

BOOK CLUB IN A BOX

Bookclub-in-a-Box presents the discussion companion for Michael Ondaatje's novel The Cat's Table

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Toronto.

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Quotations used in this guide have been taken from the text of the hardcover edition of *The Cat's Table*. All information taken from other sources is acknowledged.

This discussion companion was written by Jo-Ann Zoon and Marilyn Herbert, B.Ed. Herbert is the founder of Bookclub-in-a-Box and an international speaker with more than 30 years experience as a teacher and school librarian. Bookclub-in-a-Box is a unique guide to current fiction and classic literature intended for book club discussions, educational study seminars, and personal pleasure. For more information about the Bookclub-in-a-Box team, visit our website.

Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion companion for The Cat's Table

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BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

Michael Ondaatje's *The Cat's Table*

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BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

Readers and Leaders Guide

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is clearly and effectively organized to give you information and ideas for a lively discussion, as well as to present the major highlights of the novel. The format, with a Table of Contents, allows you to pick and choose the specific points you wish to talk about. It does not have to be used in any prescribed order. In fact, it is meant to support, not determine, your discussion.

You Choose What to Use.

You may find that some information is repeated in more than one section and may be cross-referenced so as to provide insight on the same idea from different angles.

The guide is formatted to give you extra space to make your own notes.

How to Begin

Relax and look forward to enjoying your book club.

With Bookclub-in-a-Box as your behind the scenes support, there is little for you to do in the way of preparation.

Some readers like to review the guide after reading the novel; some before. Either way, the guide is all you will need as a companion for your discussion. You may find that the guide's interpretation, information, and background have sparked other ideas not included.

Having read the novel and armed with Bookclub-in-a-Box, you will be well prepared to lead or guide or listen to the discussion at hand.

Lastly, if you need some more "hands on" support, feel free to contact us.

What to Look For

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is divided into easy-to-use sections, which include points on characters, themes, writing style and structure, literary or historical background, author information, and other pertinent features unique to the novel being discussed. These may vary slightly from guide to guide.

INTERPRETATION OF EACH NOVEL REFLECTS THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX TEAM.

Do We Need to Agree?

THE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION IS NO.

If we have sparked a discussion or a debate on certain points, then we are happy. We invite you to share your group's alternative findings and experiences. You can contact us via our website (www.bookclubinabox.com), by email (info@bookclubinabox.com), or by phone (1-866-578-5571). We would love to hear from you.

Discussion Starters

There are as many ways to begin a book club discussion as there are members in your group. If you are an experienced group, you will already have your favorite ways to begin. If you are a newly formed group or a group looking for new ideas, here are some suggestions.

- Ask for people's impressions of the novel. (This will give you some idea about which parts of the unit to focus on.)
- Identify a favorite or major character.
- Identify a favorite or major idea.
- Begin with a powerful or pertinent quote. (Not necessarily from the novel.)
- Discuss the historical information of the novel. (Not applicable to all novels.)
- If this author is familiar to the group, discuss the range of his/her work and where this novel stands in that range.
- Use the discussion topics and questions in the Bookclub-in-a-Box guide.

If you have further suggestions for discussion starters, be sure to share them with us and we will share them with others.

Above All, Enjoy Yourselves

INTRODUCTION

Novel Quickline

Keys to the Novel

Author Information

INTRODUCTION

Novel Quickline

Michael Ondaatje's sixth novel is an adventure story, charting the journey of an 11-year-old boy sailing from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to England in the 1950s. Below the waterline, *The Cat's Table* is a layered and evocative reflection on childhood and its loss, the nature of memory and shifting identity.

The novel opens with a boy's nighttime arrival at the Colombo harbour and his solitary walk up the gangplank of a cruise ship, into an unknown future. The boy worries about how his mother, whom he has not seen in a number of years, "*could know exactly when I would arrive in that other country. And if she would be there.*" (p.7)

On board the Oronsay, the young Michael, soon nicknamed Mynah, is assigned a dining seat at the lowly Cat's Table. Here, the young narrator meets two other boys, also travelling alone, and an intriguing array of displaced grown-ups who, through life stories and lore, lead the school-aged boys towards the far shore of adulthood.

Having escaped parental supervision and “bursting all over the place like freed mercury,” (p.79) Michael, the unruly Cassius, and fragile Ramadhin make a vow that seals their bond: each day they will do at least one forbidden thing. Their escapades include hiding in lifeboats to spy on other passengers, lashing themselves to the deck during a vicious storm, smoking twigs from a bamboo chair, exploring a secret garden deep within the ship’s hull, and slithering through stateroom transoms at the behest of an urbane thief. At midnight, the boys steal from their bunks to watch the nightly walk of a shackled prisoner whose fate will follow them in the years to come.

Looking back at the drama of his childhood journey is the grown-up Michael, a writer who fills in the details of his and his friends’ adult lives while re-examining the events of their decades-old sea voyage. What begins as a wide-eyed adventure becomes infused with suffering and loss. “Some events take a lifetime to reveal their damage and influence.” (p.143) But in remembering the stories of the strangers he met long ago, the adult Michael reflects, “It would always be strangers like them at the various Cat’s Tables of my life, who would alter me.” (p.196)

Keys to the Novel

- The first important clue to why this book is so interesting is that Michael Ondaatje loves to play with ideas, images, symbols, and formats. So it’s no surprise that in *The Cat’s Table*, he blends fact and fiction into a lovely, intriguing mix. Critics are divided as to whether this book is part autobiography or plain fiction. (see **Memoir vs. Fiction**, p.74)
- His starting point is the description of a young boy, traveling alone at sea to meet a mother he has not seen in years—an event that a young Ondaatje experienced in his own life. From there he branches out into a coming-of-age adventure story, where the protagonist and two friends experience freedom from adult supervision for the glorious time period of three weeks.

- Added to the brew of truth and imagination is the fact that narration has two concurrent perspectives: the voice and eyes of the 11-year-old Michael and the thoughts and emotions of the adult Michael looking back.
- The second important feature of this novel is its wonderful cast of characters. Michael introduces us to each in turn, focusing on their individual quirky characteristics, in exactly the way a young child would notice.

Consider the genres of fiction and biography in terms of how each best depicts boyhood adventure. Which best describes this novel?

Consider whether this book is character-driven or plot-driven. As a reader, which do you prefer? Which character do you like best/least? Why?

Author Information

- Internationally celebrated author Michael Ondaatje was born September 12, 1943, in Colombo. After immigrating to England to join his mother, brother, and sister in 1954, he followed his brother to Canada in 1962. He became a Canadian citizen in 1965.
 - Ondaatje received his B.A. from the University of Toronto in 1965 and his M.A. from Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario in 1967. Ondaatje has taught at the University of Toronto, York University (also in Toronto), London's University of Western Ontario, the University of Hawaii at Manoa, and Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.
 - A fact that appears often in interviews is Ondaatje's perception of himself as a mixed-genre citizen of the world. He sees himself as having evolved from a variety of sources and experiences, a theme that appears in nearly all his work. (see **Journey, p.37**) Ondaatje often refers to
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**Thanks for previewing this
Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion guide.**

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print or PDF format, just visit:**

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