

Meeting: Jan 10, 2012 — 7:30 pm @ Leslie's

Not so much 'Blues in the Night' but more "Bewitched, bothered and bewildered - am I"

### **Bewitching**

"In a novel superbly poised between the magic of innocence and the melancholy of experience, Mr. Ondaatje probes what it means to have a cautious heart."

—The Economist

### **Bothersome**

"The Cat's Table shimmers with the freshness of a child's wide-eyed and openhearted perspective....a yearning tribute with an almost fairytale-like aura to the memories of awe that pervade our dreams (and nightmares and fears), and the memories of sometimes unlikely affiliation and love and what we mistake as love that pervade and haunt our hearts, guide us or sometimes lead us astray."

—Bookgaga (blog)

### **Bewildering**

Ondaatje has created a beautiful and poetic study here of what it means to have your very existence metaphorically, as well as literally, at sea."

—The Independent on Sunday (UK)

A jigsaw puzzle of glittering pieces ... that don't fit together:

"We came to understand that small and important thing, that our lives could be large with interesting strangers who would pass us without any personal involvement."

### **The Characters**

#### **Nine people at Table 76 – The Cat's Table on a sea journey from Colombo to Tilbury in 1954**

1. The pigeon lady: Miss Perinetta Lasqueti – Perinetta is "a type of apple, found in the Netherlands"
  2. 3. 4. The friends: Ramadhin, Cassius, Mynah/Michael (the narrator)
  5. The musician: Mr. Max Mazappa or 'Sunny Meadows' —"There was not much that was optimistic or well trimmed about him."
  6. The retired ship dismantler: Mr. Nevil
- [Mynah's cousin: Emily de Saram (not assigned to the Cat's Table)]
- [The prisoner: Niemeyer (we don't learn his name until p122)]
- [The lady in first class – Mynah's guardian: Flavia Prins]
- [The roommate: Mr. Hastie — in charge of the kennels on the Oronsay]
- [The roommate's friends: Mr. Invernio, his assistant at the kennels and the other two, unnamed wireless operators — unnamed until p 160 when we learn they are called Mr. Babstock and Tolroy]
- [Ramadhin's sister: Massoumeh]
- [The Australian early morning roller skating girl on the upper deck]
7. The botanist: Larry Daniels —had a crush on Emily

Meeting: Jan 10, 2012 — 7:30 pm @ Leslie's

**The acting troupe —The Jankla Troupe including Sunil, the Hyderabad Mind and the deaf girl, Asuntha**

[Narayan, Michael's Ayah and the cook Gunepala]

[The teacher: Mr. Fonseka]

[The wealthy but cursed (by a Buddhist monk) philanthropist: Sir Hector de Silva – travelling with two doctors, one ayurvedic, a lawyer, and his wife and daughter – a Moratuwa entrepreneur, who had ground out his fortune in gems, rubber, and plots of land]

8. **The silent tailor: Mr. Gunesequera, who owned a shop in Kandy = 9.**

[The thief: Baron C]

[The Captain]

The Gully Gully man who had rowed up to the Oronsay and performed magic tricks while it was anchored in the outer harbour of the port of Aden, Steamer Point, from which passengers could be ferried to the city by barges

The carpet salesman in the market in Aden

Heather Cave, the 14-year-old girl with whom Ramadhin becomes obsessed

The two Violets—Violet Coomaraswamy and Violet Grenier, Flavia Prin's friends who were professional bridge players

The prisoner's sister: Pacipia who looks after Asuntha and who is also the founder of the circus that includes Sunil

The English official: Mr. Giggs

9. **The undercover agent from the Criminal Investigation Department in Colombo: Mr. Lucius Perera (?)**  
“We never saw Mr. Perera, the police officer from Ceylon. P193”

Horace and Rose Johnson, a wealthy American couple who owned the Villa Ortensia in Italy that they were turning into an art institute — a great archive of art

The ship: The Oronsay - a small [tidal island](#) south of [Colonsay](#) in the [Scottish Inner Hebrides](#) with an area of just over two square miles. There are two theories for the origin of the name from [Old Norse](#). Either it is Oran's Isle, St Oran being the founder of the island's monastery in 563, or it may be from the Old Norse [Örfirisey](#) meaning "island of the ebb tide".

