Ondaatje’s *The Cat’s Table* is not your average coming-of-age narrative. While all of the elements of a typical Bildungsroman are present – a youth on a journey, growth and change – the novel manages to exceed the genre’s limitations by pinpointing an elusive truth about the nature of our reality: that it is a fragile illusion, at best. In fact, it is the dualistic nature of the narrative’s central perspective that leads the reader to this ultimate truth, for it simultaneously arises from the eleven-year old version of the naïve and “peculiar” Michael (Ondaatje 28), and his older, reflective counterpart. In other words, Michael is at the same time experiencing and re-experiencing his own life, ultimately forcing him to re-evaluate past events (specifically those which occurred during his twenty-one days aboard the *Oronsay*) in light of the knowledge he has gained since being on the ship. It is the reflective quality of his inquiry into the past, then, which ultimately teaches Michael that his reality while aboard the *Oronsay* is highly subjective.

Indeed, *The Cat’s Table* is from the outset about a journey: the eleven-year old Michael is sailing across many oceans in order to reunite with a mother he barely remembers (Ondaatje 114), and embarks on this trip without “joy or fear” (6) of what lay ahead. What is interesting, though, is that the *Oronsay* provides us with a metaphor for a kind of contained universe (263); one that abides by an unspoken, hierarchal order (38). Michael – who is seated at “the least privileged” (8) table and so, is seemingly invisible (10) – boards the *Oronsay* in a completely neutral state of contemplation, where he is liable to be influenced by the ‘universe’ around him. Thus, we can conclude that the ship
represents our perceived reality, the reality we see before us, while Michael is that being who is simultaneously a subject and an object, thereby reinforcing his enlightened perspective as an adult. Essentially, he only gains *true* knowledge outside of the ship’s “seemingly imaginary world” (13) and so, it is arguable that the ‘reality’ of the life aboard the *Oronsay* was superficial – that none of what Michael saw was entirely true. Via a comparison of his past and “present” perceptions, then, we come to better understand the implicit truth present within the narrative.

When Michael begins his journey, he has already been inaugurated into a world of secrecy. His scattered and largely forgotten upbringing (Ondaatje 11, 27), he says, has actually contributed to a “skill in lying” (13). As such, Michael is incredibly sensitive to the network of secrets around him. He is even given the nickname Mynah by his friends Cassius and Ramadhin, which may be translated to mean “an unofficial bird, and unreliable, its voice not fully trustworthy” (146). Later in the novel, too, the boys tie themselves to the deck of the ship during a terrible storm, and lie about it to the authorities on the Orient Line (88, 93), ultimately contributing to the aforementioned system of ambiguities. Michael’s lies, however, are only the tip of the iceberg. His own aunt, Flavia Prinns, is a known gossip and *tries to outdo an eleven-year old* when they are speaking of the mysterious prisoner aboard the ship (17). It is only when Miss Lasqueti – perhaps the novel’s wisest character – denounces Flavia’s suspicions (18) that Michael understands his aunt may have been lying to him. Furthermore, one of the members of the “Jankla Troupe” – a group of circus performers aboard the ship – turns out to be more than he seems. The Hyderabad Mind, though simultaneously involved in one of those great secrets only revealed to Michael years later, often amazes his audience with what
seem like psychic capabilities. While he is still aboard the ship, though, Michael finds that The Hyderabad Mind accomplishes many of his tricks via deception; he will steal a passenger’s watch only to miraculously return it to him later during a show (45). It is because of his disillusionment that Michael “witnesses for the first time what possibly took place behind the thin curtain of art,” he feels that he “could almost see, or least [] was aware of, the skeleton within” (45). Nevertheless, Michael’s moments of disenchantment while on the Oronsay are only shadows of the more destabilizing discoveries he makes as an adult.

