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David George Joseph Malouf (mah-LOOF) shows diversity both in his background and in his writing. He was born in Brisbane, the capital of Queensland, Australia. He grew up in this provincial city and graduated from the University of Queensland in 1954. His mother of British descent, his father Lebanese, Malouf from an early age identified with both Australia and Europe. At twenty-five, after working at temporary jobs in Brisbane, he moved to England, where he taught until 1968, when he returned to Australia. For the next ten years he lectured in literature at the University of Sydney. After the publication of several books of poetry and two novels, he decided to devote himself entirely to writing and moved to a Tuscan village. In 1985 he began to divide his time between Italy and Australia, as well as traveling in Europe and North America, insisting that he was not an expatriate. The autobiographical essays in *12 Edmondstone Street* attempt to explain his double attachment to Australia and Europe.

This tow between two continents manifests itself in Malouf’s writing, which draws from both worlds. His major preoccupations are the oppositional forces within each individual and those in nature. He has chosen a wide range of literary forms to express these concerns.

Malouf published first as a poet, beginning in 1962, when he shared a book with three other Australian poets. Three more collections of poems appeared before the publication of his first novel, *Johnno*, in 1975. He continued to write verse, with *Poems, 1959-1989* published in 1992. Commenting on his poetry, Malouf said: “I wrote poetry for a long time before I wrote prose that I thought publishable, and I think that you learn habits of working as a poet which I’ve used in making the fictions, so I think they are in their structures very poetic.” Although highly regarded in Australia for poetry as well as fiction, Malouf has gained an international reputation through his novels.

In *Johnno*, Malouf re-creates his Brisbane childhood during World War II, when the sleepy city, threatened by Japanese invasion, became the center of operations for Allied troops. While often praised for capturing wartime Brisbane, the novel more significantly examines the oppositions between the two main characters, Johnno and Dante—what Malouf describes as “involvement and withdrawal, action and contemplation.” In fact, Johnno and Dante may be one person, and the novel an exploration of the conflicts in the author’s own consciousness.

Many critics consider Malouf’s second novel, *An Imaginary Life*, to be his best work. Its action distant in time and place from Australia, this short, poetic, meditative book recounts Ovid’s exile from Rome. The Roman poet, forced to live a primitive life along the Black Sea, discovers disconnection from his language to be the harshest punishment, for he can no longer negotiate his experience. Like *Johnno*, the novel develops an oppositional relationship, this time between the sophisticated Ovid and a wild boy reared by wolves.

*Child’s Play* contains three short stories. In the title piece Malouf relies on a factual account of an Italian terrorist who plots to murder a famous writer but gradually finds himself mysteriously linked to his target. Here Malouf takes up the theme of opposition through the metaphor of assailant and victim. A novella published the same year, *Fly Away Peter*, relates the story of a Queensland soldier in World War I and focuses on the contrast between landscapes he experiences: the life-destructive trenches of the European war and the life-affirming Australian countryside. Several years later Malouf again addressed the twofold experience of war and peace in *The Great World*, a chronicle of Australian soldiers captured by the Japanese during World War II. Continuing until 1987, the narrative follows two of these men, who—like Johnno and Dante—express oppositional views of life.
Relying on his Brisbane childhood for setting, Malouf directs his attention to the artist in *Harland’s Half Acre*, a fully developed and richly textured novel. Here the opposition lies in the singular distinction between the artist—in this case a painter—and the ordinary person. Eighteenth century Queensland serves as the setting for *Remembering Babylon*, which relates the story of a young Englishman who has lived for years with Aboriginals and then joins a pioneer settlement of Scottish immigrants. Not only is the theme of language worked out—the man has lost his native English—but the oppositions are at play again as well in the contrast between civilization and primitivism, past and present, darkness and light, understanding and ignorance, compassion and hatred. This novel is reminiscent of *An Imaginary Life*, sometimes to the former’s detriment. *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* contrasts two Irishmen in Australia, one a soldier and one a convict, who spend a night in conversation, which is supposed to end with the convict’s execution.

Although moving between Australia and Europe for most of his life, Malouf has consistently taken Australia as the setting for his work. Still, he has been described as a writer with a European sensibility. Possibly, this opposition of place has enriched his work.

**Biography**

The name Malouf is Arabic and was handed on by the writer’s paternal grandfather, who immigrated to Australia from Lebanon late in the nineteenth century; other relatives were from England and were of Portuguese Jewish ancestry. David George Joseph Malouf, the son of George Malouf, a Lebanese Christian, and Welcome Mendoza Malouf, a British-born Portuguese Jewish mother, was born in Brisbane on March 20, 1934. He attended Brisbane Grammar School and graduated in 1950. He earned a bachelor’s degree, with honors in English, from the University of Queensland in 1954. He earned a bachelor’s degree, with honors in English, from the University of Queensland in 1954. For two years he taught there, and evidently during that period he also began to write poetry. Along with the work of other writers, his verse was published as part of the collection *Four Poets* in 1962.

Malouf left Australia when he was twenty-four years old and lived in Britain from 1959 until 1968. Between 1962 and 1968 he was a schoolmaster in England at St. Anselm’s College, Birkenhead, Cheshire. When he returned to Australia, he served as a lecturer in English at the University of Sydney until 1977. He was also a member of the Literature Board of the Australia Council for two years, beginning in 1972. He gained recognition and several awards for his poetry written during his teaching years. The increasing recognition accorded his work encouraged him particularly to devote time to his writing, and in 1978 he began spending part of each year in Australia and part in Grosseto, Italy. Appropriately, much of his writing has tended to deal with cultural confluences and differences that are felt in lands on two sides of the world.

**Biography**

David Malouf was born in Brisbane, Australia, on March 20, 1934, to George and Welcome (Mendoza) Malouf. After he was awarded a degree with honors from the University of Queensland, he relocated to England, where he was employed as a teacher from 1959 to 1968. That year he returned to Australia where he served as a lecturer at the University of Sydney until 1977. Malouf gained recognition and several awards for his poetry written during his teaching years. In 1975, he turned to fiction with his well-received first novel, *Johnno*. In 1978, he retired from teaching and devoted himself full-time to writing.

Malouf has gained international acclaim for his work, which includes several volumes of poetry, six novels and two novellas; three short-story collections, including *Dream Stuff*, in which "Great Day," appeared; several nonfiction works; a series of libretti for opera, and a play.

Malouf has received many awards. Among these are the following: the 1974 Australian Literature Society Gold Medal and the 1974 Grace Leven Poetry Prize for *Neighbours in a Thicket: Poems*; the New South
Wales Premier's Fiction Award in 1979 for *An Imaginary Life: A Novel* and the New South Wales Premier's Drama Award in 1987 for *Blood Relations*; the 1983 Book of the Year and the 1983 Australian Literature Society Gold Medal for *Fly Away Peter*; the Best Book of the Region Award, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Southeast Asia and South Pacific Region), the Miles Franklin Award, and the Prix Femina Prize (France) for *The Great World* in 1991; and the 1994 Los Angeles Times Book Prize for fiction, the 1994 Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Southeast Asia and South Pacific Region), the 1995 Prix Baudelaire (France), and the 1996 IMPAC Dublin Literary Award for *Remembering Babylon*. In 1994, his *Remembering Babylon* was short listed for the prestigious Booker Prize. In 2000, the *New York Times* named *Dream Stuff* one of its Notable Books of that year, and the same year, Malouf received the Neustadt International Prize for Literature.

David Malouf lived in Tuscany, Italy, from 1978 to 1985, after which he returned to Australia.
Critical Essays

Critical Essays: Analysis

Many reviewers have commented on the finely honed language and the delicately etched descriptive passages that have distinguished David Malouf’s important works. Often, affinities have been found between his poetry and prose writing, which possess similar lyrical traits. Certain thematic concerns—such as the effects of history, time, and memory, and the distinctive cultural position of Australia with respect to other nations—have also received comment. On the other hand, some readers have regarded Malouf’s prose as somewhat coy and elusive, as hinting at meanings that are sometimes obscure or incompletely developed; indeed, some of his narrative works are told through highly oblique means and finish on rather inconclusive notes. In this view, Malouf’s achievements in long fiction must be weighed against structural problems to the extent that the manner of his narration at times has threatened to overshadow the stories he has chosen to recount.

Malouf has received increasing critical attention over the course of his career, much of which has been concerned primarily with the unity of his fiction and poetry. His works testify to his defined and preserved individual identity, focused through humanist values in terms of language, mapping, art, and imagination.

Johnno

Malouf’s first novel, *Johnno*, is a haunting and evocative depiction of youth and friendship in Australia and abroad during World War II. The narrator, Dante, an outwardly decent and somewhat impressionable young man, has become intrigued with the wayward habits of Johnno, a fatherless boy who possesses a strange, attractive charm. Although Johnno’s propensity for drinking and revelry has a darkly appealing side to it, Dante is unable quite to enter into the spirit of his companion’s conduct, and later he becomes somewhat more suspicious and withdrawn from his friend. After some travels that bring them together in Paris, Dante returns home and learns that Johnno has drowned under circumstances that suggest suicide. He learns later, from a note that his friend has written, that Johnno indeed intended to take his own life, partly because he came to regard Dante as unsympathetic and uncaring. This early novel introduces a theme that preoccupies Malouf: the way oppositional forces within individuals function and the manner in which these forces determine human behavior.

An Imaginary Life

Although much of Malouf’s writing has dealt with settings and historical periods that have had some significance in his own life, *An Imaginary Life* aroused interest precisely because it represents a venture into an area that is remote in time and is all but unknown to historians and literary scholars. The famous Roman poet Ovid was sent into exile to an isolated outpost on the Black Sea in the year 8 c.e.; the reasons for his banishment remain somewhat unclear. Apart from what can be gathered from his epistles in verse, the *Tristia* (after 8 c.e.; *Sorrows*, 1859), which pleaded for his release, essentially nothing is known about the final decade of his life. From this point of departure, Malouf commenced with his own version of Ovid’s last years, into which he also incorporated material from an account of the eighteenth century “wild child” of Aveyron.

The story is told in stark, spare, measured prose, and indeed the setting in which the fictional Ovid finds himself seems gloomy and desolate. His existence among the people of a small, primitive village would appear at the outset to be drab and monotonous, but after a while he has come to regard his life in exile with something more than resignation. As Malouf portrays the classical poet, Ovid feels the stirrings of new life even as he has become accustomed to surroundings that have little in common with the metropolis of imperial
Rome. He regards himself as thrown back upon the most elemental and rudimentary sensations, when the most ordinary objects of the natural world arouse in him a wonderment that he has not felt before. Time and change seem recast as they operate in a fashion much different from what he knew before; with only the most basic temporal points of reference, he finds it difficult to keep track of passing days, and only transitions in the seasons serve to remind him that years have passed during the period of his banishment.

When the villagers, who are accustomed to hunting wild animals in the open fields, bring in a small boy they have captured, Ovid takes an immediate interest in the child’s welfare and for that matter believes that, though the boy may appear backward and inarticulate, the poet himself still may learn from the gradual development of his speech and manual skills. His affection reflects in some form memories of his own childhood; indeed, so captivated does he become by the boy’s companionship that he ceases hoping for a return to Rome and becomes reconciled to his fate. Nevertheless, the villagers, who follow a form of shamanism and believe that malevolent spirits are constantly lurking about them, are not quite so tolerant of the boy from the wild; when it is thought that the child is responsible for a mysterious illness that afflicts the local headman, Ovid concludes that he and the boy must leave the family with which they have been staying and venture off into the trackless steppes to the north. His story ends in the open spaces, where, far from other human habitations but without regrets or unhappiness, he and the child have found safety.

An Imaginary Life attracted much favorable comment for its originality in supplying what was possibly a plausible ending in fictional form to what otherwise was a sizable lacuna in the literary history of classical times. Some have objected, however, that Malouf’s depiction of Ovid is at odds with what is actually known about the earlier life of the Roman poet; Ovid, after all, made a name for himself in Rome for the elegance, wit, and virtuosity of his verse works, and to portray him as accepting a simpler and more austere way of life arguably is out of character with the historical figure.

Child’s Play

Malouf uses a contemporary Italian setting in his short novel Child’s Play, which deals with a young man who believes that his chosen calling deserves a better term than what the newspapers call “terrorism.” The novel reconstructs, ostensibly from the inside, a hired gunman’s characteristic mode of operation, and indeed the narrator’s story of preparations for a planned assassination is gripping and engrossing in an eerie, offbeat way. This curiously sympathetic evocation of the mind of a terrorist—moreover, one who takes a distinctly impersonal view of his work (the narrator is moved by no sense of political commitment)—may be taken perhaps as an oblique commentary on violent acts that seemingly defy specific explanation.

The narrator, who maintains that for security reasons he must be reticent about his own past life and identity, nevertheless is willing to provide some glimpses of the inner operations of his group. His planned victim is a venerable literary man, about eighty years old. As part of his assignment, the narrator has learned much about the man’s publications and other aspects of his life. The great man has nothing really villainous about him; rather, he is merely recognized and successful. He was a political émigré during World War II, and his subsequent activities have hardly been of a sort that would provoke social or ideological hatred. Nevertheless, because he is well known, he is considered a suitable target by the organization that has employed the narrator. In the course of the narrator’s methodical planning, which requires him to know precisely certain details of the victim’s daily habits, the narrator has come to regard the old man as somehow a necessary component of a task he must accomplish.

The Bread of Time to Come

Much of Malouf’s writing has a retrospective tendency, where events from earlier portions of the twentieth century are called back in an effort to delineate the effects of historical change and upheaval on Australia and its people. The Bread of Time to Come, also known as Fly Away Peter, is one such work. The novel concerns
two young men in their early twenties, Ashley Crowther and Jim Saddler, who are drawn together by a common interest in the birds that gather at a local refuge. Strange, exotic birds of every sort, from as far away as Siberia and Norway, put in an appearance in the course of their elongated migratory flights. Just as it has become a destination for such journeys from afar, the island continent seems isolated yet a part of the greater pattern of events in the world at large. Having lived at the bird sanctuary as a guide, Saddler has been protected from the harsh realities of the wider world. His perception changes as he finds himself fighting during World War I along with his friend Crowther.

The outbreak of World War I in Europe sets in motion a delayed reaction in Australia. The men are packed off to the western front in France, feeling perhaps at first some tug of patriotism, but the harsh realities of trench warfare leave them troubled and hardened. After one soldier, as part of a foolish bet, shows himself to snipers and is shot down, and an enemy shell leaves others dead or maimed, the grim, mindless, and destructive underside of armed conflict becomes apparent to them. When the news eventually reaches Australia that, in another engagement, Saddler has been killed and Crowther wounded, it brings home finally the senseless and brutal waste the war has brought.

In this novel, Malouf uses symbolism, repetition, and contrasts between the “natural” and “civilized” worlds, between birds and biplanes, and between the edenic bird sanctuary and the violence of war. Through Jim Saddler, who sees birds migrating even during war, Malouf reveals a character who comes to terms with the universe he lives in and the realities in it.

**Harland’s Half Acre**

One of Malouf’s most highly regarded works of fiction is *Harland’s Half Acre*, which portrays the development of an Australian artist against a historical backdrop that embraces much of the twentieth century. The title character, Frank Harland, is a crotchety, reclusive person who wears his aspirations lightly. Harland is loosely based on the life of Ian Fairweather (1891-1974), a painter who settled on an island off the coast of Brisbane. Like Harland, he was reclusive and ignored the demands of fame.

During the early portions of his career in the difficult years of the Great Depression, when he has been beset by economic hardships, Harland finds odd ways to support himself. He also becomes acquainted with others who have become impoverished by the onset of hard times. Later, during World War II, he comes to know refugees who have left Europe and learns that older established nations have cultural traditions with historical dimensions that Australia cannot yet share; on the other hand, Europe is also subject to political turmoil and upheaval that has not affected the island continent.

