

is falling on me like a private  
Niagara Falls in my soul.  
I'm not trying to dissuade you  
from coming up here, Rosita, no.  
I'm only trying to tell you about  
the pleasure one can find here and  
also tell you that everything  
has an end. (For some peculiar reason  
these two seem to go together;  
it's hard to distinguish  
between them.) But most importantly,  
I am trying to tell you about  
all those things we leave behind.

Only yesterday, Ali, my neighbour,  
asked me if by any chance  
I had a flask of pills  
or a gun of some kind.  
I guess he hasn't got  
someone like you in his hometown  
he could write about  
the wonders of  
this land that grows  
more foreign as time goes by.  
Forever yours,

Ramon Rascacielos (Ramon Skyscraper)

## THOMAS KING

(b. 1943)

Although the question of 'what it means to be Indian' is not one that concerns Thomas King 'all that much personally', as he says in an interview, 'it is an important question in my fiction. Because it's a question that other people always ask... it's part of that demand for authenticity within the world in which we live. It's the question that Native people have to put up with. And it's a whip that we get beaten with—'Are you a good enough Indian to speak as an Indian?'

King's treatment of these questions relies formally on both the Native oral storytelling and the Western narrative traditions, thus reflecting his life and personal heritage. The son of a mother of Greek and German origins, and a Cherokee father, King was born in Oklahoma, but doesn't 'think of Oklahoma as home. If I think of any place as home, it's the Alberta prairies, where I spent ten years with the Blackfoot people.' Although he is both a Canadian and an American citizen, King 'think[s] of [him]self as a Canadian writer because that's all [he] write[s] about.' If anything, his double citizenship and mixed heritage—'With my looks,' he admits, 'I could have gone either way'—have made him all the more aware of borders—between countries, between Native and white people, between men and women, between urban Natives and Natives living on reserves. As he says, for 'Native people, identity comes from community, and it varies from community to community. I wouldn't define myself as an Indian in the same way that someone living on a reserve would. That whole idea of "Indian" becomes, in part, a construct. It's fluid. We make it up as we go along.'

King, who holds a Ph.D. in English and American Studies from the University of Utah,

was professor of Native Studies at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, for ten years, where he had an enormous impact on young Native writers and began writing creatively himself. Subsequently, he was professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, where he also served as Chair of the Department. Before joining the Department of English at Guelph University, King lived in Toronto (1993-94) where he was Story Editor for *The Four Directions*, a CBC-TV dramatic production about Native people. King, whose short stories and poems have appeared in many literary magazines in Canada, was the editor of the special issue of *Canadian Fiction Magazine* (1987) on Native writers, and of *All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Writing* (1990).

King's first book was the novel *Medicine River* (1990), which has been dramatized by CBC-TV. It was followed by a children's book, *A Coyote Columbus Story* (1992), which won him his first Governor General's Award nomination. His second nomination came with the publication of his second novel, *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993). His short stories have been collected in *One Good Story, That One* (1993).

King's fiction, as is the case with the story that follows, illustrates that 'the range of "Indian" is not as narrow as many people try to make it.' Through the Coyote trickster figure, which he often uses as a 'sacred clown', through puns, which he has learned from '[t]alking to storytellers and to Native people', and through humour—'Comedy,' he says, 'is simply my strategy'—King has proven himself to be one of the most innovative and popular Canadian Native writers.

### THE ONE ABOUT COYOTE GOING WEST

This one is about Coyote. She was going west. Visiting her relations. That's what she said. You got to watch that one. Tricky one. Full of bad business. No, no, no, no, that one says. I'm just visiting. Going to see Raven.

Boy, I says. That's another tricky one.  
Coyote comes by my place. She wag her tail. Make them happy noises. Sit on my porch. Look around. With them teeth. With that smile. Coyote put her nose in my tea. My good tea.

Get that nose out of my tea, I says.  
I'm going to see my friends, she says. Tell those stories. Fix this world. Straighten it up.

