David Malouf was born in Brisbane in 1934 into a family of Lebanese and English extraction. He was educated at Brisbane Grammar School and the University of Queensland, where he taught for two years after completing a degree. At twenty-four he left Australia and remained abroad for nearly ten years, teaching in England and travelling in Europe. In 1968 he returned to Australia and was appointed Senior Tutor and later Lecturer at Sydney University.

Malouf started writing in his late teens and began to publish poetry while still at University. His first book of poems was *Bicycle and Other Poems* (1970), which was followed by *Neighbours in a Thicket* (1974). *Neighbours* won the Grace Leven Prize for poetry, the James Cook Award for the best Australian book of 1974, and the Australian Literature Society’s Gold Medal—an award he again received in 1983, for *Child’s Play* and *Fly Away Peter*.

His first novel, *Johnno* (1975), gained wide critical acclaim and was followed by *An Imaginary Life* (1978), for which he received the New South Wales Premier’s Literary Award. In 1978 he gave up teaching to write full time, and one of his early projects was to write the libretto of Patrick White’s *Voss*, commissioned by the Australian Opera. In 1982 *Fly Away Peter* won the Australian Book of the Year Fiction Award, and *Child’s Play* with Eustace and The Prowler (1982) was highly commended.


David Malouf was interviewed at a friend’s house in Newtown, Sydney. Malouf divides his time between his house in Tuscany and various resting places in Australia. He owns a flat in Sydney which is let out, and when he is in Australia he stays either with his sister Jill and her husband in their Brisbane home, or with other friends.

The interview took place in an unusually large four-storey terrace. The house had something of the atmosphere of an old French chateau—there were large mirrors over tiled fire-places, a spacious kitchen in black and white tiles, baskets of fruit and fresh bread, high ceilings, polished wooden floors, and a book-lined study with a huge desk and an ancient black telephone. Chatting in the kitchen, waiting for the coffee to brew, Malouf remarked that it was one of his favourite places to stay in Sydney because the house was so big that even when it was full of people it was possible to work quietly.

However, he said that the trouble with the Sydney social scene—which he found frustrating and entertaining in equal measure—was that there was ‘an ear under every bed’. Patrick White, for example, never went out, but knew exactly what was happening in Sydney because, as he admits in *Flaws in the Glass*, his ‘host of telephone informers’ keep him au fait with all that is going on without his needing ‘even to open his front door’. It was difficult, Malouf said, to write in a place that operated at such a high social level, and he didn't like turning down invitations. ‘Everybody wants to be loved,’ he said, ‘and writers are no exception’.

Malouf also remarked that he felt it was possible for a country to have only one capital city, and that despite its apparent concentration on ‘things superficial’, for him Sydney was really the place to be.

Malouf described his own life-style as a constant striving to find the balance between the necessary amounts of stimulation and isolation. He said his peripatetic life-style suited him—it fitted in with his belief that there
are no beginnings and endings, but only continuing and different stages. The writing pattern that worked best for him was the one he had at the moment: the quietness of Campagnatico to give him the concentration he needs for his first and last drafts, the friendliness of family life in Brisbane for his solid work or research, and the social whirl of Sydney for re-charging his creative batteries.

INTERVIEWER: We were talking about the fact that Sydney is a beautiful city to live in, but that it's difficult to get work done here. Do you think that would prevent you from staying in Sydney permanently?

MALOUF: When I lived here before, I had a job at the university and I was writing part-time, so that worked reasonably well. But it's always very difficult to know what feeds your work best, what it is that most stimulates you. It may be that one needs the stimulation of a place like Sydney and I think Sydney is socially very stimulating. You meet a lot of people and the scene is an interesting and varied one. So that can be useful to you. Also to be in a place that has a strong style.

INTERVIEWER: What sort of style?

