



## Running in the Family

©2009 eNotes.com, Inc. or its Licensors. Please see [copyright information](#) at the end of this document.

### The Work

Michael Ondaatje's autobiographical novel *Running in the Family* is an imaginative reconstruction of the author's family history. A mixture of fact and fiction, the novel chronicles Ondaatje's attempt to gain insight into his own identity by better understanding his parents and relatives.

In the novel Ondaatje returns to Ceylon for the first time since his childhood in order to meet relatives and learn about his family. The novel consists of stories about Ondaatje's aristocratic family interspersed with accounts of Ondaatje's experiences while visiting Ceylon. As the novel progresses, the reader learns that Ondaatje left Ceylon to live with his mother in England and that his father, who remained in Ceylon, has died in his absence. It becomes increasingly clear that Ondaatje's desire to understand his family is at bottom a desire to know and understand his father. His lack of knowledge about his father is an empty space in his identity and this emptiness haunts him throughout the novel.

As he meets various friends and relatives and listens to their stories Ondaatje struggles to understand his father's life and his father's relationship with his mother. He also struggles to put to rest fears he has about his father's character. Ondaatje hears stories about his father's wildness and drunkenness, about his mother's dramatic flair, about his parents' arguments, and about the circumstances surrounding their divorce. He comes to realize that while these exaggerated and contradictory stories capture the spirit of the 1930's generation of aristocrats in Ceylon, they tell him nothing of what he really wants to know, nothing of his father's thoughts and experiences, nothing of "the closeness between two people," of how his parents "grew in the shade of each other's presence." In the end, Ondaatje recognizes that his father will remain "one of those books we long to read whose pages remain uncut." Ondaatje can rely upon only faith and imaginative insight as means of understanding his father and of filling the empty space in his own identity.

*Running in the Family* has been appreciated for its striking imagery as well as for its carefully crafted prose. Although it was initially criticized for failing to address the political realities in Ceylon, the novel has since been accepted as an evocative depiction of the relationship between one's identity and one's family history.

### Suggested Readings

Barbour, Douglas. *Michael Ondaatje*. New York: Twayne, 1993.

Jewinski, Ed. *Michael Ondaatje: Express Yourself Beautifully*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1994.

Mudwiler, Leslie. *Michael Ondaatje: Word, Image, Imagination*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1984.

Ondaatje, Christopher. *The Man Eater of Punanai: A Journey of Discovery to the Jungles of Old Ceylon*. Toronto: Harper, 1992.

Solecki, Sam, ed. *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*. Montreal: Véhicule, 1985.

**Copyright Notice**

©2009 eNotes.com, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

For complete copyright information, please see the online version of this work:  
<http://www.enotes.com/running-family-salem>