Oh boy, pretty scary that, Coyote fix the world, again.  
Sit down, I says. Eat some food. Hard work that, fix up the world. Maybe you have a song. Maybe you have a good joke.

Sure, says Coyote. That one wink her ears. Lick her whiskers.  
I tuck my feet under that chair. Got to hide my toes. Sometimes that tricky one leave her skin sit in that chair. Coyote skin. No Coyote. Sneak around. Bite them toes. Make you jump.

I been reading those books, she says.  
You must be one smart Coyote, I says.  
You bet, she says.  
Maybe you got a good story for me, I says.  
I been reading about that history, says Coyote. She sticks that nose back in my tea. All about who found us Indians.

Ho, I says. I like those old ones. Them ones are the best. You tell me your story, I says. Maybe some biscuits will visit us. Maybe some moose-meat stew come along, listen to your story.

Okay, she says and she sings her story song.

Snow's on the ground the snakes are asleep.  
Snow's on the ground my voice is strong.  
Snow's on the ground the snakes are asleep.  
Snow's on the ground my voice is strong.

She sings like that. With that tail, wagging. With that smile. Sitting there.

Maybe I tell you the one about Eric the Lucky and the Vikings play hockey for the Oldtimers, find us Indians in Newfoundland, she says. Maybe I tell you the one about Christopher Cartier looking for something good to eat. Find us Indians in a restaurant in Montreal. Maybe I tell you the one about Jacques Columbus come along that river. Indians waiting for him. We all wave and say, here we are, here we are.

Everyone knows those stories, I says. Whiteman stories. Baby stories you got in your mouth.

No, no, no, no, says that Coyote. I read these ones in that old book.

Ho, I says. You are trying to bite my toes. Everyone knows who found us Indians. Eric the Lucky and that Christopher Cartier and that Jacques Columbus come along later. Those ones get lost. Float about. Walk around. Get mixed up. Ho, ho, ho, ho, those ones cry, we are lost. So we got to find them. Help them out. Feed them. Show them around. Boy, I says. Bad mistake that one.

You are very wise grandmother, says Coyote, bring her eyes down, like she is sleepy. Maybe you know who discovered Indians.

Sure, I says. Everyone knows that. It was Coyote. She was the one.

Oh, grandfather, that Coyote says. Tell me that story: I love those stories about that sneaky one. I don't think I know that story, she says.

All right, I says. Pay attention.

Coyote was heading west. That's how I always start this story. There was nothing else in this world. Just Coyote. She could see all the way, too. No mountains then. No rivers then. No forests then. Pretty flat then. So she starts to make things. So she starts to fix this world.

This is exciting, says Coyote, and she takes her nose out of my tea.

Yes, I says. Just the beginning, too. Coyote got a lot of things to make.

Tell me, grandmother, says Coyote. What does the clever one make first?

Well, I says. Maybe she makes that tree grows by the river. Maybe she makes that buffalo. Maybe she makes that mountain. Maybe she makes them clouds.

Maybe she makes that beautiful rainbow, says Coyote.

No, I says. She don't make that thing. Mink makes that.

Maybe she makes that beautiful moon, says Coyote.

No, I says. She don't do that either. Otter finds that moon in a pond later on.

Maybe she make the oceans with that blue water, says Coyote.

No, I says. Oceans are already here. She don't do any of that. The first thing Coyote makes, I tell Coyote, is a mistake.

Boy, Coyote sit up straight. Them eyes pop open. That tail stop wagging. That one swallow that smile.

Big one, too, I says. Coyote is going west thinking of things to make. That one is trying to think of everything to make at once. So she don't see that hole. So she falls in that hole. Then those thoughts bump around. They run into each other. Those ones fall out of Coyote's ears. In that hole.

Ho, that Coyote cries. I have fallen into a hole, I must have made a mistake. And she did.

