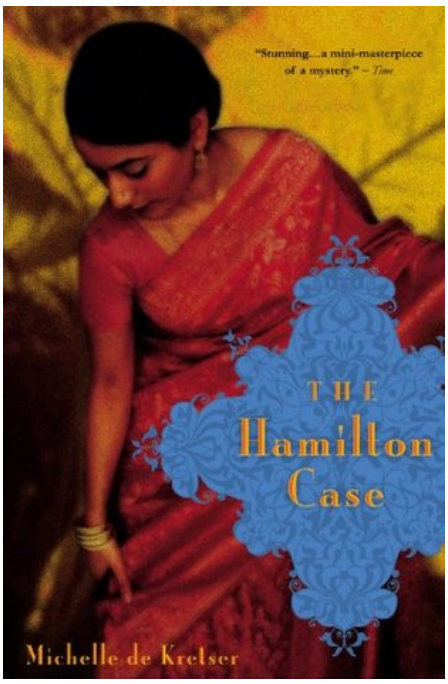

The Hamilton Case

Michelle de Kretser

The Hamilton Case

Michelle de Kretser

The Hamilton Case Michelle de Kretser
A flamboyant beauty who once partied with the Prince of Wales and who now, in her seventh decade, has "gone native" in a Ceylonese jungle. A proud, Oxford-educated lawyer who unwittingly seals his own professional fate when he dares to solve the sensational Hamilton murder case that has rocked the upper echelons of local society. A young woman who retreats from her family and the world after her infant brother is found suffocated in his crib. These are among the linked lives compellingly portrayed in a novel everywhere hailed for its dazzling grace and savage wit--a spellbinding tale of family and duty, of legacy and identity, a novel that brilliantly probes the ultimate mystery of what makes us who we are.

The Hamilton Case Details

Date	:	Published April 11th 2005 by Back Bay Books (first published 2003)
ISBN	:	9780316010818
Author	:	Michelle de Kretser
Format	:	Paperback 320 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Mystery, Cultural, Asia

From Reader Review The Hamilton Case for online ebook

B says

A decent book, though honestly it could have been done much better. For one thing, the title seems to attempt to be clever, but mostly it just feels off. I liked the first third of the book much better than the rest of it in terms of tone, since a silly old man's memoir appeals more to my sensibilities than the psychological drama it changed into.

The same goes for the rest of the book -- I can see some people giving this a four (or even a five), but I really just think it's not my cup of tea.

Peggy says

Possibly the best book I've ever read about the invisible harm that colonialism does to the psyche of a nation. The Hamilton Case is told through the eyes of a native Sri Lankan who grows up during the British occupation and does fairly well in its systems. But through his story and that of his friends and associates, we see the elaborate self deception that is needed to be able to live with oneself and one's compromises under colonialism, and the unfocused hate (at one's self, at the colonial overlords, at one's own country and countrymen) that is unleashed at "independence." It's haunting.

Casey says

As other reviewers can point out, the actual mystery of the Hamilton Case takes up little room in this drawn out novel. Whoever wrote the synopsis on the back of the book did an excellent job of what this book could have accomplished. In re-reading that paragraph, I am sort of tempted to give it a higher score because it sounds so intruiging.

de Krester certainly has a knack for description. She repeatedly takes delight in rattling off lists of every day objects that are perceived treasures by the Obeysekeres. She crafts the environment well, but the book dully trods along, due to the glaring fact that there is little dialogue in the book. Most events are described in the past tense with little hype or investment for the reader. The very end of the book proved to be the most interesting. However, this ending seemed too late to truly convince the reader that this is indeed a mystery novel.

The protagonist Sam is unlikeable. Why? We gain very little insight into his character, except for his occasional interactions with his mother Maud. In fact, Maud's part of the story entertained me the most as I was able to get away from Sam's boring perceptions. Even the court case was boring when in fact it could have been quite riveting.

Instead of living in the excitement of the book, it's like your reading it from a very far, unengaged place. de Krester hides behind her brilliant descriptions and fails to really develop her characters, letting the environment take over as the lead. I couldn't care less for Claudia or Leela when I suppose that their ends should have garnered an emotional reaction besides indifference. Possibly I could have cared more for the

rotting abode at Lokugama. It was given more attention to than the characters.