MALOUF: Well, that thing people refer to as Australian hedonism and which they see Sydney as the centre of. They tend to speak of it dismissively, but it seems more likely to me to be a developing form. Anyway, that's what I've always wanted to think: that this might be a place where things like social gatherings, eating, drinking, the sea, sex, physical love, might develop an almost sacramental status. Now you can see that as the defilement of a tradition, as decadence, but it could also be turned into something positive. It could also become a way of dealing with the real world—this world only—in sacred terms. Maybe we are developing a genuine paganishness here which could be a sustaining thing. I'm not convinced you have to be a Christian, or need any otherworld or God-centred life to be aware of the sacredness of things. So it's just possible that this hedonism that seems so crude and soulless to some people may turn out to be quite the opposite. I tried to point to that, in a way, in a poem called 'The Crab Feast', which is an attempt to deal with activities utterly of this world, like eating and sex, and see them as sacred.

INTERVIEWER: It is an immensely sensual poem.

MALOUF: Yes. Well, that is one way in which Sydney has been important to me. It offered me a vision of another kind of life from the platonic one that seems to me to exist in places like Europe. This is an anti-platonic place. And if it's a pagan place it may also free us from destructive notions, like body and spirit being separate. To that extent Sydney has had a large influence on me, and it's all in areas that other people might point to as being frivolous or empty. So if you can cope with Sydney, and still get work done, it's a stimulating and exciting place to be.

INTERVIEWER: But you say that from the perspective of someone who doesn't live here all the time …

MALOUF: That's true. And I did find towards the end of my last period here that I couldn't escape from the telephone and calls and the demands that are made on your time here. In the end I wanted to go somewhere I could be quiet for a bit. But of course these moves are never final. You do that, and you get done what work you have to do, and then you may decide to come back into the muck of it all again. To heap the pressures on that you need in order to get yourself going. So I would consider coming back here again, to try it. I hope I've developed a toughness now about saying no, and not caring if I'm hurting people by refusing invitations. If I can develop that, then I can probably cope with it. Like take my number out of the book and tell my friends that I never answer calls before one.

INTERVIEWER: That works well in theory!

MALOUF: True. The other thing is—and I've spoken about this before—that a lot of what happens in Australia makes me angry all the time, and there are very few ways that you can express your anger here that are taken seriously. The great danger is to have all this anger locked up inside and to go barging about the house knocking your head on walls. None of which is useful either to you or your work. The society offers so few ways for people to express their anger or dissent—or at least, as I have said before, the forms are there but they're not taken seriously—your anger becomes useless. So over the last few years I've wanted to put myself in a place where I didn't have to see too close up what was going on in the society I actually
belong to, where I didn't have to face it every morning in the newspapers. Of course, Brisbane, where I come from is worst of all. To have to read The Courier Mail every morning is to be driven to distraction.

INTERVIEWER: Yet you're one of the few Queensland writers who has left Queensland, who still goes back on a regular basis …

MALOUF: Yes. Over the last seven years I've spent a good half of every year in Queensland. So it's not as if I don't know what's happening here. But for all those reasons—and I'm really speaking now about what you might like to think of as being the ideal balance between being completely 'out of things' and completely 'in things'—you have to find the conditions that are best for you and your work. There are no rules about it. It's different for different people.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you write your latest book Harland's Half Acre?

MALOUF: I've always tended to write first drafts in Italy where I am completely uninterrupted. I can write a first draft in four or five months working every day. That's just to get the shape of it, and large parts of it of course are quite sketchy. Then I do the second or third drafts back in Australia. That way, I can follow up things, facts I mean, that I need to get accurate. Then I go back and do the very last draft there. Taking advantage of the solitude again. For Harland's Half Acre and Fly Away Peter the second and third drafts were done in Brisbane, because for each of those books I had things I needed to check up on once the first draft had been completed.

INTERVIEWER: Where do you work when you're in Brisbane?