So, there is that hole. And there is that Coyote in that hole. And there is that big mistake in that hole with Coyote. Ho, says that mistake. You must be Coyote.

That mistake is real big and that hole is small. Not much room. I don't want to tell you what that mistake looks like. First mistake in the world. Pretty scary. Boy, I can't look, I got to close my eyes. You better close your eyes, too, I tell Coyote.

Okay, I'll do that, she says, and she puts her hands over her eyes. But she don't fool me. I can see she's peeking.

Don't peek, I says.

Okay, she says. I won't do that.

Well, you know, that Coyote thinks about the hole. And she thinks about how she's going to get out of that hole. She thinks how she's going to get that big mistake back in her head.

Say, says that mistake. What is that you're thinking about?

I'm thinking of a song, says Coyote. I'm thinking of a song to make this hole bigger.

That's a good idea, says that mistake. Let me hear your hole song.

But that's not what Coyote sings. She sings a song to make the mistake smaller. But that mistake hears her. And that mistake grabs Coyote's nose. And that one pulls off her mouth so she can't sing. And that one jumps up and down on Coyote until she is flat. Then that one leaps out of that hole, wanders around looking for things to do.

Well, Coyote is feeling pretty bad, all flat her nice fur coat full of stomp holes. So she thinks hard, and she thinks about a healing song. And she tries to sing a healing song, but her mouth is in other places. So she thinks harder and tries to sing that song through her nose. But that nose don't make any sound, just drip a lot. She tries to sing that song out her ears, but those ears don't hear anything.

So, that silly one thinks real hard and tries to sing out her butt hole. Pssst! Pssst! That is what that butt hole says, and right away things don't smell so good in that hole. Pssst! Boy, Coyote thinks. Something smells.

That Coyote lies there flat and practise and practise. Pretty soon, maybe two days maybe one year, she teach that butt hole to sing. That song. That healing song. So that butt hole sings that song. And Coyote begins to feel better. And Coyote don't feel so flat anymore. Pssst! Pssst! Things smell pretty bad, but Coyote is okay.

That one look around in that hole. Find her mouth. Put that mouth back. So, she says to that butt hole. Okay, you can stop singing now. You can stop making them smells now. But you know, that butt hole is liking all that singing, and so that butt hole keeps on singing.

Stop that, says Coyote. You are going to stink up the whole world. But it don't. So Coyote jumps out of that hole and runs across the prairies real fast. But that butt hole follows her. Pssst. Pssst. Coyote jumps into a lake, but that butt hole don't drown. It just keeps on singing.

Hey, who is doing all that singing, someone says.

Yes, and who is making that bad smell, says another voice.

It must be Coyote, says a third voice.

Yes, says a fourth voice. I believe it is Coyote.

That Coyote sit in my chair, put her nose in my tea, say, I know who that voice is. It is that big mistake playing a trick. Nothing else is made yet.

No, I says. That mistake is doing other things.

Then those voices are spirits, says Coyote.

No, I says. Them voices belong to them ducks.

Coyote stand up on my chair. Hey, she says, where did them ducks come from?

Calm down, I says. This story is going to be okay. This story is doing just fine. This story knows where it is going. Sit down. Keep your skin on.

So.

Coyote look around, and she see them four ducks. In that lake. Ho, she says. Where did you ducks come from? I didn't make you yet.

Yes, says them ducks. We were waiting around, but you didn't come. So we got tired of waiting. So we did it ourselves.

I was in a hole, says Coyote.

Pssst. Pssst.

What's that noise, says them ducks. What's that bad smell?

Never mind, says Coyote. Maybe you've seen something go by. Maybe you can help me find something I lost. Maybe you can help me get it back.

Those ducks swim around and talk to themselves. Was it something awful to look at?

Yes, says Coyote, it certainly was.

Was it something with ugly fur?

Yes, says Coyote. I think it had that, too.

Was it something that made a lot of noise, ask them ducks.

Yes, it was pretty noisy, says Coyote.

