From Book to Film 1

The English Patient

A What deserts can you name?

B Read the information on these pages and find out the name of a famous African desert.

The book

The English Patient (1992) is a romantic novel about love and war. The story takes place during the Second World War in Northern Africa and Italy. The novel won the Booker Prize for Fiction.

The English Patient

M I C H A E L
O N D A ATJE

C Read the plot.

Plot

The first part of the story takes place in the 1930s. Count László de Almásy is a geographer in Egypt who is making maps for the British government. He meets a British couple, Geoffrey and Katharine Clifton. The Count falls in love with the beautiful Katharine and they have a love affair. But Katharine leaves László and he becomes very depressed and jealous.

In 1939 war breaks out. Geoffrey Clifton finds out about the love affair between his wife and the Count and decides to take revenge. He crashes his plane, with Katharine aboard, into the Count’s desert camp. The crash kills Geoffrey, seriously injures Katharine, and nearly kills the Count.

László takes Katharine to a cave in the desert, leaves her with water, a torch and a fire, then begins his three day walk back to Cairo to get help. However the Count loses his temper during questioning, and goes to prison. He later escapes and returns to the cave. But Katharine is dead.

The second part of the story takes place in Italy in the last months of the war. The Count is a patient in a hospital. He has serious injuries. His nurse, Hana, takes care of him. The Count starts to tell Hana about his past… we find out the truth about the mysterious ‘English Patient’ in a series of flashbacks. The war is still going on. Can love exist when the world is at war?

D Answer the questions.

1. When does the story take place?
2. What does the Count do?
3. How does the Count feel when Katharine leaves him?
4. How does Geoffrey punish the Count and Katharine?
5. Why does the Count go to prison?
6. Where does the second part of the story take place?
The author

Michael Ondaatje (born 12th September 1943) is a Sri Lankan-Canadian novelist and poet. He teaches at Glendon College and York University in Canada.

The characters

Count László Almásy (Ralph Fiennes) – a mysterious Hungarian geographer. He is making a map of the Sahara desert. Almásy is in love with Katharine.

Hana (Juliette Binoche) – a French-Canadian nurse in an abandoned Italian monastery.

Geoffrey Clifton (Colin Firth) and Katharine Clifton (Kristin Scott Thomas) – a married couple. They help Count László Almásy with his work.

Madox (Julian Wadham) – a colleague of Count László Almásy.

The film

The film of The English Patient (1996) is a romantic drama directed by the English film director Anthony Minghella (1954-2008). The film won the Oscar for Best Film, the BAFTA Award for Best Film and the Golden Globe Award for Best Director.

Work in pairs. Use your diary to help you tell your partner about a recent holiday you spent in a desert. Ask each other questions about it.

The scene takes place following a sandstorm in the desert...

Count

Quick, get the other shovel!

Katharine

The tracks have disappeared.

Count

Madox, Madox!

Katharine

Oh, how awful. We've got to get them out.

Katharine

Am I a terrible coward to ask how much water we've got?

Count

Could I ask you please to paste your paintings into my book. I should like to have them. I should be honoured. The others! Oh, God! Quick!

Count

A little in our can. We have water in the radiator which can be drunk and ...er... it's not cowardly at all, it's extremely practical. Come on, come on.

Katharine

Madox!

I took a pair of sunglasses, a watch and my iPod.

Someone stole my camel when I was sleeping so I walked.

I was in the desert for five days but it felt like five months.

I was really bored. So I passed the time by making pictures in the sand.

I felt lonely and sad. I missed home and my pet dog.

I learnt that the desert is a big, sad place.