Part 1

Jane Austen’s Persuasion (22) = Austen’s 1816 novel (her last) tells the story of Anne Elliot who breaks off an engagement to Frederick Wentworth, because of her snobbish family’s persuasion. After a decade Anne sees him again, and realizes she never stopped loving him.

minotaur (25) = In Greek mythology, a creature with the head of a bull on the body of a man who inhabited the center of the Cretan labyrinth (eventually killed by the Athenian Theseus).

palmyrah (26) = a tall palm native to tropical regions capable of growing up to 30m high.

toddy (26) = drink.

Commission on race-riots (26) = Ondaatje’s reference to his uncle Ned as heading a commission on race-riots is ironic, considering the uncle secludes his family in the governor’s home. While the ethnic violence had not yet escalated to the point of civil war, tensions were certainly visible during Ondaatje’s time visited Sri Lanka in the late 1970’s.

Part 2

the Rebels (32) = the Irish Republican Army (IRA) fought against British forces days after Ireland had declared its independence. The war lasted from January 1919–July 1921, and it marked the end of British rule in Ireland.

Ceylon Light Infantry (CLI) (33) = oldest regiment in the Sri Lankan Army.

Isadora Duncan (33) = an American dancer, known for natural, improvised movements.

Lindberg’s baby (37) = refers to the infamous March 1932 kidnapping of the son of the famous aviator Charles Lindbergh. The toddler was abducted from his home, and two months later his body was discovered; the crime and trial were highly publicized.

Wimbledon in shorts (37) = a break from what was at the time deemed appropriate for women.

the body of Valentino (37) = Rudolph Valentino was a cinema sex symbol of the 1920’s, known as the “Latin Lover.” He died of multiple internal infections at the age of 31. Thousands of weeping women filled the streets after his death, mobbed the funeral parlor where his body lay in state, and generally created disorder in NYC.

C.B. Cochran (37) = Sir Charles Black Cochran was an English theatrical manager who produced several musicals and plays.

pythons were decreasing in Africa (37) = the population declined as they were captured to be used for luxury leather goods.

Charlie Chaplin (38) = English comedic actor and filmmaker who rose to prominence in the 1920’s, the silent film era.

Kandy dance (38) = dance from Kandy, in the central highlands region in Sri Lanka, originally from an exorcism ritual known as the Kohamba Kankariya.

“Love Birds,” “Caught Cheating,” and “Forbidden Love” (38) = popular local films at the time.

fighting in Manchuria (38) = the Japanese began their invasion of Manchuria (northeast China); fighting went on from September 1932 to February 1933, and after that Manchuria became a Japanese “puppet state” (a state controlled by a foreign country) until the end of WWII.

Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British, & Burgher blood (41) = different ethnic groups and colonial influences in Sri Lanka, as mentioned in the Setting section of this Study Guide.

the Pettah market (42) = an open market in the Colombo suburb of Pettah, specializing in gold and jewelry trading.

“A Moonlight Bay” and “A Fine Romance” (46) = famous songs in the 1930’s; “A Fine Romance” is one of the well-known songs by the American composer Jerome Kern.

Sinhalese baiha (46) = dance and folk music that originated from Afro-Sinhalese communities of Portuguese, African and native Sinhalese people.

“Rio Rita” = name of 1932 musical film.

polecats (47) = weasels.

Wall Street crash (48) = American Stock Market Crash of 1929 led to the Great Depression in the US and affected other industrialized countries in the world.

lime-burners and fishmongers (48) = a lime burner had to heat chalk in a kiln to make quicklime, used in mortar; it was a dirty, dangerous job: the dust it produced could cause blindness and the carbon monoxide could make the workers faint and fall into the kiln. A fishmonger is an old term for a fisherman and, more vulgarly, a pimp (see Hamlet).

Gandhi enclosure (49) = area at the racetrack where gamblers bet the least money; over-crowded, specifically for poor people. It is a reference to Gandhi, who fought for justice and helped the poor.

coming of the Magi (49) = the three wise men, who traveled with gifts to worship Jesus after he was born in Bethlehem.

Japanese planes (50) = a reference to the Battle of Ceylon (also known as Easter Sunday Raid, April 2942), a Japanese air attack on Sri Lanka that targeted British warships and air bases. Japan wanted to force Britain’s fleet to leave Asia.

