

Interview with David Malouf in Adelaide/Writers' Week (2.3.1992)

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David Malouf was born in Brisbane in 1934. His grandfather was of Lebanese descent. He was educated at the University of Queensland. He left for Europe in 1959 and worked in England until 1968. During that time he worked as a relief teacher in London and then took up a permanent teaching position at Birkenhead. He taught English at the University of Sydney until 1977, but now is a full-time writer, who spends his year in Australia and partly in southern Tuscany.

His most recent novel, *Remembering Babylon*, was published in 1993. He has always written prose as well as poetry and is the author of the libretto of Richard Meale's opera, *Voss*, which is based on Patrick White's novel. His autobiography *12 Edmondstone Street* (1985) concentrates on his childhood experiences in Queensland.

His many awards include the NSW Premier's Award for Fiction for his novel *An Imaginary Life*, the Age Book of the Year Award for *Fly Away Peter* the ASAL's Gold Medal for the same book and *Child's Play*. When I talked to him during *Writers' Week* in Adelaide, he had just received the *Festival Award for Literature* for his novel *The Great World* (1990).

* *I understand that you grew up in a smaller place, is this correct?*

Not really. I grew up in Brisbane which is now a town of over a million. The time that I was growing up there it would have been four, five hundred thousand people.

* *I see.*

That was during the war. It was also swollen in those days by huge numbers of servicemen, because this is where the Pacific war was being directed from. No, it was quite a big town.

* *I read your book 12 Edmondstone Street. You explained that first you lived in a smaller place and then -*

No, it's not a small town, it's a - It was a very provincial and weatherboard sort of town so that's -

* *So you were born in Brisbane?*

Yes.

* *Okay, I see. I wanted to know whether you have any childhood recollections as far as the Australian landscape and nature is concerned. Does a special scene stick to your mind?*

No, not of nature. I mean we lived in a city, but we also – Brisbane is close to Moreton Bay and we used to go every weekend to a beach house at the Bay and there you'd be in the sea mainly and some bush close by, but I grew up beside the sea in that kind of way really.

* *So this was your first surrounding more or less.*

Yes.

* *To what extent is travelling important for your work. I understand that you live in Italy and you come over here from time to time –*

Yeah, I'd say not important at all. I mean, even when I'm travelling I'm really essentially in the same place – in my head. I mean, I think writers mostly live in their heads.

* *But what you see and experience doesn't really stimulate or influence you at all?*

Well, I think what living elsewhere does is qualify your views. I mean the fact that you see that people in other places live in very different ways. It stops you from believing that the way you do things is the only way they should be done. Or even that the way you live is the only way of being human. As Westerners for example it's quite easy for us to assume that what defines us as human is the things that inside the Western culture we have made important. And you can go to a place like India and see that there is a different meaning there to what being human is. And that these other things are just cultural things. I mean it's very good to be made to question your own culture in that kind of way, but you know in Australia for example, if we had our eyes open, we would have learned that from looking at the Aborigines, except we never look at them. Or we didn't till quite recently.

* *But that's changing now, don't you think? People –*

Yes, that's changed.

* *People start to realize that this is an important kind of culture as well.*

Sure. But this is a place of where Western cultural values in every kind of way have always been terribly important. You can take them for granted if you live in Europe. If you come to a place where they have to be hung on to firmly, then of course they're more important to you and you never stop thinking about them.

* *Right. So, living in Italy for instance do you think that you really become attached to this place or detached from all places, from Australia and Europe, because you observe them all from a wider perspective?*

No, I think I'm a visitor in a place like that. But what I do think is – I mean, I have learned some things there. They're things that would already have existed in my family tradition, because my father's family are Mediterranean people. I mean, they're Lebanese. But coming to a place like Italy, you see for example the extent to which meals are sacramental occasions and the idea of a family coming together each day and eating is a kind of sacred moment each day. That's something that is not so strong in the Anglo-Saxon world and it would have been part of the original family tradition of mine, but then I went to Italy and I saw that it was a part very much of that Mediterranean world and a lot comes out of that. All of – most of our notions of religion in fact, come out of that. I mean, you know, Christian notions of the sacrament are really an extension of the sacredness of eating together at the same table. So to that extent I have learned something by being there.

