



# DAVID MALOUF

A C E L E B R A T I O N

# DAVID MALOUF

## *A Celebration*

Compiled by Ivor Indyk for the  
Friends of the National Library of Australia

With an introduction by Ivor Indyk, and essays by  
Nicholas Jose, Judith Rodriguez, Vivian Smith, Colm Tóibín

Friends of the National Library of Australia  
Canberra 2001

Some content in this online publication may be in copyright. You may only use in copyright material for permitted uses, please see <http://www.nla.gov.au/copiesdirect/help/copyright.html> for further information. If in doubt about whether your use is permitted, seek permission from the copyright holder. In addition, please follow the links or otherwise contact the relevant institutional owners of images to seek permission if you wish to use their material.

Published by the National Library of Australia for the Friends of the National Library of Australia Inc.  
Canberra ACT 2600  
Australia

© National Library of Australia and Ivor Indyk, Nicholas Jose, Judith Rodriguez, Vivian Smith, Colm Tóibín 2001

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

David Malouf : a celebration.

ISBN 0 642 10745 9.

1. Malouf, David, 1934—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Malouf, David, 1934—Themes, motives. 3. Authors, Australian—20th century. I. Indyk, Ivor. II. National Library of Australia. Friends.

A823.3

Publisher's editor: Theresa Willstead  
Designer: Kathryn Wright  
Printer: Inprint Pty Ltd

Cover: David Malouf, Florence, 1979 Photograph by Carlo Olivieri

Every reasonable endeavour has been made to contact relevant copyright holders. Where this has not proved possible, copyright holders are invited to contact the publisher.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The photographs on pages iii, vi, 6 and 42 were supplied courtesy of David Malouf and reproduced with the permission of the photographers.

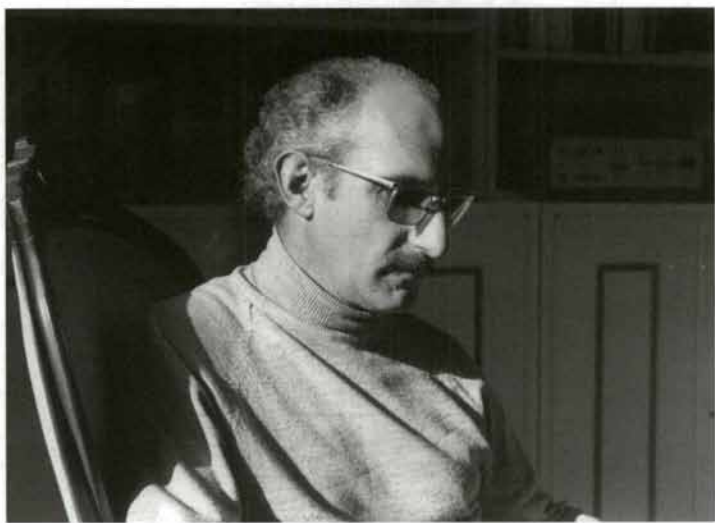
The photograph on page 20 is from the 'Canberra Life' series, Pictorial Collection, National Library of Australia.

The photograph on page 37 was supplied and reproduced courtesy of Juno Gemes.

David Malouf's poems featured in this book first appeared in the following collections: 'Easier' in *Bicycle and Other Poems*, University of Queensland Press, 1970; 'Bad Dreams in Vienna' and 'Adrift' in *Neighbours in a Thicket*, University of Queensland Press, 1974; 'Inspirations IV' in *Poems 1975-76*, Prism, 1976; and 'Beside the Sea' in *David Malouf: Poems 1959-1989*, University of Queensland Press, 1992. All of these poems were also published in *David Malouf: Poems 1959-1989*, and are reprinted here in the form they appeared in there, with the permission of University of Queensland Press and David Malouf.

## CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction	1
<i>Ivor Indyk</i>	
Away in the Sixties	7
<i>Judith Rodriguez</i>	
Over Thirty Years	15
<i>Vivian Smith</i>	
Giving Voice	21
<i>Nicholas Jose</i>	
Swimming in English	29
<i>Colm Tóibín</i>	
 Poems by David Malouf	
Easier	5
Bad Dreams in Vienna	13
Adrift	19
Inspirations IV	27
Beside the Sea	36
 Principal Works by David Malouf	38
Honours and Awards	40
About the Contributors	41



David Malouf, Florence, 1979

*Photograph by Carlo Olivieri*

## INTRODUCTION

Ivor Indyk

IT DOES NOT SEEM NECESSARY to begin a tribute to David Malouf with the usual introductions: an account of his life, his background and his major achievements. So much of this is public knowledge already; and Malouf himself is so well known, as an author of international standing, as a commentator on Australian values, and especially as a familiar presence to readers through his books and personal appearances, as to render such formalities superfluous.

But this familiarity is in itself an interesting place to begin, for it points to the fact that David Malouf's public reputation rests on the most private grounds of all, the achievement of intimacy. It is paradoxical to think of an author—a novelist particularly—as a master of intimacy, not only because writing is a solitary occupation, but because it is destined for readers who are complete strangers to the writer, as he is to them. One of David Malouf's great distinctions as an author is that he has been able to close the distance between writer and reader, to create an intimacy which is lyrical, sensual and immediate. When Ovid addresses his future reader in *An Imaginary Life* as 'you, unknown friend', and then goes on to ask, 'Have you heard my name? ... Am I still known? ... Do my lines still pass secretly somewhere from mouth to mouth?'—and then still more urgently across the millennia, 'Have I survived?'—you recognise the human qualities of vulnerability, modesty and recognition, which are so much a part of Malouf's own relationship with his readers, and that of his characters too, at those moments when they are closest to each other.

It is significant, in this respect, that Malouf should have started out as a poet, and remains a poet, writing in the medium of prose. The great moments of intimacy in his novels all have the quality of poetry. One thinks immediately of the ending of *An Imaginary Life*, when Ovid's heart goes out to the young boy, splashing in the



shallows of the river, the water dropping from his fingers like diamonds, or stars; or the scene in the prisoner-of-war camp in *The Great World*, when Digger stands supported by Vic in the oily waters of the creek, and sees the 'stars overhead, so close he could hear them grinding'; or the climax of *Remembering Babylon*, when Jock McIvor comforts Gemmy after he has been abused and humiliated by some of the settlers, afraid of allowing a stranger into their midst:

He sat huddled close to him in the dark, and when he shivered, drew him closer, pulled the old moth-eaten blanket around the two of them, and with the man against him, heard his juddering breath, and smelt it, while outside moonlight fell on the cleared space around the hut where his wife and children waited.