It's a letdown that this novel was painful to finish. de Krester has definite skill and talent. Where was the action?

Larin says

I kept slogging through this one despite despising the narrator...and didn't really find any big payoff at the end. Ah well.

Jim Fonseca says

The Hamilton Case is set in Sri Lanka (then the British colony of Ceylon) around the early 1900s. The main character is Sam (after his initials). He is a young black man, a native Sinhalese, who goes to Oxford to become a lawyer. He is so sold on the ideals and benefits of British colonialism that all his life he uses the phrase “We Edwardians.”

Most of the time he seems oblivious to his skin color and native status despite many warning signs, such as a European piano teacher who catches him handling one of her knickknacks and screams at him about his black hands touching her property. Sometimes he is aware, as when he states that at Oxford “I knew very well that in order to be their equal I should have to prove myself their superior.” Of course, the Sinhalese themselves screwed the lower-class Tamils; even more so after independence. And so it goes.

There’s a funny line when the main character returns from Oxford and his mother, disappointed with his choice of degree, says to him “All that money squandered on you at Oxford. Classics and whatnot. How many ancient Greeks do we know?”

The books is structured around a trial loosely based on a real incident. A European land owner was ambushed, shot and killed on his way back from a bank. He was on horseback in a rural areas when it happened. But the money never reappeared. Another European is charged with murder in what appears to have been not a robbery but a love triangle.

Sam, now a lawyer working for the prosecution, seems oblivious to the endangerment of his career generated by being a native black prosecuting a white European. The times are such that people asked: What if the European was found guilty and sentenced to be hung? They’d have to bring in a European executioner from Europe because they couldn’t possibly allow the natives to hang an Englishman! The dilemma is solved when the accused dies in jail.

The case is to some extent peripheral to the main story, even though it generates the book’s title. In fact, the case is over about a third of the way through the book and it isn’t until the very end that we get to hear other scenarios of what might have happened and how the main character could have been deliberately misled into believing who the perpetrator was. Was it a robbery? Was it a love triangle? Was it an act of rebellion by the downtrodden against the colonial masters?

The main story is the sad striving by the main character to be accepted into the English world he was

indoctrinated into. He is largely married to his career; disaffected from his wife; estranged from his son; unloved by his (crazy) mother and he returns that favor by isolating her in a rural house as she ages.

True to form, Sam ignores the impending independence of his country, which is inconceivable in his mindset. (Why would “We Edwardians” want to do that?) When it happens, chaos ensues, and his attitude is “well is serves them right.” He associates all the modernity of the new era, beginning in the 1950’s, with the evils of independence.

There is a lot of local color and great ethnic diversity in the book. The main island population is divided between two groups, the Buddhist Sinhalese and the Hindu Tamils. But there are also Indians, Moors, Chinese and East Africans. A small but influential group is called the Burghers. They are largely white descendants of mixed European ancestry by intermarriage among the various colonial occupiers of the island over the centuries: Portuguese, Dutch and British.

We are treated to some good writing. A few examples:

“Earnshaw set about unraveling the prosecution’s case with the apologetic air of a maiden aunt called on to point out the dropped stitches in someone else’s knitting. He was a trim little man with a large head that photographed handsomely. Where Minton bullied, Earnshaw flattered. Juries loved him for it. In cross-examination he took witnesses by the hand, walked them with infinite sympathy into quagmires.”

“Insomnia, which would eventually transform his nights into ragged holes held together with threads of sleep, was already a moth blundering softly into Sam’s dreams.”

“The powerless can never be certain when the powerful will move against them, nor how they will be required to defend themselves, so children, like servants, put together an ant hoard of guesses and shreds of knowledge; an archive of oddments whose detail a general might envy.”

I enjoyed this book even though the middle third got bogged down in the daily trials and tribulations of the isolated mother. It’s a good study from the perspective of the colonized about how the sun set on this particular corner of the British Empire.

Holly says

Great setting (Sri Lanka), odd (not always in a good way) characters, potentially interesting story that wasn't worth the number of pages it took to tell it.