“the horse’s mouth” (51) = meaning from the highest authority. The origin of this comes from horse races where the people wished to get the best information possible on the horse, which usually came from the trainer or the stable manager, someone in the inner circle who knows what’s going on.

Ambalangoda (51) = a large town in southern Sri Lanka famous for its hand-painted masks used in the traditional devil dances, which come from the belief that some illnesses caused by “unseen hands,” could be cured through dancing.

catarrh (52) = an excessive discharge or build up of mucus in the nose or the throat, associated with inflammation.

Frangipani (52) = type of tree and flower common in the tropics; its botanic name is plumeria; known as the Temple Flower in Sri Lanka.

a Q.C. (53) = a Queen’s Counsel, i.e. a jurist or barrister (attorney).

dipsomania (58) = alcoholism; one who suffers from dipsomania is called a dipsomaniac.

Rodgers and Hart (59) = a famous American composing duo, who created famous musicals from the 1920’s to mid-1940’s, such as Pal Joey and Babes in Arms.
Part 3

Henri Matisse (61) = French expressionist painter (1869-1954) known for color. Matisse deeply disappointed his father when he became a painter instead of a lawyer. The title of this section comes from a work by the Sri Lankan poet Lakdasa Wikkramasinha on page 85, which refers to Matisse’s paintings of reclining nudes. In 1942, Matisse painted “L’Asie.” Search for the image, and note how the image relates to what Ondaatje and the poet Wikkramasinha write about regarding foreigner’s views of Sri Lanka.

Tabula (63) = board game similar to backgammon. The movement of the pieces may echo how the possession of Sri Lanka went back and forth between the different European powers and the dice rolls may reflect the way in which Sri Lankans didn’t have control over their own country. The title may also be a play on “tabula rasa,” Latin for “blank slate,” and the theory that we are all born without preconceptions at birth; all knowledge is gained through experience and perception. With this in mind, consider the narrator’s objective in returning to Sri Lanka and writing the book.

cassowary (63) = a very large flightless bird, also considered the most dangerous bird in the world due to its weight, claws, and aggression.

desertum (63) = Latin for desert or wasteland.

Moorish (63) = this refers to Medieval Arabic peoples of northern Africa.
satys (64) = in Greek mythology, the half-man, half-goat companions to Pan and Dionysus.
durian (69) = delicious but stinky southeast Asian fruit.

bullocks (69) = young bulls.
kabaragoya and thalagoya (73) = Sri Lankan monitor lizards.
skinks (71) = another kind of lizard: long, skinny, and snake-like.

Paul Bowles (76) = American author who wrote travel literature, specifically of Africa and Spain, which explored the dilemma of the outsider in an alien society, the gap in understanding between two cultures, and the transmutation of identities.
vattacka (76) = type of vegetable.

Carnegie Hall (76) = concert venue in NYC.
maggie (76) = a crow.
pappadans (77) = large thin, crisp cracker made from a type of bean flour, common in Sri Lankan and Indian meals and snacks.
brinjals (77) = eggplant.

betel (77) = southeast Asian plant with leaves that are commonly chewed with the areca nut as a mild stimulant.

karapothas (78) = beetles with white spots on them. On page 80, Ondaatje’s niece calls foreigners this term because, like the beetles, they “never grew ancient here,” but just admired the landscape, disliked the natives, and left.

Edward Lear (78) = British painter of the 19th century who spent a year traveling in India and Ceylon in 1873-74.

Taormina (78) = a commune and small town on the east coast of Sicily, Italy.

like Jonahs (78) = In the Bible’s Old Testament, God asks Jonah to prophecy against the people of Nineveh because of their wickedness; instead, Jonah tries to flee by sailing away. There is a great storm that Jonah recognizes is because he abandoned God’s request. He is then thrown overboard by sailors and swallowed by a whale. After three days of praying in the whale’s belly, Jonah is spit out by the whale, and he returns to Nineveh to fulfill God’s request.

the prodigal (76) = the Prodigal Son is a parable in the Bible about a son who demands his father give him his inheritance. After wasting this fortune (the word “prodigal” means “wastefully extravagant”), the son goes hungry during a famine. Repentant, the son’s return home is celebrated by his father with a feast.

