



# Warlight

By Michael Ondaatje

First published in 2018

## Genre and Subject

*Historical fiction*

*Abandoned Children*

*Brothers and Sisters*

*London (England)*

## Synopsis

Just after World War II, Nathaniel and his older sister Rachel stay behind in London when their parents move to Singapore, leaving them in the care of a mysterious figure named The Moth and his eccentric crew of friends. These friends are men and women joined by a shared history of unspecified service during the war, all of whom seem, in some way, determined now to protect and educate Rachel and Nathaniel. Their mother returns after months of silence-- without their father, explaining nothing. A dozen years later, Nathaniel begins to uncover all that he didn't know and understand in that time.

## Author Biography

Ondaatje was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka, then called Ceylon, in 1943; he is of Dutch, Sinhalese, and Tamil ancestry, making him a Burgher. His parents separated when he was an infant; he then lived with relatives until 1954 when he joined his mother in England. Before moving to England, he attended S. Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia in Colombo. While in England, Ondaatje pursued secondary education at Dulwich College; he then immigrated to Montreal, Quebec, in 1962. After relocating to Canada, Ondaatje studied at Bishop's University in Lennoxville, Quebec, for three years. In his final year he attended the University of Toronto where he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1965. In 1967, he received a Master of Arts from Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.

While he was working on his undergraduate degree at Bishop's University, Ondaatje's met his future mentor, the poet D.G Jones, who praised his poetic ability.

After his formal schooling, Ondaatje began teaching English at the University of Western Ontario in London. In 1971, reluctant to get his Ph.D., he left his position at Western Ontario and went on to teach English literature at Glendon College, York University.

Since the 1960s, Ondaatje has been involved with Toronto's Coach House Books, supporting the independent small press by working as a poetry editor. Ondaatje and his wife Linda Spalding, a novelist and academic, co-edit Brick, A Literary Journal, with Michael Redhill, Michael Helm, and Esta Spalding. In 1988, Ondaatje was made an Officer of the Order of Canada (OC) and two years later a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Ondaatje served as a founding member of the board of trustees of the Griffin Trust for Excellence in Poetry from 2000 to 2018.

Ondaatje has two children with his first wife, Canadian artist Kim Ondaatje.

## Discussion Starters

One of the quandaries at the heart of Michael Ondaatje's novel is reconciling Rose Williams's bravery, indeed her patriotic heroism, and her treatment of Nathaniel and Rachel. How do readers, and especially her (fictional) children, wrap their heads around this inconsistency? How are we to consider Rose?

What do you make of Moth and Darter? As Nathaniel, in the opening lines, puts it, "our parents left us in the care of two men who may have been criminals."

Consider this passage from the novel and how it might be said to sum up one of the story's central concerns: We never know more than the surface of any relationship after a certain stage, just as those layers of chalk, built from the efforts of infinitesimal creatures, work in almost limitless time.

Warlight's structure is anything but linear as it shifts back and forth in time and point of view. Is it confusing? Might the structure be a reflection of Nathaniel's own confusion: his sense of being able to see reality only dimly—as if through "warlight"?

Follow-up to Question 4: What are your thoughts on the second section of the novel with its sudden switch from to the third-person perspective? Did you find it difficult to integrate this outside voice into the overall narration?

"The lost sequence in a life, they say, is the thing we always search out," Nathaniel tells us. How has that "lost sequence" of Nathaniel's life shaped who he is? When he and Rachel discover that the reason their mother gave for leaving them was not the true reason, how did her lie make them feel? What lasting repercussions does her untruthfulness leave?

What does Nathaniel resolve within himself by the novel's end—what understanding has he come to? Or are things left unresolved for him—and for us? Is there a satisfactory resolution at the conclusion?

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