

David Malouf

Don Randall

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Reviewed by Victor Oost, Université de Paris VI (UPMC)

This is a timely and eminently readable volume from an Associate Professor at Bilkent University (Ankara). Apart from a collection of essays in 2001,¹ Amanda Nettelbeck's monograph and essay collection in the mid-nineties,² and Philip Neilsen's *Imagined Lives: A Study of David Malouf*, reedited in 1996, there has been no recent full-length study of Malouf's fiction. Randall provides a lively and cogent analysis of Malouf's novels, poetry, autobiography and criticism, from the vantage point of postcolonial theory and with an encompassing focus on the *leitmotiv* of self and alterity that is so salient in Malouf's work. Randall explores this theme with constant reference to earlier criticism, contrasting each work with that of forerunners and contemporaries who influenced Malouf's novelistic development; for example, W.H. Auden's poetry or Patrick White's preoccupation with nationality, ethnicity and landscape.³ Chapter by chapter, Randall charts Malouf's progress through his writing career, as he moves towards greater narrative sophistication and thematic universality. *Child's Play* (1981), for example, explores the terrorist mindset and, as Randall astutely remarks, at the same time points to our own alienation in stultifying late capitalist narcissism (65). Throughout this text, the critic evinces a prodigious breadth of scholarship, in literature, criticism and philosophy.

The vice in this *virtù*, however, is an overreaching exhaustiveness at times. One wonders whether Randall's style may have been cramped by too close an adherence to the specifications in the Series Editor's Foreword:

Each volume includes a chronology of the writer's life, an introductory section on formative contexts and intertexts, discussion of all the writer's major works, a bibliography of primary and secondary works and an index. Issues of racial, national and cultural identity are explored, as are gender and sexuality. Books in the series also examine writers' use of genre. (xi)

¹ *David Malouf: A Celebration* by Ivor Indyk.

² As editor, *Provisional Maps: Critical Essays on David Malouf*, 1994, and as author, *Reading David Malouf*, 1995.

³ For example, compare *Harland's Half Acre* with *The Vivisector* (7, 8, 93).

Generic concerns are germane to the task in hand and an informed reader might have some reservations regarding the biographical component of Randall's analysis. While the three-page chronology logically alternates between short references and longer sections for more important dates and periods—for instance the year 2000, when his opera libretto, and a short-story collection were published at the same time that Malouf won two international literary awards—biographical comments in the text can seem curiously inappropriate. For example, the final remark about Malouf in the following passage seems rather indecisive:

A masculinist perspective typifies the male writers of empire, major and minor—not only Kipling, but also Conrad and Haggard, and Ballantyne and Henty and Wallace and a long list of others now largely forgotten . . . male voices, male characters and relationships between male characters, are unignorably prominent in his writing. (4)

The use of the word “unignorably” points to an unwillingness on Randall's part to be drawn into a debate on possible ramifications between Malouf's (homo)sexuality and the focus of his novels. A similar tendency emerges in another passage discussing the character Johnno in the eponymous novel: “Johnno's main role in the novel may not be, then, that of the unavowed object of unfulfilled homosexual desire. He may serve, principally, as one of two key opponents in Dante's quest to affirm the value of texts” (35). Why not suggest, more expansively, that there may be *both* a homosexual component and a thematic justification for Johnno's centrality in the novel? While a serious critique should obviously avoid committing the biographical fallacy of confusing the author with his literary creation, it would seem that some further explanation was justified here for the sake of clarity. Despite these minor failings, however, Randall elsewhere engages in a perceptive description of the evolution of Malouf's generic development, which trends towards a more postmodern aesthetic in later works.

The other prescribed features of the book are well executed. Though a trifle short (less than four pages long), the index refers to the critics cited and the main themes that are discussed in the text, such as difference, exile and sense of place. A useful inclusion is that of works discussed at several points in the text. However, I failed to find any index entry for Malouf's libretto *Mer de Glace*, which was produced by the Australian opera in 1990. The endnotes for each chapter are frequently illuminating, expanding some of the topics briefly discussed in the text; for instance noting “the perturbed relationship, in migrant colonial contexts, between words and things” (note 123, chapter 6), Randall usefully points the reader to an article by Xavier Pons in *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 2004. One small quibble, given the book's other excellent qualities, with regard to the “selective” primary bibliography of Malouf's output is that readers are referred to the AusLit database for a more extensive list of his works.

All in all, Randall provides an informed analysis of Malouf's works, and his monograph will no doubt be well thumbed by both undergraduates

and academics looking for an extensive overview of the Australian author, his sources of inspiration and his formative background.