

## **Warlight by Michael Ondaatje**

### **Summary**

It is 1945, and London is still reeling from years of war. Fourteen-year-old Nathaniel and his older sister, Rachel, seemingly abandoned by their parents, have been left in the care of an enigmatic figure they call The Moth. They suspect he may be a criminal and grow both more convinced and less concerned as they come to know his eccentric crew of friends: men and women with a shared history, all of whom seem determined now to protect and educate (in rather unusual ways) the siblings. But are they really what and who they claim to be? And how should Nathaniel and Rachel feel when their mother returns without their father after months of silence—explaining nothing, excusing nothing? A dozen years later, Nathaniel begins to uncover all he didn't know or understand during that time, and it is this journey—through reality, recollection, and imagination—that is told in this magnificent novel

*From the publisher*

### **Author Biography**

Michael Ondaatje is the author of six previous novels, a memoir, a nonfiction book on film, and several books of poetry. *The English Patient* won the Booker Prize in 1992 and the Golden Man Booker in 2018; *Anil's Ghost* won the Irish Times International Fiction Prize, the Giller Prize, and the Prix Médicis. Born in Sri Lanka, Michael Ondaatje now lives in Toronto.

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### **Discussion Questions**

1. One of the quandaries at the heart of Michael Ondaatje's novel is reconciling Rose Williams's bravery, indeed her patriotic heroism, and her treatment of Nathaniel and Rachel. How do readers, and especially her (fictional) children, wrap their heads around this inconsistency? How are we to consider Rose?
2. What do you make of Moth and Darter? As Nathaniel, in the opening lines, puts it, "our parents left us in the care of two men who may have been criminals."
3. Consider this passage from the novel and how it might be said to sum up one of the story's central concerns:  
*We never know more than the surface of any relationship after a certain stage, just as those layers of chalk, built from the efforts of infinitesimal creatures, work in almost limitless time.*
4. *Warlight's* structure is anything but linear as it shifts back and forth in time and point of view. Is it confusing? Might the structure be a reflection of Nathaniel's own confusion: his sense of being able to see reality only dimly—as if through "warlight"?

5. *Follow-up to Question 4:* What are your thoughts on the second section of the novel with its sudden switch from to the third-person perspective? Did you find it difficult to integrate this outside voice into the overall narration?

6. “The lost sequence in a life, they say, is the thing we always search out,” Nathaniel tells us. How has that “lost sequence” of Nathaniel's life shaped who he is? When he and Rachel discover that the reason their mother gave for leaving them was not the true reason, how did her lie make them feel? What lasting repercussions does her untruthfulness leave?

7. What does Nathaniel resolve within himself by the novel's end—what understanding has he come to? Or are things left unresolved for him—and for us? Is there a satisfactory resolution at the conclusion?

Book club questions courtesy of LitLovers.

(<https://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/fiction/11276-warlight-ondaatje>)