Malouf's language at these moments beats with a pulse, its breath-like rhythms bringing the scene so close that one seems to share in the enchantment of the characters. At the same time, the visual quality of the scene—its clarity as an image—holds it at a distance. The moment is amplified and framed, brought up close and simultaneously opened out to long perspectives stretching beyond and between the individuals involved. We normally think of intimacy as the denial or refusal of distance, but here it is distance that makes intimacy possible, and gives it the intense, all-embracing quality that it has in Malouf's works.

At one point in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, Adair reflects on his devoted correspondence with the distant Virgilia. He presents the act of writing to her as 'a kind of dreaming on the page' which, since it is to be read by her, is also a shared dreaming: 'a deep communion of mouth to ear and soul to soul, such as he could never have contemplated when she was near'. The engagement between writer and reader is defined by Malouf with the same beguiling combination of intimacy and distance that marks the engagements he describes between his characters, and may indeed be seen as a model for them.



This is because, though such engagements have all the sensual immediacy of physical encounters, they occur, for the most part, as acts of the imagination. The communion his characters achieve depends upon the imagination's power to reach out beyond the individual, across social and even human boundaries. Indeed Malouf's most powerful communications are often those which cross boldly from the human into the natural world, taking the perspective of a crab, or a wolf, or a pool in moonlight. Even when the scene focuses on two people, which is how we usually think of intimacy, there is a larger agency at work, operating within the couple, through them, around them. It may be a primitive natural force; equally, it may be history which holds them, or language, or the power of tradition. Malouf's characters have their most intimate experiences on or across frontiers.

So just as his novels depict intensely personal moments in the lives of his characters, they also depict formative moments in the history of Australia (and Queensland in particular). These range from first contact, through colonial settlement and expansion, the ANZAC involvement on the Western Front, the fall of Singapore, the Burma Railway and wartime Brisbane, to the commercial and entrepreneurial frontiers of the present day. The private and the public worlds are so closely intertwined that they seem to dwell within each other.

There are two ways of thinking of this interrelationship between the private and the public in Malouf's work. By rendering the public dimensions of Australian history in personal terms, Malouf gives them an intimate and indeed modest cast which is quite different to the grandiosity and stereotyping that often marks their presentation in official discourses. And it isn't only a difference in presentation: there is a different vision of Australia at work here, one which sees its decisive moments in small personal dramas of courage and fear and loyalty, and local expressions of that adventurous spirit which Malouf characterises, in his Boyer Lectures, as 'the spirit of play'.

On the other hand, by rendering the personal gestures of his characters in a way that imbues them with public significance, Malouf brings out much that would otherwise remain hidden if it had to be told in purely personal terms. He can speak so compellingly of what would normally be held private or secret because his characters, while remaining individuals, are also representative public figures, settlers and bushrangers, farmers and soldiers, painters and property developers, workers and middle-class aesthetes.

In Malouf's most recent book, *Dream Stuff*, there is a story called 'Great Day' in which a powerful public servant nearing the end of his life contemplates one of his most personal possessions—a set of knucklebones—on display in the local museum. He had kept the knucklebones for more than 60 years as a reminder of a childhood infatuation with another boy, 'then five years ago had given them over, his bones as he called them, into public custody, which was in some ways the most hidden, the most private place of all'. Then Malouf adds: 'It would be nice, he sometimes thought, if he could give himself as well.'

As a writer, David Malouf has long given himself over into public custody, not only in his autobiographical poems and essays, like those in *12 Edmondstone Street*, but in the many facets of his novels through which his experience is displayed in a myriad diffractions. And yet, it is true, he remains a private person. His public achievements as a writer guarantee this privacy, just as in his work it is the assurance of distance which underwrites his characters' most intimate moments. The interplay between these qualities, which we normally hold opposed, will be apparent in the essays which follow—tributes to David written by four friends who are also fellow authors. ■

## EASIER

Easier after a time to speak  
of what we share together  
as four rooms and a garden  
plot where all the weeds in seven counties  
congregate, a view  
in spring of pink horse-chestnuts and in winter  
of black playing-fields.  
Also a common interest in Jean Luc Godard,  
the I Ching and Marx.

Easier to allow the gilt plunder  
of junkshops in the King's Road, a weakness  
for last month's papers,  
to show how we make room  
for each other's oddities: a bowl  
of cherries on the night-table, your green travelling clock  
set always ten minutes  
east of Greenwich meantime,  
and nearer the sun.

Toothbrushes red and black,  
your muddy wellingtons among egg-boxes  
and daffodil bulbs  
in the dark of kitchen cupboards,  
your thinness in my shirts.  
Easier, I mean,  
than to speak of what we share  
beyond all this, night journeys hand in hand

across distances like Russia, touching  
down to find pale sunstalks in our bed.

*Poem published in David Malouf: Poems 1959–1989  
(University of Queensland Press, 1992)*

## AWAY IN THE SIXTIES

Judith Rodriguez

ON THE 24TH OF FEBRUARY 1959, I made one of a group seeing David Malouf off to Europe on board the *Fairsky*. We in our early twenties were fish in a shoal, all darting the same way and caught in the same light. Aghast, it seems—and has it changed?—at being on an island we might never escape, our whole lives long, if we didn't leave the moment the parental clasp loosened, and make after ... what?

In hindsight I'd like to think it was an imaginative move different from the British exile's return, and beyond the cringing colonial pilgrimage. More an ecological intuition—a dread that, marooned on our island, however big and various its landscapes, we might enact in our few decades a slump (no doubt, high and mighty, we saw it all around us) into wingless, guileless decadence and be unfit to cruise the rousing intercontinental winds and the added-risk, newsworthy traffic of the world.

Our guiding spirits were music, film and books—history, poetry, novels—the ones we read, the ones we'd write. Unawares, all of us holding the paper streamers essential to a proper wharf-to-deck send-off were standing near the watershed between the expats who stayed over there, and the travellers who returned.