Did it smell bad, them ducks want to know.

Yes, says Coyote. I guess you ducks have seen my something.

Yes, says them ducks. It is right there behind you.

So that Coyote turn around, and there is nothing there.

It's still behind you, says those ducks.

So Coyote turn around again but she don't see anything.

Pssst! Pssst!

Boy, says those ducks. What a noise! What a smell! They say that, too. What an ugly thing with all that fur!

Never mind, says that Coyote again. That is not what I'm looking for. I'm looking for something else.

Maybe you're looking for Indians, says those ducks.

Well, that Coyote is real surprised because she hasn't created Indians, either. Boy, says that one, mischief is everywhere. This world is getting bent.

All right.

So Coyote and those ducks are talking, and pretty soon they hear a noise. And pretty soon there is something coming. And those ducks says, oh, oh, oh. They say that like they see trouble, but it is not trouble. What comes along is a river.

Hello, says that river. Nice day. Maybe you want to take a swim. But Coyote don't want to swim, and she looks at that river and she looks at that river again. Something's not right here, she says. Where are those rocks? Where are those rapids? What did you do with them waterfalls? How come you're so straight?

And Coyote is right. That river is nice and straight and smooth without any bumps or twists. It runs both ways, too, not like a modern river.

We got to fix this, says Coyote, and she does. She puts some rocks in that river, and she fixes it so it only runs one way. She puts a couple of waterfalls in and makes a bunch of rapids where things get shallow fast.

Coyote is tired with all this work, and those ducks are tired just watching. So that Coyote sits down. So she closes her eyes. So she puts her nose in her tail. So those ducks shout, wake up, wake up! Something big is heading this way! And they are right.

Mountain come sliding along, whistling. Real happy mountain. Nice and round. This mountain is full of grapes and other good things to eat. Apples, peaches, cherries. Howdy-do, says that polite mountain, nice day for whistling.

Coyote looks at that mountain, and that one shakes her head. Oh, no, she says, this mountain is all wrong. How come you're so nice and round? Where are those craggy peaks? Where are all them cliffs? What happened to all that snow? Boy, we got to fix this thing, too. So she does.

Grandfather, grandfather, says that Coyote, sit in my chair put her nose in my tea.

But that's not what Coyote sings. She sings a song to make the mistake smaller. But that mistake hears her. And that mistake grabs Coyote's nose. And that one pulls off her mouth so she can't sing. And that one jumps up and down on Coyote until she is flat. Then that one leaps out of that hole, wanders around looking for things to do.

Well, Coyote is feeling pretty bad, all flat her nice fur coat full of stomp holes. So she thinks hard, and she thinks about a healing song. And she tries to sing a healing song, but her mouth is in other places. So she thinks harder and tries to sing that song through her nose. But that nose don't make any sound, just drip a lot. She tries to sing that song on her ears, but those ears don't hear anything.

So, that silly one thinks real hard and tries to sing out her butt hole. Pssst! Pssst! That is what that butt hole says, and right away things don't smell so good in that hole. Pssst!

Boy, Coyote thinks. Something smells.

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Yes, says them ducks. We were waiting around, but you didn't come. So we got tired of waiting. So we did it ourselves.

I was in a hole, says Coyote.

Pssst. Pssst.

What's that noise, says them ducks. What's that bad smell?

Never mind, says Coyote. Maybe you've seen something go by. Maybe you can help me find something I lost. Maybe you can help me get it back.

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Yes, says Coyote. I guess you ducks have seen my something.

Yes, says them ducks. It is right there behind you.

So that Coyote turn around, and there is nothing there.

It's still behind you, says those ducks.

So Coyote turn around again but she don't see anything.

Pssst! Pssst!

Boy, says those ducks. What a noise! What a smell! They say that, too. What an ugly thing with all that fur!

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Grandfather, grandfather, says that Coyote, sit in my chair put her nose in my tea.

