

The English Patient
By Michael Ondaatje
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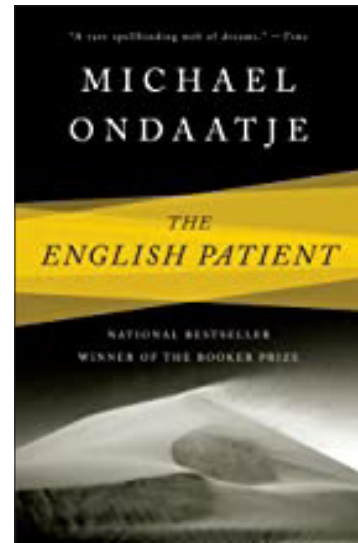
**The English Patient by Michael Ondaatje:
Love in the Desert.**

Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* was declared the Golden Man Booker winner, a special one-off award to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Booker Foundation in 2018. It was chosen as the best work of fiction from the last five decades of the Man Booker Prize by five judges and then voted for by the public. It has been translated into 40 languages and sold more than one million copies and turned into an Oscar winning film.

It is an absorbing story of endurance, suffering, loss and love against the background of odds and challenging circumstances of vast stretches of desert and destruction. Hana, a twenty-year-old Canadian nurse quietly tends an English patient, completely burnt in an air crash. She washes his charred body, bandages his festering wounds, gives him shots of morphine and feeds him and reads to him from books from the library of the villa. and the book the patient carried with him even when he was burnt – *The Histories* by Herodotus.

The nurse and the patient were sheltered in a villa, Villa San Girolamo, a nunnery occupied by German soldiers and then turned into a makeshift hospital. When the war shifts to North, the staff of the hospital too shifts but Hana stays behind with the English Patient. When not attending her patient, she tends a garden to grow vegetables Caravaggio, a Canadian thief, working for the Germans and caught by the English and maimed for life, seeks out Hana, the daughter of his friend at the villa. Soon one more person joins them- Kirpal Singh, a Sikh youth from the Punjab, a sapper detailed to unearth the hidden bombs in and around the villa Caravaggio reminds Hana of her childhood days, tells her how her father died in war on a dove-cot and suspects that the English Patient is not English. Kirpal Singh, Kip as he is called by his colleagues, sets out on his job in the morning and returns late in the evening smudged with mud and dirt. He sleeps in the open on pallets by the feet of mutilated statues. Hana watches him from her window and sympathises with him for the risks he goes through. They get close to each other when Kip gets in a tight spot while defusing a large 'Satan' bomb with a new device. Hana rushes to his help. It was a most dangerous job and a slight mistake could have cost them their lives. But they carry it out most courageously and owe their lives to each other. That night Hana stays in Kip's tent and both become lovers.

Caravaggio, in his curiosity to unearth the true identity of the English Patient, gives extra doses of morphine to him to make him talk. What



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comes out is a heady love story. The English Patient was an explorer and historian of deserts and was on an expedition of a desert in Libya along with Madox and other friends. They needed a plane to move to another desert and contact their friend Geoffrey Clifton, who gets married to Katharine and joins them. The English Patient and Katharine meet Off and on and there is crystallization of love between them.

Notwithstanding the moral hassles they are swept off their feet by their love for each other. This does not go unnoticed by Clifton. He plans to do away with the lovers but his plane crashes when he was trying to crush the English Patient. He dies and Katharine is badly wounded and burnt. The English Patient pulls her out of the plane and takes her to the nearby cave of pictures. He leaves her there and looks for help and is suspected of being a spy and taken prisoner.

When at last, he is released, he visits the cave and finds Katherine lying inert. Soon he unearths a buried plane in the desert and takes Katherine along with him to get out of the desert. Unfortunately, their plane too crashes and Katharine dies but the English Patient is saved though hideously burnt. Caravaggio in his curiosity wanted to know the true identity of the patient. He gives him extra doses of morphine and makes him talk. Though the English Patient reveals his story he doesn't reveal his identity. Caravaggio comes to the conclusion that he was a Hungarian called Count Ladislaus Almásy.

However, this does not make any difference to Hana. Hana truly cares for the Sikh youth and enjoys his company whenever he is not defusing bombs. Everything seems to settle to a peaceful resolution despite the dangerous and unpleasant tasks they are called upon to do. They are unmindful of the bare, minimal, stoic lives they lead. When the lives of the four seem to fall into a pattern, the novel veers round its end which seems to reject all that has gone before.

The radio blares out that America had dropped nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The news unsettles the Sikh youth and he undergoes a complete change of mind. He realizes that he was risking his life to save lives and here millions of lives have been wiped out without any concern for innocent human beings. He is seized by nausea. He remembers what his older brother told him when he enlisted for the British army. He said, "Never turn your back on Europe. The dealmakers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans. Never shake hands with them. But he was taken in by the speeches and medals, and their ceremonies and gave his life to diffusing limbs of evil. He wonders why he did so if this were to happen. He is filled with disgust for his surroundings. He even aims his rifle at the English Patient but Caravaggio says, "He is not English and he is on your side." Kip in his rage says, "American, French, I don't care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you are an English man. You had King Leopold of Belgium and now you have fucking Harry Truman of U.S.A. You all learned it from the English." He takes his bike and heads South without so much as a word with Hana except a gentle touch on her arm. However, Hana cannot cast him away as he did her. She sees him everywhere. Though he moves away from Hana, he remains deeply embedded in her being.

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This sudden development rattles the reader. One wonders what has Hana to do with the bombing. Why should she be rejected straight away? Didn't he owe his life to her pluck and selflessness?

However, there could have been no better ending for the novel. All serious love stories end either in death or separation. It gives them the necessary piquancy. The two love stories in the novel acquire a balance, poise and depth and enrich the sufferers with deep memories.

Physical love is transformed into spiritual love mortality and separability is transformed into immortality and inseparability

Ondaatje has been praised for his elegant prose. However, in a review published in *London Review of Books*, a reviewer raises doubts about Ondaatje's use of figures of speech. He takes exception to Ondaatje's description of "penis sleeping like a seahorse." on the very first page. While reading a novel, one need not be so literal. The same reviewer is also piqued by publisher's report that Ondaatje took eight years to finish the novel suggesting the author's toil in chiselling his style like Flaubert and wonders whether Flaubert would have written a phrase "turn eternal in a prayer", or, "there was a thread, a breath of death in her? "It is looking like a gift horse in the mouth.

The fact is that the heroic qualities of endurance, suffering, loss and unconquerable spirit in the most hostile circumstances and depressing atmosphere shine through the novel. Meticulously researched and full of kinaesthetic vitality, *The English Patient* is a deeply satisfying experience as one goes along its spread of life's intrigues and intricacies.