Much of Harland’s story is told indirectly, through the accounts of others who have known him. It would appear that he has remained fiercely independent and stubbornly dedicated to his efforts at painting during bad times and good; much of his later work is done on a small plot of land where he can preserve some sense of solitude. He has, however, acquired land elsewhere, partly in an effort to regain holdings that one of his ancestors lost in a card game during the nineteenth century. At times, some of Harland’s paintings are sold for relatively little; even toward the end, when he has become well known and his works have become of some value to investors, he does little to exploit the reputation he has earned.

Critics have discussed the story that Malouf tells in *Harland’s Half Acre* as in some ways symbolic of the problematic position of creative art in Australia, which began with little legacy of its own. It seems likely as well that Malouf intended his title character’s situation to suggest in some sense the personal isolation that may accompany any creative quest.

**The Great World**
In *The Great World*, Malouf takes up various themes again in depicting the response to historical change that is felt among Australian men who grew up before World War II. Their uncomplicated existence is abruptly altered when war with Japan brings the men to Malaya with other Australian fighting forces. After their units have surrendered to the enemy, the men, who have been trained in combat, are ill prepared for captivity, and waves of memories from the past sweep over them during the difficult early days of their confinement as prisoners of war. Their lot is hard but not quite unbearable, though there are numerous discomforts and indignities. One of them fights with a guard and a full-scale riot erupts; even then, the prisoners are not mistreated as seriously as they had feared. Even wearying labor in a work camp set up along the lines of a railway into Burma does not daunt them entirely, though some among them fall victim to any of a multitude of diseases. In time, however, exhaustion and fevers begin to tell on them, and their lives seem reduced to a few relatively simple elements. The men feel a common bond with one another; they also cherish the few letters they have received from the outside world.

Toward the end of the war, weakened by privations and troubled that they have become little more than coolie labor for their captors, they have nearly lost track of the passage of time, and when peace comes, they are somewhat taken by surprise. Even after they have been repatriated, afterimages from their years of ordeal haunt the men occasionally. Nevertheless, there is also a sense of tedium and sameness to the routine into which they are cast in their civilian work. Renewing old acquaintanceships holds some fascination for them, but even this becomes tiresome after a while. Settled patterns of doing things eventually become habits that are followed almost instinctively.

After the war, time seems to pass quickly and stealthily, sometimes in leaps of years at a time, and change engulfs Australia in odd, ironic ways. The Japanese, once feared as enemies, become known for their commercial acumen; another war, in Vietnam, comes and goes; and business expansion takes hold for a while. Toward the end of the novel, the men who began as friends some decades before look back on a bewildering array of images from the past even as financial reverses seem to have laid them low.

**Remembering Babylon**

Malouf returns to the Australian colonial period in *Remembering Babylon*, which recounts the lives of Scottish pioneers in a remote settlement. Their hardscrabble but contented existence in the northern Queensland tropics is disrupted by the appearance of a near-naked Englishman named Gemmy Fairley, who has spent sixteen years with a tribe of Aborigines after being cast away off the coast of Queensland as a boy. When confronted by the stalwart Scots, he shouts, “Do not shoot I am a B-b-british object!” Gemmy gains reluctant acceptance in the community of Scots until two men from the tribe he has left visit him. The settlers’ deep-seated fear of the Aborigines and of anyone tainted by them is so strong that the settlers eventually drive Gemmy back to the bush, where he is killed during a raid on the tribe he has joined. The narrative also follows into adulthood some of the children who knew Gemmy and reveals how their contact with his exile affected their lives.

Fragmented in structure and abbreviated in its development, *Remembering Babylon* falters as a precise depiction of pioneer life and as a sympathetic account of the hapless Gemmy. Instead, it has been read as a symbolic representation of exile—in particular, artistic and linguistic exile, which brings to mind Malouf’s earlier books *An Imaginary Life* and *Harland’s Half Acre*. On this level, the narrative questions obliquely, through the experiences of the pioneers, how the Australian artist can grasp the fresh experience that the new continent offers and reshape it in untried forms apart from inherited European culture. Gemmy appears to represent the artist’s answer to this dilemma. He realizes that there exists a connection between language and landscape. At least metaphorically, by forgetting his English and replacing it with a native language, he is better able to reach an understanding of the new world.

**The Conversations at Curlow Creek**
In *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, Malouf again finds a rich source of metaphor in colonial Australia and the great emptiness of the continent. Set in 1827, this work examines the growing bond created as conversations take place between Michael Adair, a policeman, and Daniel Carney, a bush ranger. They meet in a desolate area, where Carney, the remaining member of a gang, awaits hanging. The two men spend the night before the execution in a hut, intermittently talking, remembering, sleeping, and dreaming. About half of the book is devoted to actual conversations, the rest to flashbacks of the two men’s lives in Ireland. Although the direct exchanges are stronger than the extended forays into memory, revelation of the men’s disparate backgrounds intensifies the immediate situation.

The two men take opposite views of the colony, reflecting a dichotomy that has long dominated Australian thinking. The doomed one sees the barren land as a source of punishment, a place that makes life hard, while the policeman imagines settlers prospering there. Along with this exploration of colonialism, the novel focuses on a timeless question: Which takes precedence in human affairs, human justice or a higher justice? As usual in Malouf’s work, no clear-cut answer emerges. The reader must unravel the plot and then contemplate the themes that have been left unrealized.

**Malouf, David (Vol. 28): Introduction**

David Malouf 1934–

Australian novelist, poet, and short story writer.

Malouf first gained attention for his poetry but has since developed a reputation as a novelist of considerable talent. His work, much of which is set in Australia, is often concerned with the relation of the past to the present and with the human desire to live in harmony with nature. Malouf’s fiction and poetry are often marked by memories of childhood and are full of concrete, vivid descriptions of the natural world. Malouf is also intensely interested in the subject of individuals in search of their "hidden," or true, selves. His first novel, *Johnno* (1977), portrays the spiritual growth and coming of age of two young men who have been friends since childhood. In the novel *An Imaginary Life* (1978), which has been described as a long prose poem, Malouf speculates on how the Roman poet Ovid might have come to terms with himself and nature during his exile to a village on the Black Sea.

Malouf’s poetry, which has not received the critical interest accorded his prose, reflects his belief that "poems are acts of reconciliation." In his verse, Malouf seeks to join the past and the present, the real and the imagined, and the individual with others and with life itself. In spite of mixed opinions as to how well Malouf succeeds, critics admire his ability to capture the beauty and mystique of nature and are pleased by his wit. *First Things Last* (1981), Malouf’s recent collection of poetry, has received a generally favorable critical response. This volume shares with Malouf’s other collections and novels an attentiveness to detail and finely drawn, elaborate backgrounds.

**Malouf, David (Vol. 28): Helen Daniel**

[The] narrative line in *Johnno* wavers between Johnno and Dante, uncertain of its direction, and by sometimes leaping across periods of several years that seem to have worked significant changes in Johnno or Dante, fails to sustain the development of either as a wholly convincing character. (p. 192)

In *Johnno*, the narrator is at times observer, duly recording the activities of the observed with the detachment this implies; he is at times directly engaged with Johnno so that their interaction is foremost; at other times Dante seems almost the central figure in whose experience Johnno is a striking but only periodic element. The uncertainty reflected in these different impulses works against the vigour often felt in the portrayal of Johnno.
himself, particularly in the sections of the novel set in Europe. Malouf does suggest the expatriate search for meaning against what Johnno and Dante both conceive as a stifling and narrow Brisbane, but this period in their lives is broken into isolated sequences and the pace slows. Dante reports increasing bitterness in Johnno, a more aimless and dissolute life, a forced quality to his exuberance. The nature of the change is not fully realized because there are only glimpses of Johnno during this period, the narrative seeming more attentive to Dante here. (pp. 193-94)

The novel somewhat unsteadily moves towards Johnno's death, through Dante's musing on conventional married life and through Johnno's enigmatic explanation of his return to Australia. Johnno's death is "aesthetically apt" and Dante's awareness of this overrides the subdued guilt he feels at having not cared enough for Johnno, not realized Johnno's need of him. Johnno's baulking at the "narrow certainties" of an ordered, conventional world, his feeling of oppression and diminution, does not ... emerge from an explicitly realized society that is scathingly exposed. The novel does rather focus on an attempt to distil a more meaningful existence, through fantasy. It establishes fantasy for Johnno as a defining of him and "Maybe, in the end, even the lies we tell define us. And better, some of them, than our most earnest attempts at the truth." (p. 194)

Johnno himself is often a compelling figure, the portrayal of him lively and rich. When the narrative focuses on Dante, it seems to lose direction, to falter and create a kind of passivity in him. Dante's perception of the implications for him of a relationship found important in the past remain shadowy. In part, this uncertainty in the novel springs from the narrator's role that is both observer and participant, both confined to the narrator's own experience yet extended to the portrayal of Johnno himself. (p. 195)

_Helen Daniel, "Narrator and Outsider in 'Trap' and 'Johnno'" (reprinted by permission of the publisher and the author), in Southerly, No. 2, June, 1977, pp. 184-95._

**Malouf, David (Vol. 28): Katha Pollitt**

"How close to where I live lie the ultimate ends of the earth," Ovid wrote from Tomis, the semisavage Black Sea village to which he had been exiled by Augustus in A.D. 8. History is silent about the reason for the sudden banishment from Rome of its wittiest, gayest poet, last of the generation that included Virgil, Horace and Propertius. Ovid himself thought he was being punished for his writing. "My only fault is that I possess both talent and taste," he claimed in the "Tristia," a long, half-defiant, half-abject poem that he thought would somehow win him imperial forgiveness (it did not; he died in exile sometime after A.D. 16) and that gives a vivid picture of the many miseries of life in Tomis. (p. 10)

From this meager historical background the Australian poet David Malouf has fashioned an extraordinary novel. "An Imaginary Life" is just that: a kind of fantasia on what Ovid's life in exile might have been and, as time went by, become, as the quintessentially civilized man of letters was forced to come to terms with a harsh, pre-rational, thoroughly alien world.

To Mr. Malouf's Ovid, newly arrived from Rome, Tomis is raw nature, primeval mud and stone and brackish water: "Even the higher orders of the vegetable kingdom have not yet arrived among us. We are centuries from the notion of an orchard or a garden made simply to please." Yet as he learns the native language, he comes to see that his hosts have, after all, their wisdom—hunting rituals, the visions of the shaman, the secret magic practiced by the women. His exile becomes a quest for his real self, lost years ago when he put his own childhood behind him and entered what he now sees as a frivolous and superficial existence.

In that long-ago childhood, Ovid had a friend, a wild child who lived in the forest and who in later years came to seem like a mysterious messenger, possibly even a god. Now, on a hunting trip he sees another wild boy,
and persuades the men of Tomis, much against their better judgment, to capture him. As Ovid patiently attempts to humanize the child, it is really he who is changing, regaining his own early sense of oneness with nature. But the boy's wildness is a direct threat to the barbarians' precarious existence, and so the novel ends with the flight of the poet and the child across the Danube and into the grasslands that seem to stretch all the way to the Pole, lands upon which perhaps no human has ever set foot, and where, tenderly cared for by the child as he sinks toward death, Ovid has a final vision of the mystical union of man and the natural world.

Essentially, "An Imaginary Life" is a meditation on the dialectic between the human and the nonhuman, a subject that arises gracefully in connection with Ovid, whose central work, Mr. Malouf reminds us, was the "Metamorphoses." Mr. Malouf has many penetrating and even original things to say about what it means to be human—his notion that play and ornament are the essential characteristics of civilized life, for instance—so that when Ovid plants a flowerbed he is in a sense subverting the whole barbarian ethos. I must say I was sorry to have it all end in the standard modern wish to dissolve the self in blissed-out communion with the universe, and perhaps my resistance to Mr. Malouf's conclusions was what made me find the wild-child theme a bit forced; this story was already exotic enough. Moreover, Mr. Malouf's child strongly resembles the boy in François Truffaut's recent film, "L'Enfant Sauvage" (which is not surprising, because both are based on the same actual case, the 18th-century wild child of Aveyron), and thus seems from the outset oddly familiar. Certainly he is a much less compelling figure than Mr. Malouf's Ovid, whose complex Romanness is conveyed with great sensitivity.

All the same, David Malouf has produced a work of unusual intelligence and imagination, at once sensuous and quirky, full of surprising images and intriguing insights. Poets are sometimes said to write the best prose, and Mr. Malouf's is indeed fine: a spare yet evocative English that captures both the bleak monochromes of Tomis and the sunny humanized landscape of Ovid's remembered Italy, without ever losing the distinctive voice, now caustic, now dreamlike. In which Ovid tells his own story. (pp. 10-11)


Malouf, David (Vol. 28): Kate Eldred

If Lucretius was Rome's philosophical poet, and Virgil her chronicler of former glories, then Ovid was Rome's poet of decadence, the bad boy, extoller of carnal love, the avant-garde revolutionary of the last days of Glorious Rome. Not much is known for sure about his life beyond some bare facts….

In [An Imaginary Life], David Malouf, following in the foot-steps of Doctorow and Vidal and Meyer, has taken an historical figure and invented the missing part of his story. (p. 36)

[Malouf's novel] is a vehicle for expounding one of Ovid's favorite themes, transformation. Beginning with the poet's early journal of banishment, Malouf shows us the mind of a great wordsmith struck dumb in his surroundings trying to adjust to a new life. When he spots the child for the first time the poet recognizes something of himself in him, speechless, outcast, unacceptable; and in transforming the child to human, Ovid will effect his own transformation. Moreover, the poet is interested in his posthumous readers; he questions us rhetorically, asking if we have become gods by the time we read this, if we have harnessed the sun, taken the steps to transformation, stilled the elements.

There are two possible ways to read this book. One is from a position of total ignorance about Ovid, to read it as a daring and experimental novel, a novel that plays with the language and dazzles us with startling syntactical shifts and concatenations of adjectives that enrich our literate experience. And the other is from the position of a classical student, to come to it having read Ovid and knowing something of what he stood for
and what the time was like.

If it's read as simply a lyrical dream novel, it has certain rewards; Malouf, an Australian poet, has a gift for phrases and an eye for the evocation of murky and mystical places. The book is oddly whimsical, taken naively, and fey and fabulistic in its subjective tone and philosophical overtones.

But read from the point of view of a classicist, it opens up a further dimension of allusion and intellectual appreciation. Malouf interplays the historical present, clumsy in English, with a narrative present and an anecdotal past tense, interweaving them so gracefully that the techniques aren't obvious, only the aftertaste of grandeur in certain passages, of a facile rhythm in others. The knowledge of Ovid's preoccupations from his writings lets us see the change occurring before he, as narrator, does; and knowing that Ovid was an iconoclast if anything, one appreciates his growing sense of omnipotence, his realization that he can become like a god and further, that it doesn't really matter.

There is, of course, a price to pay in each case. For not having to scuff through dusty collections of Ovid's writings, the unlettered reader has to settle for a one-dimensional account of a weird experience. And for being conversant with Latin history, one has to wince slightly at the portrait Malouf draws of Ovid, the bawdy agnostic.

For instance he wrote a lot about and for women; his love poems glorified them and his "metamorphoses" happened more to women than to men. But there are no women in this book, no significant women. Further, Ovid was politically inclined; it may have been only a naughty sort of pseudoanarchism that he espoused, but it was effective enough to get him banished. And there's no sign of that in this Ovid. Certainly not least, one of the most beloved aspects of his work was a line of wry and urbane humor that ran through all his poetry. Granted that a middle-aged decadent Roman plunked down among barbarians might find it difficult to laugh, a devotee of Ovid would look for at least a nod to the absurdity of the position in which Ovid found himself.