Why is that Coyote changing all those good things?  
 That is a real sly one, ask me that question. I look at those eyes. Grab them and squeeze that nose. Hey, let go my nose, that Coyote says.  
 Okay I says. Coyote still in Coyote skin. I bet you know why Coyote change the happy river. Why she change that mountain sliding along whistling.  
 No, says that Coyote, look around my house, lick her lips, make them baby noises.  
 Maybe it's because she is mean, I says.  
 Oh, no, says Coyote. That one is sweet and kind.  
 Maybe it's because that one is not too smart.  
 Oh, no, says Coyote. That Coyote is very wise.  
 Maybe it's because she made a mistake.  
 Oh, no, says Coyote. She made one of those already.  
 All right, I says. Then Coyote must be doing the right thing. She must be fixing the world so it is perfect.  
 Yes, says Coyote. That must be it. What does that brilliant one do next?  
 Everyone knows what Coyote does next, I says. Little babies know what Coyote do next.  
 Oh no, says Coyote. I have never heard this story. You are a wonderful storyteller. You tell me your good Coyote story.  
 Boy, you got to watch that one all the time. Hide them toes.  
 Well, I says. Coyote thinks about that river. And she thinks about that mountain. And she thinks somebody is fooling around. So she goes looking around. She goes looking for that one who is messing up the world.  
 She goes to the north, and there is nothing. She goes to the south, and there is nothing there either. She goes to the east, and there is still nothing there. She goes to the west and there is a pile of snow tires.  
 And there is some televisions. And there is some vacuum cleaners. And there is a bunch of pastel sheets. And there is an air humidifier. And there is a big mistake sitting on a portable gas barbecue reading a book. Big book. Department store catalogue.  
 Hello, says that mistake. Maybe you want a hydraulic jack.  
 No, says that Coyote. I don't want one of them. But she don't tell that mistake what she wants because she don't want to miss her mouth again. But when she thinks about being flat and full of stomp holes, that butt hole wakes up and begins to sing. Pssst. Pssst.  
 What's that noise? says that big mistake.  
 I'm looking for Indians, says that Coyote, real quick. Have you seen any?  
 What's that bad smell?  
 Never mind, says Coyote. Maybe you have some Indians around here.  
 I got some toaster ovens, says that mistake.  
 We don't need that stuff, says Coyote. You got to stop making all those things. You're going to fill up this world.  
 Maybe you want a computer with a colour monitor. That mistake keeps looking through that book and those things keep landing in piles all around Coyote.  
 Stop, stop, cries Coyote. Golf cart lands on her foot. Golf balls bounce off her head. You got to give me that book before the world gets lopsided.