* *What is your attitude towards Christianity?*

Well, I'm in every way I think anti-institutional so I have a good degree of contempt for the institutionalized Christian churches. I mean what I really believe, if you want me to say that is that –

* *Yes –*

I think that Christianity was originally meant to be a religion which was never be organized, that wherever two or three people were gathered together that's where the religion would be. That's how it was meant to be. And it was meant to be a kind of disseminated set of beliefs where those who shared them would recognize one another from place to place, but it was not meant to be organized in any other kind of way. And you were supposed to believe that what would see that it grew and remained was the Holy Spirit. But sometime in second or third century the church fathers, looking around, lost their nerve, stopped believing that the Holy Ghost would do it, and thought the best way of doing it was to tie yourself to a political institution. They tied themselves to the empire and took over from the empire all the places of organization, so that the important civil centres became the centres of bishoprics, archbishoprics and so on and they turned themselves into an entirely worldly political power in the belief that somehow the Holy Spirit would have a chance of moving around inside that.

* *(Laughs)*

I don't believe it.

* *That's the wrong way, yes.*

I think, at that moment it became, like all institutions and bureaucracies, a possible source of the anti-human or the anti-Christ or whatever it is. So, no I have no time for any institutionalized religions.

* *Would you agree that for you and your work a realm of transcendence is important?*

Yes, sure, sure. I mean, I think that my main preoccupations are essentially religious ones. And I mean the sacred is part of all of that. But I almost never anywhere in the books mention God or any organized religion, but I would say that what concerns my characters is the sacred, is –

* *a union with nature?*

sacraments of various kind, is death for example. It's essentially a religious world.

* *Actually in Harland's Half Acre for example, which is a book I liked a lot, there is this union with nature shortly before death that Frank experiences.*

Yes.

* *So do you think that this true understanding is only possible within nature and only at the end of life or something like that?*

Well, I think it's only possible within creation, but creation for me again, you know in the poetry and in all the books, creation is not – is something continuous in which man has a place in the part, but is not separate and not superior and so if I were to say that I –

(interruption)

Somebody asked me the other night at a session something like that and I thought that – I was talking about the fact that *The Great World* is about what it is we lose, and in fact what we lose is everything, but if you understand death in the right kind of way, at the moment of death you lose everything but also get everything.

* *So what do you get?*

Well, you enter at last the flow of creation. So that, I mean, in becoming part of that, you get that.

* *I see.*

But in order to do it you have to lose individuality, personality, separate consciousness and all that.

* *I read somewhere that your attitude towards creation is that you see the universe as a chain of being more or less, where everything of connected so that therefore ultimate unity becomes so very important to your work. Would you agree to that?*

Yes, and also within that, there's no contrast between continuity and change. They're not opposites. They're aspects of the same thing.

* *Yes, I think I see what you mean. Actually this understanding at the end of your life is something you find with Patrick White, in his novels as well. Do you think that there is a kind of influence?*

No I think I've always – There may well be a connection, but I think that's always what I felt.

* *So this coincidence is pure chance –*

it's hard to say where it comes from, but wherever it starts, it's so far back in your life you couldn't guess.

* *Right, okay. Actually I found it very interesting what you once said in an interview that there is really no difference between fact and fiction that we are all compulsive shapers.*

Yes.

* *That we remake things through the imagination. So would you say that it's impossible to be objective?*

Yes, absolutely. I think it's impossible to be objective. I mean I would go a long long way back and say that I reject almost all the sets of opposites on which our thinking is usually done. I mean, I reject the opposite of mind and body, of subject and object, of spirit and flesh, of change and continuity, of male and female. I think these are all – they all go back to a cultural choice. It happens early, no doubt, but you get it in our culture, coming from Aristotle. You know, where what you do is you categorize, and you categorize by dividing things so that there's either or – And I think that there is an earlier way of thinking than that. You get it in the Pre-Socratics for example and you get it later I think in someone like Heidegger –

* *Yes.*

where those terms no longer operate. A lot of what happens in my writing – I mean, it's a subtext of the writing it seems to me – is a kind of breaking down of those opposites. I think a lot of the books' subtext and interest in argument and all the rest of it is in destroying any –

* *But this makes understanding a lot more difficult, doesn't it? If you have to account for all these connections and don't have these categories any more.*

Yes, yes it does. And also our capacity to act and our cultures believe in action. I think my view of the world is a very passive one. But that seems to me to be acceptable.

* *In how far passive?*

Well, – to see things as they are from within might be to see them in a way that makes it difficult for you to act on them – to act against them. But that's okay by me, that's okay.

* *I see. All right.*

I mean one of those things is that in our society, in the way our society is always seen, goodness is always passive, and evil is always active.

* *That might be true, although sometimes it can be wrong not to act, to stand up and do something.*

That doesn't mean that everything that acts is evil, but evil is always active and for that reason attractive and dramatic. And goodness is often passive and undramatic, because goodness has to do with being, not with acting.