MALOUF: My sister has a house in Brisbane which is very large. An old wooden house where I can have one of the three or four rooms at the back. I've worked there quite well over the years. It's very quiet during the day. The children are more or less grown up, so they're out during the day and I can settle down to it. I also like to work very early in the morning and Brisbane is good for that because everybody tends to be up and going by about five o'clock, so often I can work there, do a four or five hour stint, and my working day will be over at half past ten in the morning. Which is good.

INTERVIEWER: Do you work at night as well?

MALOUF: No, mostly not. Sometimes of course. If I'm doing a long job of going through a manuscript and preparing it, then I can work for sixteen hours straight. But mostly, for first and second drafts, which are the real creative process, I would write in the early morning hours. I suppose I got into that habit when I was working at the University. When I was writing An Imaginary Life I was in the middle of marking exam papers. I used to get up early and work on the book for a few hours and then spend the rest of the day doing these terrible H.S.C. papers. But if, later in the day, I suddenly thought of somewhere further on in the book that I could see clearly, I'd sit down and write a paragraph or whatever, just to have it down. In fact I've almost never begun a book from the first page. I always write what I can see.

INTERVIEWER: Do you write in longhand or type?

MALOUF: I often write in longhand, but my writing is absolutely indecipherable even to myself. So I'm very unwilling to do that over a long stretch because when I come back to it I can't read the crucial bits. I usually begin like that though. Writing in this tiny, crabbed hand, all over pages and pages, and sometimes I can't even work out what order the pages are in, because I fold a piece of typing paper into four and write on one side, then I write on the back and so on. I'm terribly disorganised in that way. Then sometimes I write straight onto the typewriter. Not very often. If I just want to see how a scene might go for example. And that will work until I strike a place where I need to be very precise and careful, so I immediately go on in longhand for three or four paragraphs until that part of it is absolutely settled. When I come to something that's not so complex I begin typing again.

INTERVIEWER: Harland's Half Acre is by far your longest book, how long did it take you to write?

MALOUF: I started it in the middle of August '82, and did a very rough first draft which was only two thirds of the length of the final thing. Everything was underdeveloped, but it was enough to tell me what kind
of shape it was going to have and what was going to happen in it—because I never know—and what was finished by the middle of October. So about two months for the first draft, although that's very rough. Then comes the proper writing.

INTERVIEWER: So how long did it take altogether? About a year?

MALOUF: Oh no, more. Longer than that. But how long it takes depends on what it is. Two books of mine I wrote very quickly. One was *An Imaginary Life* and the other was *Fly Away Peter*, but they're both quite short. *Child's Play* seemed to take forever; I wrote *Fly Away Peter* in the middle of it and then went back. I was always terribly unconfident about the book, and when *Fly Away Peter* came to me I really wanted to do that first, to have it done so that I could say, ‘Well it's okay, now I can risk this other one’. In the end they were both ready together. I'm not sure why I was so nervous about *Child's Play*. Probably because it wasn't set in Australia.

INTERVIEWER: At the end of *Child's Play*, the terrorist shoots the old woman and then the philosopher—who was his real target. He then escapes in the car with his fellow terrorist, until further down the road they come across the road-block and they both bail out. After that I wasn't sure if you meant the ending to be ambiguous, or if the terrorist died …

MALOUF: There's a point after the assassination where he really does get killed. He is shot as he's running away and the rest of it is dreamlike, an escape from facts, from history. The last part is all impossible. For one thing he gets into the photograph at last, and goes around the corner of that street he's never seen. Then the last sentence in the book has him walking under trees that are in blossom and he reaches up and picks an apple! I was interested in a whole lot of things in that book. Partly it's a matter of time and endings, how not to end things, how to suspend them in some way, so that you can break out of the notion that stories *do* come to an end. That's a very liberating thing to do. There's a lot in *Child's Play* that is in the present tense because I wanted—even at the end—to keep the presentness of the thing going.

INTERVIEWER: The end seemed to me to link up with the scene early on where he sees his own brother's spirit coming to him through the trees.