Felice says

The Hamilton case is a murder in Sri Lanka in 1902 when it was still known as Ceylon. Born into a wealthy Celonese family and educated at Oxford, Sam Obeyskere is a home grown product of the British Empire. He returns home to practice law and finds that he is too British to be native and too native to be British. When he is asked to comment on a sensational local murder his arrogant belief in his own importance and his rash

response that an Englishman is responsible for the killing will dog him the rest of his life. His future though still considerable will now be ruled by should have beens and whispers.

The life surrounding Sam: his family, his own shocking behavior, the British, the jungle, tea plantations, the social pettiness of the haves and the crippling poverty of the have nots are all conveyed with remarkable skill in this novel. Reminiscent in turn of the colonial life of The Jewel In The Crown (The Raj Quartet Vol 1) and the delusions of The Remains of the Day, The Hamilton Case is a masterful evocation of entangled lives and unfulfilled dreams.

Heather says

This book somehow managed to be boring. There was some good imagery, but I didn't really care about the main character at all.

Joanne says

Another unreliable narrator -- this one pompous. Everybody in this novel is unhappy, abused, or slowly decaying. Bleh, bleh, bleh.

Jessica says

I don't know why, but I had a really hard time plowing through this book. I just didn't care about any of the characters, and found the narration/writing style a choppy, a good idea but poorly executed. I almost abandoned it but was encouraged by my mother to skim the last 100 pages (I had already made it that far, so why not, right?). I'm am glad I skimmed it, only to re-enforce that fact that I was glad to be done with it, I would have been very annoyed if I had taken the time to read it porperly, because overall it was just 'meh'.

Debbie says

For the life of me I cannot understand why this was published. I am sorry to the author, who I know put a lot off time and effort into this story, but...

She did weave a beautiful picture of Ceylon in all its tropical glory, and with all the tropical glory comes the bugs, pests, reptiles, and rodents. But the characters, men who are filled with ego, macho self worth, and conceit! Women who are mousy, arm candy and married for breeding purposes only save one, Maud. She was the only colorful spot in the entire book. A murder under English rule, an Englishman accused, unheard of! Then it just rambles for 100's of pages.

The story line was so confusing it was hard to continue reading. When at the last chapter it appeared that all would be explained, it wasn't. I cannot recommend this book to anyone.

Michelle says

Where to begin? Changing the cover of this book to the above, did not make this book any more appealing. I read about 225 pages, and was still clueless-the character of Sam was downright condescending and arrogant-along with the handful of annoying and strange characters. Who are these people? what relevance do any of these chapters have to each other??
The synopsis has NOTHING to do with the book.
Skip it...completely confusing and unlikable. I gave up, and I never give up on a book unless its absolutely awful.

Stef Rozitis says

This was a lush, richly textured, complex novel sort of like Proust except interesting. I actually think the post-structuralist bent of it was deliberate as was certain reflexive elements within it.

Set in Sri Lanka, the novel probes identities available to colonised yet somewhat privileged people. Sam is a lawyer, one who is proud of his English education and sees himself as above Singhalese and Tamil people (even though technically he is still Singhalese himself). He goes out of his way to distance himself from anyone who is embarrassingly un-English - this includes his own family and people he went to school with. He is a man devoid of real connections.

He is oddly fixated on his mother and sister. Some of that fixation gets deconstructed later in the book as we see the way Sam deals with one or perhaps two murders (the "truth" remains hazy and overlaid with several different possible interpretive narratives).

I found the book hard to read, meaning was not always clear sentence to sentence but atmosphere and character were. Sam was unlikable, every time I began to have some sympathy for him he would say and do something unforgivable. Other characters were softer and more mixed, although noone was really there for the reader to connect with- a rugged and tragic sort of individualism was perhaps what I liked least about this book.

Cliches and literary conventions are critiqued in scenes such as the anglophile Sam insisting that his gin and marmalade (or whatever) are just as authentic to Sri Lanka as spicy curries and monsoons. Also at the end where every solution to the murder/s unravels into another better one (or is this progress too illusion?). People are shown to write or say or be or live what is expected from them, the only difference in being educated is that a person might act out their education, but it is still a culturally/socially constructed set of choices and possible identities.

