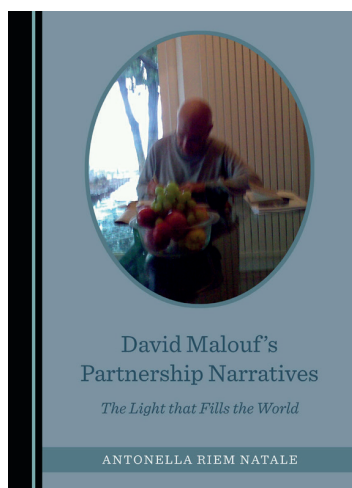


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Coral Ann Howells

David Malouf's Partnership Narratives: *"The Light that Fills the World"*

***Antonella Riem Natale. 2024. David Malouf's Partnership Narratives: "The Light that Fills the World". Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 228, £ 67.99, ISBN: 978-1-036403157***



<https://www.cambridgescholars.com/product/978-1-0364-0315-7#gallery>

This book as its title promises is a luminous study of the work of David Malouf, one of Australia's major writers, which explores a wide selection of his novels, short stories and poetry from a new critical perspective. The key words here are "partnership" and a phrase from one of Malouf's stories, for they spell out both the distinctive features of his creativity and of Antonella Riem's critical methodology. It is designed to reveal under-represented aspects of his work, highlighting the visionary dimension at the core of Malouf's writing: "This use of the creative word is a constitutive element of his oeuvre and it manifests the essential connection between body, nature and spirit through a distinctive language, revealing deep spirituality within the physical and natural realms" (23-24). That concept of interrelatedness is the foundation of the Partnership model which Riem employs in her 'conversations' with Malouf's texts over more than thirty years.

Antonella Riem's name is synonymous with Partnership Studies throughout Italy and

internationally, ever since she founded the Partnership Studies Group (PSG) at her home university of Udine in 1998 which has become a research network of scholars promoting intercultural dialogue, based on the principles of Riane Eisler's Partnership paradigm<sup>1</sup>. She is also a distinguished scholar of Australian literature and was appointed in 2021 as an Honorary Member of the Order of Australia for distinguished service "through the promotion of Australian literature internationally" (x). Her book *A Gesture of Reconciliation: Partnership Studies in Australian Literature* (2017) is witness to this. Interestingly it does not feature Malouf for, as she explained, she was already writing this book which we are reading now.

The book is arranged in six chapters. In Chapter 1, Riem sets out her position, outlining her main themes and topics, and acknowledging her critical foundations in an alternative field of scholarship to that used by most Australian literary critics: Eisler's biocultural model, Raimon Panikkar's concepts of 'dialogical dialogue' and the 'creative word', and Francesco Benozzo's *Ethnophilology*, supplemented by studies of archetypes and myths. Her eclectic bibliography extends over twenty pages, plus a list of Malouf's works.

Chapter 2, "Partnership Language, Dialogical Dialogue and Ethnophilology" offers an in-depth analysis of Malouf's creativity focused on the language of his poetry and prose: "I think I really learned to shape a novel the way I'd learned to shape a poem" (26). Riem demonstrates how his language becomes an instrument for reading (inventing?) reality as a system of correspondences via metaphors and analogies which put us as readers "in a particular relation and dialogical dialogue with texts and characters" (34). Malouf insists on the coexistence of multiple points of view, on the reconciliation of differences, on the importance of the spoken word, and the value of oral cultures. His sympathy with Aboriginal culture is beautifully illustrated in Riem's reading of "The Only Speaker of His Tongue", an elegy for dying and lost languages as a consequence of white settler colonisation. Chapter 3 continues the exploration of partnership through Malouf's historical novel of colonial Australia, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. This is a chapter on Partnership Doubles, framed by a scholarly discussion of the Double, that archetypal figure which consistently features in his fiction from his first novel *Johnno*. *Curlow Creek* is very much a 'dream history' or 'myth history' which ends with reconciliation and redemption. Malouf's visionary perspective is comparable with Patrick White's *Voss* – Malouf wrote the libretto for that novel as an opera in 1986.

Chapter 4 on Malouf's short stories in *Every Move You Make* and *Dream Stuff* is for me the central chapter in this book – coincidentally its title quote comes from one of these stories "Great Day". In her discussion of many stories Riem brings us close to the core of Malouf's writing with its poetic and imaginative 'Dreaming' which reveals affinities, partnerships and moments of vision, always embodied in ordinary existence. His enterprise of remapping Australia is akin to Aboriginal 'Dreaming', emphasising the importance of geography, the history of the land and its myths, where "every shape, outline and sign of the landscape are imbued with sacred and ancestral vibrations" (105). Malouf's stories are his way of redeeming Australia's imperial legacy as a white settler colony by giving it a new mythology resonant with its past. Dreaming opens the way to imaginative and mythological thinking

<sup>1</sup> <https://partnershipstudiesgroup.uniud.it/> (consulted on 08/07/2025).

where boundaries between conscious and unconscious, civilisation and wilderness, become permeable. It is the site of transformations and visions which are basic to Malouf's ecological ethic in his postcolonial criticism: "a land can bear any number of cultures laid one above the other or set side by side. It can be inscribed and written upon many times. One of those forms of writing is the shaping of the landscape" (159).

With Chapter 5 "Journeying towards Peace" Riem completes her narrative arc with studies of *Child's Play*, *Ransom* and *An Imaginary Life*, all of which trace the arduous movement from a dominator approach to a partnership ethic. Consonant with these values and though all the main protagonists are male, it is through the 'feminine' attributes of empathy, forgiveness and caring that reconciliation is achieved, either between characters (*Ransom*) or within the Self (*An Imaginary Life*). Not surprisingly, given her interest in Malouf's creative word and the visionary dimensions of his art, Riem ends with his poet's novel *An Imaginary Life*, where Malouf recasts Ovid's classical text *Metamorphoses* as a story of individual spiritual transformation. Ovid dies far from Rome up in the wild grasslands of the Steppe, disappearing into the ground to become one with the universe, "continuous with the earth" and "continuous with the sky" (203) in a final perfect moment of transcendence when his soul is freed "as if space itself were its dimension" (203).

Riem's illuminating book shares with readers significant new insights into how imagination, vision and myth are foundational to his art and to his partnership ethics in this heartfelt tribute and scholarly assessment of David Malouf's writing.

**Coral Ann Howells** is Professor Emerita of English and Canadian Literature, University of Reading, and Senior Research Fellow, Institute of English Studies, University of London. She has lectured and published extensively on contemporary Canadian fiction in English. She is the author of *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction: Refiguring Identities* (2003), editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (2006) (revised 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2021), co-editor with Eva-Marie Kröller of *The Cambridge History of Canadian Literature* (2009), and co-editor with Paul Sharrad and Gerry Turcotte of the final volume of *The Oxford History of the Novel in English* (2017). She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

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