Until he boards the ship, Michael’s experiences with adults were both limited and confusing. As such, it comes as no surprise to find that he misjudges many of the people around him; specifically the central female characters within the story – his cousin Emily de Saram and the mysterious Miss Lasqueti. While it is clear that Michael has had little to no experience with females (29), he completely undermines the strength of both women because of his limited perspective. For instance, Michael has trouble identifying with his cousin Emily even though they share a relatively parentless past (11). Although he learns a great deal from her, it is seemingly impossible for him to learn anything about her while he is aboard the ship: “there was a wide gulf between Emily’s existence and mine, and I would never be able to cross it” (113) and he believes she lives a “disguised life” (118). In the same way, Miss Lasqueti is initially perceived as an odd and insatiable spinster (73) who may or may not have a preference for much younger men (211). What Michael discovers, though, is that both women have over-sexualized pasts that have resulted in a kind of guardedness about whom they trust. Emily, when she was younger, may have been harassed by one of her uncles (11) and even while she is aboard the ship, she is
abused by the Hyderabad Mind (170). Accordingly, when Michael confronts Emily about their journey later in the narrative, he has no idea that their adventures on the boat affected her as much (if not more than) they did him. Upon gaining this new insight, then, Michael is able to better understand what really happened on the ship, as well as the character of his distant cousin.

Comparatively, Miss Lasqueti is sadly misjudged by the boys. It is only when Michael reads a letter intended for Emily that Miss Lasqueti’s true nature is revealed. Remember, the boys were under the impression that Miss Lasqueti was an odd woman who sometimes disguised herself as a man. Moreover, the boys believe that – like Emily – Miss Lasqueti had some integral part in the novel’s climax: the escape of a convict aboard the ship. However, years later Miss Lasqueti sends Michael a letter with an additional envelope intended for his cousin. Instead of following her instructions, Michael reads both his and Emily’s letters only to find that Miss Lasqueti had her own secrets that she kept even from those she could have helped. When Miss Lasqueti was a young woman, she entertained an affair with an art collector named Horace Johnson (218). But the affair turned sour: Horace ends up stabbing her in the stomach with a pair of scissors (227), a wound which inflicts her as much mentally as it does physically. Though Michael does not comment on his new discovery regarding Miss Lasqueti, it may be assumed that this information moved him to a better and truer understanding of the woman: that she “did not control any of the paths [she] thought [she] had freely chosen” (222).

While the actual climax of the novel may be when the prisoner – Niemeyer – who is being held captive aboard the Oronsay alights over the side of the ship, I like to think
that the pinnacle of the narrative is the moment when the connection between a small
subgroup of passengers is revealed. Throughout *The Cat’s Table* we have been
introduced to a variety of interesting though secretive characters. However, three of these
characters in particular – namely the Hyderabad Mind, the Prisoner and the deaf-mute
Asuntha – are related in a way that could not have been foreseen by anyone aboard the
ship. Until he investigates the details surrounding the prisoner’s escape, Michael believes
the events of that night to be entirely coincidental. All he sees is a wounded prisoner
trying to escape, the abduction of Asuntha, and their subsequent fall into the sea
(Ondaatje 241-3). Indeed, even Michael laments that “[he] didn’t know if what [he] had
seen was what [he] thought [he] had seen” (238). When Michael reaches England,
though, he is able to learn the underlying details of the incident: Niemeyer is actually
Asuntha’s father, and Sunil (*The Hyderabad Mind*) was deeply involved in the attempt to
free Asuntha’s father (178-86). Michael’s initial anger because of Asuntha’s needless
death is thereby diminished, for he understands that the daughter, both literally and
figuratively, held the key to her father’s escape (255). Thus, Michael only gains these
elements of *true* knowledge once he leaves the confines of the *Oronsay*.

Although it is “painful to realize that nothing [is] permanent” (72) in terms of
one’s memories, Michael eventually comes to the understanding that the reality around
him is variable. However, it is only because of Michael’s reflection on past events that he
comes to understand this critical truth. Ondaatje’s genius, then, can be considered his
structuring the novel in such a way that Michael is simultaneously living and re-living his
own experiences, for the reader becomes explicitly aware that the events related from
Michael’s past have been altered and influenced by the knowledge he has gained since
arriving in England: Michael recognizes that his memories are fallible in that they may be affected by the “memor[ies] of [his] own from later” (199). In conclusion, “it is only we, the spectators, who can read [a] face as someone who knows the future” (200). In other words, only when we come to know the details surrounding our pasts may we surpass the limitations of our contained universe to attain true knowledge.
Works Cited