Malouf says, in his own afterword, "My purpose was to make this glib fabulist of "the changes" live out in reality what had been, in his previous existence, merely the occasion for dazzling literary display." If the reader might wish that Malouf had let Ovid take a little more of his acclaimed chutzpah into the wilderness, I guess that's her own problem. Malouf at least accomplishes his purpose. (pp. 36-7)


Malouf, David (Vol. 28): Cecil Hadgraft

[If] you are committed to literature and have written poems, which are shorter and do not require the persistent physical effort—among other efforts—that a novel does, then it may seem that a novel is next in the natural order of things. But a saving sophistication makes you wary of the thinly veiled autobiography. A decent camouflage of interests and themes is advisable. Instead of yourself, an acquaintance may serve as a focus. And if he is in the novel, then you yourself are naturally, even necessarily, present as well, so that you may introduce him, accompany him, and possibly farewell him. A further device should add the last touch to the disguise: enclose it as it were in a frame. (p. 214)

You can even introduce an additional refinement. To underline the fact that it is the friend, not yourself, who is the main attraction, you note some inexplicable trifle that stresses the oddity of the friend. That, indeed, that was characteristic of him, it was part of the fascination that induced you, almost in despite, to take up a reluctant pen to tell his story. As David Malouf puts it in Johnno: "The book I always meant to write about
Johnno will get written after all … he had me hooked. As he had, of course, from the beginning. I had been writing my book about Johnno from the moment we met."… To say we don't believe Malouf is to pay him a compliment, to enter the conspiracy, to join with him in the literary jape.

The jape, however, has taken charge of the author. Johnno, the narrator's friend, is to be the lure, distracting our attention while the author enters unnoticed. But a third contestant has slipped in and occupies at frequent intervals those parts of the stage where the spotlight rests. This intruder is Brisbane. It turns out to be the book's real concern, a background against which people move and things happen. It is brought before us by appeals to sight and hearing, touch and even smell: pubs and brothels, corners and alleys, the river and its banks, gardens and backyards, wooden walls and iron roofs—the whole range of dubious items that make up an old-fashioned entirety that as child and adolescent and young man the author carries off as indelible memories. In even greater particularity there are the individual details of rooms and their contents. Indeed, furniture and food have a special place. The most lyrical passage in the book, for instance, is on lollies…. For any reader familiar with the reality evoked, such parts of the book are extremely effective in their nostalgic savour. They are authentic and unromanticized except for the haze of the years between, which gives them the charm that mist confers upon even an unromantic scene. (pp. 214-15)

Charming as the book is in style and vignette, and however evocative, one has to be careful not to overestimate it on this last score. Anyone who knows the period and place cannot but respond to Malouf's re-creation of parts of the overgrown country town. A name is given, of street or suburb or building, and, conjured up with a phrase, the old and sometimes vanished reality rises before the reader. Momentarily he is back where he once was, and he performe feels a sort of gratitude for this rejuvenation. The same thing occurs in, say, poetry, where an untutored reader finds a poem effective in one way and therefore good in all ways…. If Brisbane, then, is the hero or heroine of the novel, what of Johnno, the overt eponym? He need not worry any reader Malouf has been saying: Bear with me a little, and join with me in seeing how we can ring the changes on a rather trite theme—Looking Backwards. A variation here and there, an elaboration, an omission, an altered stress and we almost have a new genre…. It would be an unresponsive reader who would not collaborate. In doing so, he comes to recognize that Johnno is of little consequence. Johnno appears most frequently in the schooldays, less frequently at the university, and sporadically after that. He dies at the end of the novel, whether by suicide or accident does not matter. So he bulks large when he is small, but when he grows up—if he ever does—he is minor. And this is how he should be. Malouf does his best for him, but nobody adult could find him of much attraction. (p. 216)

The only quality [Johnno] has is his honesty to himself. Hypocrisy being, as the adage goes, the tribute that vice pays to virtue, we all of us try to justify or hide our failings—we may even try to cure them. Johnno will have none of this: he is not so much shameless as indifferent. He is as he is—let them do what they like about that.

This is not endearing: it is merely surprising. We are not shocked at the natural behaviour of a leech or scorpion, but we are shocked that a human being should resemble both and apparently think this natural. So any fascination Johnno may have for us at the start evaporates as the novel progresses. We come to find him distasteful. Then we lose interest. This is a probability that Malouf must have foreseen, for he attributes to Johnno an element of mystery. He is spoken of as having some inner life, as though he concealed an enigma that would be worth solving. And near the end of the book this mystery, we are told, still resides in that fascinating figure—even his death is a mystery. Most of us will remain cheerfully unconvinced. That mystery, if ever it existed, is a bagatelle. (pp. 217-18)

Malouf, David (Vol. 28): John M. Wright

Many of the poems in First Things Last … seem overwrought, as if Malouf were struggling to find forms in which to embody his lyricism. There is often a laboured quality to the rhetoric. 'Reading a View' is typical in this respect….

Most of the First Things Last poems deal with only those aspects of human life that reflect the natural world. A constant stream of intricate metaphor runs through this poetry, with an occasional triumph of the literal. This juxtaposition of the abstractly rhetorical with the sharply delineated detail gives the better poems their edge….

['The Crab Feast'] is a ten-page work in which the speaker digs away at what seems common to his own life and that of the crab. I find it a self-conscious poem, factitious in places. The opening, for instance, applies conventional sexual metaphors to the reality of the speaker's eating the crab. But the effect is merely bizarre….

Notwithstanding the weakness of this, the poem has fine moments….

'The Crab Feast' is an odd mixture of epicureanism (there being no doubt that the speaker plans to eat the crab that sits on a restaurant dinner plate as he addresses it), sharp summary imaging a whole society in landscape …, and a kind of abstract sentimentality where the speaker finds it too easy to see himself as a crab… 'The Crab Feast' is an ambitious poem, and I may not have done it justice. Its failings, however, preclude it from being the finest in the volume….

[First Things Last is a significant work] by an author who blessedly evades categorisation. What often comes through … is a lyricism about the possibilities for human life when lived in the context of an animal natural earth. (p. 59)


Malouf, David (Vol. 28): Fleur Adcock

David Malouf is a … mature poet, and … [an] accessible one; his long looping sentences twining over their line-endings need to be followed carefully, but he is no exhibitionist: the techniques he has learnt are subordinated to the poems themselves. He has a strong visual consciousness with a sense of joyful absorption in the natural world which makes the overworked word "celebration" irresistible. The first poem in [First Things Last] is about lemon trees gone wild, and the second about a garden: the image of Eden recurs throughout the book, as garden or as wilderness or as landscape remembered from the past (in a fine long poem, "Deception Bay", he reconstructs the surroundings of his childhood by a series of conscious acts of will shared with his readers)….

One of Malouf's concerns is with the relations between reality and seeming…. Another preoccupation is time, the interfusion of the present and the past. In an elegy for his father he writes of the dead being buried in the living and looking out through their eyes, as do the not yet born. The concept occurs again in "Deception Bay"…. Then there is his reiterated use of the word "blue", not only for sky and sea and shadows on the land but as a personal symbol, almost a verbal tic. It is the indigo of the crabs—"blue, majestic"—he lovingly pursues in "The Crab Feast", in order to eat them, incorporate them and become one with them. The process of achieving a symbiotic harmony with the natural world is also at the centre of his novel, An Imaginary Life, which like many of these poems looks back to a prelapsarian mode of existence.
Malouf's powerful imagination allows a certain amount of surrealism, without too much self-indulgence. He uses a variety of fairly free verse forms, including prose-poetry, while retaining a commitment to normal syntax. He can be playful, and his obsession with the visual sometimes carries him away into digressions, but he is a serious poet concerned with serious things.

_Fleur Adcock, "Importing a Modern Tradition," in The Times Literary Supplement (© Times Newspapers Ltd. (London) 1982; reproduced from The Times Literary Supplement by permission), No. 4113, January 29, 1982, p. 114._

**Malouf, David (Vol. 28): David Guy**

The coupling of two so different novellas as ["Child's Play" and "The Bread of Time to Come"] seems peculiar at first: one concerns a young Australian's experiences just before and during the First World War; the other is an intensely inward first-person narration by a contemporary Italian terrorist. David Malouf, however, is a richly imagistic writer, philosophical and literary in the best sense; his terrorist is hardly the subject of a slick thriller. Though probably not written to do so, his stories do reflect and enrich one another by being together.

"The Bread of Time to Come" is the simpler and—at least for awhile—the quieter of the two. Ashley Crowther has returned to pre-World War I Australia after 12 years in England with only a vague idea of what he wants to do with himself and with the thousand acres of land he has inherited. On his land he discovers Jim Saddler, a lower-class man similarly vague about his future, who until his 20th year has been content simply to observe, alertly and patiently, the natural world around him, especially the countless varieties of birds that migrate to Australia in season. Ashley hits on the happy idea of leaving his land as a wildlife sanctuary and hiring Jim as a kind of Adam to name the beasts…. The situation seems too good to be true….

It is too good to be true. The modern world intervenes, in the form of World War I, and Jim feels compelled to enlist simply in order to understand the changes that are taking place. Ashley soon follows. At first Jim's war is liberating and a bit of a lark, but not once it moves to the front; Malouf's descriptions of trench warfare are vivid, sickening, horrifying, and—in their last scenes—almost surreal. Men in that war and, as Ashley sees, in the world to come, are parts in a machine, interchangeable, expendable, a far cry from what a man could be in the little paradise Ashley had founded. Determined individualists in the modern world are like the peasant whom soldiers found digging a garden in a bombed-out forest: obviously mad (or, perhaps, the only sane people left).

"Child's Play" has seen this modern world evolve still further; its nameless narrator has postponed what he thinks of as his real life in order to perform a single act of political terror. He gives few details from his past, and only the vaguest reasons for wanting to pursue this course….

The narrator's rather fascinating assignment is to assassinate a world-renowned man of letters, and Malouf's portrait of this writer—a man of iron discipline and deep compassion, enormous intellect and playful irony—is masterful. To the extent that we are all the children of such an artist—his voice has epitomized a previous generation—the drama is Oedipal, and thus, in one of the title's several senses, child's play. We resent the man who in some ways shaped us, who saw from his lofty eminence what we would become. His knowledge of us is insufferable, and we kill him in order to live.

In his isolation, the narrator studies the approaching event from every conceivable angle…. None of these meditations, however, prepares him for the event itself, which in the shock of the actual becomes, like the battle scenes of "The Bread of Time to Come," almost surreal, revealing that nothing—not art, nor history, nor news, nor even dream—is a match for bare reality.
"Child's Play" is the richer of these two works, but also perhaps the less fully realized, with a few loose ends and odd episodes; still, it is a striking story whose scenes and images remain with the reader long after he has finished it. Malouf is something of a primitive narrator, rough around the edges, but he is also a deeply serious writer, not to be taken up lightly. In these two unique perspectives on the modern world, he exhibits the kind of eccentric vision that one might expect from an outsider, an Australian, say, or an isolated terrorist, or a genuine artist.


Malouf, David (Vol. 28): Peter Kemp

Surreally hard-edged, the world [the short novel, Child's Play, and the short stories, "Eustace" and "The Prowler," project] is one where details have a hallucinatory vividness and patterns stand out with stark clarity: only significance remains creepily opaque.

Like the dreams that regularly perturb their characters, the short novel and two stories gathered here are intensely enigmatic. Though geographically a world apart—Italy is the background to the novel, Australia to the stories—all three fictions cover the same imaginative ground. Whatever the ostensible setting, Malouf's locales invariably turn out to be disorienting mazes, full of echoing de Chirico perspectives and trompe l'oeil Magritte effects. Ranged in cryptic symmetries around them, the same types recur. Particularly favoured is the threatening solitary, some ominous loner endowed with "the ambiguous gift of singularity". Central to these three pieces are, respectively, an outsider, an intruder, and an interloper. Anti-social figures, they are often cast as the shadows of respectability: dark, distorted counterparts that people in the well-lit public world are unable to shake off….

Polarities … magnetize Malouf's attention. Conformity, community, security are repeatedly set against anarchy, loneliness, danger. Obsessively, his work juxtaposes order and disturbance, light and dark. Those positives and negatives can unexpectedly change places. And always in Malouf's stories the powerful attraction between seemingly opposed poles is used to generate some shock effects. In "Eustace", a trespassing misfit slides into the dormitory of a decorous girls' school, pacing eerily round the ranged beds, fantasizing among dreaming children. When the girls awake, he is not denounced because, until menace breaks through make-believe, he satisfies "their own hunger for fairytale". Similarly, in "The Prowler", a placid and affluent suburb is infiltrated by a sexual maniac. Soon, however, he comes to seem a weird externalization of disruptive urges lurking inside law-abiding citizens. Reports of his behaviour, multiplying fantastically, take on bizarre, semi-revelatory patterns. False prowlers proliferate bemusingly, as deviance is carbon-copied. Finally, the investigating officer, symbol of authority and reassurance—"a sort of prowler in reverse"—emerges as the prime suspect.

Malouf's fiction opts for dream-like stylization. Through-the-looking-glass reflections and refractions turn his work into something like a hall of mirrors. Twisted likenesses loom everywhere: doubles, doppelgängers, secret sharers, alter egos. But the high degree of similarity between the various figures is only attained by a low degree of individual characterization. In these works, even proper names are rationed. Slimmed down to the bone of type—"the woman", "the boy", "the son"—the characters are psychologically anorexic. And their undernourishment is particularly pointed up by the fact that the backgrounds they are silhouetted against are portrayed with great fullness. Here, lavish detail is stamped sharply on the mind's eye. The Italian scene especially is captured with inventive accuracy—as when, for example, Malouf writes of a piazza suddenly floodlit with sunshine after heavy rain: "the square was full of pieces of sky with pigeons sipping at them or splashing up broken glass". Mirroring the natural world in this glittering fashion, Child's Play shows a poetic talent that is at its best when trained outwards rather than diffused in shadowy reflections of the doublings of

Malouf, David (Vol. 28): James Tulip

There is good reason for believing that the Australian coastline region north from Newcastle to Brisbane is one of the choicest parts of the earth, indeed in a good season a Garden of Eden…. David Malouf in Fly Away Peter [published in the United States as The Bread of Time to Come] has … made one part of it his own. The South Coast of Queensland (or, as it is now known, the Gold Coast) is created in his novel of pre-World War I days as if it is a Paradise before the Fall, a world of harmony between nature and human nature. There is even an Adam and Eve. (p. 113)

The moment when [Jim Saddler and Imogen Harcourt] meet is a fine one. It is by accident. Separately, they each are observing a sandpiper, and when the photo is developed their pleasure is caught by the novel as a moment of suspension of the centrally achieved interest of the book…. The openness of two people—their love of nature—is richly present. It is a poetic triumph for Malouf to have found this kind of stasis and sharing. The maturity in the characters is a measure of yet another advance in his gifts as a writer.

Fly Away Peter, however, does not rest there. It attempts to move out from this centre and frame this Paradise with its Fall. Jim Saddler goes to World War I and dies there. His is no migratory pattern or cycle. Nor was Imogen's, who had come from England and settled eccentrically in Australia. Only Ashley Crowther follows the pattern of the birds in coming home from England to his property, then in going to the War and returning. The two patterns—bird and human—are held up for inspection and comparison. It is as if the myth in the birds' cycle is the superior one. A sadness envelopes the human Fall. Even Imogen's closing vision of a surfboard rider off Southport as if it were some eternal resurgence of youth does not dispel the irony. It has daunting associations for the reader with what the South (Gold) Coast has since become. Who there now thinks of sandpipers?