* *Hm, but sometimes you have to act in order to support goodness and speak up for it.*

Oh yes, absolutely, that's true. Yes, that's always a risk, because in doing that you're entering the world of possible evil even in attempting to protect good, yeah.

* *To come back to this point that you said it's really difficult to be objective at all - Would you agree that metafiction is important to your work, especially in Harland's Half Acre? I mean, there you have a lot of story telling, you have the dual narrative -*

Yes, that story telling seems to be to me an essentially human activity, in that - See, if you listen to a story, you are relieved of your own individuality and your own consciousness or something, you enter into - What I love about fiction is that the reader is invited to enter the world of the fiction and to become the centre of it. So that he's for the time that he is reading outside his own life, inside someone else's life. But also, you're freed of time, you know. You can be in a single sentence, you know. If the sentence says 'twenty years later', you're asked to enter a time world which is not the world of the two seconds by your watch in which it takes even to say that sentence. Your mind is moving in a different time realm. And that may be very important and healing to us in some kind of way. So I do see story telling, quite apart from the fact that it's a sociable activity, as being psychologically and spiritually important to us. I love that oral world in which people are still telling one another stories. That world is not dead, you know -

* *I hope not, yes,*

just because television exists or there are other alternative ways in which people occupy their mind. I mean kids still come home from school and say, 'mummy I must tell you.' That's essentially our need to tell, and our joy in listening to what's being told is something - we're not going to give up.

* *Sure. That's really good. Do you think that the power of imagination or let's say the depiction of consciousness is important to your world as well? I mean like what the characters think and -*

Yes, I'd assume always that what people are capable of understanding and feeling has got nothing to do with how articulated they are, especially how educated they are. And so I think, you might assume that what's going on in the heads of people that we think of as being inarticulate, uneducated, simple, might be very very complex. And it seems to me that writing, and a writer who has the words, that one of the responsibilities put on writing, might be to attempt to give words to those who in life don't have them.

* *That's right, yes.*

We all know that a lot of what we apprehend is at the edge of articulation. We never have enough words for what it is we feel or - and that's true of everybody. But it's the business of writing which is not naturalistic in that way, to find words for those things that don't get spoken, that can't get spoken. So the best writing, it seems to me, is always pushing at the edge of the inarticulate, the unspoken or whatever.

* *But you don't experiment with technique to do that, do you?*

Not much, I don't I think -

* *Actually that's the impression I got from reading your work, but I thought after what you said I should find out if or what you intend to do in this direction.*

No. It never struck me that for example what you get with stream of consciousness writing -

* *Yes, what you get in Joyce for example.*

adds anything really. That doesn't catch the inarticulate anymore than writing which is sentence structured. I think of that stream of consciousness writing, some of which of course is very good and some of which is not so good, as being - it's almost as if it were a scientific attempt to catch the way people's minds move, but really it's just another literary mode.

* *So how do you try to convey it, with nature imagery for instance, or--?*

Sometimes it's with metaphor and sometimes it's through - I mean, I think I write very visually.

* *Yes, true.*

So sometimes it's through a visionary quality which people have, which stands for a kind of emotional, spiritual perception. And I think the reader understands that. The book I suppose in which I most consistently did that was *An Imaginary Life*, you know? The odd thing about that is that, I mean, you know that's not an experimental book in any way, at the level of either sentence structure of narrative and no one reading the book, it seems to me, finds themselves puzzled by the way the language works, or by what they think of as a, as something that draws attention to itself in the writing; it's meant not to draw attention to itself. But I do think that that book, for people who read it, does lead them into places where they're not used to being.

* *But this is true for Harland's Half Acre and The Great World as well, isn't it?*

Yes, I would hope that the visionary experience can always be contained inside language which is quite plain and straight-forward and transparent.

I got a fair idea that, say, the German translation of *An Imaginary Life* is difficult, because experience of that kind in German writing tends to be difficult and what guarantees its quality as vision is its difficulty. That's never been so in English. Almost all the best visionary writing in English is transparently simple. That's a long tradition from the visionary poets in English too. So I think that - so, when that book was translated into German, the mere fact of its simplicity to Germans meant that there couldn't be anything there. That it had to be -

* *So there was something lost really in the translation process?*

No, that there had to be something more difficult about the syntax or the writing for it to be actually having anything to say.

* *Which is really strange, I agree.*

Yes, but that's the difference between two languages and their traditions.