When David sailed, I was not sure whether we were close friends or not. His sister Jill had been in my class for a year or so at Ascot State School, and then right through Brisbane Girls' Grammar. We hadn't a lot in common: she was the popular and gregarious captain of the basketball team, I was a bookworm. One day when I was 13, I was invited to the Maloufs' three-storey brick house—very sophisticated for Brisbane in 1950—built against the hillside in a narrow gully off the river drive. On the way up the carpeted stairs from the living room, Jill opened a door and said: 'This

is my brother and he's writing a novel.' And so he was—a boy with dark curly hair and large dark eyes, working at a large typewriter and undoubtedly writing a novel. The room was full of bookcases: squads of maroon-bound classics. I read Collins Classics—we shared a taste for Dumas—but David's seemed most superior editions, and there was even a *miniature* book or two ...

He was around at Jill's parties. I always wondered how the Maloufs knew so many people. I was not social, not up with teenage manoeuvres, and there was much conjecture about what happened at Deception Bay when somehow David—or Jill—for a joke got a boy they knew called Henry to take me off in his car for a Sunday picnic outing. I have no idea how I persuaded my mother to let me go!

At university David was two years ahead of me, contributing poems and a story to *Semper Floreat* and *Galmahra*, the student paper and magazine. As an academic achiever, he was recruited to teach Elizabethan Drama to second-year students. He wrote radio scripts for school broadcasts, and worked awhile for the Department of External Studies. With Peter Edwards (who later became a professor) he threw ideas around—and tried them volubly on anyone else who would listen—for the green and yellow foolscap pages posted out to instruct students beyond the black stump. David, an inspired reader overflowing with enthusiasm, could always motivate students; his parents and university teachers were probably heartsick as he refused the safe career, teaching teachers of teachers. Though he was later a popular lecturer at Sydney University, he knew then too that it was not in itself his goal.

We got closer around the time when I graduated. First I lived in as a student 'resident mistress' at my old school, then in 1958 taught at Toowoomba, and I'd take the train down to Brisbane for the weekend. David said, 'Call me up', so I did—and got introduced to foreign films in particular, by someone who was really interested in discussing how they worked. Either with him and whoever he had around that day, or after he'd gone to London, on the basis of this introduction I first saw *Smiles of*



*a Summer Night, The Seventh Seal, Wild Strawberries, La Strada, Nights of Cabiria, The Rose Tattoo, Rashomon, Ray's The Music Room; and later, probably in England, La Dolce Vita, Jules et Jim ...*

David's life and friends seemed enviably free, though his basement flat was, in fact, in his parents' home. It was enough of a feral zone for him to wake up one night staring over the foot of his bed at a huge water rat from the river. It was a young man's life. He and his friends zoomed around on motorbikes, left doors open and loose change lying round on the tabletop or in a bowl, and turned up where they liked when they liked. Student households were not common then as they are now; 'resident mistressing' was a convent lifestyle, and—in a weird mixture of loud outspokenness and prudishness at the time—I felt I was a privileged witness of high thinking and low living. Various friends 'organised' books from bookstores, one friend married a nurse on marital bed linen souvenired from the General Hospital, and then, wanting a tape recorder, 'organised' that from a store, and was caught only when he went back for the forgotten microphone.

Then David sailed, off to London and Europe. The correspondence, begun in 1957 when Jill and he stayed briefly with my parents in New Zealand, took off: cards and blue aerograms covered with small careful script, full of prices and visa arrangements, rapturous about the latest-seen marvels of civilisation. And yet ... within two months, raving about cathedrals and 'whole streets of *real* Tudor', David was articulating an understanding of where his lines and life were set: 'But still it is not our past—really it isn't—& one realizes with a terribly poignancy here that we really are different people, neither English nor European, and that the 2000 years of European culture which we might like to feel behind us, is not really ours.' I answered these reports from the louvred veranda of my very first flat, in Toowong; I was teaching at the University, feet in David's impressive tracks, and within 18 months I landed a scholarship to Cambridge.

When finally, late in autumn 1960, I worked out how to get from Cambridge to London, we arranged to meet at a teashop at Kensington Station. The David I met seemed quite uninterested in seeing me, hard to get to converse, entirely distant. I must have made a mistake, I thought. He the sophisticate didn't want to talk to me.

He explained, after getting over his cold, that he had been light-headed, more or less unhearing and unseeing. My education resumed. During the next two years, David proved, especially for someone prepared to walk and work hard, a cicerone without equal. He relied on youth hostels and the *Blaue Bücher*. Any city we came to, we read the *Blue Book*, and from it he worked out a preferred *route raisonnée*. He appealed to my love of system by doing three maps of Rome: the classical, the baroque and the rococo I think ... I don't remember the 19th century getting much of a look-in, not in Italy anyway.

Vienna was the place for that, for the *Hochschulkurse* in German—bad new wine, opera, castles, art museums and walking in the Kamptal. There was Salzburg, and a weekend in Prague; there was Greece, Rome, a drive with David's friend Carlo Olivieri right round the foot of Italy from Bari to Florence, and *die Romantische Strasse's* walled towns strung across south-west Germany. I went other places with other people and alone. But David showed me how—he gave me the great gift of travelling, travelling with curiosity, with languages where possible, travelling for art and food and scenery and people.

Early on we hitched, as I would never advise anyone to hitch now; we developed our method, taking the bearings and then sitting in the front seat according to the attitude of the driver towards one or the other of us. We remember the hearty lift with red braces, on the way back from Bath and Wells, who shouted us a drink; and dusk at the motorway entry outside Linz, where David proclaimed he'd beat me with a furled umbrella because of my determination to continue, to make it to Vienna that night (we did). We remember the mixed party of four hitchhikers along from us on the approach to a West German autobahn, all dressed in faultless whites and seated nonchalantly on a tanker-sized picnic-hamper, to be picked up by a Rolls.