D.H. Lawrence (78, 79) = English novelist, poet and painter, a major figure in English literature. Lawrence traveled extensively with his wife in the early 1900’s. His home country expelled him in 1917 (during WWI they even suspected he was a spy for Germany), and he lived much of his life outside England. Lawrence's best-known work is *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, first published privately in Italy in 1928. It tells of the love affair between a wealthy, married woman, and a man who works on her husband’s estate; the book was banned for a time in both UK and the US as pornographic.

Leonard Woolf (78) = English political theorist, author, publisher and civil servant in Ceylon from 1904-1911; husband of author Virginia Woolf

Pablo Neruda (80) = a Chilean poet and diplomat, Neruda was a supporter of Communism and when it was outlawed in Chile in 1948, a warrant was issued for his arrest. An exile, he traveled extensively outside of Chile; yet when Allende came to power, he returned to Chile. Neruda wrote in a variety of styles including surrealistic poems, historical epics, overtly political manifestos, odes, and love poems.

Burma and Josie Bliss of “The widower’s tango (80) = Neruda had an affair with Bliss in Burma. “The Widower's Tango” is his 1928 poem about his escape from her, whom he called an “amorous terrorist.”

Residence on Earth (80) = collection of poem Neruda wrote over two decades (1925-1945), while a self-exiled diplomat in South Asia.

Robert Knox (81) = the British sea captain who landed on Sri Lanka in 1659 and was captured by the king of Kandy, along with his fellow sailors. Knox escaped after nearly twenty years and wrote an account of his experience, a story that was the basis for the novel *Robinson Crusoe* [see Defoe below]. Also note that on page 206, Ondaatje quotes from Knox’s account.

no more than Desdemona could understand truly the Moor’s military exploits (81) = in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Desdemona is young daughter of a Venetian senator who falls in love with the Moor, Othello.

A perfumed sea (81) = this phrase is an allusion to Edgar Allen Poe’s poem “To Helen,” which celebrates the power of a woman’s beauty (the allusion is to Helen of Troy) to draw home the wanderer.

Defoe (82) = Daniel Defoe is most famous for the novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), a fictional autobiography of the title character, a castaway who spends years on a remote tropical island near Trinidad, encountering cannibals, captives, and mutineers before being rescued.

George Keyt (85) = considered Sri Lanka’s most distinguished modern painter, Keyt’s style is influenced by Cubism and by his contemporary Henri Matisse (note the title of this part of the
novel. He was also influenced by Buddhism and Hindu myth in his works. Even though born to a wealthy family, Keyt rejected their wealthy, European-focused perspective.

Lakdasa Wikramasinha (85) = a contemporary of Ondaatje, Wikramasinha wrote in both English and Sinhala. He was politically active and had to publish his books in other countries because of censorship. The name of one of his popular poems was “The Cobra.”

Anuradhapura stone (87) = Anuradhapura is one of the oldest most consistently inhabited places in the world; one of the ancient capitals of Sri Lanka, it still holds some of the most well-preserved stone ruins; it is now a UNESCO World Heritage site.

kurumba (90) = green, young coconut.

Sigiria graffiti (92) = poem verses written on the smooth rock surface of Sigiriya; Sigiriya is in central Sri Lanka, a massive column of rock nearly 200m high. According to an ancient chronicle, it was chosen by King Kasyapa in the fifth century as his new capital. He built his palace on the top of this rock and decorated its sides with colorful frescoes. On a small plateau about halfway up the side of this rock he built a gateway in the form of an enormous lion. The name of this place is derived from this structure (Sigiriya means “the Lion Rock”); it is a UNESCO World Heritage site and is the most visited site in Sri Lanka.

cinnamon peeler (95) = one who harvests the bark of the cinnamon tree using a highly skilled, traditional technique, handed down almost unchanged from ancient times. In Sri Lanka it is still the exclusive occupation of the Salagama caste. Twice a year the shoots of the tree are cut and in an intricate difficult process, using the distinctive tool of the trade, a small curved knife called a kothathva, the peeler deftly marks two parallel slits on the stick and eases the bark free in one piece.

Part 4

aspersions (106) = slander; defamation of someone’s character.

Negombo (107) = a major city on the west coast of Sri Lanka.