* *Right, that's true. So are you interested in the visual arts as well?*

Yes, I am. That's not so unusual. On the whole, writers tend to be interested either in the visual or the aural: So you get writers who are interested in music, and you get writers who are interested in painting, and some writers who are interested in both. I'm certainly one of these people interested in both. Music means a lot to me and the music of the writing means a great deal too. I mean, the writing is almost always written as if it were to be read aloud. And so the rhythms of it are always important, but it's always very very visual.

* *I would agree, yes, definitely. In an interview you also said that Frank Harland was in a way, well drawn after Michelangelo? And the Michelangelo story? So I was really wondering about this remark and -*

It's just that when I first - I knew what I wanted to do, what the book was to be, but I hadn't really settled on what the central character would do: whether he would be a painter or whatever. I just happened to pick up a book, which - It was a book actually by an Australian woman about the male nude and I picked it up in someones house and opened it up, like that, and there was a paragraph about Michelangelo. And it was simply that the story told there was how Michelangelo's family had been an aristocratic family; that it had a lot of land and all the land had been lost and gambled away and that -

* *Oh like the fate of the Harland family, yes okay -*

and that Michelangelo's father had lost the last of the land and that Michelangelo set out to try and buy the land back. And the other thing is that Michelangelo, when the father remarried, was sent away from the family, exactly like Frank Harland -

* *Oh, I see that's another parallel.*

and came back later and became, through all his career, a supporter of the whole family: a lot of them pretty hopeless. So to that extent, you know, that story of Frank Harland's is the Michelangelo story. And it just amused me to translate that to Australia. I was never going to say that because I didn't expect anyone to recognize it - but the question of who owns the land is an essentially Australian question.

* *That's right.*

And it doesn't just mean who has a legal right to the land. In a place like this where we were all settlers who owns the land is an important question. And also whether you *can* own the land. I mean, how can we ever own the land? No one owns the land. You know, possession is a strange word,

* *True.*

so what that book ends up wanting to affirm is that the people who possess a thing are the people who possess it in their imagination and not in fact.

* *So do you think you write more about a 'country of the mind' than about real Australia?*

No, no. I mean that was meant to be, that was meant to attack, a real question in Australia: to say that Australians don't own the land, neither do Aborigines, but those who have taken the land into their imagination in some kind of way, so they form a real spiritual union with it, *they own* the land, but only in the world of the imagination, in the world of the spirit, not in the world of fact. There is a suggestion of that even earlier in my work, in the way Ashley, in *Fly Away Peter*, recognizes that Jim Saddler has as much right to the land that Ashley owns, because he understands it and has lived with it. And that is the way in which somebody here might recognize that Aborigines have a prior right to the land; not because they settled it, but because they had lived with it and owned it in *that* way.

I know where that perception came from in my case. I had written about it earlier in another context. It goes back to the moment in *The Tempest*, when we recognize the difference between the way Prospero possesses the island and the way Caliban does. And Caliban's - when he describes it to us, it's entirely in terms of his knowledge of how it smells, how it looks, all its animals. I mean, the land belongs to him, because it belongs to him in his senses and his imagination. That's Shakespeare's perception.

* *So, would you say that the land belongs rather to the Aborigines for that reason?*

No, I would say that the land belongs to nobody. Land doesn't belong to anybody. But those who have taken it into their consciousness, possess it.

* *Right. So everybody can do that theoretically.*

Yes, everybody can do that and I think white Australians are involved in a long process, which is what we mean by culture, of possessing the land in that way. We already possess it in the other way, but it's no possession at all. So you know, it's deliberate that at the end of *Harland's Half Acre*, when Frank legally possesses all the land, there is no one to inherit it. And that finally his possession of the land is that half acre of paintings, you know, which he has made through his imagination. That's the only kind of possession there could be.

The other thing in that book which a couple of people have picked up, because it's much more obvious, is the bit of the plot in which Frank adopts the nephew and has the fight with the mother. That's Beethoven. (Laughs)

* *Oh really?*

That's the situation of Beethoven and Karl, except that Karl in fact did not kill himself. A couple of people have picked that up. But it just amused me, in a way, to make the plot, which is not very important to me, reproduce the lives of these two great European artist figures.

* *Yes, that's interesting. And also Frank's movement to the island and into open space, does that belong to Bribie Island and the Australian painter Ian Fairweather's life?*

I didn't set out to do that, and Frank Harland's life in no way reproduces Fairweather's. But yes that is certainly what happened to the Scottish/Australian painter Ian Fairweather. He went and lived on Bribie Island and it is Bribie Island that I'm describing there.

