

A BARBAROUS COAST

Peter Kemp

Michael Ondaatje's first novel since he won the Booker prize with *The English Patient* in 1992, plunges like its predecessor into a war zone. This time, the setting isn't the bomb-battered Italy of the mid-1940s, but Sri Lanka in the early 1990s. All the horrors of an island ripped apart by civil war bespatter the pages. Human limbs and bodies shattered by bomb blasts strew the streets of Colombo. Terrorist and counter-terrorist killings clog its morgues. When not performing autopsies on mutilated torture victims, doctors working in near medieval conditions tend horribly maimed casualties of guerilla outrages. Broken corpses dropped out at sea by helicopters are washed back up on beaches where holiday-makers once basked. Babies have bullet wounds. Schoolboys' heads are impaled on stakes. Massacres, kidnappings and disappearances are rife. So anarchic is the situation that it is often unknown who is behind a barbarity—freedom fighters from the north, insurgents from the south, or undercover government agents.

Into this welter of carnage—described in a manner that is unflinching but never unfeeling—arrives Anil Tissera, a young forensics expert dispatched to the island of her (and Ondaatje's) birth by a human rights organization. Absent from Sri Lanka for 15 years, she returns to investigate the annihilation campaigns. Teamed with her is a middle-aged archaeologist, Sarath Diyasena. Almost immediately, amid the 6th century bones of a historical sight restricted to government access, they uncover a recent skeleton.

What follows is partly a gripping narrative of post-mortem detection. Anil's expertise at decoding damage enables her to reconstruct the final moments of the man whose remains she pores over. Unexpected trace elements adhering to the skeleton indicate that it was earlier buried elsewhere. Insect pupae and pollen clinging to the bones help pinpoint that location. "Marks of occupational stress" testify to the former work of this war casualty.

The intellectual excitement of this search for an identity is accompanied by suspense of another sort. Anil's intended use of this "unburial" to establish government complicity in the killings is fraught with danger. Murderous menace shrouds the island.

Amygdala, the term for the nerve-cluster in the brain that houses the emotion of fear, sounds like a Sri Lankan place-name, Anil grimly reflects. Truth, Sarath observes, can be "a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol." The physical risks the two run as the story twists towards its dark conclusion are on view in the novel's visits to Sarath's brother Gamini, a doctor close to breakdown in one of the island's abattoir-like hospitals. The ghastly butchery he daily encounters is laid bare in prose scrupulously clean of sensationalism. Like the war-traumatized nurse in *The English Patient*, he is the most sympathetic figure in the book.

As with *The English Patient*, too, *Anil's Ghost* seems notably ineffective at giving much substance to its character's psychological and emotional life. Their interactions are cursorily recorded, their pasts rather flatly sketched in. The effect sought for, perhaps, is that of individuals numbed and depersonalized by the pressures of war. But, in any case, this tenuousness of personality scarcely matters in the kind of fiction Ondaatje favours, with its preference for cinematic montage, tableaux-like scenes and striking juxtaposition of incident. Again, as in *The English Patient*, he is here especially fond of counterpointing art and atrocity, civilization and slaughter. An interlude in an ancient "forest monastery," a crumbling sanctuary hemmed in by the ravages of war, hauntingly highlights the humane refinement of Sri Lanka's distant past as opposed to the crude savageries of its present.

The last two scenes contrast the hideous mayhem wreaked by a suicide bomber in Colombo with an artist's skilful rebuilding of a broken statue of the Buddha in the remote countryside. The closing paragraphs show him—following centuries-old procedures and respectfully using a metal mirror so that he never looks directly at the Buddha—painting in the impassive eyes.

Previous to this, eyes have featured affectively elsewhere. Near the end of his tether, Gamini the doctor tries to relax by reading an English paperback novel. But, although his eyes focus on the pages, his brain gazes past the fiction to the terrible actualities of Sri Lanka. Ondaatje's distinguished and disturbing novel makes you do the same. ■

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