These are good things, says that mistake. We need these things to make up the world. Indians are going to need this stuff.  
 We don't have any Indians, says Coyote.  
 And that mistake can see that that's right. Maybe we better make some Indians, says that mistake. So that one looks in that catalogue, but it don't have any Indians. And Coyote don't know how to do that either. She has already made four things.  
 I've made four things already, she says. I got to have help.  
 We can help, says some voices and it is those ducks come swimming along. We can help you make Indians, says that white duck. Yes, we can do that, says that green duck. We have been thinking about this, says that blue duck. We have a plan, says that red duck.  
 Well, that Coyote don't know what to do. So she tells them ducks to go ahead because this story is pretty long and it's getting late and everyone wants to go home.  
 You still awake, I says to Coyote. You still here?  
 Oh yes, grandmother, says Coyote. What do those clever ducks do?  
 So I tell Coyote that those ducks lay some eggs. Ducks do that, you know. That white duck lay an egg, and it is blue. That red duck lay an egg, and it is green. That blue duck lay an egg, and it is red. That green duck lay an egg, and it is white.  
 Come on, says those ducks. We got to sing a song. We got to do a dance. So they do. Coyote and that big mistake and those four ducks dance around the eggs. So they dance and sing for a long time, and pretty soon Coyote gets hungry.  
 I know this dance, she says, but you got to close your eyes when you do it or nothing will happen. You got to close your eyes tight. Okay, says those ducks. We can do that. And they do. And that big mistake closes its eyes, too.  
 But Coyote, she don't close her eyes, and all of them start dancing again, and Coyote dances up close to that white duck, and she grabs that white duck by her neck.  
 When Coyote grabs that duck, that duck flaps her wings, and that bit mistake hears the noise and opens them eyes. Say, says that big mistake, that's not the way the dance goes.  
 By golly, you're right, says Coyote, and she lets that duck go. I am getting it mixed up with another dance.  
 So they start to dance again. And Coyote is very hungry, and she grabs that blue duck, and she grabs his wings, too. But Coyote's stomach starts to make hungry noises, and that mistake opens them eyes and sees Coyote with the blue duck. Hey, says that mistake, you got yourself mixed up again.  
 That's right, says Coyote, and she drops that duck and straightens out that neck. It sure is good you're around to help me with this dance.  
 They all start that dance again, and, this time, Coyote grabs the green duck real quick and tries to stuff it down that greedy throat, and there is nothing hanging out but them yellow duck feet. But those feet are flapping in Coyote's eyes, and she can't see where she is going, and she bumps into the big mistake and the big mistake turns around to see what has happened.  
 Ho, says that big mistake, you can't see where you're going with them yellow duck feet flapping in your eyes, and that mistake pulls that green duck out of Coyote's throat. You could hurt yourself dancing like that.

You are one good friend, look after me like that, says Coyote.

Those ducks start to dance again, and Coyote dances with them, but that red duck says, we better dance with one eye open, so we can help Coyote with this dance. So the ducks dance some more, and, then, those eggs begin to move around, and those eggs crack open. And if you look hard, you can see something inside those eggs.

I know, I know, says that Coyote, jump up and down on my chair, shake up my good tea. Indians come out of those eggs. I remember this story, now. Inside those eggs are the Indians Coyote's been looking for.

No, I says. You are one crazy Coyote. What comes out of those duck eggs are baby ducks. You better sit down, I says. You may fall and hurt yourself. You may spill my tea. You may fall on top of this story and make it flat.

Where are the Indians? says that Coyote. This story was about how Coyote found the Indians. Maybe the Indians are in the eggs with the baby ducks.

No, I says, nothing in those eggs but little baby ducks. Indians will be along in a while. Don't lose your skin.

So.

When those ducks see what has come out of the eggs, they says, boy, we didn't get that quite right. We better try that again. So they do. They lay them eggs. They dance the dance. They sing that song. Those eggs crack open and out comes some more baby ducks. They do this seven times and each time, they get more ducks.

By golly, says those four ducks. We got more ducks than we need. I guess we got to be the Indians. And so they do that. Before Coyote or that big mistake can mess things up, those four ducks turn into Indians, two women and two men. Good-looking Indians too. They don't look at all like ducks any more.

But those duck-Indians aren't too happy. They look at each other and they begin to cry. This is pretty disgusting, they says. All this ugly skin. All these bumpy bones. All this awful black hair. Where are our nice soft feathers? Where are our beautiful feet? What happened to our wonderful wings? It's probably all that Coyote's fault because she didn't do the dance right, and those four duck-Indians come over and stomp all over Coyote until she is flat like before. Then they leave. That big mistake leave, too. And that Coyote, she starts to think about a healing song.

Pssst. Pssst.

That's it, I says. It is done.

But what happens to Coyote, says Coyote. That wonderful one is still flat.

Some of these stories are flat, I says. That's what happens when you try to fix this world. This world is pretty good all by itself. Best to leave it alone. Stop messing around with it.

I better get going, says Coyote. I will tell Raven your good story. We going to fix this world for sure. We know how to do it now. We know how to do it right.

So, Coyote drinks my tea and that one leave. And I can't talk anymore because I got to watch the sky. Got to watch out for falling things that land in piles. When that Coyote's wandering around looking to fix things, nobody in this world is safe.