* *You suggest that he had to move into open space and to the island to be within nature and to gain some real understanding. Is that correct?*

It's another thing in work of mine that turns up over and over again – a movement from the centre to the very edge.

* *Yes right, I also wanted to ask you about that.*

The geography of *Harland's Half Acre* to me was very interesting, because you begin out West, and then you go down South and then you go into the city. So Frank's geographical movements are as important as anything else is in the plot.

* *I read about that and critics describe your work and argue that terms like map, gap and edge are really important to understand your writing.*

Yes, yes.

* *I was wondering whether you also feel this gap between the Australian landscape and English language, I mean there's this –*

Oh yes, yes, sure. Absolutely.

* *So you feel the difference, but how do you cope with it as a writer?*

I think that's one of the things that makes the literary world that we are dealing with an interesting one. That the language –

* *So it's a challenge.*

Yes, yes. In a place like England, the language has grown out of the people's living in that particular place for a thousand years. Ours is a language which is superimposed on a different landscape altogether and so it's a much more willed thing. And it – I mean, working to make the language fit, is something quite interesting. In some ways that was done before I suppose, in America, but less so because the landscape was less different.

* *Right, that's what I feel. Yes. What can you do in order to overcome this problem?*

Well, people are very flexible. People's mind are very flexible. We have no difficulty in reading poems about spring, where the poem is saying that spring is April and May when spring for us is September and October. (Laughs) I mean, you know, human minds are very flexible. You can live in two places at once.

* *There were actually two other scenes in Harland's Half Acre which I found very interesting and the one is where blood is spread on Frank's picture when Knack kills his girlfriend Edna. So I was wondering whether what you wanted to convey there was that something like European tragedy is possible in Australia as well, or what was your intention?*

Yes, that's true. Yes, absolutely that. The idea that Australia is a place that is innocent. I mean it never has been. From the beginning our history has been extraordinarily bloody and filled with suffering.

* *With the Aborigines –*

Oh and convicts too.

* *Yes, true.*

But for some reason part of the mythology of the New World is always that the New World is a new beginning and that you can begin from innocence in some kind of way. And that is impossible. And Frank Harland discovers it in that moment, when he sees his painting at last with the blood over it. It's like seeing the landscape with the blood over it. He is forced to let a new colour come into his sort of painting world, which is red, but also he is forced to recognize that any notion that you're dealing here with a world that is innocent and unmarked by the human and by irrationality and all the rest of it, is impossible. And that's a real revelation to him. It's as if he has seen a new colour or seen the landscape under a new aspect.

* *We talked about nature imagery before, but I also found the depiction of your houses outstanding, they acquire metaphorical value.*

Yes, yes. Well, I don't know, yes they do. I mean you know *12 Edmondstone Street*, I'm sure.

* *Yes sure.*

What I would really want to argue is that we all read the world in spatial terms, and that those spatial terms are different as we first encounter them. So the way someone in the domestic world that I grew up in, I mean a place with a very very peculiar domestic architecture – you do read the world in a different way. You read it in terms of a safe nest of rooms at the centre of the house, and the verandah which is the edge, which is on the street, and you also read it in terms of the house which is above, and is light, and then the same space underneath which is dark and is in contact with the earth and all the rest of it. So that's the way. If symbolical – I think it is – It's a symbolizing of space, but it's always, I mean we always, we all turn space into symbol in that kind of way.

* *Yes, but I was wondering especially with the sinister depiction of under-the-house, whether this was a depiction of our psyche?*

It is, yes. But I think that's again what we - I mean we have a long tradition in our way of thinking of things coming up from below. Below is always where that world, that other set of experiences, is. It's no accident that when Freud comes to talk of the unconscious, we always think of it as being under the consciousness rather than over to the side of it or above. I mean that's where we have always believed that things come from. So to live in a place, in a house, which has, not a cellar, but a big open space under it which exactly matches the house, is a strange kind of experience, especially because it is the place, you know, as I have said, where children go: I mean you go there to sulk, or you go to cry, or you go to play and do things which you can't do in the light. It's where in Queensland almost all children have their first sexual experiences or experiments. So that becomes a very potent place.

* *Talking about Freud actually. You also said in one of your interviews that you were interested in dreams and that dreams are important to you, so -*

Yes, I am. But I'm not a Freudian. (Laughs).

* *Yes, that's what I just wanted to ask were Freud or Jung for instance were they -*

Well, Jung certainly more than Freud, but I mean again as in those other cases I -

* *They didn't really influence you.*

No, I mean I hate that kind of categorical interpretation. (Laugh).