Then there were the places in England. Flats in London, survival on coffee, friends who are still friends 40 years on, tales of landladies and David's job teaching at Comprehensive schools. Attic rooms and punting in Cambridge, where David tried it for a few weeks one summer; Australian parties in Kangaroo Valley, the height-challenged guy whose party trick was leaping out of the darkness roaring to give people grey hairs. Later in Birkenhead, when David had taken a schoolteaching job offered to me (but I wanted the Equator) and proceeded to win scholarships for his boys at St Anselm's, there was Pope read in the back garden in summer, and walking along the Mersey river flats, and the glacial cavernous white-walled flat where once again, in the later 1960s, I saw more manuscript for the novel that would be written.

Yes, the writing.

Going back to the letters, I discovered (and then remembered) that I was the one who dared to send a couple of the absent David's poems to Clem Christesen for *Meanjin*. David at 25 wasn't sending them anywhere and, a few months before I arrived in England, wrote displaying a lordly reticence: 'of course I was delighted to see one of the poems in print, though as I explained in my last letter I have no particular interest in the poems as such and was rather surprised that C. should have thought any of them worth his trouble.'

Still, we began commenting in our letters on our own and one another's poems. We did well, I think, to salve dignity between the personal sallies and self-protection of this exchange. David, for instance, found in his life and works a 'tension set up between involvement and distancing', and the importance to him, above local atmosphere, of 'ideas, meanings, love affairs etc'. 'The real secret lies in the word "interior", which I am very fond of (I would like to call my poems "Interiors").' He became embarrassed on my account before a very frank poem I'd written to Rex Cramphorn; fortunately I didn't change it, and to my surprise found it picked up and kindly understood at Rex's funeral 30 years later—*o tempora*. On another occasion he pointed out that I used the word 'circumspect' far too much—like twice!—and he was right.

We chose 15 each for publication. Then Rodney Hall, who was getting his first book *Penniless Till Doomsday* out at about the same time, joined us, and finally Don Maynard, who being at Longmans and in Australia said, 'We'll apply for the CLF grant' ('we' being the Cheshire imprint). And so the thing—*Four Poets*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1962—was done.

David went on writing, with a fountain pen in small neat script with neat crossings out. At times throughout the decade he'd retell some part of the life of the compelling character Johnny Milner, who burned down churches and later died by drowning in the Condamine. The quarto and odd-sized pages of small script multiplied, poems as often as not, many stopped mid-page, abandoned for a re-try. *Johnno* waited for the 1970s.

Meanwhile David's kind and gentle father died, and he spent time in Australia, some of it working on a play production with Rex Cramphorn; and I went to Jamaica and married Fabio and came back to teach in London colleges. I can't think of a better point to end the self-indulgence of recall than 3am on a June morning in our third-floor Gipsy Lane flat, now rased, when after going through every name we knew—from myths and legends, films, the news, the heroic in any line, to Roman Emperors and villains (I liked Iago)—David said (we were combing lesser Victorian novels), 'How about Ensor?' and Fabio said, 'Say that again ...', and we knew we had the name for my son, now aged 36. And could say goodnight and go to bed.

Within three years we had all left. We had done a lot of living. For me, to be in England was to discover eventually that England—England on its own, the England you rush to from Australia—was in a deep way irrelevant. David gave me a wider and richer world—Europe for starters!—and the real and necessary and present Australia that we sailed from was enough to bring us back, though, as it turned out, not to Brisbane. ■

## BAD DREAMS IN VIENNA

*for Judith*

Past midnight turning east at the Deutsches Eck, a shallow corner  
where the first legions broke out of the wood. A little ice-age  
settles in, like Charlemagne's iron crown its fierce grip tightens

from Aix to the Pyrenees, Belle Ile to where the Danube swings  
its tail to lash the Balkans. It is the shadow of empire falls  
to mark the shaky boundary of dreams. Old verbs contain

the anarchist's plot, there are fingerprints all over. A province breaks  
away but can't shake off the small clerk's passion for gold braid,  
gilt saints, diminished sevenths and *Schlagobers*. Nightmares drag us

back to the same address. Sweating in snowfields of white sheets  
tonight at the Hotel Graben, a million dead turn in my sleep  
as the great wheel in the Prater turns on the breath of children sleeping

at Döbling, Rudolfsheim, the Freudian suburbs. Over garden  
tables of rustic wood, black ironwork angels creak, dark exiles  
gather, gunfire rattles the canal. Snowclouds come lowering

in off the Polish plain, a new invasion from the east.  
Flakes drop their dark—fat ashes. In frozen pipes typhus bacilli  
wait, dreaming of heat-waves. The Turks are always at the gate.

Blind hands poke over scrapheaps in the wind: a begging letter  
of Mozart, the slum where Hitler mooned, worn shaving brushes, gold  
-rimmed spectacles, gold fillings, the foul breath of a death's-head party

whistling *Wiener Blut*. I wake towards morning and look out  
on the snowbound square, the Graben, grave or ditch. The great Pestsäule,  
a column of white worms, writhes out of its pit, and touched by winter

light the long dead wrestle, wave upon wave, hard heel on shoulder  
surge upward, choke for breath. The survivor's warm breath freezes. Here  
bad dreams have monuments. Their agents yawn and lick the moon.

*Pestsäule*: baroque column erected over the mass-grave of plague victims.

*Poem published in David Malouf: Poems 1959–1989*  
(University of Queensland Press, 1992)

## OVER THIRTY YEARS

Vivian Smith

DAVID MALOUF IS INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED for his novels and short stories; in Australia he is our foremost literary figure, a rare example of a man of letters. Literary criticism, cultural commentary, reviews, plays, memoirs, prefaces and introductions—there is hardly a literary field that he has not worked in. But he first established himself as a poet, and it was as a poet's novels that his first two prose works, *Johnno* and *An Imaginary Life*, came to public attention. Now, such is his achievement and acclaim in other genres, there is perhaps a risk of his poetry being overlooked, or merely referred to for the light it can throw on different aspects of his prose or biography, instead of being read for its own sake. It is worth recalling the extraordinary impact of his poems when they first appeared.

