



Life-Changing Literature

Susan Fletcher

EVEN NOW – TWENTY-THREE years after I first read it – no book has taken my breath away so frequently or quietly as Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*. I say ‘quietly’ because this never feels to be a loud book: it is fluid, tender, intensely poetic; its characters are tired and damaged by war. They reminisce. They grieve. It’s a novel of aftermath — about what is left.

I discovered it at university. By then, *The English Patient* had been published for over five years. It shared the Booker Prize in 1992 so I knew it was deemed special; I knew, too, that I was a reader who revelled in what it promised – lyrical language, new landscapes, passionate plots and subplots – and therefore I skirted Ondaatje’s novel warily, knowing full well that it might hurt or change me. The timing had to be right for it.

I read it in the attic room of a student house in York, with condensation on the window and damp on the walls. Yet I wasn’t there, of course: I was in Cairo or in Siwa oasis; I was looking back through cypresses at a ruined Tuscan monastery; I was standing on the white chalk horse of Westbury with Kip, a metal detector in my hand. The book transported me entirely. I would descend the stairs of the student house with Saharan sand in my hair.

But it was more than that. I couldn’t believe Ondaatje’s language. Even now I’m not sure how to describe its effect on me. I found myself looking at single, commonplace words – words I had known for years – as if



they were new and magical: words like *cattle*, *promontory*, *sombre* and *moon*. I felt swept away by Ondaatje's prose, as if by water — and yet so often I would need to climb ashore and look up from the book or set the book down in order to spend time with an expression or a character's reply because these words were too beautiful to be hurried through, too strange. It's fiction that deserves, in so many places, to be read out loud. And I remain — all these years later — in awe of the novel's structure which seems so fractured, at first, and hard to decode. But it forms a perfect, whole story about these fractured lives.

The English Patient shows me, on every page, the gorgeousness of language. It reminds me, too, of the loveliness of people — there isn't a character here that I don't love, despite their damage or mistakes. It's full, too, of painful feelings — grief, envy, loneliness, betrayal — yet it's such a luminous and deeply human book. In 2005, I travelled to Egypt because of it. I stayed at Siwa; I went into the Great Sand Sea, looked back at my own desert tracks and thought of Almasy and Madox and the Cliftons — and I marvelled, again, at what Ondaatje and his novel have shown me: this landscape, this new awareness of beauty and this longing to set that beauty down in the right words, and in the right way.