* *Yes sure, I can understand that.*

I want dreams to be as free as narratives can be in expressing what they have to express. They're not just one to one allegorical. I mean there's no little dictionary, you can look up to find out what the action in a dream means. It means itself.

* *Sure, but I just thought what Jung and Freud did is sometimes quite interesting and it helps to understand not only dreams, but mechanisms of our consciousness and especially our unconsciousness.*

Oh yes, it does help, I agree.

* *Yes, and not only for dreams, I think it might be helpful to analyze literature as well, although I agree that the way psychoanalytic theory is used to interpret literature is often quite problematic.*

Well, they seem to be to me sort of simple-mindedly allegorizing in a way, which is just not true to us. I am interested for example in how it works for me in the writing. When I was writing *An Imaginary Life*, I really had no idea what was going to happen in the last part of the book. None at all. And when I came to a certain point in the book where I said I really just don't know what's going to happen now, I went back and read the earlier part. Ovid has a dream in the earlier part of the book about going out to the plain and I said, oh of course that's what it is.

* *Oh, I see.*

It was as if that dream, which was telling him about his life - I mean I had not realized that when I wrote it, but it was also telling me what his life was to be in the book.

* *So you don't have a synopsis in your head before you start writing?*

No, never. Not in any of them. - So I mean, at that point I just had to stop and I thought I just know that what is to happen in the second half of this book is already somewhere there in the first half; I just have to go and find it. But it was the dream that was the thing.

* *So you really are an inward looking writer?*

Yes.

* *You have discussed the psychological novel in another context and I understood that it has to be enigmatic and teasing and you need the reader's participation? Would you say that this is also true for Harland's *Half Acre* in a way, because I would call that a psychological novel.*

Yes, sure. But what I mean by that is that often novels set the characters up, and once you know what the character is, then your interest in the rest of the novel is to see them in some kind of conflict where what you know about them is acted out. I don't want that. I want you to be discovering further sides of the character right up until the end of the book. Do you see what I mean? I don't want a kind of novel where you present the character and then you see the character in action. I want the reader right up until the very last to be discovering new things about the character, which is what our lives are really like. I mean we are always discovering new aspects of ourselves. And death really is the last of those. So the novels are not psychological in that sense. It is in the sense that the characters can go on changing right to the end and that your attitude to them might also go on changing, right to the end.

* *How would you present these changes by placing them in a new surrounding, like you did for instance in *Harland's Half Acre* or *The Great World*?*

Yes and by presenting them with new experiences which bring out a hidden side of them, a side that has never been called into existence before, because they'd never had that experience before. One way of putting that, the way a lot of people would put it, is that the books are very weak on action.

* *Oh, I don't think so. (Laugh).*

Yes, some people would feel that.

* *I mean sure as you said action or plot is not the most important thing, in this context one other thing interests me and this is your article that you wrote on Proust:*

Yes.

* *People then started to compare your work to Proust's work. Would you feel that there is a justification for that? Or don't you like it at all?*

Oh, I don't know. It seems to me – I mean Proust is the best.

* *Well, he uses retrospection in a way you seem to be interested in, he certainly valued the imagination as much as you do –*

Yes, maybe these things. Obviously you respond most to the writers that you feel a kind of affinity for. And when you are reading them you, part of the joy reading them is to discover them doing things that you yourself would be interested in doing. But Proust can't be imitated.

* *Sure. No, not imitated. I didn't mean it this way. It was just that you wrote this article and I somehow thought that he might be one of the major influences for your work.*

No, yes sure. But simply because he can't be imitated, you never think of him in relation to you in that way. There are a lot of writers that I'm very interested in like that. I mean, I'm very interested in Thomas Mann for example.

* *Oh yes.*

And have always been. And Dickens. You know, obviously when you say that you are interested in a writer, or you like a writer, it's because you feel a kind of affinity with them. Except that, you know, sometimes the writers you like best are writers who are doing things you couldn't do. We can also leap out of ourselves in that kind of way. Proust is a very interiorizing writer and also he's a writer who's continually doing what I was just saying: you're continually revising your attitude to his characters right up to the end, because you're discovering new things about them. That's made easier in his case, because all the writing is first personal and retrospective.

* *Yes. So it wasn't a kind of revelation that when you were reading Proust that you realized you wanted to do something like this as well?*

No, I don't think so. No. I'm sure that the aspects of Proust that I – I mean Proust has a thousand aspects, but the ones that I chose to write about in that piece are ones that did occupy me at that time. It must have been, I would have thought, very soon after I'd finished *Harland's Half Acre*.

