

Anja Snellman

The Finnish Patient

I have been smitten with *The English Patient*; that is to say, this work of literary art has rendered me a Finnish patient, a chronic one. Those close to me know that I always—and I mean *always*—carry a copy of *The English Patient* with me, in my purse, in my backpack, or rolled up in my pocket. The original version, at the very least, accompanies me on longer journeys, but in most cases I also take with me the Finnish and French translations. At home, I always have the book at hand on a desk or a nightstand or the bookshelf in the dining room, and often also on the shampoo shelf in the bathroom and the mirror shelf in the washroom by the sauna. Whenever a copy falls apart, I buy a new one; in fact, I have over twenty copies, spare copies, and spare copies of spare copies on my bookshelves. I continually add to my collection in bookstores around the world—most often, I buy secondhand, because I find used books particularly fascinating: the pages have softened and may have underlines, sidelines, exclamation marks, or stars drawn by another devout patient of whatever nationality, or food stains, tearstains, or rumpled patches from reading the book in the bath. My most recent find—a golden-covered copy that looks brand new—I made in Hania, Greece, at the excellent flea market where I had bought half a dozen copies earlier. The English owners are well aware of my habit; they stash any new copies under the counter and present them to me when I appear in Hania again.

This is some madness, admittedly—but the same applies to the book, not to mention the writer. Michael Ondaatje is a divinely gifted artist with words. A magician of language. An aficionado of sentences. He writes prose poetry, poetic prose. Dew, honey, sap. A dash of snake venom. I have read everything he has published; currently, I am on a waiting list for his latest book, *Divisadero*, which came out earlier this year. Ondaatje—who was born in Sri Lanka in 1943, went to school in England, and later moved to Canada—could this year celebrate his fortieth anniversary as an author: his first novel was published in 1967. However, in addition to the object of my addiction, only a couple of his works have been translated into Finnish, namely *In the Skin of a Lion* and *Anil's Ghost*.

The English Patient was published in 1992 and won the Booker Prize in that same year. As soon as I first heard of the book, I had to buy it; I have always been a great fan of the Sahara, and I have always loved to read stories about nomads and cartographers, explorers of winds and scents, restless heroes who defy natural phenomena as well as social transitions in their thirst for knowledge and experiences.

Many have asked me what the secret of *The English Patient* is. Hmm, is it a diagnosis

you want? The book is warm, gentle, and very wise; it breathes a joy of storytelling, a power of senses, an impressive body of knowledge, and true wisdom of the heart. Of course, if you are after a more categorical and perhaps more clinical answer, *The English Patient* is also a social novel, a war novel, and a love story. The book portrays a search for the lost oasis of Zerzura, the meaning of life, the core of being human, and great love. And more: the work is filled with passion, the Sahara, history, wadis, oases, acacia ashes. And the language!

The protagonist is a mysterious man who falls from the sky, burning, after a plane crash. Hana, a nurse who has lost her boyfriend in the war, takes care of this dying patient in a severely damaged Italian villa shortly before the end of World War II. The patient, Count Lazlo de Almásy, tells the nurse stories about his life, his love affair with Katharine Clifton, and his colleagues, researchers who pursued their lifework in the Sahara. Citing Herodotus, the patient tells the young nurse about the writing of history, the birth and destruction of cultures, desert peoples, maps, and uncharted territories. The book also tells the peripheral stories of a charming thief named David Caravaggio, a sapper named Kip Singh, and many others in the maelstrom of war.

Ondaatje's way of describing his characters is beautiful, tolerant, oblique, and I would also say inexplicable. All individuals have their lights and shadows, their mysteries, and their secrets, and everyone has a Destiny.

The English Patient has been made into a motion picture, directed by Anthony Minghella in 1996. Unusually and fortunately enough, this interpretation of the book works; Ralph Fiennes, Juliette Binoche, Kristin Scott Thomas, and Willem Dafoe are excellent in their roles. I have seen the movie dozens of times—and I tend to make our guests watch it in the early hours of the morning.

How many times have I read *The English Patient*? Two hundred? Five hundred? A thousand times? It does not matter. Each time, I discover new thoughts, new metaphors, new landscapes. Each time, I see Count Almásy, Hana, Katharine, Caravaggio, and Kip through slightly different eyes, discerning features that escaped me earlier. Each time, I sense intimations of something new.

“We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography—to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings. We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps.”

Translated by Timo Luhtanen