I first met David towards the end of the 1960s at Sydney University where we were both teaching in the English Department. He had recently returned to Australia after some years overseas. I had moved to Sydney about a year earlier, having decided to leave behind Hobart and the teaching of French. I should add that both of us were employed to teach various sections of the academic courses, and that neither of us taught creative writing, which was not a university subject in those days. I have now known David for so long that first and early impressions have inevitably merged with later memories. I must suppose that he is, like most of us, a multifaceted mixture, but the person I have always known is one of great kindness, gentleness and warmth, with a consistently unpossessive friendliness of manner and an instinctive civility.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were times of extraordinary, accelerated change for Australia both culturally and politically. The war in Vietnam and the Domino Theory seemed to be on everybody's mind. The protest movements and the opposition to



conscription were gathering momentum. The White Australia Policy was on the way out and a new relationship to Asia was starting to emerge. The ferment, change and diversity of the times did not affect one age group only, and perhaps for the first time writers were starting to make their weight felt as a significant section of the community. In fact the early 1970s were a watershed. The death of Kenneth Slessor, and Douglas Stewart's retirement from Angus & Robertson, a decade after his 20-year reign as literary editor of the *Bulletin*, marked the end of an era. New developments were opening up in publishing, new poetry editors were being appointed to the various newspapers and journals, small magazines started to proliferate, battlelines were being drawn up.

David, who is so gregarious and sociable as a person, was very much a part of all this ferment and diversity. He quickly started to make his mark both inside and outside the university. He took an active interest in the work of young writers, he wrote articles and reviews, he organised poetry readings. Readings have since become a fixed item at our many festivals, along with the appearances of overseas writers as part of the internationalising of our literary life. They are now so much taken for granted that it is often forgotten how rare such events were 30 years ago. David's appointment to the new Literature Board, which replaced the old Commonwealth Literary Fund, gave him further opportunities to influence the course of Australian writing. No doubt one of his biographers will sort out the various strands of his multifarious activities, including theatre and opera. My purpose here is simply to indicate how David, whom I have always known as a private rather than a public person, was at the centre of new developments.

Of all the new volumes that appeared at the time, David's *Bicycle and Other Poems* (1970), quickly followed by *Neighbours in a Thicket* (1974), were the two that had the greatest appeal. *Bicycle and Other Poems* struck a note quite unlike that of any other Australian writer. Here was an undeniably stylish poet with a deft, light touch, who seemed to stand apart from the other writers of his generation. Although he was,

as I've indicated, very much a part of the literary scene, he also seemed independent of the easy groupings, the catchcries and the labels of the time. I liked the way some of his poems suggested a certain continuity with older Australian poets—with some aspects of the work of Judith Wright, for instance—or the way some seemed to be in cultural dialogue with A.D. Hope; while others seemed to be arguing with Les Murray as they moved out to question Australian self-definition, the connections between Australia and Europe, and the meaning of the First World War for our collective experience.

What appealed to me in particular in *Bicycle and Other Poems* was the sure eye for the sharp detail: his mother's old fox-fur, that 'Magda Lupescu / of a fox', the China cabinet with the Noritake teacups; the kitchen with 'the sun in a knifecase, / the dolour of spoons.' Here was a young poet, I felt, who had learnt much from Robert Lowell without becoming an imitator—how to focus on the spare image or the precisely pointed observation that could sum up an epoch, or summon a mood. And there was the unemphatic word play: 'Brisbane ladies, rather / the worse for war'; 'tindrum and tantrum'; the icy irony of 'Health Farm': 'the lucky poor of course are always thin'; and the vision of 'Australia / hitched like a water-tank / to the back veranda'. What was most striking was the fact that the poetry, for all the precision of its observations, was rooted in the physical, in the tentacular, in the life of the body—its fears and desires—and the sense of constant animal and vegetable growth. There was nothing else quite like this in Australian poetry at the time.

*Neighbours in a Thicket* is more ambitious and wide-ranging than *Bicycle*. There are continuities between the two volumes, especially in the fine series of autobiographical pieces: 'Confessions of an Only Child', 'Early Discoveries', 'Evergreen', 'Asphodel', 'With the Earlier Deaths', and the exquisite pre-elegy to his mother, 'Adrift', one of his most perfectly achieved poems and rarely noticed by critics or anthologists. But *Neighbours in a Thicket* is even more drenched in a sense of belatedness, of the burdens of history, culture and political ferments for an Australian in Europe in



the middle of the Cold War. It is a very Eurocentric Australian collection, imbued with a sense of the complex nature of Australian identity and of a complex personal heritage. What most strikes me still about it is the quality of its unique voice, its various registers, and the consistent interplay between what I can only call the big topic, or the grand subject matter, and the deliberately understated approach and tone that so nimbly sidestep the grandiose. This is itself the subject of poems like 'In the Grand Manner', 'Mythologies' and 'The Little Aeneid', with their often difficult ellipses and allusions: 'legends nowadays / are hard to get started / and the gods aren't easy / to believe in.' Such poems affirm an unpretentious humanity, in their rejection of rhetoric and their assertion of the significance of the apparently trivial.

David went on to write more experimental poems—love poems, explorations of sexuality, poems set in different parts of the world, sequences and series. He has continued to be as obsessed with light and evanescence as an impressionist, but nothing in the earlier work quite prepares us for the sheer beauty and dazzling accuracies of some of the later poems. The series 'A Place in Tuscany', poems like 'Magpie', 'Two More Pieces for a Northern Winter' and 'This Landscape' are as saturated with precise sensual colours as expressionist paintings. They add to the variety and scope of an abundant *œuvre*.

There is a sense in which nearly all the themes of his future work are already present in the earlier books. If there is a key experience which recurs in every collection it is the opening out of the individual consciousness to merge with a landscape, a past, another consciousness; a moment which becomes one of self-recognition, of which the poem is the voice:

To interpret the wood you first must fall  
asleep in it, feel  
its breathing lift your ribs, turn  
owls out of a pocket  
of fog ...  
('The Fables') ■

## ADRIFT

Adrift in her Parker Knoll  
rocking-chair, my mother  
rocks this way and that  
in this room and that room  
of a stranger's house—the new  
two-roomed flat she calls  
her unit, never home.  
A unit: but of what?  
Where now is the whole?

And brought from the house  
at Hamilton her solid  
antique furniture—  
chairs, bed-ends, a credenza  
stacked against the wall,  
piled up without thought  
for use or for order.  
Haphazard: an image of  
the way things never were.

