so to kind of crawl away from the last book.

GT: Perhaps it's appropriate to end on that note of indeterminacy.

*This interview was broadcast on ABC Radio and is reprinted here with permission of the producer of "Books and Writing", Robert Dessaix, and the Australian Broadcasting Commission. See also a review of *The English Patient* in the Reviews section.