

# AN IMAGINARY LIFE

## VIEWING NOTES prepared by Philip Nielsen

**Subject Areas:** Australian Studies, English and Literature, General Studies, Human Interest

**Levels:** Upper Secondary, Tertiary, General Interest

### Synopsis

In 1996 Australia *Remembering Babylon* was considered by the IMPAC literary judges to be the best novel written by anyone, anywhere, in any language, in the last three years. *An Imaginary Life* is an exploration of his life and work.

In his beautiful and evocative stories the past is always very close to the surface of the present. Half-forgotten memories, inner states, obligation and friendship all provide inspiration for David Malouf.

*An Imaginary Life* interweaves the imagined world of Malouf's writing with the reality of places and experiences that have inspired him. We visit places from his past and delve into his Lebanese and English heritage and his memories of growing up in war-time Brisbane. We follow him to England, Ireland and the tiny Tuscan village of Campagnatico where he has written most of his work.

The interviews with Malouf reveal his underlying belief that we have the ability to transform ourselves and change the way things are. He feels the power to dream out of one existence and into a higher one, underpins even the most mundane life events. His novels are driven by emotion rather than storyline and he is particularly interested in the way we relate to each other, friendship and the codes of behaviour between men

*An Imaginary Life* is richly illustrated with rare archival footage and evocative dramatisations from his books and offers an emotive exploration into the life and the mind of an extraordinary writer and poet.

**Executive Producer:** Chris Oliver

**Producer/Director/Writer:** Don Featherstone

**Duration:** 55 minutes

**Year of Production:** 1996

## **Biographical Notes**

David Malouf was born in Brisbane on 20 March, 1934. He attended Brisbane Grammar School and then the University of Queensland, where he subsequently taught for three years. In 1959 he travelled to Europe, teaching in London and Birkenhead. From 1968 to 1977 he taught in the Department of English at the University of Sydney.

His first full collection of poems, *Bicycle and Other Poems*, was published in 1970 by UQP, who also published his first novel, *Johnno*, in 1975. In 1978, when *An Imaginary Life* was published, Malouf became a full-time writer, and bought a house in a village in Tuscany to spend part of each year. He currently has a residence in Sydney, and visits Brisbane regularly. His eighth novel, *Conversations at Curlow Creek*, was published in 1996.

Malouf has won many awards, including the NSW Premier's Award, Age Book of the Year Award, and the Pascall Prize. *The Great World* won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, the Prix Femina Etranger and the Miles Franklin Award. *Remembering Babylon* was short-listed for the Booker Prize and the Irish Times Award, and won the Los Angeles Times Fiction Prize and the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. In 1987 David Malouf was made an Officer of the Order of Australia.

## **Bibliography**

### **Fiction**

- Johnno
- An Imaginary Life
- Fly Away Peter
- Child's Play
- Harland's Half Acre
- Antipodes
- The Great World
- Conversations at Curlow Creek

### **Autobiography**

- 12 Edmonstone Street

### **Poetry**

- Bicycle and Other Poems
- Neighbours in a Thicket
- The Year of the Foxes and Other Poems
- First Things Last
- Wild Lemons
- Libretto
- Baa Baa Black Sheep

## Notes & Activities

### A WRITER OF "MYTHOLOGIES"

*...what gives you possession [of a country] finally is taking it into your consciousness...possessing it imaginatively, and I think that's the only way in which we can possess anything in the world ...*

These words, spoken by David Malouf in the film *An Imaginary Life*, sum up a central theme running through all his novels: the need for people to imaginatively possess the place where they live - to truly understand and accept it. This is the task of each new generation. As a novelist, Malouf is also involved in this exercise of the imagination; he is "rewriting" the story of Australia, reinventing its history, culture and landscape. He is creating stories that help readers to engage more fully and dynamically with the place they inhabit.

It makes sense then, that Malouf sees himself as a writer of "mythologies":

*...you have to find some way - I call it mythological - to find some real spiritual link between us and the landscape, us and the cities, us and the lives we live here and to do that you have to give people - in books - something like a mythology that they can have... it's not ready-made - it has to be imagined. (Interview with Julie Copeland, First Edition, ABC Radio, 15 August 1985)*

Malouf's second novel, *An Imaginary Life*, now a contemporary classic, retells the story of the Roman poet Ovid's exile from Rome - the centre of culture at the time - to the bleak wilderness at Thomis, near the Black Sea. Here we have a person absolutely dependent on language - a poet - forced to live in a world where the landscape, the language, all is alien him. Eventually, with the assistance of the Child, a youth reared in the wild, Ovid comes to accept his new surroundings. He does this by using the power of language and imagination to construct this new world for himself in a way that is meaningful. His finding of a familiar flower, a poppy, in the wilderness, evokes for him the magical power of language to construct human reality. Without shared language humans lack a shared perception of the world. Of course, Malouf's novels also serve the function of making meaning for us the readers; as he says in the film: "fiction is something that believes absolutely in the capacity of the imagination to make the world".

