*The English Patient*

Michael Ondaatje, [*The English Patient*](http://www.amazon.com/The-English-Patient-Michael-Ondaatje/dp/0679745203) (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1992)

Summary:

“Everything that ever happened to me that was important happened in the desert,” says the English patient, a mysterious and knowledgeable man burned beyond any type of recognition. In 1945, Hana, a twenty-year-old Canadian Army nurse who refuses to leave an Italian monastery turned hospital, cares for him. The English patient is a *tabula rasa* onto which each of the villa’s inhabitants projects ideas: Hana, the nurse who sees the English patient as a saint/father-figure; Kip, the sapper who adores the west yet appreciates the patient’s lack of national identity; and Caravaggio, the thumbless thief who believes the patient to be a spy. Canadian author Michael Ondaatje spent eight years writing *The English Patient*, which won the Booker Prize, Britain’s most prestigious literary award.

Themes, Symbols, & Motifs:

* Love. The reality of love transcends ethnicity, time, geography, death, and marriage. The connections made with people go beyond borders and wars. Love is the only sacred thing.
* Bodies. Bodies are maps of a person’s past, revealing an individual’s history through scars, expressions, hair, and skin color. “We are communal histories, communal books.”
* Setting. Even in dead places—the desert, a bombed villa—there is still life and beauty. Nationality disappears—something Almásy greatly desires—and one can forge a new identity in a new setting without being owned or labeled. But to be nationless is to be without a past.
* Words. “Words, Caravaggio. They have a power.” For Katharine, words give clarity and shape, but for Almásy, “words ben[d] emotions like sticks in water.”
* Sensuality. Katharine’s voice, the plum in the patient’s mouth, Kip’s hair being stroked, and all the instances of sex. The book’s scenes engage a full array of senses.
* Reading. Reading leads to knowledge, wisdom, and intimacy.
* Herodotus’s *Histories*. The heavily annotated volume is called the English patient’s “holy book” and “guidebook.” Drawings and portions of other books are pasted within alongside letters, maps, and postcards. Like the book, history itself is dynamic, alterable. Almásy creates his own reality, and each reality is equal in value but different in content and form.

Discussion Questions:

1. Discuss the religious allusions in Chapter I.
2. Almásy believes that love disassembles him. Does love truly dissemble? Should it?
3. Why does Katharine physically abuse Almásy?
4. Each character is certainly changed by the war, but does each character *grow* over the course of the book?
5. Why is *The English Patient* written in a nonlinear, piecemeal format with multiple POVs, tenses, and settings?
6. What image or phrase stuck with you the most, and why?
7. Why is there such an abundance of personification?
8. The English patient does many things with Katharine’s dead body. Why?
9. Referencing Hiroshima, Kip believes “[the west] would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation.” Do you agree?
10. Is Almásy the protagonist and WWII the antagonist?
11. How do the characters Patrick, Madox, and Katharine each die in a “holy place,” and why is this important? Does the English patient?