* *Yes.*

I think *Harland's Half Acre*, well the first draft was written by the end of 1982 and I think it was published 1984 and I'm not sure, but I think that Proust thing would have been just a bit after that?

* *Yes, I think so.*

But maybe I was alerted to things in the Proust, because I'd realized that they're things that interested me in *Harland's Half Acre*, which is in some ways the most – I mean, it's the one that deals most with families and relationships to a society and a place and all the rest of it, and to that extent it is not doing anything like Proust, but is more like that than some of the other books.

* *Actually are you familiar with William Faulkner's work as well?*

Oh yes, Faulkner is a wonderful writer and certainly I think in English in this century – I mean the great writers in English in this century are all people, you know, that I owe something to, and they would be Conrad and Lawrence and Faulkner. Those three more than anybody else. Patrick White owes an enormous amount to Faulkner. People hardly ever say it, but he owes more to Faulkner than to anybody else.

* *Well, yes. Actually I thought so. Part of my first thesis was a comparison between White's and Faulkner's and also of Eudora Welty's work.*

More like Faulkner than anyone else. Yes.

* *Are you familiar with Eudora Welty as well?*

Yes.

* *I think there are also parallels, because she is also using landscape and nature imagery for depicting her character's imagination and their thoughts –*

Yes, I haven't read her for a very long time, but I certainly read a lot of Eudora Welty when I was nineteen, twenty or something like that, a long time ago. I certainly knew her.

* *Her short stories probably –*

Yes, yes it was.

* *One other thing that I would like to know about your own writing is, do you keep a notebook?*

No, no I don't.

* *So you would say writing is rather intuitive than self-taught.*

Yes. No, I never keep a notebook of any kind. The thing is, I have a very good, but very strange memory. I mean, you know, people are always saying to me, people who grew up in Brisbane – or my sister would say, 'it's astonishing all those things you remember'. But I don't have – I have a memory that only works on a visual or sensory trigger, so if I can – I don't remember things verbally, but if I can remember – I mean I can remember absolutely any moment in the past back to the time when I was about three, if I can get one visual detail, or one little sensory thing, then I can absolutely see the entire scene.

* *That's amazing.*

And that's how my memory works and so I do have an almost total recall of things.

* *Are you a friend of any of the major writers in Australia?*

Yes, with most.

* *With most?* (Laugh).

I used to be a good friend of Patrick's for example, Patrick White in the later years, I mean after about 1978. I knew Patrick quite well. I wouldn't see a lot of him, but we corresponded and I would have seen him once every two months or something like that. But I mean most of the - Australia is a very very small place.

* *Hm, a small place?*

I mean you know all the writers. So yes, I have very good close friends. Rodney Hall is a friend going back a very long way. I grew up with almost with Judith Rodriguez, and Tom Shapcott has been a friend for the last nearly twenty years. Helen Garner is a good friend, Murray Bail is a close friend.

* *How did you meet Patrick White for instance?*

Well, really through - well, he was a wonderful person this way: in a way that none of the rest of us do, he absolutely read everything in local writing. And he was enormously generous. If he read a book by a younger writer and liked it, he would go out and buy twenty copies and send it to all sorts of people. He did this always. Poetry, novels. I mean, he was enormously generous in that way. I heard, say by about 1971, somebody saying, 'oh Patrick White has been buying your book of poetry and sending it to people'. And then when I had my first novel, *Johnno*, people said to me, 'oh Patrick is buying your novel and sending it to everybody'. (Laugh) Then about 1977 it might have been, Elizabeth Riddell, who I was telling you about with the policeman, she was a good friend of Patrick's, and she said, 'oh Patrick would like to meet you. I'll have dinner and invite you both.' So that's how I met him.

* *And how did you meet Rodney Hall?*

I met Rodney when he was sixteen or seventeen, because there was a very very good poet who lived in Brisbane called John Manifold. And John Manifold was very interested in music and had bush music groups, you know, Australian ballads, and people used to go to his place near Brisbane in the Bay every Saturday or Sunday. I got into the habit of going there and Rodney was one of the people who went there. So I met him then. That was a long time ago. Judith Rodriguez was in my sister's class at primary school, so I met her then when I was about twelve or thirteen, and she was a year or two years younger or something.

* *Another very general question: What do you feel about Australia today, just spontaneously, what comes to your mind?*

The thing that's most striking about the country these days, and it's what everyone is aware of, is the enormous and fast change in the population mix here. You know, you just can't miss that.