Miss Havisham (111) = a key character in Charles Dickens’ 1861 novel Great Expectations. Miss Havisham is old, decrepit, confused, self-centered woman—a symbol of a wasted life.

The Mikado, A Midsummer Night’s Dream (111) = The Mikado is an 1885 Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera considered especially exotic when it premiered in London because it was set in Japan; A Midsummer Night’s Dream is Shakespeare’s 1595 comedy about exchanging identities and the shifting nature of love.

Boralesgamuwa (111) = a suburb of Colombo on Sri Lanka’s west coast.

chrysalis (113) = the pupa stage of the butterfly.

Rinderpest Fever (115) = an infectious viral disease of cattle.

Italian prisoners during the war (121) = because of Egyptian instability, Italian prisoners of war who were captured in 1941 during the North Africa campaign were evacuated to India, Ceylon, South Africa and Australia.

mastectomy (123) = surgical removal of one or both breasts.

Wandering Jew (124) = a legend of a Jew who taunted Jesus on the way to the Crucifixion and was then cursed to walk the earth until the Second Coming; also, the name for a prolific plant that grows well indoors and outdoors.

Rudyard Kipling (124) = British short story writer, poet, and novelist born in Bombay in 1885; well known for his poems about British soldiers in India. At the age of 5 he was sent to live with foster parents in Britain, where he was unhappy. Kipling travelled all around the world and went back and forth from India to Britain.

“bucket shops” (125) = fraudulent or scam businesses.

Mahaweli (126) = the longest river in Sri Lanka, over 335km long.

Moon Plains (126) = an area in the south-central highlands of Sri Lanka, rich in biodiversity; it is near Nuwara Eliya; there are rivers, waterfalls, grasslands, and mountains. It is now a protected national park that attracts tourists.

Jesus lizards (128) = small lizards known for their ability to run across water, over a distance of 4m.

scimitar-babblers (128) = birds typically found in tropical jungles in Asia. Due to their rather short wings, they do not fly well; they are loud, with long, curved bills and strong legs.

Part 5

“Harbour Lights” and “Sea of Heartbreak” (133) = Both songs express nostalgia for childhood. In “Harbour Lights” the line “you were my rock, but never my stepping stone” could connect to Ondaatje’s search for his family history and identity. A line from “Sea of Heartbreak” is used in the chapter (“the lights in the harbour don’t shine for me.”); the song expresses nostalgia for the land from the perspective of being at sea.

string hoppers, egg rulang, papadams, date chutney, seeni sambol, mallung, brinjals, buffalo curd, jaggery sauce (137) = typical Sri Lankan dishes.

carbolic soap (138) = a mild disinfectant soap that used to be used in hospitals.

Pears Transparent Soap (143) = the first translucent soap on the market, made by the British.

Rumi (143) = Rumi wrote poetry in 13th-century Persia. He has been widely translated and continues to be quite popular today; his poetry focused on mystical and spiritual journeys.

Merwin (143) = W.S. Merwin is an American poet known for his prose-narrative style; he is also a respected translator of literature written in Spanish, French, Latin, Italian, Sanskrit, Yiddish, Middle English, and Japanese. Ondaatje refers carrying Merwin’s translations with him to Sri Lanka, which is interesting, given the reason he travels to his home country.

val oora (141) = a wild boar.

pakispetti box (145) = is a small and fragile wooden box

Joseph Conrad (149) = Ondaatje writes about Doris entering the tunnel’s “darkness” to talk to Mervyn as “a moment only Conrad could have interpreted”. Conrad, a Polish writer who spent most of his life in England but always considered himself a Pole, wrote Heart of Darkness in 1899, one of the most famous novels in English, which deals with European colonialism of Africa, themes of savagery/civilization, sanity, imperialism, and racism.

Tennyson and early Yeats (149) = Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was an English poet. W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) was an Irish poet. Both poets are known for their lyricism.

