

Fall 1977

## On Michael Ondaatje

Terry Nathan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

### Recommended Citation

Nathan, Terry (1977) "On Michael Ondaatje," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 9 , Article 39.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss9/39>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

white, round mask of light  
eclipsed, and now there is only this,  
the plate, my hand, the clock, the owl,  
and I caress it, as a blind man  
the mirror.

("The Moon")

Perhaps it is Stafford's choice of subjects, or the measured cadence of his lines; whatever the reason, these poems seem to carry an almost fundamental message: slow down, watch and listen.

For me, the best poems in this book are the small (and not so small) dramas, and what comes from them in poems like "The Moon," "Halfway Home," "Marriage," and "Inside the Fence." They work something like knotholes in a construction barricade — we look in, curious and happily amazed.

*Lex Runciman*

*Coming Through Slaughter*

Michael Ondaatje

House of Anansi Press Ltd.\*

Toronto, Canada

4.95 paper

In the Pound tradition of history as a series of fragments woven by highly lyrical prose and poetry, Ondaatje explores the inner thoughts and emotions of jazz pioneer Buddy Bolden. The obsessive nature of Bolden's creative energy produces a "landscape of suicide," an inevitability of loss. Bolden's peripheral encounters with the prostitutes of New Orleans, his two extended love affairs, a mysterious friendship with Bellocq, the photographer of whores, and those he groomed at his barber shop, are the backdrops for Bolden's unsettled life.

With almost nothing important outside his music, Bolden attempts to contribute a unique possibility to jazz. He talks about his forerunners:

My fathers were those who put their bodies over barbed wire.  
For me. To slide over into the region of hell. Through their  
sacrifice they seduced me into the game. They showed me their

autographed pictures and told me about their women and they told me even bigger names all over the country. My fathers failing. Dead before they hit the wire.

Continuity is absent from everyone's life. Reaching out to the world often becomes a self-destructive gesture. As in Bolden's return to Nora, his wife, after two years away from music and New Orleans, there is little peace in his homecoming.

Not enough blankets here . . . Found an old hunting jacket. I sleep against its cloth full of hunter's sweat . . . I went to sleep as soon as I arrived and am awake now after midnight. Scratch of suicide at the side of my brain.

But Bolden hates stasis, as other men "hate to see themselves change." This provides an impetus for his music. He continually seeks new limits for his music, as well as the strained relationships with those who loved him.

In a final and obsessive attempt to mirror music to the rhythms of his world, Bolden blows his cornet to the flesh-dance of a woman taunting and testing his music.

Notes more often now. She hitting each note with her body before it is even out so I know what I do through her. God this is what I wanted to play for, if no one else I always guessed there would be this, this mirror somewhere.

It is this audience, this woman, who gives Boddy Bolden the energy, the freedom to blow until blood comes, his mouth frozen to the cornet.

Willy Cornesh catching him as he fell outward, covering him, seeing the red on the white shirt thinking it is torn and the red undershirt is showing and then lifting the horn sees the blood spill out from it as he finally lifts the metal from the hard kiss of the mouth.

It is energy Bolden needs, enough energy to go insane and finally gain peace and freedom from the world. If nothing else, the clarity of

Bolden's inevitable destruction gives us the risks of the creative process.

\**Coming Through Slaughter* is also available in America from the "Asphodel Book Shop," 17192 Ravenna Rd., Burton, Ohio, 44021.

*Terry Nathan*

*Man In A Rowboat*

Tom Rea

Copper Canyon Press

Port Townsend, Washington 1977

\$2.50, paper

Dear Rick: I'm in Browning, travelling light. The stars are closer here, nearer to all things, even my backpack. Rick, we don't need much: One raincoat, an extra shirt (L.L. Bean), a can of smoked salmon and Tom Rea's book. You should read it, friend, the poems are bright as a drum. Each one unfolds quiet and quickly, the great way of the photo album on Sunday evenings. But see, these snapshots aren't your regular fishing trips, these here poems catch a lost strange land. Take the opening *Poem*: "There were/ no words yet." Or *High Plains, Wyoming*: "But there was a time/ you could float to the ocean in a month,/ just drift, no portages, no falls." Or even *The Climber Takes A Breather*. There's the man in the strange awkward land, the one who (isn't) "bred for ledges." See, even the title poem starts "There was a lake once," and flows on to be a love poem to the joy of living in the awesomeness. Wordsworth, right? No. Not rightly. More Uncle Ezra and Mr. Kawabata: these poems are elegies to Wildtime, to pure and beautiful Mystery. Take the hard poem *The Wolf* or the sad sad *Bear*. These strong or subtle violences toward the very wildness within us must eventually cause our own imprisonment. "His cousin is dying in the Denver zoo/ one cage down from the pool where seals/ try anything for fun." See, we are capable,