Malouf's novella works best as a prose poem. So much is evocatively said of nature here. The charm in Jim Saddler's response to life brings a lyric and celebrative density to the writing. (pp. 113-14)

Gratuitously, I feel, Gallipoli makes an entrance in the novel; the second half is given over to a strong but finally unconvincing account of Jim Saddler in France. His knowledge and experience grow; he keeps his morale steady with watching birds. But the effect on the novel is to increase a sense of passivity in a negative sense with regard to human nature, which touches on the overall limitation of the book. For the characters and events in Fly Away Peter are in some disturbing sense not real. The duality of Jim Saddler and Ashley Crowther is transparently schematic. Class consciousness, while real enough in Australian society especially of this period, has an arbitrary feel to it in Fly Away Peter. And even Jim Saddler seems to be a centre of consciousness more than a character. Only in Imogen Harcourt has Malouf landed on a person who is a subject in her own right. She is choric, but quirky. She has made a choice where she wants to be in life. Her answer to the conundrum of choice and doubt in the title of the book is to accept what she has done in migrating like a bird. She knows, however, that she will never return. (p. 114)

Malouf, David (Vol. 86): Introduction

David Malouf Remembering Babylon

Award: Los Angeles Times Book Award for Fiction

(Full name George Joseph David Malouf) Born in 1934, Malouf is an Australian novelist, poet, short fiction writer, playwright, librettist, and editor.

For further information on Malouf's life and works, see CLC, Volume 28.

Updating the theme of the "noble savage," Remembering Babylon (1993) is set in nineteenth-century Australia and concerns Gemmy Fairley, an English citizen who was abandoned by shipmates as a child. After living with the aborigine people of Australia for a sixteen-year period, this "black white-feller" attempts to rejoin white Australian society, a community governed by European cultural norms and the English language. Variously regarded by some settlers as a curiosity, a potential ally against the aborigines, and an object of scientific wonder, Gemmy is also viewed with fear, loathing, and distrust. His reinitiation into white society, particularly after he is seen conversing with blacks in the aborigine dialect, culminates with several settlers attacking him. Eventually he abandons the "civilized" ways of the whites and rejoins Australia's indigenous community. Critics have lauded Malouf's focus on the relationship between politics, language, social stature, and personal and national identity in Remembering Babylon, praising the novel as a document of Australia's history, European settlement, and multifaceted population. Reviewers have additionally admired Malouf's use of Gemmy as a means of discussing the sublime in literature, the alienating and binding nature of language, and the paradox posed by the individual's need for acceptance and desire to distinguish between self and the "Other." In honoring Malouf with the Los Angeles Times Book Award for Fiction, judge Annette Smith stated: "Malouf's novel testifies all along to the confusion of languages. It demonstrates the demonic nature of words, both their destructive power and their creative force, as Gemmy's past and his new identity take form."

Malouf, David (Vol. 86): Principal Works

Bicycle, and Other Poems (poetry) 1970
Neighbours in a Thicket (poetry) 1974
Johnno (novel) 1975

An Imaginary Life (novel) 1978
Wild Lemons (poetry) 1980
†Child's Play; The Bread of Time to Come (novellas) 1981
First Things Last (poetry) 1981
Selected Poems (poetry) 1981
Child's Play; Eustace; The Prowler (novella and short stories) 1982
Harland's Half Acre (novel) 1984
Antipodes (short stories) 1985
12 Edmondstone Street (memoir) 1985
Blood Relations (drama) 1988
The Great World (novel) 1990
Remembering Babylon (novel) 1993

s work was published as The Year of the Foxes, and Other Poems in 1979.
The Bread of Time to Come was published as Fly Away Peter in 1982.

Criticism: Peter Otto (essay date September 1993)


[In the essay below, Otto analyzes Malouf's portrayal of male-female relationships, the sublime, the political, and the social in Remembering Babylon, noting Malouf's delineation of the evolution of Australia's colonial identity into a national identity.]

Whether this is Jerusalem or Babylon we know not.

Blake, The Four Zoas

Remembering Babylon begins 'One day in the middle of the nineteenth century, when settlement in Queensland had advanced little more than halfway up the coast', at an imaginary line that purportedly divides colonial settlement from its Unknown. It may at first seem odd to associate this locale with Babylon but, as the first of the book's two epigraphs suggests, one of the title's allusions is to Blake's Babylon, a city formed by the dismemberment of Albion (England). The allusion suggests that colonial Australia is a dismembered Albion, formed by successive waves of transportation and migration. If the scattered pieces of Albion's body could be put back together again, then, according to Blake, Babylon would become Jerusalem once more and Albion would rise from the grave. Malouf attempts an analogous task in Remembering Babylon. The book re-members the divisions of colonial Australia, not to reconstruct an imperial Albion but to build a New Jerusalem of (Australian) national identity.

In the aftermath of the Mabo ruling and in the year of indigenous peoples, it hardly needs to be said that this project is fraught with difficulty. Phrases such as 'halfway up the coast' of Queensland and 'One day in the middle of the nineteenth century' will inevitably evoke two very different kinds of recollection. On the one hand, this locale might stand for the point from which a properly Australian identity springs. On the other hand, it is the site of violent dispossession. How is Malouf to re-member the different histories and cultures that collide at this point?

From the first pages of Remembering Babylon it is evident that the book sets out to re-member the former rather than the latter. It displaces the second set of recollections by translating the political into the psychological, and matters of history and politics into questions of creativity and aesthetics. The border between settlers and indigenous peoples is interpreted through a Romantic (or postmodern romantic) psychology and tropology which reads such encounters as thresholds or borders of consciousness. 'Halfway up the coast' of Queensland in the 'middle of the nineteenth century', one does not stumble across a site of dispossession or conflict between races; instead, one comes face to face with the Unknown. The book goes on to suggest that contact between European settlers and the Unknown occurs at a place just beyond the reach of imperial power where, thanks to the mysteries of the imagination, it becomes possible to build an authentic Australian identity.

The translation of the political into the aesthetic and psychological, and the accompanying metamorphosis of the colonial into the national, appears in different guises in other fictions by Malouf. One might describe Remembering Babylon as reformulating, in a more historically specific idiom, the mythology outlined in An Imaginary Life. It is instructive to trace some of the key moments in the erasure of the political in Remembering Babylon, and in particular the use of the sublime to orchestrate his remembering of colonialism. I should underline that my concern is not with the views of Malouf as an individual, but with the implications of the discourse that structures this book. I take as given the literary virtuosity that makes Malouf one of
Australia's most accomplished writers.

At the threshold between settler society and the Unknown, 'something extraordinary' occurs. Before the startled eyes of the McIvor children, Janet and Meg, and their cousin, Lachlan Beattie, something separates itself from the forbidden world on the other side of the line:

a fragment of ti-tree swamp, some bit of the land over there that was forbidden to them, had detached itself from the band of grey that made up the far side of the swamp, and in a shape more like a watery, heat-struck mirage than a thing of substance, elongated and airily indistinct, was bowling, leaping, flying towards them.

The cousins' first thought is that they are being 'raided by blacks', but this conjecture turns out to be wrong:

The stick-like legs, all knobbed at the joints, suggested a wounded water-bird, a brolga, or a human that … had been changed into a bird, but only halfway, and now, neither one thing nor the other, was hopping and flapping towards them out of a world over there, beyond the noman's land of the swamp, that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome, and since it lay so far beyond experience, not just their own but their parents' too, of nightmare rumours, superstitions and all that belonged to Absolute Dark.

In the face of this threat from a being that eludes classification, the children's game of make-believe is disrupted, and they stand transfixed, almost as if turned to stone.

Even from this thumbnail sketch it is evident that Lachlan, Meg and Janet are actors in a drama belonging to the literature of the sublime. The opening pages of Remembering Babylon follow the first steps in the plot of the sublime: a state of harmony between subject and object (play or habitual activity) is disrupted by a superior power that brings 'irresistible might to bear' and then to a sense of blockage in which, as Edmund Burke described it [in A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful], all of the motions of the soul 'are suspended, with some degree of horror'. This moment of blockage is followed by a powerful sense of release, which for the male subject leads to a newly invigorated identity. This is achieved through a complex sequence of accommodations and transformations. First, the threatening force dissipates. Second, what was at first experienced as a disruptive, blocking force comes to be understood as a sign of a transcendental power that orders and stabilizes the world. The terms used to describe this power are quite diverse: God in the religious sublime, the self or the imagination in the Romantic sublime, language or desire in the postmodern sublime, and so on. Third, some of the might formerly attributed to the blocking agent is now transferred to the subject. As Burke explains,

Now whatever … tends to raise a man in his own opinion, produces a sort of swelling and triumph that is extremely grateful to the human mind; and this swelling is never more perceived … than when without danger we are conversant with terrible objects, the mind always claiming to itself some part of the dignity and importance of the things which it contemplates.

In Remembering Babylon one can trace a very similar sequence of transformations and accommodations.

As if waking from a momentary trance, Lachlan steps 'resolutely' out in front of the girls in order to do 'what his manhood required him to do'. He raises his make-believe gun to his shoulder and confronts the phantom. This act of defiance has staggering results. First, the horrifying power turns out to be nothing more than Gemmy (or Jimmy) Fairley (or Farrell). He is a white man, even though he has 'the mangy, half-starved look of a black'. Gemmy, it transpires, 'had been cast overboard from a passing ship' when he was thirteen and 'had been living since in the scrub country to the north with blacks'. As if in recognition that he stands at a border
between worlds, Gemmy jumps onto the top rail of a fence and for a few moments balances between the world he has left and the one he is to enter. He is unable to remain at this point for long. Once he has confessed that he is 'a B-b-british object!' his descent into settler society is swift: Gemmy falls to the ground, crawls 'about with his nose in the dust', is advised to stop speaking in the Aboriginal language he has learnt, and is finally taken into custody by Lachlan and marched back to the white world.

Just as astonishingly, as the Unknown withers, Lachlan expands. It is as if some of the power that had once belonged to the Unknown has been transferred to him. As Lachlan prods the man he has taken prisoner, he hears 'sounds of such eager submissiveness' that his 'heart swelled'.

He had a powerful sense of the springing of his torso from the roots of his belly. He had known nothing like this! He was bringing a prisoner in. Armed with nothing, too, but his own presumptuous daring and the power of make-believe.

The encounter with the Unknown transports Lachlan from the position of child to that of young adult, from the Imaginary to the Symbolic realm. As a young adult, the stick he wields has become 'what his gesture had claimed for it': the Phallus. He is now able to lay claim to the Law (he takes Gemmy into custody), language (he is the one able to translate Gemmy's attempts at communication) and masculine authority (he gives directions to his cousins, and they obey him).

Throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, the language of the sublime was frequently invoked by travellers, explorers and writers as a discourse appropriate for an encounter with an alien land or people. A representative instance of this usage can be seen in J. W. Gregory's *The Dead Heart of Australia* (1909), which offers an account of Gregory's journey around Lake Eyre in 1901–2. In the eleventh chapter of this book, Gregory describes an encounter that closely follows the scenario that I have been describing.

Gregory begins with an account of his boyhood 'yearning for the opportunity of travel', and his particular fascination with the desert, which promises a 'soothing solitude, and the exhilaration of its buoyant sense of freedom'. Unfortunately, when he enacts his dreams, reality stubbornly blocks his desires. The surface of the desert is 'black and rocky'; he gets sun blisters 'from the heat reflected from the ground'; 'a westerly gale' pelts him with 'coarse, black grit'; and the water he is carrying becomes 'warm and putrid, and almost poisonous'. As the narrative proceeds, the desert is personified as a fearsome adversary. What had been the source of a merely physical discomfort now produces an astounding catalogue of horrors:

A vision rises before us of the desperate struggles of the lost explorer, and of the despair of his last mile's march. We begin to realise the agony of death by thirst, when the sun is burning like fire, and perhaps swarms of ants are stinging like a medieval 'jailer's daughter'. We then understand how Nature can rival the malignant tortures of the Inquisition.

Gregory responds to this adversary with a surprising degree of passion. He describes the desert as 'an enemy that must be fought' (my emphasis) and the sun 'in its fiery march' across the sky inspires feelings which 'sometimes approach to hatred'. Night, however, effects a miraculous deflation of the blocking power. The passive foe is softened, the active adversary is displaced by a faint light, and 'the demon dread of day' is exorcized: 'The air is cool and bracing; the low, brown hills that looked so near, but are so far, can no longer mock, or the mirage tantalise.' The desert's blocking force is displaced by a silence broken only by a 'barely perceptible humming' that 'one is tempted to believe' is the music of the spheres, 'such as that you dream'd about'. In touch with this transcendental order, Gregory is elevated and renewed.

Why should this elaborate scenario be used to describe an experience in the desert at the beginning of the twentieth century? Or, for that matter, why should Malouf use the sublime to describe an event that occurs in the 'middle of the nineteenth century', 'halfway up the coast' of Queensland? *Remembering Babylon* and *The
Dead Heart of Australia suggest at least three answers to these questions.

First, the sublime offers a powerful set of procedures for constructing a self in the face of an external threat. In effect it is a defence reaction that preserves the self against alterity. Second, the sublime consolidates this self by staging a drama that recapitulates a socially constructed division between the genders. In psychoanalytic terms, Lachlan's (and Gregory's) masculine identity is determined as much by his ability to separate himself from the feminine and the maternal (the pre-Oedipal world suggested by Gregory's dreams and Lachlan's make-believe) as by his willingness to take his father ('his manhood') as a model. The sublime offers an opportunity to effect this separation by dividing the world into two radically different groups: those who are overcome by 'power and irresistible might' and those who are able to assume this power as their own; the passive and the active; women and men.

In a colonial context, however, there is a third reason for the invocation of the sublime. The sublime offers a colonial (and post-colonial) society a drama in which the settler's encounter with an indigenous people and an alien land can be staged as an encounter with the Unknown. In so doing it re-inscribes the imaginary line that marks the furthest extent of settler expansion and Aboriginal dispossession as a limit of vision.

Pictured in this way, the politics of settlement is eclipsed by questions concerning the relation between centre and margin, Europe and Australia. In Remembering Babylon the boundary between white and black cultures becomes not so much a place of dispossession as the point where imperial power falters: it is a place 'only lightly connected to … the figure in an official uniform … and the Crown he represented, which held them all, a whole continent, in its grip'. A story of Oedipal rivalry deftly interprets and displaces the narrative of a conflict between races. This threshold turns out to be not merely a place where a masculine self can be consolidated, but a site where that self can expand, freed from the power of the centre.

Although the sublime may conclude with male swelling, this desired state is preceded by an experience of extreme subjection. The male subject is overcome, possessed, and moved by a power not his own. In the discourse of the sublime this experience is habitually described in the language of (a male vision of) sexual ecstasy. It is small cause for wonder that male writers are deeply ambivalent about this ravishing. In this brief moment they are the possessed rather than the possessor, the object rather than the subject.

Yet male writers, particularly in the twentieth century, are often fascinated by this experience of subjection. It suggests a state in which the social, civilized self is put aside in favour of an encounter with a more primitive, presocial and fundamental power. Writers such as Rilke, Lawrence, Yeats and Malouf figure the moment of sublime submission as a moment of inspiration in which the writer is in touch with the dark gods. The relation between the male self that emerges from the sublime and the 'female' state that is its immediate predecessor then becomes a question of the relation between the male writer and the (female) experience of inspiration and creativity. In Remembering Babylon, these questions are worked out in relation to Janet's experience of the sublime.

As is evident from Burke's notion of male 'swelling', the discourse of the sublime is far from gender-neutral. In the aesthetic discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the sublime is masculine, while the beautiful is feminine; it would be unnatural for a woman to appropriate the power of the blocking agent. Remembering Babylon seems to share this view. Lachlan's mode of defence is not available to Janet or Meg. Instead, they remain passive, caught at the point of blockage, their minds filled by the object that confronts them. In this unenviable condition, their best defence is submission.

Before Gemmy's appearance, Janet and Meg are unwilling participants in Lachlan's game: 'They complained and dawdled and he had to exert all his gift for fantasy, his will too, which was stubborn, to keep them in the game.' Immediately after Gemmy has been taken prisoner, they silently accept the boy's 'new-found mastery' and 'let themselves be led'.
Remembering Babylon, however, claims more for the moment of subjection. It wants its readers to believe that Janet emerges with a premonition of a knowledge and power very different from that which is available to men. Her account of the sublime experience is at odds with the heroic narrative offered by Lachlan. Janet asserts that 'Me and Meg found [Gemmy], just as much as Lachlan' and that, if truth be told, the real agent of discovery is the dog. She proffers this deflationary narrative and waits expectantly for her parents to bring Lachlan down, because for her the experience is one in which her faculties were suspended, not one in which an active self was precipitated.

