Warlight by Michael Ondaatje. London: Jonathan Cape, 2018
ISBN 9781787330719

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Sometimes you read a book and whether you are creatively inclined or not, you wish you could have written such a book because the emotions and ideas it contains are the very ones you have felt and thought about but they have remained unarticulated because they are deeply personal, confounding and, consequently, really hard to communicate. Warlight is one such book. Though the novel is located within a specific time frame and within a particular location, there is a familiarity and intimacy in the story which envelop the reader who is prompted to say to herself, “yes, I know this feeling.”

Michael Ondaatje’s latest novel, a skilfully-crafted narrative, asks questions that relate to human existence in a fundamental way: How do we make sense of who we are? Naturally, in attempting to find answers to a question of this nature, memories and the past would play a vital role. But the author goes many steps further in pursuing the themes of memory, history and identity which lie at the heart of this layered work that unravels the complexities inherent in an individual life because it is tightly bound up with other lives. People, the novel puts out repeatedly, are so magnificently different that sometimes it is a wonder how we manage to “do” this thing called life.

Ondaatje has always been one of my favourite writers, an author who constantly tells us that life is complicated, that we have to rely, wisely that is, on fact and fiction to comprehend why and where we are and how to live. Running in the Family, part memoir, part travel narrative, part fiction, remains a text I love, a light-hearted, funny yet poignant family tale which discusses identity and history in a profound way. However Ondaatje surpasses the wonderful feat of Running in the Family in Warlight, and the novel, while giving a nod to the early text, goes on to graphically demonstrate the ways in which memory and the imagination are all-important in comprehending the present. This mnemonic novel cleverly explores the different facets of memory: that of remembering and of reconstructing.

The person recalling the past and putting together a history, both factually and imaginatively, in Warlight is Nathaniel. This is post-war Britain and Nathaniel, who is the narrator, and his sister Rachel, find themselves in an extremely curious situation: “In 1945 our parents went away and left us in the care of two men who may have been criminals” (5). So begins the story of a young boy who, as he grows older, wants to, actually needs to, piece together his past which necessarily also includes learning about his errant parents. His journey to know his mother Rose is especially urgent and finds resonance with Ondaatje’s personal quest for his own father in Running in the Family. Both narratives, Running in the Family and Warlight, seem to assert that family history, especially knowledge of one’s parents, is vital to self-understanding. And this also happens to be a challenging endeavour. For Nathaniel, this endeavour is even more difficult because Rose was a spy for the British government and her history has been systematically erased.

However, Nathaniel and Rachel do not go through adolescence without any adult supervision because Rose engages a few people to watch over her children. These strangers,