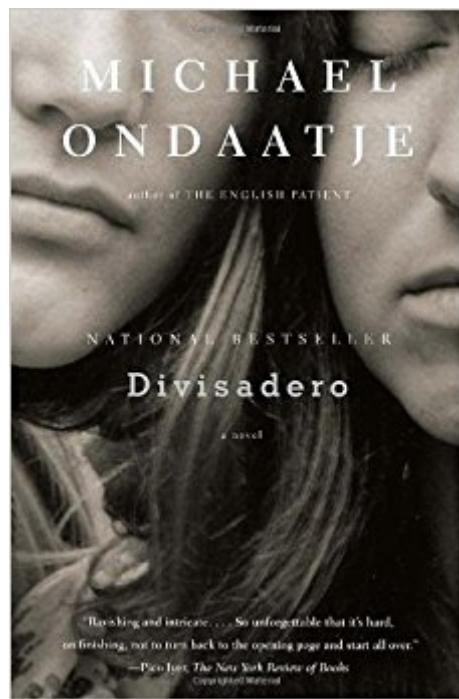


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Divisadero



Synopsis

From the celebrated author of *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost* comes a remarkable, intimate novel of intersecting lives that ranges across continents and time. In the 1970s in Northern California a father and his teenage daughters, Anna and Claire, work their farm with the help of Coop, an enigmatic young man who makes his home with them. Theirs is a makeshift family, until it is shattered by an incident of violence that sets fire to the rest of their lives. *Divisadero* takes us from San Francisco to the raucous backrooms of Nevada's casinos and eventually to the landscape of southern France. As the narrative moves back and forth through time and place, we find each of the characters trying to find some foothold in a present shadowed by the past.

Book Information

Paperback: 273 pages

Publisher: Vintage International; 1st edition (April 22, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0307279324

ISBN-13: 978-0307279323

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 0.8 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (109 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #738,085 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #144 inÂ Books > Literature & Fiction > World Literature > Canadian #3149 inÂ Books > Literature & Fiction > British & Irish > Historical #38280 inÂ Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Historical

Customer Reviews

It is difficult to write a review for a novel that rises above superlatives. Ondaatje is one of the world's greatest living writers, and *Divisadero* is his finest novel. At times it rises to the level of true greatness, and it is the most challenging novel I have ever read. It is also my new favorite. Be forewarned: this is not a light read. The prose is smooth and lyrical and unmistakably Ondaatje. The novel focuses on memory, the past, and violence as his prior works have but *Divisadero* takes the concept one step further: it is separated into three distinct sections, overlapping enough only to give the reader a reason to continue reading. It reads more like a collection of three novellas than it does a novel. It also travels in reverse chronological order. I considered the opening section to be the main story, with the following stories as the reflections spoken of in the novel's last line. This is not a novel that concerns itself heavily with plot. It is an exploration of its themes first and foremost. I don't

want to speak for the author, but it seems to me it was not written to be a page turner. If that is what you're expecting I think you'll probably be disappointed. Any hope of that will be gone with the abrupt end to the opening section. But don't give up because of it. There are many novels with compelling stories: there are few that treat its reader with as much respect as *Divisadero*. Ondaatje tells you a story, but not all of it. He leaves the unwritten to the reader to piece together. What does it mean that Coop/Anna and Segura both have blue tables they treasure? What does it mean that Coop becomes a card player and Segura names Ramon's sidekick 'One-eyed Jaques'?

There's much to enjoy in this new Ondaatje novel--all his usual gifts are on display--but I was disappointed. First, it seems too many serious writers these days are obsessed with writing itself as a metaphor for life and all its existential complexity. Ondaatje tries to include the "world" in his tortured literary effort--e.g., clunky references to the two Gulf Wars--but in the end the novel and its concerns feel terribly self-involved and self-referential, like he's finally given into a private world just as his characters Lucien Segura, Rafael, and Anna have done. Art as an escape from truth. Nietzsche deserves a better interpretation! Second, I found it needlessly confusing. I know we're not supposed to admit this -- we're supposed to pretend that it all makes sense--but does it? Early on Anna recounts a shared memory in the barn with her sister Claire. She says that "even now" they remember it differently. When is even now? She runs away from home and never goes back as far as we know, so when do she and Anna get together and compare memories? Also, how can her telling of Lucien's life story contain resonances with Coop's life after she left, a life of which she knows nothing? Are we to believe in magic here, or are we to believe that the family at some point reunites? Don't get me wrong, the book is a pleasurable serious read. I read it in one sitting (one long plane ride). But it became increasingly disappointing as it went on. He refuses to tell a straight story--I get it--but the (perhaps) unintended effect of his narrative stubbornness is that as the book went on I wanted basically one thing: to know what happened to Coop, whom he abandons at mid-book.

Divisadero, one of Michael Ondaatje's characters helpfully informs us, is a street in San Francisco, a former dividing line between the city and the open area of the Presidio. Then again, the character tells us, perhaps the name comes from the Spanish *divisar*, meaning to "gaze at something from a distance," from a vantage point where one can see far. While the actual street and the city of San Francisco have little significance to the story, both of these inferred meanings come into play as Ondaatje unwinds two parallel tales, nearly a century apart, of natural and acquired families, of

passions and betrayals and deaths, and of orphaned children and equally abandoned parents. DIVISADERO, the book, offers two intertwined stories, connected through the peculiar literary researches of one of the modern characters named Anna. Anna specializes in writing biographies of history's secondary characters, the unknown individuals who orbit the lives of the famous. She has chosen for her latest subject an obscure, one-eyed, turn-of-the-century French poet named Lucien Segura. Anna's explorations lead her to occupy the last house where Segura lived. While there, she meets and interviews Segura's semi-adopted son Rafael, ultimately engaging him in a sexual affair. In a dreamlike recounting of Segura's life that appears meant to be viewed as Anna's biographical voice, we later learn that Lucien was more successful as the anonymous author of a series of light escapist fictions based on his romantic imaginings of a lost love than he was as a poet.

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