The different kinds of knowledge and power are first glimpsed through Gemmy's eyes. When Gemmy looks at Lachlan he never fails to see 'the power he had laid claim to with the pretence of arms'. Gemmy is therefore always ready 'to appease' the boy. Lachlan's power, the narrator observes, belongs 'to him because he was a boy; because, one day, the authority he had claimed … would be real'. By contrast, when Gemmy catches Janet looking at him he has the feeling 'that she was trying to see right into him, to catch his spirit'. Janet's knowledge arises from her ability to blur the boundaries between self and other, to allow others to 'enter her and reveal what they were'. As this knowledge is not predicated on the mastery of an object by a subject, Janet's power needs 'no witness' and is 'entirely her own'.

These radically different powers and knowledges reflect lives driven by different ambitions. Lachlan projects his desire out into the world. He is full of 'heroic visions in which the limitations of mere boyhood would at last be transcended'. By contrast, Janet is fascinated by a world beneath this one, by an identity more fundamental than the social.

One day … picking idly at a scab on her knee, she was amazed, when the hard crust lifted, to discover a colour she had never seen before, and another skin, lustrous as pearl. A delicate pink, it might have belonged to some other creature altogether, and the thought came to her that if all the rough skin of her present self crusted and came off, what would be revealed, shining in sunlight, was this finer being that had somehow been covered up in her.

She feels as if she has been relieved of the weight of her own life, and 'the brighter being in her was very gently stirring and shifting its wings'.

This fantasy finds its most extreme form in the fifteenth chapter of the book. The primitive source of the sublime's 'power and irresistible might' here becomes a swarm of bees. Bees are a traditional symbol for primitive energy, either sexual or divine. Remembering Babylon allows both sets of associations to accrue. For Janet the bees suggest 'another life, quite independent of their human one', and evoke the fantasy that 'If she could escape … just for a moment, out of her personal mind into their communally single one, she would know at last what it was like to be an angel.' These intimations of violent possession and dispossession are given graphic form later in the chapter when the bees attack Janet:

She just had time to see her hands covered with plushy, alive fur gloves before her whole body crusted over and she was blazingly gathered into the single sound they made, the single mind.

This barely disguised rape scene is figured by Malouf as a wedding. Janet's 'old mind' is put to one side and her 'new and separate mind' (provided by the bees) tells her that 'You are our bride'. This consummation provides her with a 'new' (spiritual) body and self; it is, however, also a conflagration which leaves her old body 'a charred stump, all crusted black and bubbling'.

In the sexual politics of this novel, male identity is defined in terms of the distance it has moved from the 'feminine'. Janet's metaphorical marriage through rape confirms the position she was allocated in the drama of the sublime: she is the defining other to male identity. But the masculine self is unable to divide itself once
and for all from the feminine. In the Romantic discourse of Remembering Babylon, this is not simply because woman is the defining other to male identity, or that woman stands for all of the 'bodies' over which Lachlan's authority will be exerted. Janet's most crucial role at this point in the book is concerned with the status, in a colonial context, of the traditional identification of women and nature. Janet's possession by the bees confirms what was implicit in the drama of the sublime: woman can be possessed by the spirit of this new land. The sublime, therefore, is not merely the vehicle for the production of the Australian man; it also brings the truly Australian woman into being.

This second miracle performs a remarkable coup, a second displacement of the indigenous population. It is the white, female settler who now emerges as the authentic mouthpiece for Australia. She is the natural receptacle for the spirit of place: an Australian who stands, with her Platonic Adam, at the (expanding) edge of empire.

With the displacement of the conflict between settler and indigenous peoples, and the installation of Janet as authentic voice of the land, Remembering Babylon is set to begin its work of recollection. What it proceeds to remember is not the original inhabitants of the land, but a division itself produced by the sublime: a woman who speaks for the primitive voice of the land and a man who represents Australian political and social life. If achieved, this recollection would piece together an androgynous Australian identity. It would hold together the primitive and the civilized, the feminine and the masculine, those who submit and those who force others to submit. The focal point of this remembering is Gemmy.

Gemmy has a complex set of roles to play in this novel. He serves as a locus and catalyst for certain kinds of disorientation intrinsic to the colonial experience. First, as a white man who arrives in settler society from Aboriginal Australia rather than from Great Britain, he suggests a white civilization transposed to an alien context and so made strange. Second, he embodies the feared Unknown. Third, as a person who seems both black and white, he evokes fears of deracination and loss of racial purity. Gemmy also implies the possibility of a future identity and culture that is not simply black or white, Australian or European, but stands between these poles.

The anxiety Gemmy produces in the colonists is related both to their inability to categorize him and their desire not to recognize him. There is a bewildering proliferation of names and circumlocutions for him. Aside from the uncertainty as to whether he is Gemmy or Jimmy, Fairley or Farrelly, he is described as, or compared to, a 'blackfeller', 'plain savage, marionette' and moron, 'puppet', 'mongrel', 'pathetic, muddy-eyed, misshapen fellow', 'half-caste', 'run-a-way', 'straw-topped half-naked savage', 'black', 'nigger', parody of a white man, 'black whitefeller' and 'white black man'.

Remembering Babylon provides what could be called an alphabet of possible responses to the unknowns that are given tangible form by Gemmy. Most of the settlers treat Gemmy in a way that is analogous to their treatment of the land, 'ringbarking and clearing and reducing it to what would make it, at last, just a bit like home'. These are the responses that produce the Babylon of the book's title by dividing white from black, the familiar from the unfamiliar, the known from the unknown, Australia from Europe and the present from both the past and the future.

Lachlan and Janet (along with a few of the other colonists) have a very different response to Gemmy. For them he is the focus of, and catalyst for, the remembering that is to heal colonial society. One might well ask what licenses Gemmy to play this role, for at first glance he appears to be a decidedly lacklustre hero. He is, at best, rather simple; and throughout the novel he acts in an oddly absentminded, childlike way. Yet these disqualifications turn out to be his greatest assets.

The closest model for the character and role of Gemmy is the 'idiot boy' in Wordsworth's poem of the same name, whose simplicity is a sign that he has avoided socialization and is therefore still in touch with nature. This proximity to nature means that he is also close to the transcendental force that informs nature: the
imagination. In this regard, the 'idiot boy' is like that staple of Romantic poetry (and second model for Gemmy), the Child. The Child, Wordsworth writes, is the 'best Philosopher', an 'Eye among the blind, / That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep, / Haunted for ever by the eternal mind', because his imagination has not yet been tempered by the adult world of reality and social necessity. In Romanticism, 'idiot' and Child are often characterized as dwelling on the border between two worlds: they stand between, on the one hand, a paradisal world projected by the imagination and, on the other hand, a world determined by the artificial constraints of adult life. This is why for Lachlan and Janet what is most resonant about Gemmy is the transcendental power he implies as he stands balanced, on the top rail of the fence, between one world and the next. This power is the imagination, which for Romanticism is the active source of both human and physical nature and so represents the spring from which individual and national identity flows.

Once again, many of the key moments here can be found in narratives of colonization and exploration. In the final stages of Gregory's sublime encounter with the South Australian desert, he also discovers a vision of the future, of primitive nature, and of the imagination. As he lies under the stars, listening to the music of the spheres, he feels 'an irresistible attraction towards the better rest and fuller silence of the long, desert journey, that lies before us all'. This proleptic vision of a journey after death is coupled with the stirrings of primitive man:

The simplicity of desert life, the uniformity of its conditions, the merciless severity of its forces, awaken in us the primitive man, lying beneath the carefully built-up fabric of social obligations. The unchanging face of Nature dimly stirs the beginnings of man. His pushing forward into the unknown is as the crown and completion of those beginnings.

Standing on the edge of the Unknown, pushing forward into the future and back into the past, produces an extraordinary sense of elation and inflation. For a moment, Gregory confides, 'a man sums up in himself the long experience of his race'.

This place between the past and the future, the primitive and the civilized, where a man can sum up the entire 'experience of his race' is, not surprisingly, one in which the imagination is free to act:

To retain the knowledge and thought of the twentieth century while meeting the conditions of prehistoric man, to face the mystery of the unchanging desert, divested of the fetish-begotten fears that half paralysed the primitive races, gives that stimulus to the imagination, which is one of the highest joys given to man to feel.

In the last chapter of Remembering Babylon we see Lachlan Beattie, now a respectable politician in his late middle age, attempting to tie up 'one of the loose ends of his own life, which might otherwise have gone on bleeding for ever'. It is this that leads him back to Janet (now Sister Monica), Gemmy and the extraordinary event with which the book began. In these last pages we see the form that the remembering alluded to in the book's title will take:

All that, fifty years ago. An age. They were living in another country. He could afford to admit now that it had not ended. Something Gemmy had touched off in them was what they were still living, both, in their different ways. It would end only when they were ended, and maybe not even then. They would come back, as they had now, from the far points they had moved away to, and stand side by side looking up at the figure outlined there against a streaming sky. Still balanced.

This passage effects a re-membering of child and adult, past and present, which recalls Wordsworth's economics of memory in the 'Immortality Ode'. Wordsworth's poem mourns the adult loss of the child's imagination through socialization, yet affirms that the child's imagination is still present to the adult through
recollection and, moreover, that

those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain-light of all our day,
Are yet a master-light of all our seeing.

The closing pages of *Remembering Babylon* also offer two answers to the question of what relation the now elderly Janet and Lachlan can have to their childhood and to Gemmy. Gemmy, like their youth, is no longer physically present. Lachlan discovers that he has been killed by white settlers (along with the Aboriginal people he has joined). Though Lachlan is not even sure where he was killed, he and Janet can still be with him in memory. Gemmy can still be the 'fountain-light' of their adult day.

Remembering their sublime encounter with Gemmy brings Janet and Lachlan back into relation with their childhood selves and experiences. In a Romantic psychology this is always therapeutic. It draws the fragmented identity of the adult back into relation with its source in the imagination of the child. At the same time, this recollection takes them back to a point where their very different trajectories have not yet diverged. Gemmy is a sign for the vanishing point in childhood (in the Imagination) where male and female, politician and nun, possessor and possessed, have not yet drawn apart.

The passage of fifty years that separates the temporal location of the book's final chapter from its beginning places this work of memory in a historical moment charged with significance: approximately ten years after federation and just before the First World War. In Australian mythology, both temporal markers imply a bringing together of disparate fragments into a new whole. As a result of the former, the colonies came together as a single nation. In the course of the latter, it is still sometimes asserted, a fledgling Australian nation forged a sense of collective identity. This is the vision that Malouf wants to be seen proleptically in Gemmy. If we return to the moment of contact between settlers and indigenous people, we will find, not Babylon, but the redemptive source of national identity in the imagination. The recollection of this beginning draws present-day Australia and colonial Australia into a whole; it opens the possibility of a nation built on the re-membering, the forging into one, of different peoples and states.

Perhaps the most startling thing about this redemptive narrative is the magnitude of what it has to forget in order to re-member, its transformation of a moment of violent dispossession into an anticipation of national unity. Something of the extent of this forgetting is oddly implied by the epigraphs with which Malouf begins this book. The first, included as epigraph to this essay, quotes words spoken by Ahania to her husband and king, Urizen, in Blake's *The Four Zoas*. Ahania claims not to know whether the fallen world she and Urizen inhabit is Jerusalem or Babylon. These words might at first seem apt, for *Remembering Babylon* is centred on the premise that the colonial experience harbours the still-living source of the Jerusalem of national identity. In *The Four Zoas*, however, Ahania equivocates about the nature of the reality she inhabits because she fears that Urizen will cast her out rather than hear the truth. Malouf does not quote the next line, in which Ahania details the full extent of the devastation which surrounds them: 'All is Confusion. All is tumult, & we alone are escaped.'

The book's second epigraph is even more ambivalent. It comes from an untitled poem by John Clare, which imagines an apocalyptic crisis of gigantic proportions:

Strange shapes and void afflict the soul
And shadow to the eye
A world on fire while smoke seas roll
And lightenings rend the sky
The moon shall be as blood the sun
Black as a thunder cloud
The stars shall turn to blue and dun
And heaven by darkness bow'd
Shall make suns dark and give no day
When stars like skys shall be
When heaven and earth shall pass away
Wilt thou Remember me.

If one were to read these lines in the light of the last chapter of *Remembering Babylon*, the 'world on fire while smoke seas roll' might suggest the First World War. The final line would then allude to Janet's and Lachlan's therapeutic recollection of Gemmy. But if one were to take the first chapter of the book as the interpretative context for these lines, then 'A world on fire while smoke seas roll' could just as easily refer to the historical and political realities of colonization that *Remembering Babylon* displaces. The last line would then have a much more plangent tone. It would refer to the very things that *Remembering Babylon* works so hard to forget.

**Criticism: Michiko Kakutani (review date 19 October 1993)**


[In the following favorable review of Remembering Babylon, Kakutani praises Malouf’s characterizations and his focus on Australian history.]

The Babylon referred to in the title of David Malouf's new novel *Remembering Babylon* is Australia: a 19th-century frontier that many of its settlers regarded as Eden, a New World paradise where they might make a fresh start and begin new lives, tabula rasa. Yet as we learn in this astonishing novel, Australia was also a harsh, dangerous land, a place that brought out in its colonizers the dark passions of racism, brutality and hate.

*Remembering Babylon*, Mr. Malouf's seventh novel, takes place "one day in the middle of the 19th century" in a small British settlement in the desolate territory of Queensland on the eastern coast of Australia. Three young children, Janet and Meg McIvor and their cousin Lachlan, are playing at the edge of the family paddock, when they see something amazing: a creature that seems half animal, half child emerges from the wilderness (that "abode of everything savage and fearsome") and slowly makes its way towards them. A hopping and flapping bird, they think, or maybe a scarecrow "that had somehow caught the spark of life."

Lachlan takes a stick and aims it, like a gun, at the creature; and the creature, to the children's shock, issues a plea in their own language: "Do not shoot," it stutters. "I am a B-b-british object!"

The creature, it turns out, is a man named Gemmy Fairley, who grew up on the streets of London. Abused by a savage employer, he ended up going to sea, where he soon fell into the hands of equally savage sailors; at the age of 13, he was cast ashore on the coast of Australia and left to die in the bush. He has spent the last 16 years living in the wilderness with a group of aborigines.

Bewildered by Gemmy, the children bring him back to town—a gathering of buildings, really, a store and post office and a pub—where the other settlers are amazed and amused by the "black white man" they have found. There is much exclaiming and joshing about the attempts of this "marionette or imbecile" to ingratiate himself, and eventually the town minister attempts to quiz Gemmy about his past.
Much the way he was once taken in by the aborigines who found him close to death on the beach, Gemmy is taken in by Janet and Meg’s parents, Jock and Ellen McIvor. He is to help out on the farm and assist with simple household tasks, jobs he is only too happy to perform.

As the weeks slowly pass, Gemmy becomes a part of the family and a friend and confidant of the children. A bond of "fearful protectiveness" develops among them: he is their playmate, companion and instructor in the ways of the bush.

Conflict between the settlers and the local aborigines accelerates, however, and the McIvors' neighbours come to view Gemmy with more and more suspicion. They begin questioning him about his former friends, trying, without much success, to get him to divulge information about aboriginal habits and intentions. After Gemmy is glimpsed speaking with two blacks, seeds of mistrust quickly sprout. Gemmy is no longer regarded as an entertaining simpleton; to many of the settlers, he has become a symbol of their starkest fears about the Other that lies beyond the flimsy fences of their settlement: their fears about the encroaching wilderness, their fears about "the Bogey, the Coal Man, Absolute Night."

