SRI LANKAN SKELETONS

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Even when writing of corruption, death and decay, Michael Ondaatje's prose is the very opposite of unsavoury. "He loosened a new tungsten carbide needle from its plastic container and attached it to a hand pick and began cleaning the bones of the first skeleton, drilling free the fragments of dirt. Then he turned on a slim hose and let it hover over each bone, air nestling into the evidence of the trauma as if he were blowing cool breath from a pursed mouth onto a child's burn." The refinement of Ondaatje's expression acts as a balm on his subject, nestling into the evidence of its trauma. He has away with hurt bodies, hurt minds, with what is fragile. The professions of archaeology, medicine and pathology with which his new novel concerns itself exert for him, one senses, a real occupational attraction.

The key to *Anil's Ghost* lies near its end, in a conversation about western culture's relationship with war. "American movies, English books–remember how they all end? The American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. Thats it. The camera leaves with him. He looks out of the window at Mombasa or Vietnam or Jakarta, someplace now he can look at through the clouds. The tired hero. A couple of words to the girl beside him. He's going home, So the war, to all purposes, is over. That's enough reality for the west. It's probably the history of the last two hundred years of western political writing. Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit."

The question is of whether Ondaatje's novel of war-torn Sri Lanka entirely evades this prescription; or rather, of what demands could reasonably be made of its subtlety when its central character is a Sri Lankan-born American women who has been sent to the country by the UN for a matter of weeks. Anil does, indeed, fly out at the novel's end, leaving the mess of it behind her. We, too, are left behind, having been spared the irony of seeing her go, with only the "ghost" of the title for company and its suggestion that Anil will continue to haunt, and be haunted by, what the novel has described.

Anil is a pathologist who lives, in the modern American sense, for her work. Her loves and leisure are patchy and part-time. Her sense of identity is riven by familial separation and cultural difference. Her return to Sri Lanka has all the hallmarks of "personal quest" literature: a search for roots, memory and fulfillment. The novel sets out to confound her, and our, expectations. In Sri Lanka, she quickly finds herself among people who live and die for their work, who labor in an atmosphere of political terror, bloodshed and mortal danger. Her plans to make contact with family connections fade away. Instead, she determines, following a different but equally American narrative tradition, to expose governmental corruption by proving that a skeleton she has found in an ancient burial site is in fact that of a recent victim of a political murder. In this, too, she is confounded: naive, schooled in the redemptive mythology of the west, she condemns to suppression that which she seeks to expose. In an excruciating final scene, she is to be found asking for her confiscated notebooks and equipment to be returned. Forget your notes, she is advised, and get out of here.

Anil's story intersects with that of two Sri Lankan brothers: Sarath, an archaeologist, and Gamini, a doctor. Sarath is a martytrying to live by two books: the good book and the government book. He, to, wishes to see government brutality exposed by the discovery of the skeleton; but the mortal necessity for retaining, in doing so, the appearance of conformity undoes him. Anil fails to understand him, believing him to be some kind of double agent: he is too subtle. His brother, a man who has entirely relinquished his emotional and material life, is protected, conversely, by having nothing to hide. Gamini has the appearance of a tramp. He lives in the hospital, sleeping occasionally in the children's ward, propelling himself on speed and doing nothing but working to save the victims of torture, bombings and violence. These are different ways of living under a regime, ways of doing good, but in the end it is Gamini, with his utter selflessness, who survives. Anil, of course, fails to understand him, too.

This clever and complex novel is a study of death: death as a science, as a fact, as a threat, as an absence attended by a memory, as a presence deserted by life. As a boy, Sarath "would watch fishermen in catamarans travel out at dusk till they faded into the night just beyond a boy's vision. As if parting or death or disappearance were simply the elimination of sight in the onlooker." *Anil's Ghost* is an attempt to describe this vanishing, to apprehend both its remoteness and its immediacy, lovingly to pick over the intangibility of its remains. Ondaatje is trying here to uproot the novel and transplant it closer to something real, in order, it seems, to make us understand.

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