### **The themes**

The role of dogs in the plot of the Cat's Table: de Silva, Mr Hastie and Mr Invernio, Clive Johnson

The role of water

The role of Sidney Bechet — The story of Bash and his dog Goolah —because of Goolah Bechet left the Duke Ellington band and opened the Southern Tailor Shop

The craziness and dangerousness of woman in love

Disguise, duplicity, surface appearance versus the depths, masks and personas

Overt and invisible overseers

Gardens and plants: Ayurvedic healing, potions, herbs, hemp, poisons

Acrobatics and trust

Seeing into the future - foresight

Meeting: Jan 10, 2012 — 7:30 pm @ Leslie's

People wanting to protect others vs the self protective, the self-contained  
Murder, self-sacrifice, self-defense, suicide  
Keys, locks, bars – breaking into and out of places  
Love and passion and hate  
Hearts – two hearts, moved hearts – the self-sufficient ignorant heart versus the cautious heart  
Art and the artist and the artistic spirit

### **The structure**

— after travelling through the Suez canal from p 130 to 155 the story moves ahead in time into Michael/Myna's adult life —Cassius art show, the death of Ramadhin, Myna's marriage and then divorce from Massi

— a boy voyaging towards his mother

— a girl (Asuntha) voyaging with/towards her father — p177 to 186 is the back story

— p202 to 204 – Mynah's break-up with Massi revealing Mynah's problems with intimacy

— p214 to 231 – Miss Lasqueti's letter to Michael with drawings

— p244 to 260 — Michael's meeting with Emily on Bowen Island

### **The storytelling method**

A 'sort of' third party narrator at the beginning and an attempt to tell the story from his mother's perspective at the end. In between, Mynah's voice — more or less straight on.

Verb tenses:

The present

The past — Mynah's past – Asuntha's past

The future

Sidling up to the story – tid-bits, side bars, hints

### **Favourite bits**

“We came to understand that small and important thing, that our lives could be large with interesting strangers who would pass us without any personal involvement.”

P19 There was darkness all around us, but we knew how to walk through it. We slid quietly into the swimming pool, relit our twigs, and floated on our backs. Silent as corpses we looked at the stars. We felt we were swimming in the sea, rather than a walled-in pool in the middle of the ocean.

P23 Sleep is a prison for a boy who has friends to meet.

P25 ...the fact that I was on my own, save for the distant Flavia Prins and Emily, was itself an adventure. I had no family responsibilities. I could go anywhere, do anything. And Ramadhin, Cassius, and I had already established one rule: Each day we had to do at least one thing that was forbidden. The day had barely begun, and we still had hours ahead of us to perform this task.

P27 Who realizes how contented feral children are?

P40 There was a gentle democracy in Cassius. In retrospect, he was only against the power of Caesar. I suppose he changed me during those twenty-one days, persuading me to interpret anything that took place around us with his quizzical or upside-down perspective. Twenty-one days is a very brief period in a life, but I would never unlearn the whisper of Cassius.

P48 “A garden on a ship!” Mr. Daniel's secret had impressed even Cassius. “Noah...” said Ramadhin quietly. “Yes. And remember, the sea is also a garden, a poet tells us.”

P72 ...it was painful to realize that nothing was permanent, not even an ocean liner. ...in a breaker's yard you discover anything can have a new life, be reborn as part of a car or railway carriage, or a shovel blade. You take that older life and you link it to a stranger.”

Meeting: Jan 10, 2012 — 7:30 pm @ Leslie's

P73 Miss Lasqueti and Mr. Mazappa: They seemed an unlikely pair. Although she had a laugh that hinted it had rolled around once or twice in mud.

P75 ...our table's status on the Oronsay continued to be minimal, while those at the Captain's Table were constantly toasting one another's significance. That was a small lesson I learned on the journey. What is interesting and important happens mostly in secret, in places where there is no power. Nothing much of lasting value ever happens at the head table, held together by a familiar rhetoric. Those who already have power continue to glide along the familiar rut they have made for themselves.

P115 Adults are always prepared for the gradual or sudden swerve in an oncoming story.

P118 But a good part of [Emily's] world, as I would come to know later, long after our time on the Oronsay, she kept to herself, and I have come to realize the gentleness of manner I spoke of must have grown naturally out of a disguised life.

P139 Every immigrant family, it seems, has someone who does not belong in the new country they have come to. It feels like permanent exile...I've met many who remain haunted by the persistent ghost of an earlier place.

P143 Some events take a lifetime to reveal their damage and influence, I see now that I married Massi to stay close to a community from childhood I felt safe in and, I realized still wished for.