Tension grows between the McIvors and the rest of the community, and one terrible night, it explodes: Gemmy is abducted, beaten and nearly killed. For Gemmy, that night is another awful replay of all the abuse he suffered as a child. For Jock McIvor, it is a night that shatters his trust in his neighbors and undermines his sense of purpose. For his children, it is a night that will initiate them into the brutalities of the grown-up world; for both Janet and Lachlan, it is a night that will determine the shape of the rest of their lives.

In relating the story of Gemmy and the McIvors, Mr. Malouf gives the reader an extraordinarily intimate sense of these inarticulate people's inner lives: their longing for connection in this vast, empty land, and their clumsy apprehension of both the kindnesses and cruelties others are capable of committing.

Through deft, quickly drawn cameos, Mr. Malouf also provides us with a sense of the community the McIvors inhabit. He introduces us to Mr. Frazer, the benevolent town minister, who's lost in his dreams of botany; the schoolmaster George Abbot, a young sourpuss of a man, embittered by his own inadequacies and failures; Mrs. Hutchence, the eccentric old woman who teaches Janet the mysteries of beekeeping, and Andy McKillop, an angry, half-witted farm hand, who yearns to stir up trouble.

As related by Mr. Malouf, the settlers' appalling mistreatment of Gemmy serves as a kind of frightening prelude to the far more violent "dispersals" and massacres that would be perpetrated on the aboriginal population in the years to come. Perhaps what makes his portrait of such acts so devastating is his understanding that they are a consequence of the settlers' own dreams: their dreams of creating a safe place in the wilderness for their families; their determination, in the face of illness and hardship and fear, to make a new life in a land free of memories and ghosts.

There are passages of aching beauty in Remembering Babylon and passages of shocking degradation. Mr. Malouf has written a wonderfully wise and moving novel, a novel that turns the history and mythic past of Australia into a dazzling fable of human hope and imperfection.

**Criticism: Richard Eder (review date 31 October 1993)**


[An American critic and journalist, Eder received the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 1987. In the following review, he discusses Malouf's focus on alienation, colonialism, identity, and cultural conflict in Remembering Babylon.]
There is no fully satisfactory word to oppose to exile, that forced removal and dismayed regret for a land that will always be home. Contemporary Australian writers need such a word; it would denote the forcible remover, and the dismay of occupying a land that will always be alien.

"Invader" doesn't quite do it. What such gifted authors as Rodney Hall, Janette Turner Hospital and Peter Carey conjure up is more like the notion of crime in Greek tragedy than in our present-day world: a transgression against the gods committed without knowledge or intention, but which must be paid for anyway. Explicitly or by remote implication, these authors evoke the land-spirits of the aboriginal culture as the deities who punish white settlers and their descendants by estrangement or even wreckage of the spirit.

David Malouf, too, makes settler estrangement the theme of his new novel *Remembering Babylon*. He uses it quite as powerfully as the others but in quite a different way. Where their writing is drastic and nightmarish, his is muted and elusive. They launch boulders over crags to demonstrate the force of gravity; he floats twigs and straw down a rivulet and demonstrates something similar. To use a film comparison, he is Ozu to their Kurosawa.

There is another difference. Running through Malouf's novel there is a note of reconciliation. Even the most penitential nightmare, he suggests, is a dream, which life undermines by its insistence on waking up. Malouf's story is a multiplicity of story fragments, in fact, and they persist in undermining each other. There is some disorientation in reading him from page to page, and a rich accumulating subtlety.

*Remembering Babylon* is placed at the settlement of Queensland, the steamy territory on the northeast coast. The settlers have a precarious footing in their enclaves, surrounded by swamp and gray endless wilderness. Shadows live in the wilderness, itinerant bands of aborigines who respect the shotgun-enforced boundaries by day, but at night wander through the farmers' lands and restless sleep.

One day a tattered, scarecrow-like figure lopes out of the horizon and approaches the little nephew and daughters of Jock and Ellen MacIvor, at play in the paddock. Lachlan, defending the Empire, raises a stick at him. "Do not shoot," the figure shouts. "I am a B-b-british object."

Gemmy Fairley was a London slum-child who became a ship's cabin boy. At 13 he was put ashore in the shallows off Queensland. We do not know why; Malouf's story is full of holes which, like lace, let through the blurred light of a larger reality. An aborigine band found him unconscious and gave him water. They took him for a sea-spirit and when he stood up, a sea-spirit turned to a child. For 16 years he wandered with them; they accepted him while patiently waiting for him to turn, as they saw it, fully human.

His arrival in the little settlement is an eruption that tests its inhabitants in different ways. There is intense curiosity. Mr. Frazer, the minister, patiently coaxes a story out of Gemmy's few English words and extravagant gestures. The young schoolteacher writes the story down, adding some details himself out of creative vanity. There are other distortions; Malouf writes a lovely spoof of how history is achieved. The saintly and solicitous Frazer supplies phrases out of sympathy for Gemmy's anguished stammering.

There is the settlers' fear of the Other, their antipathy for Gemmy's outlandish appearance, and their sense of duty toward what seems to be an unfortunate fellow white. "It was the mixture of monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness that made Gemmy Fairley so disturbing to them." Jock MacIvor, out of his wife's insistence and his own conscience, takes Gemmy in, but with nervous distaste. Others are more outspoken; eventually a gang abducts Gemmy at night, pushes him around and gives him a dunking.

Jock brings him back, then holds him in arms all night to calm him. Gemmy raises a double question for them all: Is he the Other or is he us; and who are we? The question turns Jock from a self-reliant settler to a man who begins to question himself, to look about him, to open up to his wife. In a tender night-scene, Ellen
recalls the amiable crowding of lives in their native Scottish town. Once she saw a tightrope walker cross above the thronged street. She takes a few steps to show her husband. "Ah'd gie aenethin' t'hae seen it," he says. "You, Ah mean. T'hae seen you."

Less directly, Gemmy changes other lives. An epilogue shows Lachlan, the endearing young imperial boy, as an old politician whose rise is curtailed by an act of conscience. His cousin Janet, who burned with puzzled envy of his boy's freedom, will find a different identity in her mother's charity toward Gemmy, work with him and an old woman neighbor on her beehives and eventually, as a nun, become a renowned entomologist. Malouf is never insistent; far from stressing what happens to his characters, he lets them fall away or wander off. His touch can be as fugitive and suggestive as a trick of light.

Gemmy, awkward and misfitting, we feel intensely and never see entirely. He did not come to join the settlers, but to pull together a haunted memory. His stay is an act of exorcism. He never relinquishes what the aborigines instilled in him, and eventually he will quietly go back among them. Gathering plants with Frazer, he had sensed the hidden presence of a group of black watchers. He knew what they were seeing:

He himself would have a clear light around him like the line that contained Mr. Frazer's drawings. It came from the energy set off where his spirit touched the spirits he was moving through. All they would see of Mr. Frazer was what the land itself saw: a shape, thin, featureless, that interposed itself a moment, like a mist or cloud, before the land blazed out in its full strength again and the shadow was gone, as if, in the long history of the place, it was too slight to endure, or had never been.

Malouf, however, does not condemn his whites to invisibility. They can open up to the country, he suggests. He speaks, above all, through the polymathic and inquisitive Rev. Frazer. Perhaps he will become more than a shadow. Botanizing with Gemmy, learning all the plant names and getting some wrong, he is the antithesis of the settler mentality that seeks to implant England in Australia. A vegetable idealist, he petitions the governor to alter the emphasis on growing lamb and wheat in favor of developing the continent's own native fruits and roots:

"This is what is intended by our coming here to make this place, too, part of the world's garden, but by changing ourselves rather than it, and adding thus to the richness and variety of things."

**Criticism: Alice Truax (review date 2 December 1993)**


[In the review below, Truax offers a thematic discussion of Remembering Babylon.]

The Australian writer David Malouf is fascinated with the power of words, an obsession he shares with the characters in his books. At the opening of his second novel, *An Imaginary Life* (1978), the poet Ovid has arrived at a desolate edge of the Roman Empire, where he has been banished for tweaking the emperor's nose once too often. His new home is a village of huts, pigs, and mud. No one reads Latin; no one can even understand what he is saying. He walks around ranting during the daytime, cut off from the essential working life of the village, and at night he writes letters, even when there is no one to read them:

I speak to you, reader, as one who lives in another century, since this is the letter I will never send....
Have you heard my name? Ovid? Am I still known? Has some line of my writing escaped the banning of my books from all the libraries and their public burning, my expulsion from the Latin tongue? Has some secret admirer kept one of my poems and so preserved it, or committed it to memory? Do my lines still pass secretly somewhere from mouth to mouth? Has some phrase of mine slipped through as a quotation, unnoticed by the authorities, in another man's poem? Or in a letter? Or in a saying that has become part of common speech and cannot now be eradicated?

Have I survived?

Malouf isn't particularly interested in the circumstances surrounding Ovid's censorship, nor does he seem to care very much about Ovid's enduring literary fame. But here Ovid is like the desperate man on a desert island who puts a message in a bottle and throws it into the sea. The desire to be recognized and remembered is always close to the heart of Malouf's work—whether he is writing about a prisoner of war in southeast Asia or a lonely Roman poet. And for these yearning characters, language often defines the boundaries of their imagined worlds. Malouf rescues their "utterances," even when they are unspoken; he gives them room to grow, transplanted, in the reader's mind.

At the same time, Malouf is distrustful of words that are divorced from visceral experience: these can foster enchantment and delusion. Ovid's fortunes improve only after he abandons his sterile self-imprisonment in Latin and learns the language of the place where he now lives. A feral boy is then discovered in the woods, and the poet teaches him to speak; this linguistic challenge is what binds Ovid anew to the present. It therefore seems appropriate that Malouf's own heady concerns, which pleasingly resurface in book after book, are increasingly fused with the immediate and the particular. In his new novel about nineteenth-century Australia, *Remembering Babylon*, almost every idea seems lovingly fleshed out, just as the most commonplace object or gesture—a teacup, the slicing of an apple—is alive with meaning.

*Remembering Babylon* begins in a remote Queensland community in the 1850s, and the farming families who live there—the transplanted McIvors and Corcorans and Sweetmans who've abandoned mine pits and blacksmithies to stake their claim—are unsure whether the new world will be their salvation or their downfall. There is no name yet for the dusty track that runs by the general store, no road attaching their settlement to the others along the coast. The newcomers have barely made a scratch on the vastness that surrounds them:

> It was disturbing, that: to have unknown country behind you as well as in front. When the hissing of the lamp died out the hut sank into silence. A child's murmuring out of sleep might keep it human for a moment, or a rustling of straw; but what you were left with when the last sleeper settled was the illimitable night, where it lay close over the land. You lay listening to the crash of animals through its underbrush, the crack, like a snapped bone, of a ring-barked tree out in a paddock, then its muffled fall; or some other, unidentifiable sound, louder, further off, that was an event in the land's history, no part of yours. The sense then of being submerged, of being hidden away in the depths of the country, but also lost, was very strong.

The massacres of the Australian aborigines are hinted at throughout *Remembering Babylon*, yet Malouf makes ready-made twentieth-century judgments about this historical catastrophe seem embarrassingly glib. Just as Pat Barker's recent novel *Regeneration* demands a strenuous moral reevaluation of the First World War by entangling the reader in Siegfried Sassoon's decision to resign from the army, Malouf forces you to experience not only the colonists' hatred, but also the fear that fosters it. The terrors engendered by this new land of upside-down seasons and wide skies seem almost equal to its opportunities. Cyclones. Floods. Natives who can come up on you without a sound, who refuse to recognize the authority of a fence. Jock McIvor dreams of snow, and his wife tells their children the stories of her own growing-up over and over. The faded dress with its pattern of larkspurs; the schoolmaster's slim French volumes, with their heroines named Ursule or
Victorine: these are the settlers' talismans against the unknown, for Australia speaks a language that they do not understand.

It is out of this unfathomend, unfathomable territory that Gemmy Fairley emerges. On the blisteringly hot morning when the McIvor children first catch sight of him coming out of the swamp, they are already involved in a rather energetic game of make-believe—tracking wolves across the snowy forests of Russia—and at first they are mystified by what the creature bobbing awkwardly toward them is:

The stick-like legs, all knobbed at the joints, suggested a wounded waterbird, a brolga, or a human that in the manner of the tales they told one another, all spells and curses, had been changed into a bird, but only halfway …

The children are frightened, but also utterly transfixed. Is he a scarecrow? Is he a black? By rights he should be a black, jumping out of the wilderness and running toward them in this eerie, incomprehensible way. But his hair is a shock of blond against his darkened skin. Lachlan, the boy, steps forward and gestures threateningly with his stick as though it were a gun. The creature squawks with alarm and leaps to the top rail of the fence. There, teetering, it stutters to justify its existence before being annihilated by the boy's imaginary weapon:

"Do not shoot,' it shouted. 'I am a B-b-british object!'"

After this astonishing statement. Gemmy falls off the fence and allows Lachlan to lead him back to the settlement, where he is considered quite a wondrous find.

Like Ovid, Gemmy is an outsider and an outcast, but of a far more ordinary sort: a white man, yes, but even so, a British object of little value—factory "maggot," ratcatcher's urchin—always defined by his usefulness to others. Sixteen years before, after a miserable stint as a much-abused ship's boy, Gemmy had been unceremoniously dumped overboard while he was sick with fever. Rescued by the aborigines, he has lived among them ever since.

Gemmy's years in Australia have not been unhappy ones, but he is haunted by a sense of his life before, a life that he can no longer remember. He lies by the aborigines' campfire at night and mysterious images come, unbidden, into his mind. Unsurprisingly, they are often contained in a word, like the seed locked in a fruit: "'Boots' the darkness whispered—he caught only the breath of the word—and there they were: objects that made no sense here, that he saw propped up in front of a barred grate."

So when Gemmy learns that there are white-faced creatures living to the south, he goes to seek them out, knowing that he needs their language to coax out this other spirit that lives inside him and troubles his dreams. Soon he comes upon a man in a clearing, who is preparing to swing "a long-handled, bladed instrument."

Gemmy watches from his hiding place:

He was amazed. A kind of meaning clung to the image in the same way that the clothes he was wearing clung to the man, and when the blade flashed and jarred against wood, it struck home in him. Axe.

The word flew into his head as fast and clear as the flash and whistle of its breath. Axe. Axe. Circles of meaning rippled away from the mark it blazed in the dark of his skull.

Gemmy is not escaping his present life, but attempting to reclaim his past, and as he circles the white community, observing, exploring, the language is as palpable to him as the chicken feed he shoves into his mouth and the clothes dancing on the line in the yard. The next day, when he runs toward the children, he
wants to prove that "all that separated him from them was ground that could be covered."

Because the boy, Lachlan, feels that he discovered Gemmy, the McIvors agree to take him in. But, in a larger sense, the settlers can't seem to take him in; they find his presence among them strangely unnerving. What can it mean that, despite his lack of modesty, his goofy mannerisms, his humiliating desire to please, he is one of them?

He had started out white. No question. When he fell in with the blacks—at thirteen, was it?—he had been like any other child, one of their own for instance. (That was hard to swallow.) But had he remained white?… Could you lose it? Not just language, but it. It.

The day following Gemmy's arrival, Mr. Frazer, the minister, brings Gemmy to the schoolhouse to examine him, instructing the schoolmaster, George Abbot, to take down his story. This dictation proves to be somewhat of a farce. Young Lachlan is Gemmy's best interpreter, but he is so rambunctious that he is finally banished from the schoolroom, leaving Gemmy in Mr. Frazer's well-meaning but far less capable hands. (Gemmy, anxious to be agreeable, eagerly accepts any interpretation Mr. Frazer offers, while Lachlan looks on, contemptuously, from the window.) Meanwhile Abbot, who is scornful of what he sees as the minister's gullibility, begins introducing fanciful elements of his own into the record. By the time Gemmy has finished, any sense that this is an accurate transcription of his experience—and whether, by implication, any such transcription is accurate—has been seriously compromised.