So the transforming power of language is a primary theme in Malouf's work; but language - the hallmark of our human culture - is also seen as a potential hindrance. Ovid's sophistication makes it difficult for him to be open to the different languages and silences of Nature - until he is taught how to do so by the Child.

*An Imaginary Life* also retells the Australian myth of exile - the sense of being separated, at the edge of the world, away from the centre of things. By portraying Ovid's ultimate acceptance of the harsh land of his exile, Malouf's novel evokes for Australian readers this sense of exile and strangeness. The fact that Ovid comes to embrace his new surroundings can be interpreted as a suggestion that contemporary Australians too, need to identify with, or have a better sense of belonging to, Australia as more than a second-hand Europe. Malouf's novels and poetry celebrate a vivid sense of place and immediacy - of light, colour, and texture.

In *Remembering Babylon* several of the characters are shown to have difficulty coming to terms with their new home in tropical North Queensland because of the cultural filter through which they still view their new home. Young Janet McIvor has an idealised image of a place she has never been - Scotland. To her Australia is not authentic; what is real is her parents' accent and phrasing. She is trapped by language. Her cousin Lachlan plays a game in a dusty paddock in which he imagines himself hunting wolves through snow. What he "imagines" to be real is more powerful to him than the objective fact of the baked earth beneath his feet.

But if imagination can reinforce self-delusions, it can also be helpful and transforming. Malouf suggests in the novel that the settlers in mid-19th century North Queensland will have to re-imagine the country if they are to re-map the geography and make it their own. Clearly, this theme may still be relevant for readers in the 1990s.

In *Johnno*, the narrator Dante begins by seeing his home town Brisbane as utterly uninteresting, yet ends with a sense of belonging to this place of his formative years. In *The Great World* Digger uses his imagination and memory to make Keen's Crossing a space in which he can live fully engaged with his environment, while his friend Vic continues to be indifferent to the landscape and alienated.

## ISSUES: HISTORY AND IDENTITY

### HISTORY

On the other hand, Malouf also wants his readers to imaginatively come to terms with the suffering and cruelty that resides in Australian history; for example, in convict times, in the treatment of the Aboriginal people by white settlers, or in the two world wars.

Several of Malouf's novels deal with the idea that there is a blurred boundary between history and fiction. Official history is revealed as partly a fiction - something that gets modified over time. But unofficial history, the lives of ordinary people, is in a sense the "true history....the secret history" that can be brought to life through fiction. Malouf is at pains to celebrate the heroism of "ordinary lives" in *The Great World*, which in part retells the daily struggle of Australian prisoners of War on the Thai/Burma railway during World War 2.

As Malouf remarks in the film, almost none of the 40,000 years of Aboriginal history is recorded. The novel on which Malouf most clearly tries to redress this silence is the internationally acclaimed *Remembering Babylon*. The main figure in the novel is Gemmy Fairley. At the age of 13 he was thrown overboard while ill off the coast of Queensland, then rescued by Aborigines, with whom he lives for 16 years. Hearing that there are white settlers living in the south, he seeks them out, sensing that the key to some troubled part of him lies with the different language. He approaches three children, Lachlan Beattie, and his cousins Janet and Meg McIvor. Lachlan, who seems best able to communicate with Gemmy, "captures him", and the McIvor's take him in. Most of the settlers, however, find Gemmy's presence strongly unsettling, and become antagonistic to the McIvors, especially when some "blacks" appear on Jock McIvor's land and Gemmy is seen speaking familiarly with them. That Jock resists this peer pressure as long as he does in such an isolated place is a testament to the heroism exhibited by ordinary people and is contrasted later in the novel with the pompous ambitions of the governing class. There is no climax to the escalating tension of the novel; Gemmy disappears and his fate is never really known. The novel ends with the reunion approximately 60 years later of Lachlan and Janet, he a politician, she a nun.