I largely agreed with the thrust of the book, but I wanted it not to be so bleak to the point of despair- I need to believe that humans are not only fallen/flawed/fragmented but are somewhat good in some way too. I largely enjoyed the complexity and lack of obvious meanings- steeped as it was in atmosphere but at times a little bit of clarity would have helped. This was an exhausting book to read.

The racism and sexism in the book are I am sure deliberate- part of showing the fragile and fickle "truths"

that are people's identities. The problematisation both of colonialism and of some sort of "pure essence" of Sri Lanka that is untouched by the historical fact of colonisation I felt were good.

I think I will read more from de Kretser.

Jennifer says

The Hamilton Case is divided into three distinct sections. The story begins in Ceylon in the early 1900's, a British colony with a complicated social structure. The social structure is a cascading one, with the British at the top, then the Sinhalese and under them the Tamil, and so on.

Part one of the narrative is in first person - Sam is telling the story of his childhood. It is one of loneliness, attempts to get the attention of his parents and struggles to fit in socially. He says, perhaps foreshadowing his experience with his own son, *For myself, I believe that sons are born to disappoint their fathers. In that respect, every man fulfills his destiny.* In contrast to what I perceived as the reader, Sam maintains that his school days were some of the happiest of his life.
Section two is a third person account of Sam's life, beginning at the point where he leaves school and starts work. Any affection or sympathy I may have developed for Sam in part one is completely obliterated by the narrative of part two. As the narrative progresses and the characters lives unfold, two mysteries emerge. The first is the Hamilton Case with its impact on Sam's career. The second is more subtle, and concerns an event from Sam's childhood and how it has shaped his life and the lives of his mother and sister.
The third section returns to the first person narrative, but from the point of view of an outside observer. I will call this narrator The Closer. He attempts to clarify The Hamilton Case and at the same time, clarify the costs to Ceylon of British colonialism and the costs of the rebellion against it.

The characters in the story are all unhappy. Either by nature, or because someone close to them makes them unhappy. Is the point that British colonialism made people unhappy? Maybe, but so do military coups and civil war. Is the point that ignoring or brushing off unpleasant things in life makes people unhappy? That a lifetime of such behavior can cost a person their grip on reality? Perhaps.
Life is bearable only if it can be understood as a set of narrative strategies. In the endless struggle to explain our destinies we search for cause and effect, for recurrent patterns of climax and denouement; we need beginnings, villains, we seek the hidden correlation between a rainy afternoon remembered from childhood and a letter that doesn't arrive forty years later.

Red says

One of the most boring and confusing books I have ever read.

Jen Jewel Brown says

This was a crisp and tantalising read with elements of detective novel, colonial mystery and magic realism. The protagonist was fully realised and revealed as more and more unlikeable as time went on, but the marvellous descriptions of the lush Ceylonese/Sri Lankan jungle remain with me. There were elements of the

maddening irascibility of the romance of Gone With the Wind, where nothing goes into nothing.

Marguerite says

This was nothing like what I expected. What it is: a sweeping book about colonialism, especially the British variety, culture and families. The story, which takes place in Ceylon, is exotic and the writing original and beautiful. It made me think about the Philippines, where I spent almost two years of my childhood, and the spread of American culture more generally. I'll come back to this one, and look for anything else by De Kretser.

Melanie says

Also reading for school!

Kay says

A review in the *New York Times Book Review* got me to reserve *The Lost Dog* by her, but it didn't really appeal as much as this previous one--and I could hardly put it down. The details of daily life in Ceylon and Oxford, the story of colonialism in Ceylon and the murder mystery all are a really good read. I slowed down a bit in the last third, mostly because of being sidetracked by fact checking (what a "London silk" is, for example, and the flora and fauna and food). It is a very alive book and an inside story of life with the British, for whom the colonized have a love/hate relationship and imitate much and lose their lifestyle with no recourse, but are so strong in their pushing forward in spite of it all, and the life is so lush that the sensuousness and the pain snap back and forth at each other so that the reader is wrapped in the mix. I plan to choose this for my book group when it's my turn....

Samantha Tracy says

I don't get this book. I couldn't finish it.