Prime Minister of Ceylon assassinated by a Buddhist monk (151) = A dramatic story in Sri Lankan history. On September 26, 1959, the fourth Prime Minister of Ceylon (S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike) died.
in the hospital after being assassinated by a Buddhist monk (Talduwe Somarama). The monk had entered the private residence of the PM and since he was a member of the Buddhist clergy, he was not searched for weapons. Hence, when the Bandaranaike went to greet him, Somarama took out a revolver and shot the PM. Somarama was hanged in 1962.

the D.T.'s (157) = abbreviation for the Delirium Tremors, the shaking suffered by alcoholics from alcohol withdrawal.

hopper (158) = called aoppa in Sinhalese; similar to a crepe, made from a fermented batter of rice flour, coconut milk and a dash of palm toddy, which lends a sour flavor.

Camelot (159) = the castle and court of the legendary King Arthur.

Part 6

J.M. Barrie and Michael Arlen (169) = Barrie was the writer and dramatist who created Peter Pan. Arlen is an Armenian writer from the 1920s most known for his satirical romances set in England.

“kiss me once...”(174) = lyrics from the popular WWII song, “It’s Been a Long Long Time,” written by Sammy Cahn; the song is from the perspective of a lover welcoming home a soldier from war.

End of Jacobean tragedies...“with the mercy of distance” write the histories. (179) = The Jacobean tragedies are revenge plays or tragedies full of gruesome and often darkly comic violence. Hamlet is an example: the curtain closes with a pile of dead bodies on the stage. In his histories, Shakespeare loosely adapts historical figures and events.

Fortinbras (179) = Fortinbras is the Norwegian prince in Hamlet; he seeks revenge for his father's death, by attempting to reclaim the land his father lost.

Edgar (179) = Edgar is a character in Shakespeare’s tragedy King Lear; he is the son of one of the kingdom’s most powerful men, easily tricked by his illegitimate brother, and falsely accused of plotting to kill his father, Gloucester. He then disguises himself as a beggar to evade his father’s men, then by his impersonation he helps his father and avenges his brother's treason.

“I am the son who...” (180) = another reference to father/son relationships, connecting to the Biblical parable of The Prodigal Son and to Edgar from King Lear [both allusions explained earlier].

“Sweet Marjoram” (180) = an aromatic plant used to heal wounds; the phrase appears in King Lear, as it is Edgar’s password to his father Gloucester to confirm his identity as his son.

Part 7

thanikama (185) = (Sinhala) on page 190, Ondaatje defines the words as “aloneness”; solitariness, isolation, loneliness.

Mutwal (187) = suburb of Colombo on the west coast.

Orion (187) = a hunter in Greek mythology and a very bright constellation of stars in the shape of a hunter with bow and arrow.

Midsummer Night’s Dream (188; also alluded to earlier on 111—see that entry) = here Ondaatje brings up some of the characters: Titania, the queen of the fairies; Lysander, one of the four Athenian lovers whose identities get mixed up; and the weaver Nick Bottom, a humorous buffoon who is turned into a creature with an ass’s head by Oberon, king of the fairies, who wants to punish his wife; despite this Titania falls in love with Bottom, to great comedic effect. Note that the play is also alluded to on page 188.

“green hats” (189) = in Shakespeare, green connotes virility, a color associated with lovers; interestingly, in Chinese the phrase “green hat” sounds like the word for “cuckold.”

desk of calamander (190) = calamander wood is a valuable wood found in Southeast Asia.

Peppermint Twist (194) = a rock-and-roll song written by Joey Dee and Henry Glover; the twist was a 1950 dance craze.

cerebral haemorrhage (196) = brain stroke.

Perahera (197) = grand Buddhist festival with dances and a decorated elephant.

the coup case (197) = A failed military coup in 1962 in which Christian military leaders tried to overthrow the Ceylonese democratic government, but the leaders were arrested and the coup failed.

Goethe (“Oh, who will hear the sufferings / Of the man whose balm turned poison?”) (198) = Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is the author of The Sorrows of Young Werther, his most famous Romantic work (considered by Napoleon one of the greatest works in European history). This book had a huge cultural impact, especially on young German lovers who found themselves depressed after reading the book; it led to several suicides.

“see devil” place (199) = A home of contentment and peace.

in the Volks (203) = in the Volkswagen.

Acknowledgements

“for my papers ware...” (206) = a line from Englishman Robert Knox’s account of his captivity in the Kingdom of Kandy. (See the page 81 allusion in the chapter, “The Karapothas.”)

Source: Mary Pfeiffer from Graded: The American School of Sao Paolo. http://www.graded.br/page.cfm?p=266