My sister's kids come brawling  
around her knees, bring  
bits of a jigsaw puzzle  
to sort in her lap:  
a dazzle of sea—or is it  
sky? the bricks and mortar  
of somebody's house.  
Her own is tenanted  
by strangers; who leave the lights

ablaze in empty rooms,  
bang doors, let kittens pee  
on cushions, scratch at chairs.  
In a corner of afternoon  
gilt-edged and insecure  
since my father's tough heart slammed  
and shut her out, she rocks  
in the late sun, a ghost  
the sun does not shine through.

*Poem published in David Malouf: Poems  
1959–1989  
(University of Queensland Press, 1992)*



David Malouf reading poetry at Tilley's Café,  
Lyneham, Canberra, 1990s

*Photograph by Loui Seselja*

## GIVING VOICE

Nicholas Jose

A WRITER HAS A VOICE as a musician has an instrument, except that the writer composes the music too. The instrument can be adapted to many different kinds of composition, but always bears the marks of a performer's particular way of handling it. Training and inheritance, idiosyncrasies and angles, the shaping pressures of the body, the arc of a life—all are carried in the timbre of what we hear. That is what we learn to recognise. That is what moves us with its human personality. That is what we come to love.

When I think of David Malouf, whom I have known for many years, it's the voice I hear first: enthusiastic, inquiring, communicative. The voice is warm, with a vulnerable crack in it and an almost Viennese triple-time lilt. Then I picture David, as a guest at someone else's table or as the host at his own, enjoying company and food—and talking.

When he's at home the room is large and airy, with old pieces of furniture and a mix of pictures, mostly contemporary Australian, that are moved around from time to time. There are exotic cut flowers and an array of objects that have no purpose except to stimulate with their odd natures and perhaps, like household gods, to embody presences from elsewhere. The food follows the best Mediterranean principles, inspired without being extravagant, made with fresh ingredients that our host has gathered on walking forays through his neighbourhood—broad beans, basil, prawns, lemon tarts. David's shirt is open-necked and the talk is likewise unbuttoned. The friends might have come from anywhere: a handful of regulars, artists, writers, people about town, and a couple of visitors being introduced to

Sydney by a genial uncle. David will listen while carrying the plates to and fro. When something is said that grabs him he will stop and turn, his dark eyes lighting up, and launch forth. There is a tone of questioning amazement in what he says—usually followed by a laugh. Pet hates, enthusiasms, lasting loves. Understandings laid down over the years like wine, or curiosity about new directions. Copper-etched characterisations, bawdy stories, long perspectives, cut-glass memories. All these are voiced with a sensation that the world is fresh—worth pondering, worth sharing.

‘We’ll speak our minds amidst our meat’, wrote Ben Jonson in his great poem ‘Inviting a Friend to Supper’ (1616), promising, along with fine food, conversation that flows free. It’s a civilised ideal with precedents in the classical world of Plato’s *Symposium*, where Socrates discoursed at liberty with attentive friends, and in the country house life of the Roman poet Horace (alluded to in David’s poem ‘Reading Horace Outside Sydney, 1970’). The model was revived in Renaissance Italy, when artistic friends would meet for *conversazione*, and remembered again in Jonson’s London, when the playwright enticed his friends away from the rough-and-tumble of literature and politics, where they carried on their public life, to a more relaxed, secure intimacy. Sometimes, with David, the invitation is to an informal salon. Sometimes there’s live music. Other times it’s one on one, over a lunch of home-cooked lentils and salad, coffee and maybe a chocolate or two, a setting for gossip, advice and the longer nourished anecdotes that might one day leave the house as fiction. At best there’s a little group around the table, an audience to kindle talk.

The private voice I have been privileged to hear as David’s ‘neighbour in the thicket’ is continuous with the voice that many more people have heard from the public person in the course of his writing life. He has been teacher, lecturer, commentator, interviewee and, in recent years, speaker on grand occasions, stepping boldly into our national conversation about ourselves, notably in the 1998 Boyer Lectures, *A Spirit of Play*. This looks like a departure for a writer who so surrounds his written words with the consciousness of what cannot be said; but in other ways the talk and the

writing feed each other. Talk is a way of extending the instrument's possibilities in a different key. From the teasing articulation of complexities grows a passion for clarity. In his public addresses, David ventures ideas and entertains conclusions, never barking at us. He looks for the supple, transcendent middle way. In a modern, democratic fashion, we are all invited to his version of that classical possibility, an intense conversation in which language is an exploratory performance and imagination can fly:

Was [our identity as Australians] to be in what we had brought to the place or what we found when we got here? Was cultural inheritance to define us ... or the place itself?

But the belief that we must make a choice is an illusion, and so, I'd suggest, if we are to be whole, is the possibility of choosing. It is our complex fate to be children of two worlds, to have two sources of being, two sides to our head. The desire for something simpler is a temptation to be *less* than we are.

Our answer on every occasion when we are offered the false choice between this and that, should be, 'Thank you, I'll take both'.

The foxtrotting rhythms of a live voice create the space where that magical possibility can come into being.

Why do we like to hear writers read their work aloud? Partly because there are unexpected relationships between the speaking voice and the voice on the page, one given by nature and adaptation, the other diligently found and worked. In David's case, at any rate, what is written has a voice that originates in an actual way of speaking. I remember him talking about his patient wait to discover the voice for *Johnno*, his first work of prose. When the voice finally came, the whole book quickly



followed. *Johnno* starts from a spare conversational language that resists anything too fancy, yet is fertile with unspoken possibilities, as if mutely registering what lies beneath the surface. By the end of the book, the flow of that plain-speaking prose rolls in the most complex forms of expression:

For what else was his life aiming at but some dimension in which the hundred possibilities a situation contains may be more significant than the occurrence of any one of them, and metaphor truer in the long run than mere fact. How many alternative fates, I asked myself, lurking there under the surface of things, is a man's life as we know it intended to violate?

In the flexing, expansive music of that voice lies the essential David Malouf. No matter how far the imagination is projected outward, the tenor of the first person returns to a recognisable starting point of perception.

The writing is always alert to the energies of talk and the quest for a language that can, almost mystically, connect people. There's a primal scene in *12 Edmondstone Street*, where the child listens to his Lebanese grandfather telling stories to compatriots in his own language:

The stories were like poems, full of repeated figures and odd rhetorical questions to which the listeners sometimes, like children, would call out the answer and shyly laugh. They all knew the stories by heart but only he had the skill, or the right, to tell them. Listening at the edge of the circle, with my chin resting on the bent cane back of a chair, I would get so lost in the telling that I almost understood: not the words but the tune.