The irony of this scene—which is at once comical, moving, and strangely upsetting—is less that Gemmy's life history, despite being elicited and recorded, is riddled with error than that for Gemmy the solemnity of the enterprise is completely authentic. "Magic, as Gemmy understood it, had been the essence of the occasion." He examines the ink-marked pages with reverence:

He knew what writing was but had never himself learned the trick of it. As he handled the sheets and turned them this way and that, and caught the peculiar smell they gave off, his whole life was in his throat—tears, laughter too, a little—and he was filled with an immense gratitude. He had shown them what he was. He was known.

Like Ovid writing to his future readers, like Janet McIvor hunched over her needlework "as if her life was in every stitch," Gemmy possesses an intense desire to be pressed into the fabric of the world in some way that is both eternal and tangible. In one sense, Gemmy is distorted and diminished by this cobbled-together transcription, yet he is also exalted by the significance of its very existence. This contradiction is what prevents the scene from feeling narrowly moralistic. And is the illiterate Gemmy's assessment of the wonders of writing so different from the awe that all readers periodically experience throughout their lives?

It did not surprise him—it was the nature of magic—that all that had happened to him, all his fortune good and bad, and so much sweat and pain, and miles travelled and bones picked and nights of freezing dew, and dreams, and dreams … should be reduced now to what a man could hold in his hand and slip into a pocket.

It is not only Gemmy who achieves a new self-consciousness: his very presence forces a new self-consciousness upon the colonists, and many of them find it an unwelcome one. The way he speaks English is especially galling:

He was a parody of a white man. If you gave him a word for a thing, he could, after a good deal of huffing and blowing, repeat it, but the next time round you had to teach it to him all over again. He was imitation gone wrong, and the mere sight of it put you wrong too, made the whole business somehow foolish and open to doubt.
How do the McIvors put up with it? Slowly, inevitably, Gemmy's presence precipitates a reshuffling of loyalties. Old friendships are strained, new alliances spring up where none had previously existed. Malouf is particularly good at suggesting the profound disturbances and realignments that can occur within one person without being detected or remarked upon by others: the sudden terror of a despised farmhand; the fresh jealousy of a child. These assorted settlers, no less than Gemmy, have their own secret histories, and the brief glimpses Malouf offers us of their inner lives have the quality of revelation.

Although these harsh, hot landscapes of the Australian frontier are a hemisphere away from the Cornish coast and the florists of Bond Street, the loneliness of Malouf's characters is surprisingly reminiscent of Virginia Woolf; each one seems caught in an intricate prison of particularity. In Remembering Babylon, everyone important—Gemmy, Lachlan, Mr. Frazer, the schoolmaster, the various McIvors—is also very isolated, even when in the company of others. But their alienation is punctuated by brief moments of connectedness, like Mrs. Dalloway's sudden and clamorous happiness on a city street—"in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June." Both writers celebrate that fragile and joyous sense of oneself in the world. In Woolf these moments are unearned. For Malouf's characters, though, they have a moral dimension; they are a form of blessing, and one must be ready to receive it.

In Remembering Babylon, Mr. Frazer is the only adult who sees that he can learn something from Gemmy, and they often go on field trips together—"to botanise," as Mr. Frazer calls it—in the surrounding countryside. Gemmy shows the minister the edible plants and vegetables, making him taste the scavenged tuber or berry, teaching him to sound out their strange names. Mr. Frazer jots them down phonetically in his notebook and then, to his companion's amazement, sketches the plant itself, bringing it to life again on the page. This is a quintessentially Maloufian exchange: it is almost as though—through Gemmy's language—the earth meets Mr. Frazer's enthusiastic curiosity with a corresponding eagerness to be known. Just as words in Malouf are always pressing against their limitations as mere words—he describes them as whistling, blazing, darkening a room—the natural world seems to respond to the human desire to perceive it, as though thrilling to a touch.

One suspects that it is the minister's lack of popularity in his profession that has brought him to this forsaken out-post, where he can't even supply his wife with a piano. But after spending time with Gemmy, Mr. Frazer's own ruminations on Australia take a visionary turn. At night, he takes out his notebooks and lets his imagination run wild with all he has learned. He marvels to think that early settlers starved to death in the midst of such abundance, unable, "with their English eyes," to recognize it:

> We must rub our eyes and look again, clear our minds of what we are looking for to see what is there…. Is there not a kind of refractory pride in it, an insistence that if the land will not present itself to us in terms that we know, we would rather die than take it as it is? For there is a truth here and it is this: that no continent lies outside God's bounty and his intention to provide for his children. He is a gardener and everything he makes is a garden.

Just as Mr. Frazer helps Gemmy translate his life into English, Gemmy in turn helps translate the landscape of Australia into something comprehensible. Mr. Frazer learns, by defining the particular, to redefine the whole, and in so doing he finds himself transformed as well.

But while the minister fashions his paradise out of what he can see and feel and name, others in his flock are infusing more sinister mythologies with new life. Now, when Jock McIvor's neighbors regularly gather on the hillside at the day's end, they argue about the safety of allowing Gemmy to remain among them. And in the afternoons, the wives come to Ellen McIvor's to do their darning: What, their hostess wonders bitterly, did they talk about before Gemmy's arrival? Malouf captures perfectly the insidious, masturbatory tenor of their gossip:
Didn't she find it hard sometimes to sit at the same table with him? Considering that he might be happier running about naked—goodness, remember that first day!—than in the shirts she washed for him. Oh and the trousers, of course! And eating grubs—imagine!—then potatoes and cold mutton. That is, if it wasn't something worse. Their own grandfathers, so they say. And wasn't she scared, just a little—well they knew she wasn't but they would be, it was a wonder really how calm she was—of the time he spent with the children. The little girls, for instance…. And did she really let him chop wood for her? Actually let him loose with an axe?

Here the whites wield the word "axe" as a sly justification for their own eventual violence; we've come a long way from Gemmy's moment of recognition in the clearing. When some blacks from Gemmy's tribe come to pay him a visit, they are sighted by a neighboring farmhand, and the news spreads through the settlement like contagion. Jock McIvor's neighbors are restless; soon he finds an obscenity smeared in human excrement on the side of his shed, seething with greenflies. The writing, so to speak, is on the wall.

Or is it? As the question of Gemmy's fate looms over the settlement, the reader waits for the event that will draw the principal characters together and test their moral mettle in some conclusive way. This inevitable climax never happens. Gemmy manages to tilt the story away from its predictable endings, and, finally, to give the reader the slip altogether, disappearing into the mysterious country that delivered him. He remains, for the time being, the subject of his own story, but we never hear the rest of it. Nor do we return to the settlement without him—the final section of the novel is about a reunion between Lachlan and Janet McIvor in another time and place altogether. Paradoxically, this narrative swerve makes Gemmy seem more real rather than less so. It is as though he has finally eluded even the manipulations of his creator.

This elusive is chronic in Malouf, and it may be one reason why he is not, after seven novels, better known in the United States. His endings often leave us hungry with questions, as if his world is merely an extension of our own—ragged, porous, burgeoning with unfinished stories. To hold onto this great world—to remember the names for all that will otherwise be lost, to find the words with which to grasp the present, to articulate one's visions of the future—is an unceasing challenge. Perhaps Malouf believes that to suggest otherwise, even in fiction, is a misguided deceit. Perhaps he refuses to fold Gemmy's story up with some final flourish because it isn't meant, finally, to be reduced to "what a man could hold in his hand and slip into a pocket." Once so dispensed with, it might be easier to forget.

In Remembering Babylon, Gemmy desperately wants to be known, both to himself and to others. Although Malouf won't answer the riddle of Gemmy's life, he does answer Gemmy's yearning for that life to be recognized. Malouf honors the desire for recognition in all of us. After all, the author does deliver Ovid's mournful letter safely into our hands. And in response to the lonely man's closing cry—"Have I survived?"—we can answer, "Yes. Yes."

Criticism: Dwight Garner (review date Winter 1993–1994)


[In the review below, Garner favorably assesses Remembering Babylon, stating that this is "Malouf's best book" to date.]

The Australian writer David Malouf's new novel is a compact import—at a lean two hundred pages, it's practically a novella—but it arrives with a mighty rumble behind it. In the U.K. Remembering Babylon is an odds-on bet to grab the Booker Prize, and elsewhere in Europe the book has been heralded as Malouf's long-awaited breakthrough. The hype isn't mere woodsmoke: Remembering Babylon, a shrewd meditation on Australia's racial and cultural divides, has the intellectual heft and moral resonance of novels three times its
length. It's Malouf's best book, and it's a beauty.

*Remembering Babylon*'s modest size wouldn't be worth remarking if Malouf's last novel, *The Great World* (1990), hadn't spread itself across such a sprawling canvas. The book's World War II-era narrative followed an unlikely pair of misfits across several decades and continents, and it moved with the ruthless certainty of fate. As potent as *The Great World* was, though, *Remembering Babylon* focuses Malouf's flame: his masterful sentences, which are artfully unmannered and oblique, have never marched forward to greater effect.

*Remembering Babylon*, Malouf's seventh novel, is set in the "hostile and infelicitous" Australian north country of the 1840s, where a small band of European settlers has constructed a tenuous farming community. The existence they eke out is a mean, difficult one, and they're burdened with an uneasy sense "of being in a place that had not yet revealed all its influences on them." Worse, they live with a constant (if irrational) fear of Australia's aborigines—the "blackfellers." Malouf's writing about dislocating terror in the face of an unknown enemy has a clear-eyed power that stops you short:

> It brought you slap up against a terror you thought you had learned, years back, to treat as childish: the Bogey, the Coal Man, Absolute Night. And now here it is, not two yards away, solid and breathing: a thing beside which all you have ever known of darkness, of visible darkness, seems but the merest shadow, and all you can summon up to the encounter, out of a lifetime lived on the other, the lighter side of things—shillings and pence, the Lord's Prayer, the half dozen tunes your fingers can pick out on the strings of a fiddle, the names and ages of your children, including the ones in the earth, your wife's touch on your naked belly, and the shy, soft affection you have for yourself—weakens and falls away before the apparition, out of nowhere, of a figure taller perhaps than you are and of a sooty blackness beyond black, utterly still, very close, yet so far off, even at a distance of five feet, that you cannot conceive how it can be here in the same space, the same moment with you.

*Remembering Babylon* is about what happens to these settlers when, quite by accident, a gaggle of children "capture" a strange apparition that's appeared at the edge of a swamp. Gemmy Fairley, a "straw-topped half-naked savage," is dragged into town, where the settlers learn his sorry history: At thirteen he'd been rudely tossed ashore by a merchant ship and taken in by aborigines. Sixteen years later this "in-between creature"—is he black, or is he white? the townspeople wonder—has emerged back into the world of the Europeans. (Gemmy hadn't actually intended to find the white world again; something in him merely wanted to "prove that all that separated him from them was ground that could be covered.")

The abiding theme in nearly all of Malouf's work has been alienation—the terrible human divides wrought by race, class, and culture—and in Gemmy Fairley he has created a perfect lens through which to explore these concerns. Everyone in the community has a different reaction to Gemmy, and in their responses they speak far more about themselves than about him. For a while, most of the settlers treat Gemmy as a mere distraction. As the poor man "hummed and hooted and shot spittle out of his mouth" while trying to recall the few English words he once knew, the settlers revel in "the unaccustomed jollity of it, a noisy carnival." To them, Gemmy's a strange joke, "a parody of a white man."

The jollity turns to wariness, though, when Gemmy becomes a permanent fixture by moving in with one of the families. He unknowingly injects an element of poison into the community; he's a blank wall onto which they project their deepest fears about themselves and others. "Gemmy, just by being there, opened a gate on to things, things [a man] couldn't specify, even to himself, and did not want to ask about, that worried the soulcase out of him." Neighboring farmers begin to pressure the family to get rid of Gemmy; time-tested friendships are ripped apart during the debate about Gemmy's trustworthiness, a debate that ultimately turns crudely violent.
Malouf has dramatized this sort of difficult communion between "civilized" society and a seemingly part-human, part-animal presence before. In *An Imaginary Life* (1978), he imagines the Roman poet Ovid, while in a strange exile, becoming obsessed with a child who'd been living with wolves. But the earlier novel pales in comparison to Malouf's performance here.

Part of Malouf's achievement in *Remembering Babylon* is how much diverse life he packs into two hundred pages, without once cramping the narrative or losing the thread of this almost mythopoetic fable. For while Gemmy's tale provides the book's soul, Malouf skillfully interweaves numerous ancillary characters and dramas, each of which amplifies the issues surrounding Gemmy's alien status. Some of the book's best moments, in fact, emerge as the narrative skips back and forth in time, and the story is related from a multiplicity of perspectives.

Among the most potent and memorable scenes I've encountered in recent fiction, in fact, arrives when the daughter of the family that shelters Gemmy is set upon in a field by thousands upon thousands of bees. The girl sees "her hands covered with plushy, alive fur gloves before her whole body crusted over and she was blazingly gathered into the single sound they made, the single mind." But the bees don't bite, and as the girl surrenders her mind to their collective "unbodied" one, she has a quasireligious experience—her life is irrevocably altered. (She ends up, actually, in a convent.)

In this scene and in so many others in *Remembering Babylon*, Malouf is writing not only of race—that is, our fear of that which is different. He's also underlining what social creatures we are—how we're ever so willing to surrender our individuality (i.e., our capacity for rational thought) in order to merge with a larger group. Our greatest urge is to fit in; we want to know our place, even if that means expelling those who don't fit. Our sociable selves are constantly at war with the rest of us.

For Malouf's settlers, the need to feel grounded in a stable society is an undeniable yearning. Each of them feels rootless—as if they need to latch onto something quickly or they'll drift up into the dry air. It's so terrifyingly easy, as one lonely farm woman puts it, "to lose yourself in the immensities of the land, under a sky that opened too far in the direction of infinity." Life threatened to "sweep you right out of the door into a world where nothing, not a flat iron, not the names of your children on your lips, could hold you down against the vast upward expanse of your breath."

If the settlers worry about establishing firm roots lest they be swept out the door, Malouf's sentences are a perfect mixture of earth and sky, of fact and feeling. He writes like a dream, never doing fandangos at his material's expense, never descending into glibness. His prose may, in fact, put some readers in mind of Cormac McCarthy's laconic but oddly expansive storytelling.

With *Remembering Babylon* Malouf has created an historical fiction that lives thrillingly in the present: the book's intellectual achievement (a subtle examination of race and its discontents) is never at odds with the book's onrushing narrative thrust. This is a novel that sorely tests what Malouf calls "the glow of the white man's authority."

**An excerpt from *Remembering Babylon***

They were sly. They pretended to be pleased with him. He too was sly, but was less sure than he would have liked to be that he had told them nothing they might use. He leapt about, and with his heart very heavy in him, joked a little, and they narrowed their eyes, all smiles. 'Good boy, Gemmy,' Ned Corcoran said, as if he could have brained him.

But it was the other lot, those who were looking for the soft way, who gave him trouble. They could not understand why he was holding out on them. They were the peaceable ones, the ones who wanted to avoid
bloodshed, couldn't he see that? Couldn't he tell the difference? Urgency made them desperate. They shouted at him, and then at one another.

And in fact a good deal of what they were after he could not have told, even if he had wanted to, for the simple reason that there were no words for it in their tongue; yet when, as sometimes happened, he fell back on the native word, the only one that could express it, their eyes went hard, as if the mere existence of a language they did not know was a provocation, a way of making them helpless. He did not intend it that way, but he too saw that it might be true. There was no way of existing in this land, or of making your way through it, unless you took into yourself, discovered on your breath, the sounds that linked up all the various parts of it and made them one. Without that you were blind, you were deaf, as he had been, at first, in their world. You blundered about seeing holes where in fact strong spirits were at work that had to be placated, and if you knew how to call them up, could be helpful. Half of what ought to have been bright and full of the breath of life to you was shrouded in mist.


