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David Malouf. A First Place

David Malouf. 2014. *A First Place*. North Sydney, (NSW): Knopf, pp. 350. \$A29.95, ISBN 9780857984050.

David Malouf has made a major contribution to Australian literature with his essays, fiction, and autobiographical writings. His *12 Edmondstone Street* (1985), for instance, addressed the way that a house might shape a person, especially as the location for a family finding its own place in a new country. The person in that house was David Malouf, and his approach in that volume has a companion in his latest publication.

A First Place is promoted as a celebration of David Malouf's 80th birthday. Whether that is publisher's puff or not, these thirteen nonfiction pieces – forewords, lectures, and essays – offer a range of material covering some thirty years of Malouf's reflections on identity and place that collectively remind us of his gentle yet powerful presence as a thinker and artist.

The separate parts of *A First Place* share at least one characteristic in that each was prompted by an invitation to write for a public arena of one kind or another. As Malouf himself remarks, this distinguishes them from “works of the imagination...written out of inner necessity [and] entirely personal” (ix). The focus is decisively Australian, blending aspects of Malouf's own upbringing as a child of a migrant family, how one identifies as a resident of a country, and significant elements of its history. Together they marshal a view of the Australia's dramatic reshaping, especially in the last 50 years or so.

Despite the decades that separate some of the pieces, they are united through Malouf's singular and precise gaze. That necessarily shifts its focus over time but it maintains a solid link to the man via his skill at recollecting the places and events of childhood, family and locations. Particular to him, they nonetheless

also stand for the experiences of many new arrivals to Australia as it was refashioned by waves of migration from Europe and, more latterly, Asia.

The works can be read for entertainment – for the colour and vitality and some degree of nostalgic recollection – but deeper and sometimes darker factors are present too. Prejudice and neglect are properly mentioned, whether it was a rejection of black servicemen during WW2, bias against new migrants, the White Australia policy, or the denial of rights to Australia's own indigenous people. If Malouf is hardly strident about such matters, his gaze is true and his avoidance of polemics is preferable. The point is made.

Australians have long been occupied with the sense that they live on the fringes of a giant continent with a vast and largely unknown interior; a place of mysteries that is somehow part of them. Malouf draws attention to this when commenting on the Bicentenary for the way it jolted Australians' conception of themselves beyond this: "You have to be engaged by *time* to be interested in history. The consciousness of Australians has been dominated by *space*" (80). Looking back at 200 years since white settlement did force modern Australians to confront not only where they lived, but also to consider their achievements and failures, including their connections to the wider world.

Malouf engages such large themes with ease but it is through the particular that he seems to make the keenest connections. Speaking of the power of place, he says that we are sometimes blind to what is around us and to the influence it asserts on our sense of identity. It is the hard and real and sometimes relatively small-scale that we must also return to in seeing where and who we are:

In all those necessary objects that make up our sort of living; bookcases and chaise longues and silver trophies and cast-iron-railings and shoe buckles and biscuit tins. These things speak to us. They also speak *for* us, and for the many lives that lie behind us and lead up to us (151).

This is the poet's eye, translating the domestic and intimate into the common,

shared and intimate environment. Here he is deliberately and simultaneously referencing a broader sense of awareness:

This business of making accessible the richness of the world we live in, of bringing density to ordinary, day-to-day living in a place, is the real work of culture...This has been especially important in the case of the land itself...and most of all, the *spirit* of the land as it exists in all things and can be touched and felt there (152).

What we find, then, is Malouf ranging between: the personal and autobiographical as it might relate to the experiences of others; the way we make maps of our own geographies and mental landscapes; the affairs of state in a new nation as it moves from a collection of different territories to some sort of coalition; and, what it is to be a resident in a country whose own identity is constantly having to adapt.

These writings were intended as part of a public discourse. Even the oldest of them is relevant. As far as we can say a national identity does exist, its character is best tested at the level of the individual. It is reckoned by what we each see portrayed and what we are told about ourselves and our fellow Australians, but mostly by how we live now. Malouf knows that and makes it unarguably evident.

A First Place is a key contribution to Australia's ongoing debate on what it is, and how its inhabitants define their relationship with one another and the larger world. Australia's history is not that of all nations but many of its concerns are held in common. This book offers thoughtful material for the continuing process of improving our understanding of the way that place and history affect our knowledge of ourselves.

Steve Evans teaches Literature and Creative Writing at Flinders University, where he is Head of the Department of English, Creative Writing & Australia Studies. Writing prizes include the Queensland Premier's Poetry Award, New England Poetry Prize, and a Barbara Hanrahan Fellowship. He has read at various festivals and other venues in Australia and internationally, where he has also been a writer in residence (Singapore, New Zealand, Japan). He is a member of the National Council of the Australian Poetry Centre and has published 11 books, with another to appear at the end of 2014.

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