



***Warlight*, by Michael Ondaatje**
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, October 2018

Earlier this year, Michael Ondaatje's luminous novel, *The English Patient*, won the Golden Booker Prize, judging it the best past Booker Prize winner in the last fifty years. *Warlight*—Ondaatje's first book in seven years—is a worthy addition to the esteemed author's canon.

Set in post-war London, *Warlight* begins with an intriguing opening line: "In 1945 our parents went away and left us in the care of two men who may have been criminals." Teenage Nathaniel, the book's narrator, and his sister Rachel are startled when their mother Rose announces that she's going to Singapore to join their father who has taken a marketing position there. They watch Rose hurriedly pack a steamer truck full of her best clothes and favorite books.

Before she leaves, Rose explains that Walter, a lodger in their home, would look after them in her absence. Nathaniel and Rachel think him a bit odd. Walter keeps curious hours, and the kids call him The Moth, behind his back. Norman, another of Rose's past friends, also takes up residence in their house. They deem him The Darter because he comes and goes, often on dubious business. A former boxer, The Darter smuggles greyhounds on a mussel boat at night for illegal racing, often including Nathaniel on his jaunts. Other characters, such as The Darter's girlfriend, Olive, a glamorous ethnographer, pop in and out.

One afternoon, however, Nathaniel and Rachel discover their mother's steamer truck, still packed and unsent to Singapore, in their basement. They wonder: *Where is Rose? Did she really go to Singapore? If not, where is she and why did she leave her children in such a hurry?* Pressed for clues about Rose, The Moth and The Darter are not forthcoming with information.

Years later, Nathaniel becomes an archivist with British Foreign Office, hoping that his work will help him uncover details of his mother's mysterious life. As he delves

into wartime and post-war documents, he learns about Rose's involvement in intelligence operations, as well as her connections to The Moth and The Darter.

The title *Warlight* refers to the official name given to lights that were allowed for emergency transportation during the London Blitz, when the rest of the city was darkened. "Warlight," indeed, is a fitting metaphor for a secretive tale cloaked in darkness.