The authority of Malouf's art, however, is never once called into question.

**Criticism: Cynthia Blanche (review date January-February 1994)**


[Blanche is a New South Wales novelist. In the excerpt below, she faults Malouf's focus on characterization rather than theme in Remembering Babylon.]

Remembering Babylon, David Malouf's latest novel, is beautifully written, as indeed is everything that Malouf produces. It is a story about a small Queensland settlement in the mid-1800s and how the arrival of a mancreature from out of the bush affects it.

… and its flamelike flickering, was not even, maybe, human. The stick-like legs, all knobbed at the joints, suggested a wounded waterbird, a brolga, or a human that in the manner of the tales they told one another, all spells and curses, had been changed into a bird, but only halfway, and now, neither one thing nor the other, was hopping and flapping towards them out of a world over there, beyond the no-man's-land of the swamp, that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome, and since it lay so far beyond experience, not just their own but their parents' too, of nightmare rumours, superstitions and all that belonged to Absolute Dark.

Gemmy, a white man, whose first appearance is thus described, has lived in the bush with the Aborigines for many years. No mother exists in his earliest memories, just himself as a sweeper in a timber mill. At the age of five or six, Gemmy became the ratcatcher Willett's assistant.

When he plunges his arm into the musky dark and hauls the sewer-and ditch-rats out of the hot, drain-smelling interior, they squeal and tumble over one another's backs, and fight, using their teeth something horrible, and he gets many wounds that turn to open sores. He has scars all over his hands—one thumb is bitten through—and on his ears as well, since the rats, if they get the chance, will run up his body like squirrels up a tree trunk and fix their claws in his hair, till Willett untangles and tears them off. They get up the leg of his trousers too if they are not laced at the knees with string.
After escaping Willett at the age of twelve, Gemmy was press-ganged onto a sailing ship, then thrown overboard near Australia. He nearly drowned and Aborigines rescued him. When he at last emerges from the bush, sixteen years later, some of the members of the settlement take him into their hearts and hearths with kindness, while others hate and fear him and seek to destroy him. One day two blacks come out of the bush and sit with Gemmy.

They spread the land out for him, gave him its waters to drink. As he took huge draughts of it, saw it light his flesh. Watched him, laughing, bathe in it, scooping great handfuls over his breast. In the little space of dust between them as they sat, they danced, beat up clouds, threw rainbows over their heads. Then they rose, exchanged the formalities of parting, and went. A day and a night it would take them to reach a place that was already humming all round him as he took up his hammer and sent the blows of it leaping with such clarity in the release of his spirit that they might be flying, he thought, thirty miles off, like stars his arms could fling over the furthest ridge to light their path.

Then that bloke Andy appeared; came stumbling out of the scrub with his crooked jaw and restless, runaway eyes, and stood leaning on air, with the odd, empty look that anything, any madness might fill; hinting, demanding. The air around him was immediately infected, sucked into the emptiness he made just by stepping into it.

What a wonderful description of the effect a hostile, negative person can have on one!

There is much Gemmy has in common with Malouf's Wild Boy of _An Imaginary Life_. However, _Remembering Babylon_ is not as successful. There is, for my taste, too much about too many characters that I don't find interesting, despite the fact that they all, in some way, feel alienated from their former lives. And new characters keep popping up even towards the end of the book. There is the promise of a good character in Mrs Hutchence, but she has a limited presence. Gemmy is the one really interesting character, and there is too little of him.

The theme is concerned with existing in a dimension of life at one remove from everyone else. But there is little story development and I'm afraid the whole thing, apart from some magic moments, is really rather dull.

**Criticism: Harvey Blume (review date February-March 1994)**


[Blume is an American novelist. In the following, he offers praise for _Remembering Babylon_, comparing the novel to Joseph Conrad's novella _Heart of Darkness_ (1902).]

There is an area forever associated with Joseph Conrad's _Heart of Darkness_, an area of meeting, crossover, mixture, transgression, an area inhabited—incarnated—by Kurtz. Kurtz is the renegade, the one who has abandoned western identity to assume unspeakable powers in an African forest hidden almost entirely from view of Belgium's river steamers. When Kurtz returns to, or is retrieved by, the West, it is only to rave eloquently and die. He never explains the mystery; he is the mystery. He can't articulate the taboo; he is the interdiction itself, the broken commandment, in his very being. The tablets of the law are shattered on the golden calf. Out of this collision comes a Kurtz.

David Malouf returns to this supercharged Conradian terrain and summons language strong enough to hold it open, to make it bearable, nearly, for the duration of his remarkable novel, _Remembering Babylon_. Whereas
Kurtz, invoked for most of *Heart of Darkness*, only materializes at the end, Malouf presents us with his creature of two worlds, his in-between, nearly at the beginning.

The first words Malouf gives him, though they may never, like Kurtz's "The horror! The horror!," course through our culture until uttered on screen by Marlon Brando, are memorable enough:

"'Do not shoot,' it shouted [to children who are not quite convinced that the creature they are looking at is human], 'I am a B-b-british object!'"

Indeed he was a "B-b-british object"—a young one, still a boy—until British seamen heaved him overboard near the coast of Australia sometime in the mid-19th century. Then he became an aboriginal object. For the aborigines, the boy's story begins when they find an incoherent crab-encrusted creature on the shore: the creature does something that approximates a dance and becomes, thereby, approximately human. The boy himself accepts this account of his origins except in dreams and in memories of a language he no longer speaks but has not entirely forgotten.

Malouf gives us access to the mind of Gemmy Fairly, as the boy is named by the whites—or at least as much access as Gemmy has to himself, for his mind is chambered, double, and at the same time incomplete. Gemmy struggles with familiar English words until whites avert their eyes, seeing in his search for simple sounds a sign of impairment or, worse, of treason—in any case, a mark of otherness that subverts their own identity. Gemmy compels them to ask themselves "the harder question. Could you lose it? Not just language but it. It."

Gemmy has left the aborigines, among whom he has lived for years, to approach the settlement because whites offer him clues to his first memories of a tyrannical parent and the children among whom he once swarmed in an English sawmill, cleaning nuts and bolts and eating crusted machine oil as if it were candy. From the moment of his appearance among the whites—he is marched into town ahead of a boy brandishing the make-believe gun—we tremble for him.

His presence makes the hardest men among them harder still. His indistinctness—his being neither one thing nor the other, in age, culture, and appearance, his very jaw line reset by different consonants, different vowels—seems more than imbecilic to them; it seems monstrous. If his existence can be resolved at all in their minds it is that he must be a "blackfeller" disguised in white skin, a dangerous emissary of the outback. He worries "the soulcase" out of them: How long, we wonder, will they let him live?

Those few in the community who care for Gemmy despite fears of their own are gentled in the process. Like the others, they are immigrants from crowded places who have established tenancy on the land in blind terror of its expanse, its openness, and most of all its dark, nomadic inhabitants who seem to appear and disappear like shadows. Now they cross over, somehow, through Gemmy, to vision. They put down tools at odd times to marvel at themselves marveling at insects, flowers, birds pulling filaments out of running water. One man considers that previously he had been no more than "a sociable self, wrapped always in a communal warmth that protected it from dark matters and all the blinding light of things, but also from the knowledge that there was a place out there where the self might stand alone."

Occasionally—and always luminously—Malouf crosses all the way over through Gemmy to the world as seen by the aborigines. Once they seek Gemmy on the outskirts of town to telepathically transmit images of the land they used to travel together. Another time they stand squarely within the field of vision of the town's preacher who fails to see them because he cannot assimilate the raw shock of their presence. They, in turn, see him as no more than a "shape, thin, featureless, that interposed itself a moment, like a mist or cloud, before the land blazed out in its full strength again and the shadow was gone."
Gemmy sees from both sides; he is the fractured unity, the unobtainable translation. And though he is the crucial center of the book, other characters are drawn to a comparable depth. It is through two of them, children when they knew Gemmy and now middle-aged, that we look back on the denouement of the story. This break in the narrative, incidentally, is jarring. The leap from present to future, though it occurs near the end of the novel, remains the author's one questionable maneuver.

The writing, however, never falters. There are books we like so much we don't want to finish them. In this case the same applies to paragraphs and even sentences. And in keeping Kurtz-space open to us at maximum intensity, David Malouf has written a profound and poignant book.

**Criticism: Annette Smith (essay date 13 November 1994)**


[An educator, Smith was one of the judges responsible for awarding Malouf the 1994 Los Angeles Times Book Award for Fiction. In the essay below, she discusses Malouf's focus on language, boundaries, and the human condition in Remembering Babylon.]

One day, in the middle of the last century, when white settlement was crawling, tentatively, up the coast of Queensland, three children were stopped in their games by the sight of a strange "thing" in the nearby swamps: perhaps "a human that in the manner of the tales they told one another … had been changed into a bird, but only halfway, and now, neither one thing nor the other, was hopping and flapping towards them out of a world … that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome … and of all that belonged to the Absolute Dark."

What they had taken for a lone aborigine raider turns out to be Gemmy Fairley, a "black white" with hair as blond as theirs. As the creature stands, scarecrow-like at the top of the boundary fence, facing a toy gun, he shouts "Do not shoot…. I am a B-b-british object!" One mark of a great novel, it might be said, is that its totality be already contained in its first few paragraphs, and such is certainly the case for *Remembering Babylon*, this year's winner of the *Los Angeles Times* Fiction Prize. In its first two pages alone, one understands that the book will be about boundaries, about encountering the Other, about metamorphosis and (through Gemmy Fairley's unwittingly accurate statement) about language.

David Malouf begins with this primal scene of the boundary fence—a fragile line between the white settlers and a continent so vast that the silence, when the hissing of the lamp dies out, engulfs them in the unknown. His simple plot covers the two years spent by Gemmy with the white Scottish community (following 16 spent with the aborigines), the various responses to him (from total acceptance to total rejection and nuances in between), the subtle changes in relationships precipitated by his presence, and finally his mysterious disappearance and a postscript reuniting two of the main protagonists, many years older and wiser. This plot, which resembles the story of Francois Truffaut's *Wild Child* and of Theodora Kroeber's Ishi in *Two Worlds*, is a recurrent one in Malouf's work, testifying to his fascination with otherness and transformation. An Australian poet and novelist, he has previously published a fictionalized biography of Ovid, *An Imaginary Life*, in which Ovid befriends a wild child who, later during his exile in a decaying, rust-brown port town, will seem to him like a messenger, possibly a god.

With Gemmy as a catalyst, many boundaries are redefined in *Remembering Babylon*, particularly those between races. The anti-colonial and racial themes are handled with a concern for historical and individual complexity. The ghostlike aborigines looming outside the limits of the settlement constantly remind us that the whites are encroaching onto native territory. Nevertheless, Malouf legitimizes the settlers' claim to a land disputed foot by foot to the wilderness and empathizes with their need to cling to the only identity they know.
If Gemmy, "this mixture of monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness," has changed his identity, not to mention skin color and (due to eroded teeth) face structure, "could you lose it? Not just language, but it. It." The very vagueness of the pronoun connotes the essential nature of that "it."

In any case, Malouf's plea for tolerance goes beyond the racial context. While he finely satirizes empire builders in the person of Governor Lord Bowen and vividly evokes the hostility against Gemmy rampant in part of the community, he shows that Gemmy, as a rat-catcher's slave-boy in London, was indeed a "British object" long before his adoption by a native clan.

The Babylon in the title evokes therefore not only a parallel between the Israelites' captivity after the fall of Jerusalem and the colonists' nostalgia and isolation, but also the Tower of Babel, biblical site of the separation of languages and nations. Malouf's novel testifies all along to the confusion of languages. It demonstrates the demonic nature of words, both their destructive power and their creative force, as Gemmy's past and his new identity take form, however spuriously, on records kept by a minister and schoolmaster.

Professors of literature and writers will, perhaps, read in this chapter not only an allegory of literature but also an allegory of the passage from oral to written culture, as Gemmy sniffs the sheets of paper on which his life has been inscribed. Finally, Malouf's prose itself provides a subtle allegory on the separation of languages, for its ceremonial, slightly rugged unfolding seems to echo faintly some ancient biblical language that would have been lost forever with the Babel episode.

At the end of the tale, as suddenly as he has appeared, Gemmy walks away from the uncomfortable niche his goodwill and that of others had won him in the group and takes to the bush. We are not told exactly why. Nor shall we know for sure when and how he died, probably the victim of a minor colonial raid on Bushmen; nor which bones are the white ones amid the remains his friend Lachlan finds, several years later, in the forks of trees.

Yet the novel is elating, rather than depressing. Its final message is that men are capable of change and that even an imperfect change is better than none. Malouf wrote somewhere that "poems are acts of reconciliation." So, in a different way, is Remembering Babylon. For we are linked to the Other in order to exist ourselves, and the gesture that gives is always the gesture that seeks.

**Malouf, David (Vol. 86): Further Reading**

**Criticism**


Favorable assessment of *Remembering Babylon*. Sheppard asserts that this is "a remarkably original book: a lyric history that is also a national contra-epic."

Additional coverage of Malouf's life and career is contained in the following sources published by Gale Research: *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 124; and *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 28.
Analysis

Analysis: Other literary forms

Because literary recognition came to him first for his verse collections, for quite some time David Malouf (mah-LOOF) was regarded primarily as a poet. His first published writings were poetry, and in addition to contributions to works featuring several authors, efforts such as Neighbours in a Thicket (1974), Wild Lemons (1980), First Things Last (1981), and Typewriter Music (2007) have sustained his reputation in this genre. Some critics have discerned varying levels of sophistication when his earlier verse is compared with his later verse.

Malouf has also experimented with the writing of short stories, an autobiographical narrative, and drama. His stories “Eustace” (1982) and “The Prowler” (1982) concern isolated and apparently unsociable characters who seem misplaced yet oddly adapted to Australian settings. The collection Antipodes (1985) comprises short stories that in the main deal with the troubles of immigrants and problems of adjustment in Australia as well as the culturally ambivalent situation of Australians in Europe. Malouf set down some of the personal sources behind themes and images in his fiction with the publication of 12 Edmondstone Street (1985), a memoir that deals in part with the writer’s childhood years in Brisbane and in part, somewhat impressionistically, with his work and travel during the 1980’s. In addition, he has written librettos for several operas, including Voss (pr. 1986), based on Patrick White’s novel, and Jane Eyre (pb. 2000), based on Charlotte Brontë’s novel. He has explored another line of creative interest with his play Blood Relations (pr., pb. 1988).

Analysis: Achievements

Many of David Malouf’s works have won awards in his native country. In 1970, he published Bicycle, and Other Poems, for which he won the Australian Literature Society’s Gold Medal. For the poetry collection Neighbours in a Thicket, he received the Grace Leven Prize and the Australian Literature Society’s Gold Medal as well as an award from the James Cook University of North Queensland. He held an Australian Council fellowship in 1978, and his novel An Imaginary Life won the New South Wales Premier’s Fiction Award in 1979. The short novel The Bread of Time to Come (published in Great Britain as Fly Away Peter) won two awards presented by the publication The Age in 1982, and his fiction was again honored with the Australian Literature Society’s Gold Medal in 1983.

Malouf received the Victoria Premier’s Award in 1985 for his short stories, and his play Blood Relations received the New South Wales Premier’s Award for drama. The Great World received the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize and the Miles Franklin Award in 1991 as well as the French Prix Femina Étranger. Remembering Babylon, which had already won the New South Wales Premier’s Literary Award in 1993 and been short-listed for the 1994 Booker Prize, won the inaugural IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in June, 1996. In 2000, Malouf was awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. In addition to such honors, Malouf frequently has been considered an important literary spokesman for his country, and much of his writing has been regarded as significant in indicating new trends in creative work.

Bibliography


World Literature Today 74 (Autumn, 2000). The issue is devoted to Malouf’s work, including seven essays on his work, a select bibliography, a chronology of his life, and an appreciation.