P163 Mr Hastie speaking: "There is a madness in women," he tried to explain to the three of us. "You have to approach them carefully. They might be quaint and hesitant as wild stags, if you wish to lie with them, go drinking with them. But you leave them and it's like plunging down a mine shaft you didn't realize was there in their nature....A stabbing is nothing. ...So the knifing near to my left heart saved me from a permanent fate with her. I was never to see her again. I said left heart, for men have two. Two hearts. Two kidneys. Two ways of life. We are symmetrical creatures. We are balanced in our emotions. ...." For years I believed all this.

P168 [Miss Lasqueti] realized we needed the ongoing mythology of our absent friend, and one afternoon she told us, imitating Mr. Mazappa's voice, that his first marriage had indeed ended in a betrayal. He had come home unexpectedly to find his wife with a musician and had confessed to Miss Lasqueti, "If I'd had a gun, I would have shot him in the pump, but all there was in the room was his ukulele." She laughed at the anecdote, but we did not.

P181 There is a story, always ahead of you. Barely existing. Only gradually do you attach yourself to it and feed it. You discover the carapace that will contain and test your character. You find in this way the path of your life.

P196 Perhaps we had by then outgrown our curiosity about the powerful. We were preferring the gentle Mr. Daniels, after all,,and ...Miss Lasqueti...It would always be strangers like them, at the various Cat's Tables of my life, who would alter me.

P199 "You must never feel unimportant in the scheme of things," Mr. Mazappa told me one. Or it may have been Miss Lasqueti. I am not sure who it was anymore, for by the end of our journey their opinions had dove-tailed. Looking back, I am no longer certain who gave me what pieces of advice, or befriended us, or deceived us. And some events sank in only much later.

P203 Massi said that sometimes, when things overwhelmed me, there was a trick or a habit I had: I turned myself into something that did not belong anywhere. I trusted nothing I was told, not even what I witnessed. It was, she said, as if I had grown up believing that everything was perilous. A deceit must have done that. "So you give your friendship, your intimacy, only to those distant from you." Then she asked me, "Did I still believe that my cousin had been involved in a murder?"

Meeting: Jan 10, 2012 — 7:30 pm @ Leslie's

P208 Recently I sat in on a master class given by the film maker Luc Dardenne. He spoke of how viewers of his films should not assume they understood everything about the characters. As members of an audience we should never feel ourselves wiser than they; we do not have more knowledge than the characters have about themselves. We should not feel assured or certain about their motives, or look down on them. I believe this. I recognize this as a first principle of art, although I have the suspicion that many would not.

P221 viewing the underside of the tapestry—"This is where the power is, you see. Always. The underneath."

P222 In the great centres of power, you see, competition is based not so much on winning but on stopping your enemy from achieving what he or she really wants.

P231 (From Miss Perinatta Lasquetis' letter to Emily: "Despair young and never look back," an Irishman said. And this is what I did.

P243 This journey was to be an innocent story within the small parameter of my youth, I once told someone. With just three or four children at its centre, on a voyage whose clear map and sure destination would suggest nothing to fear or unravel. For years I barely remembered it.

P252 ...Michael talking to Emily years later trying to find out what happened and whether she had killed Perera: "So they had the knife? Did they give it to you?" "I don't know. That's the point. I'm not sure what happened. It's vile, isn't it?" she said. She lifted her chin. I waited for her to say more. "I'm cold. Let's go in."

P255 A writer, I cannot remember who, spoke of a person having 'a confusing grace.' With an uncertainty alongside her warmth, that is how Emily has always been for me. You trusted her but she didn't trust herself. She was "good," but she was not that way in her own eyes. Those qualities still had not balanced out somehow, or agreed with each other.

P258 How have our emotions glanced off rather than directly faced others ever since, resulting in simple unawareness or in some cases cold-blooded self-sufficiency that is damaging to us? Is this what has left us, still uncertain, at a Cat's Table, looking back, looking back, searching out those we journeyed with or were formed by, even now, at our age?

And then I thought, for the first time in years, about Ramadhin's wayward fibrillating heart, that he was aware of, and took such care of during that voyage, treating himself like someone in an incubator while Cassius and I ran about joyful and dangerous around him. ...it was Ramadhin, the unwild one, who did not survive. So what was better for us all—an ignorance, or a cautiousness like his, towards our own hearts?

P261 An artist with burned hands. What was his life like after that? The last years of his teens must have been a time when he could rely on no one and believe in nothing. It is easy to be such a person when you are an adult, when you can survive on your own. But Cassius, I suspect, lost the rest of his childhood on the ship that night"

P262 In spite of his almost natural anarchy he had wished to care for the girl. Strange. He wished to protect Niemeyer's daughter, as Ramadhin wished to protect Heather Cave. What happened that the three of us had a desire to protect others seemingly less secure than ourselves?