

The Quiet Act of Writing

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Acclaimed author Michael Ondaatje visited Dixon Hall on Monday (Oct. 25) as the most recent speaker in the Great Writers Series. Ondaatje, who won the Booker Prize for his novel *The English Patient*, presented a poem and read from two of his novels.



“The art of writing a novel is a quiet act that is based on my curiosity about things,” Michael Ondaatje tells a Dixon Hall audience after reading from his novels and poems. He is the author of *The English Patient*. (Photo by Sally Asher)

In her introduction of the speaker, Molly Travis, associate professor of English, called Ondaatje's work “a fabulous journey,” adding, “I can't wait until the next adventure.”

The audience in Dixon Hall was pin-drop silent as the soft-spoken Ondaatje began by reading one of his poems from *The Cinnamon Peeler* before moving on to excerpts from *Anil's Ghost* and his most recent novel, *Divisadero*.

Born and raised in what is now Sri Lanka, educated in England and currently residing in Toronto, Ondaatje is known for making place and time important parts of his novels.

“Not having all the details is important to me,” he told the audience about his process. “I like to start with a location and a time and find the scene at the end.”

Following the reading, Travis sat down with Ondaatje for an interview in which they talked about his process of writing.

“The art of writing a novel is a quiet act that is based on my curiosity about things,” Ondaatje said.

He also discussed the film adaptation of *The English Patient*, which won the Academy Award for best picture in 1996. The success of that film notwithstanding, Ondaatje shared his disappointment in the way many novels are represented on the silver screen.

“It's a very difficult thing to adapt a book to film,” Ondaatje said. “You can't remake the book with its structure and its intent. It's a completely different beast. Some of the adaptations I have seen have been almost too faithful.”

The [Great Writers Series](#), which has brought such writers as Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie and Joan Didion to campus, is funded by the Department of English Creative Writers Fund, established by an anonymous donor in 2006.