## MICHAEL ONDAATJE

(b. 1943)

Michael Ondaatje was nine years old when in 1952 he left his birthplace, Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), to attend Dulwich College in England. As he says, 'I was part of that colonial tradition of sending your kids off to school in England, and then you were supposed to go to Oxford or Cambridge and get a blue in tennis and return. But I never went to Oxford or Cambridge. I didn't get a blue, and I didn't return.' Instead, Ondaatje moved to Canada in 1962 to attend Bishop's University, and subsequently the University of Toronto where he received his B.A. in English (1965). Immediately after he received his M.A. (1967) from Queen's University, he began teaching in the English Department, University of Western Ontario, and in 1971 he joined the faculty of Glendon College, York University, with which he is still affiliated as a professor.

As a poet, novelist, critic, and documentary filmmaker, Ondaatje sees himself as belonging to the generation of writers that 'was the first of the real migrant tradition . . . of writers of our time—Rushdie, Ishiguro, Ben Okri, Rohinton Mistry—writers leaving and not going back, but taking their country with them to a new place.' Still, not until *Running in the Family* (1982), a book about his parents which defies generic definition in that it employs novelistic, autobiographical, poetic, and documentary elements, did Ondaatje's country find its way into his work in an extended form. His poetry books, *The Dainty Monsters* (1967), *Rat Jelly* (1973), *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do* (1979), and *Secular Love* (1984), are collections of lyrics. Through an intensely private, if somewhat exotic and violent, imagery they reflect, in his own words, 'my landscape here in Canada, my family here, certain rural landscapes here'.

In contrast, his other books seem to 'have begun with . . . the germ of document, with the rumour or incident that one reads about in the newspaper, or some paragraph in a biography.' His fascination with documents, and the way they tease the boundaries of truth and history, began with his second poetry book, *the man with seven toes* (1969), a long poem in which Ondaatje reinvents a Mrs Fraser's historical encounter with a convict in Australia. It was,

however, with the publication of his second long poem, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) the winner of a Governor General's Award, that Ondaatje's characteristic mode of writing took flight. Its collage of poetry, prose, and illustrations and its imaginative and deliberate distortion of facts about the famous American outlaw figure announce Ondaatje's preoccupation with characters that occupy extreme positions, with the romantic possibilities of life-in-art, with the limits of literary forms. 'I am not really interested in inventing a form, as such,' says Ondaatje 'I want my form to reflect as fully as possible how we think and imagine. And these keep changing, of course. With each book I try to do something I think I can't do.'

*Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), which won the *Books in Canada* First Novel Award, is about yet another legendary American figure, this time jazz musician Buddy Bolden, and is set in New Orleans. It resonates with jazz rhythms against 'a kind of mental landscape that is, as Ondaatje says, 'believable, tactile', poetic narrative in prose of a 'personal story' that 'wrestle[s] against the documentary'. In *The Skin of a Lion* (1987), which Ondaatje has called his first novel, is indeed more direct in its treatment of setting and characters, but still reflects Ondaatje's attention to language and his inclination to aestheticize experience. Set in the Toronto of the late twenties and thirties, the narrative casts its central character, Patrick Lewis, among immigrants, especially Macedonians. As the excerpt that follows demonstrates, the novel attempts to 'represent as Ondaatje says, 'the unofficial story' of Toronto's history, particularly about the even concerning the construction of the Bloor Street Viaduct and the water filtration plant by immigrants. '[R]eclaiming untold stories,' Ondaatje remarks, 'is an essential role for the writer. Especially in this country, where one can no longer trust the media.' His most recent novel, *The English Patient* (1992), which won, among other prizes, the Booker Prize, takes place at the end of the Second World War, and is set in Italy. Ondaatje, who has also written criticism and worked as an editor with Coach House Press and *Brick* magazine, lives in Toronto.