That child grows up into a man who, like his grandfather, has earned the right to hold court too, telling his own stories.



His most famous book, *An Imaginary Life*, is the story of a child and an older man and the search for a language to bridge their different world views. 'The language I am speaking of now,' says the narrator, the poet Ovid, exiled in the wilderness, 'that I am almost speaking, is a language whose every syllable is a gesture of reconciliation.' That possibility can be extrapolated as a metaphor for the society in which we live. The writer gives voice to a promise that we as Australians might find the new, more open language needed to heal our rifts.

As its title shows, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* is one among the author's conversation pieces. Other stories and novels take their form from the interplay between opposed but attracted characters. The poems, often inspired by other people's artistic voices, are solo meditations, designed to be overheard. The librettos vocalise other writers and texts before passing them to collaborators for music or performance. The writer is a participant in an artistic conversation. And then there is the resistance to facile speech, the groping for language to shadow the intensity or particularity of feelings and sensations that resist words: 'None of this could I have put into words that day,' says the narrator of *Harland's Half Acre*. 'I put it into silence.' That silence demands attention too.

In life David can be voluble, opinionated, cheeky, 'and all the rest of it', to quote one of his favourite—I think Queensland—locutions. He tells stories against himself, where he is the comic butt. Once at an Adelaide Festival opening night, Patrick White watched with disapproval as David joined the audience in standing for 'God Save the Queen'. White wagged the finger afterwards: 'I saw your plump little bottom!' David adores Falstaff the babbler. Yet his own protean capacities are put to different ends. On the page he becomes lyrical and measured, as currents and countercurrents work to a complex music.

How does that change from a gregarious real life personality to the more mysterious writerly self happen? Where does it occur? There is another space in David's houses.

In his house in Campagnatico the writing desk sits before an open window which gives onto a changing Tuscan vision of the song of the earth, quotidian and eternal. In inner-city Sydney there is the tiny courtyard at the back where plants grow wonderfully: little *Veilchenblau* roses, scrunched like babies' hands, crepy orange lantern flowers, moonflowers climbing to the chimney tops. It's like a miniature of St Francis's garden in Giovanni Bellini's painting in the Frick Collection in New York. The moonflowers open only at night, when the guests have gone and the neighbourhood is asleep. Those nocturnal moons can be an image of the writing that blooms out of sight, in an inner space of darkness and dream. I remember hearing about David years ago, when he lived in another no less grungy part of Sydney. People would see the light on in an open window, high above the mean streets, in the small hours of the night, and notice the silhouette of a single man bent over his desk. The writer was on the night shift.

David likes Henry James's story, 'The Private Life', in which there are two writers: the great novelist who dines downstairs amidst 'a listening circle', while his double is alone upstairs producing the work. The voice of the man is transformed in that secret, innermost space where the artist lives. It returns to us as a gift, something that becomes ours, and is heard far and wide. ■

## INSPIRATIONS IV

It may be the season it may be  
but suddenly I feel  
free to bring whatever into the work So 'I love you'  
is one way of beginning or 'the peartree  
lights up at dawn  
a city with its multitudinous traffic another order  
of sound'

The drawing  
of breath and the exchange of it  
for speech seems the rarest of all gifts  
in our brief possession Smoky  
Sunday shadows drift under the harbour's  
expansive map Gin  
slowly as we sip round sunlit ice-cubes  
ebbs as passing in  
and out of each other's shadow each other's eyes we are  
replenished Sunday evening  
is just over the rim its heaviness  
already in our hands and rising in us We count out breaths

Or one might say '*Love's Coming*  
surely is the best love lyric  
to have come out of Australia' or what we call  
Australia lyric love when what we mean

is the heart of the mouth of one man somewhere  
at the day's edge thinking as night tumbles  
in *Yes I love you Yes it may be*  
*love or the season their common heat or the tide*  
*of music that takes*  
*my body as you turn raise your glass*  
*in sunlight with all Sunday the best of it*  
*before us and afterwards since all things now have their*  
*occasion*  
*and rhythm in our lives*  
*as we make it*  
*love and the night*

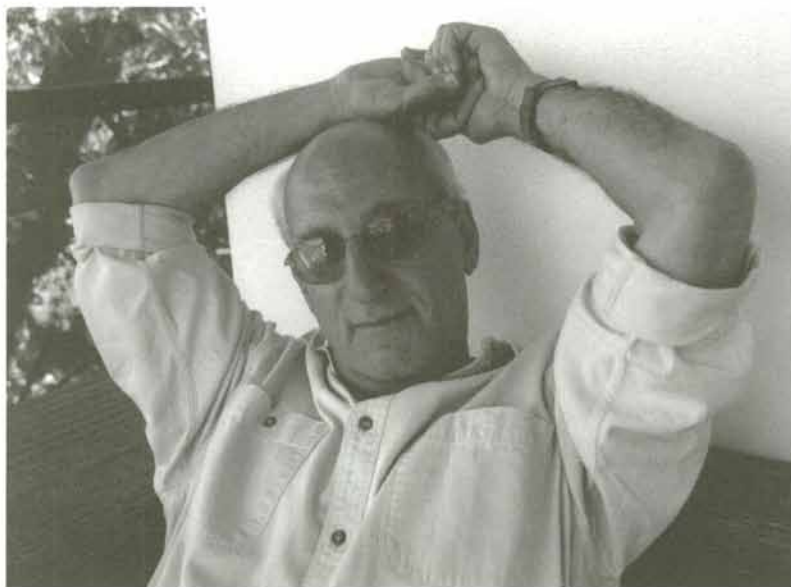
*Poem published in David Malouf: Poems 1959–1989*  
*(University of Queensland Press, 1992)*



## BESIDE THE SEA

Dense clouds of wordless breath still crowd the picture:  
each day, back there, a blue wave trampoling  
to a clear view of the next, stars turning turtle  
as they wallowed towards Peru, chromatic spindrift,  
a sleek head, seal or schoolboy, slipping through  
from the now that is to the now that was or would be.  
We took it as pure gift. Though we had not been there,  
the weather of Arcady could be construed  
from drafts of actual air and odd misreadings  
in the poets, sea-nymph, trident, a slippery-slide  
of smooth bush-logs, knee-deep at low water,  
that preached in parables to a concourse hushed  
and huge as the Pacific, each word stamped new  
on the air, the makings of a world that breath  
had not yet caught up with, to be snatched  
alive out of the mouths of those whose cries,  
whose joys had not found speech. High tide flung volumes  
of shell-shocked, sky-rocked thunder up the beach.