* *Yes, a multicultural society.*

Well, not multi-, yes, but that's a word no one really ever wants to - I mean, there are two words you just never want to use in Australia really ever again: 'identity' and 'multicultural'. But it is true, I grew up in a world until well after the second war which was essentially England or the British Isles transposed. It's no longer that. You know, you see it. It's just so different, and in a place like Sydney, you are just so aware of living in a city which is now crossroads of peoples. It doesn't surprise you to be sitting on a bus and the majority of people on that bus will be Vietnamese - I mean I live in central Sydney and get on buses that are going out into the inner West, and often there will be five or six Anglo-Saxons and the rest are Greeks, Turks, Vietnamese, Lebanese whatever, and you're no longer surprised at that. That's the world we now live in. Of course it's different in different places. In some places you're very aware of that, but there are lots of parts of Australia which are still completely Anglo-Saxon. I mean, completely. You don't expect to go out into Western towns and see people who represent that multicultural, multinational mix. But in any of the big cities you see it. Not so much here in Adelaide.

* *Right, yes.*

You're not aware of it in Adelaide. There're Italians here and some Greeks I think, but in the inner city of Sydney, you're very aware that you're in a city in Asia, you know? On the edge of Asia.

* *Why don't you want to use this term 'identity' anymore? I mean -*

Because it's just so boring.

* *But this obsession with nature for instance, that you find with Australians, don't you think that's because of their search for identity that they try to find something in order to define themselves?*

I don't know. I don't know.

* *Or would you say that's over now, and -*

No, I don't think it's over, but I think that in the actual business of people's day to day life, they don't think of themselves as belonging to a nation. They think of themselves as getting on with their life and dealing with their neighbours. I think it's, it may have a political dimension and it may be interesting to the media, but it is not what people's daily life is about.

* *Hm, so you think all that nationalist writing is not really worthwhile?*

I think it's a feature of what Mrs. Thatcher called 'the chattering classes'. (Laugh).

* *But still you said that Australia is very important for you and your work, that it's not just a country of the mind and your individuality that you want to convey.*

No, but it's the place where I grew up, it's the place where I live. And I mean in every way that's -

* *But only that?*

Yes, but you know, if you live in Germany - well, maybe it is in Germany, you do these days have to think about what that nation is to be -

* *Sure, yes.*

And I suppose really you'd say that mostly about anywhere in Europe now. Because I know in Italy too I mean the Italians, never think of themselves as Italians. They think of themselves as Tuscans or Venetians or whatever. And just at the moment when that country too may be in danger of breaking up, they have to ask themselves, well, what did it ever mean: to be an Italian? Was there ever an Italy?

* *So you don't think Australia is in a special position, because it's a younger nation?*

I don't think so, no. I think that's an illusion. As soon as you start thinking about nation, that concept itself - if that's where identity exists, in relation to nationhood, then other places are absolutely as problematic as we are. Think of the Yugoslavs. Think of the Italians. Think of the Germans.

* *Sure. I agree.*

The British too. In that place too people begin to worry what they mean by the United Kingdom. People say to themselves I'm a Glaswegian, I'm a Florentine, I'm a Berliner. Or they think of the district they live in. I mean they think of their friends and families, or they think of the people across the city that they have contact with, who are their tribe, which has no name. I mean that's how we really define ourselves. The other is a political concept. The media are very fond of talking about those things.

* *About identity as a political concept?*

Well, about definition in terms of nation - I mean, I think definition is a horrible thing. We have now got into this even worse one inside the - Australia is very much involved with this too - I mean, people get themselves defined by what ethnic group they belong to, or whether they're women, whether they're gay. There is now a kind of complete - especially in a place like Sydney - a complete sub-tribe of gay men and women, except that the gay men and gay women don't have that much in common. That's another way in which people would begin to define their identity. Not as whatever they were before that: not as Australians, not as people from New South Wales, not as Sydney-siders, but by sex, by gender. That's a madness! And I think all of that has come too from - it's kind of a - it's got a different agenda from the agenda of people's living. It comes from an agenda of talk and definition through talk.

* *Are you permanently living in Sydney now?*

Yes.

* *You no longer live in Italy part of the year?*

Well, I still have the house in Italy and I go there a couple of times. I go there two or three months a year.

* *Are you teaching at university still from time to time for instance in Sydney?*

No I haven't taught since 1977.

* *Are you working on something at the moment?*

Yes, I've got a book almost three quarters finished.

* *And what will it be about?*

No, no I'm not going to talk about that until it's done (Laughs). (The book Malouf is referring to is *Remembering Babylon*).

* *Sure I can understand that. It was really great that you gave me that opportunity.*

Good. Thanks, thanks.