Gemmy is a "hybrid" of European and Aboriginal culture and knowledge, a subversive catalyst who brings out fears and prejudices amongst the settlers. But for some, like the minister, Mr Frazer, he appears to be a precursor of a future kind of people, bearing a promise of a time when all Australians might truly connect with their land.

## IDENTITY

Malouf's novels are distinctive in focusing for the most part on dual protagonists - from Johnno and Dante in *Johnno* to Adair and Carney in *Conversations at Curlow Creek* (the only exception is *Remembering Babylon*). This dualism is linked to the prevalence in the novels of a sense of yearning for completeness, our desire to solve the "puzzles of origin and belonging" as Peter Pierce has described it. Much of *Johnno* is driven by Dante's offering of excuses for his failure to respond adequately to Johnno's friendship while he was alive. As Michael Ondaatje comments in the film, in Malouf's books the "intimacy of the relationships between the two people is sometimes so magical that you don't want to leave these people".

Malouf's most recent novel, *Conversations at Curlow Creek*, is set in 1827 in New South Wales, though there are long flashbacks to the upbringing in Ireland of the central character - army officer Michael Adair - allowing us to understand better the social circumstances and personal temperament that have brought him to this point. And this point is a dilapidated old hut, deep in the bush, where Adair spends the night philosophising with, and gently interrogating, an escaped convict-turned-bushranger called Carney. Adair is under orders to supervise the hanging of Carney at dawn, despite his increasing respect for, and sympathy with, his fellow Irishman. Republicanism lurks deep in the background of the novel. Closer to the foreground is the familiar Maloufian project of exploring the construction of identity and landscape.

The novel shows Malouf at his best; he writes with lyrical precision and intensity, creates convincing characters and maintains a strong narrative drive around such issues as whether Carney will escape the death sentence handed down by bureaucrats afraid of rebellion, or whether Adair will find his brother, or be reunited with Virgilia. Malouf explores the lives of ordinary people and renders them luminous in convincing drama, but at the same time he addresses the big issues of history, identity and the constant re-invention of ourselves. Perhaps that is why so many readers find his work satisfying.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In the novel *An Imaginary Life*, what is it that Ovid learns from the Child? Why do you think Ovid is able to die with a sense of acceptance at the end of the novel?
2. In Australian art and film we find the recurring image of an innocent child that has wandered off into the bush, never to be found. Two examples are McCubbin's famous painting "The Lost Child", and the internationally acclaimed film *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Discuss how Malouf has used this theme in his novels *An Imaginary Life* and *Remembering Babylon*, in the characters of the Child and Gemmy Fairley respectively. Does the image help readers to understand the feeling of vulnerability European settlers experienced in a new land?
3. To what extent does Malouf portray Gemmy Fairley as a "hybrid" of European and Aboriginal culture? Why does the narrative hint that Gemmy was killed in an unreported massacre? Does this cancel out the novel's hopeful ending?

4. Malouf often "rewrites" well-known Australian myths to bring them up to date. In *Fly Away Peter*, which deals with Australia's involvement in World War One, Malouf revisits the ANZAC myth. What elements of the traditional myth does he retain, apart from the coming to maturity of Australian innocents in industrialised Europe? Could it be argued that Malouf downplays Australian military aggressiveness, and avoids the usual anti-British bias of the traditional myth? Consider that two of the main characters, Ashley and Imogen, could be seen as positive, Anglo-Australian hybrids.
5. In some of Malouf's novels, the female characters are portrayed as confined or trapped by their domestic or family situation. Examples are Virgilia in *Conversations at Curlow Creek* and Jenny, Mrs Warrender, Iris, and Digger's mother in *The Great World*. Do you think that Jenny's attempts to escape from school, from the laundry and from Keen's Crossing are described in a way that suggests a more general social problem where many women lack choice?
6. In *Remembering Babylon*, when Gemmy Fairley blurts out to the children "I am a B-b-british object", are we meant to read this statement as ironically the truth? What forces have made Gemmy into a passive object? Does he find release from these forces in his lifetime? Consider the scene in chapter 19 where Gemmy walks through the charred landscape and it begins to rain, washing away the handwriting on sheets of paper, the "black magic" he thought entrapped him.
7. Malouf has been described as a post-Romantic writer, especially for his belief in the power of the imagination and in the necessity to establish connections with Nature. To what extent is the yearning to be closer to the natural and animal worlds an important theme in Malouf's novels? Many Australian novels and films depict the natural environment as hostile. Do you think Malouf is more positive in his representation of the bush?
8. Malouf is a poet as well as a novelist. What poetic qualities and strategies does he bring to his fiction? Consider description, imagery, the rhythm of sentences and evocation of mood, for example.
9. In the film Malouf refers to his poem *The Year of the Foxes* as a crucial one for him. He has said about the poem that it "introduces a whole set of oppositions that is right at the centre of almost everything I do ... opposition between suburbs and wilderness; between the settled life and a nomadic life; between a metropolitan centre and an edge; between places made and places that are unmakeable or not yet made; between the perceiver ... and all sorts of things which are 'other' and that 'other' may be the animal world or simply some other consciousness..." ("Three Talks: David Malouf, Les Murray and David Rowbotham", *Australian Literary Studies* 11 (1984): 317.)
- This is a very useful comment. Trace how Malouf uses these conflicts or tensions in his novels. For example, in *Conversations at Curlow Creek*, the ambivalent feelings Adair has towards Australia.
10. Many of Malouf's characters struggle to come to terms with the past or their childhood. Discuss the importance of memory in Malouf's novels. Does it matter that memory is unreliable? Note the repeated motif of the photograph.