*Poem published in David Malouf: Poems 1959–1989  
(University of Queensland Press, 1992)*



David Malouf, 1990s

*Photograph by Juno Gemes*



## PRINCIPAL WORKS BY DAVID MALOUF

(By Date of First Publication)

### POETRY

*Four Poets: David Malouf, Don Maynard, Judith Green and Rodney Hall.*  
Melbourne: Cheshire, 1962

*Bicycle and Other Poems.* St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1970

*Neighbours in a Thicket: Poems.* St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1974

*Poems 1975–76.* Sydney: Prism, 1976

*First Things Last.* St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1980

*Wild Lemons.* Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1980

*Selected Poems.* Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1981

*Selected Poems.* Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1991

*David Malouf: Poems 1959–1989.* St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1992

### FICTION—NOVELS, NOVELLAS AND SHORT STORIES

*Johnno.* St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1975

*An Imaginary Life.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1978

*Fly Away Peter.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1982

*Child's Play; With, Eustace; and, The Prowler.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1982

*Harland's Half Acre.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1984

*Antipodes.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1985

*The Great World.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1990

*Remembering Babylon.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1993

*The Conversations at Curlow Creek.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1996

*Dream Stuff.* London: Chatto & Windus, 2000

## NON-FICTION

*Relative Freedom: The Tempest.* Sydney: The English Association, 1973

*12 Edmondstone Street.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1985

*A Spirit of Play: The Making of the Australian Consciousness.* 1998 Boyer Lectures.  
Sydney: ABC Books, 1998

*Untold Tales.* Sydney: Paper Bark Press, 1999

## LIBRETTI

*Voss: An Opera in Two Acts.* Sydney: Australian Music Centre, 1986

*Mer de Glace.* Sydney: Australian Music Centre, 1991

*Baa Baa Black Sheep: A Jungle Tale.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1993

*Reading a View.* Sydney: Australian Music Centre, 1999

*Jane Eyre.* London: Vintage, 2000

## DRAMA

*Blood Relations.* Sydney: Currency Press, 1988

## HONOURS AND AWARDS

David Malouf AO, FAHA has won many literary awards for his work, including the Grace Leven Prize for Poetry in 1974, the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal (1974 for *Neighbours in a Thicket* and 1982 for *Child's Play* and *Fly Away Peter*), the NSW Premier's Literary Award for his second novel *An Imaginary Life* in 1979, the Age Book of the Year Award in 1982 for *Fly Away Peter*, the Victorian Premier's Prize for *Antipodes* in 1985 and the NSW Premier's Play Award in 1987 for *Blood Relations*.

The Pascall Prize for Creative Writing followed in 1988, and in 1991 the Prix Fémina Etranger, the Miles Franklin Award and the 1991 Commonwealth Writers Prize for fiction for *The Great World*.

*Remembering Babylon* won the NSW Premier's Literary Award in 1993, was short-listed for the 1994 Booker Prize, and won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize in 1995. In June 1996, the novel was awarded the first International IMPAC Dublin Literary Prize.

Malouf's most recent novel, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, was nominated for the 1996 Age Book of the Year Award and for the 1997 Miles Franklin Award.

In 2000 David Malouf won a Lannan Foundation Literary Award for fiction and also became the 16th Laureate of the Neustadt International Prize for Literature for his body of work.

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

IVOR INDYK is the editor of HEAT magazine, which he publishes from the University of Newcastle, and the author of the critical monograph *David Malouf* (1993).

NICHOLAS JOSE has published two collections of short stories, a volume of essays and six novels, including *The Rose Crossing* (1994), *Chinese Whispers: Cultural Essays* (1995), *The Custodians* (1997) and *The Red Thread* (2000).

JUDITH RODRIGUEZ has published nine collections of poetry, including *New and Selected Poems* (1988) and *The Cold* (1992), and has collaborated with the composer Moya Henderson on the libretto of the opera *Lindy*, to be performed in 2002 by Opera Australia.

VIVIAN SMITH is a poet and critic who has published numerous essays on Australian poetry. His most recent collections of poetry are *New Selected Poems* (1995) and *Late News* (2000).

COLM TÓIBÍN's four novels include *The Blackwater Lightship*, short-listed for the Booker Prize in 1999; his works of non-fiction are *Bad Blood* (1994), *The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe* (1995) and *The Irish Famine* (1999). He lives in Dublin.



David Malouf, about to film in Campagnatico, January 1985

*Photograph by Richard Tipping*

*D*AVID MALOUF: *A CELEBRATION*, compiled and introduced by Ivor Indyk, brings together four essays that pay tribute to one of Australia's leading writers. The engaging voices of David Malouf's 'four friends who are also fellow authors' speak of their varied and unique experiences of Malouf and his art.

JUDITH RODRIGUEZ writes about David Malouf as a brilliant young man in Brisbane of the 1950s, through to the Australian expatriate experience of travelling through Europe and working in Britain in the 1960s.

VIVIAN SMITH takes up the story of Malouf's career as a poet, university lecturer and active participant in Australian literary life throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s.

NICHOLAS JOSE invites us to listen to the voice of David Malouf, the private man and eminent public writer: from delivering the Boyer Lectures, and creating conversations with his readers in his novels, to hosting friends at gregarious dinner parties.

Finally, COLM TÓIBÍN takes us from the strand at Ballyconnigar to swimming in the sea off Rottnest Island, Western Australia, and brings us in this sweep a description of friendship and abiding wonder at how, in his work, Malouf 'has made the most intimate space and the closest observation his great world'.

A selection of Malouf's poetry is also interspersed throughout this collection. Now so well known as one of our greatest novelists, these poems are a timely reminder of David Malouf the insightful poet who, as Ivor Indyk points out, 'remains a poet, writing in the medium of prose'. ■