11. In *Johnno*, what excuses or rationalisations does Dante make for not responding adequately to Johnno's offers of friendship? Dante wants us to think his only real sense of guilt is a form of 'survivor guilt' - that he lives while Johnno is dead. Is this completely convincing? How does Malouf let us see the limitations of Dante's role as a passive, detached observer?

12. What does Dante mean when he says: "even the lies we tell define us"?

13. Malouf is particularly adept at writing compelling physical detail. How does he evoke for us the horror and absurdity of war in *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World*? Consider the description of mud and boredom in the descriptions of trench war in *Fly Away Peter*; in *The Great World*, the scene in which the fish nibble away at Digger's putrid leg, giving him back "cleanness".

14. Machines are an important motif in Malouf's fiction - they often contribute to a conflict or tension with the natural world. Consider the clumsy aircraft at the beginning of *Fly Away Peter*, or the harvester that kills Jim's brother in the same novel. Machines can also be benign, like the "machine for making ice" in the mildly satirical Chapter 18 of *Remembering Babylon*, or they can be enabling.

15. Malouf has often referred to the mainly Queensland phenomenon of the dark, mysterious place "under the house": this powerful space is prominent in the novel *Harland's Half Acre* as well as in *12 Edmonstone Street*, as mentioned in the film. Discuss this space and its psychological connotations.

16. There are "special moments" experienced by characters in almost all Malouf's novels, in which the character feels intensely close to the natural world, as well as a sense of wholeness, connection or self-transformation. Discuss these scenes. For example: Ovid's discovery of the wild poppy in *An Imaginary Life*; Janet covered by a swarm of bees in *Remembering Babylon*; Carney washing himself in the creek in *Conversations at Curlow Creek* - and thereby putting himself "in touch".

17. Discuss the importance of the following ideas and themes to all of Malouf's novels: the yearning for a sense of belonging or completeness; the attempt to come to terms with the past, or with childhood, or with the inevitability of change.

## References & Further Reading

### Books

Neilsen, Philip. *Imagined Lives: A Study of David Malouf*.  
University of Queensland Press, 1996.

Nettelbeck, Amanda. *Reading David Malouf*.  
Oxford University Press, 1995.

Nettelbeck, Amanda, Ed. *Provisional Maps: Critical Essays on David Malouf*.  
University of Western Australia, 1993.

Indyk, Ivor. *David Malouf*.  
Oxford University Press, 1993.

## Articles

There are useful articles in several issues of the journal *Australian Literary Studies*, for example, by Peter Pierce and by Laurie Hergenhan, and in *Kunapipi* 8, no.3 (1986) by Patrick Buckridge. Other journals with useful articles, interviews or reviews include *Meanjin*, *Scripsi*, *Southerly*, *Island*, *Outrider*, *Antipodes*, *Westerly*, *Overland* and *Quadrant*.

## About the Author

**Philip Neilsen** is presently Associate Professor of English at Queensland University of Technology. He is also a novelist, short story writer poet and editor. Ten books published including the first book on Malouf *Imagined Lives: A Study of David Malouf* (QUP 1990) which was reissued in revised edition in 1996.

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