MALOUF: Yes, I think that's exactly right. What I really wanted, in that book, where history seems to matter, was some way of breaking right out of it.

INTERVIEWER: I found it intriguing that you managed to write *Child's Play* and *An Imaginary Life* about two great writers, even though one was imaginary, and not use much of their work. Was that a deliberate technique?

MALOUF: In Ovid's case it was easy enough because there was real work there already so I didn't have to present it. Some of the descriptions in *An Imaginary Life*, of the place and the coldness of it, do in fact derive from texts of Ovid, pretty unreliable ones, meteorologically, I would have thought, since I don't think it could ever have been as cold as he says it was. So in that case, I had Ovid's work, which people either knew or didn't know, and I just hoped I could create a character who would be interesting to someone who didn't know the work, and convincing to someone who did. It was more difficult with *Child's Play* because I did have to describe texts which would suggest a body of work. People keep trying, of course, to tie the character to a particular writer, and it's amazing the number of different writers they come up with. It depends entirely on their reading who they see it as being. And that pleases me. At least they think it *is* somebody.

INTERVIEWER: Did *Child's Play* sell in Italy?

MALOUF: It's never been translated in Italy but the paperback seems to sell in Florence. The Feltrinelli in Florence has a very good English section, and it always has a couple of copies there one day and no copies the next. So it does seem to have a readership amongst Italians. But no Italian would *dare* write a novel about the terrorist phenomenon, because they know how little information we have about it. Not enough is known, and in another way, too much is known. There are no facts and too many theories. So they would never get into that area at all. I felt as a foreigner that I could. Because basically the book doesn't tell you anything much about terrorism. It has always seemed to me that it will be read most accurately
when the terrorist phenomenon has disappeared and people are no longer interested in whatever journalistic dimensions it might have.

INTERVIEWER: You once wrote a poem called ‘Wolf Boy’— was that where the seeds for An Imaginary Life were sown?

MALOUF: I would never have made that connection myself, but looking back on it, I see that it might be one of those things that sit there in the back of your mind as a source of excitement or a kind of tension or worry. I've recently written a long essay, partly speculative, partly analytical, partly anecdotal. It's a detailed description of the first house I ever lived in, room by room, object by object, in an attempt to find out how we first build up concepts of space and geography, how we build up a notion of history and family lore, and how they come to us, first of all, in the household which is its own little society and its own geographical world. We begin there by discovering all the laws of things that are our induction into the world at large. The essay gets more personal as it moves closer in to the body, and the last part of all takes place in the bathroom. We had a peculiar set-up in that first house, which was a very old house. There was a bathroom and there was a dark passage leading to a little cubby-hole of a lavatory. In that passage sacks of sugar and salt and flour were kept, and there was also a cupboard that had all sorts of stuff in it that I was not really supposed to play around, though of course I did. There were old photographs in it, and I can't remember how old I would have been, probably seven or eight, when I found this dark little book there, badly printed on awful paper. It was one of those nineteenth century books about sex, it had illustrations of all the sexual parts, of the kind of face you developed if you gave way to degeneracy, of animal children who were half-sheep or dog, and they were accompanied by dire warnings that if you had anything to do with animals you might produce these children. I'd forgotten about that, but when I started to go back, there it was. So my interest in wild children in that context, between the animal and human world, might be traced back to some kind of anxiety that was produced in me then—or some level of pleasure I found in it. I couldn't now determine which.

INTERVIEWER: Talking about your early life, and your first house, people suggest that Johnno, your first novel, is autobiographical. Is that true?

MALOUF: Fairly. It's true to the extent that given an anonymous first person narrator you are tempted to write out of your own experience. I must surely have come to the end of that—of my family, my poor old uncles and aunts. I've used them in every possible guise now, shifting the sexes, moving them from one side of the family to the other. You know, all the things you do …

INTERVIEWER: Do they know you do that?

MALOUF: I can't tell.

INTERVIEWER: They don't talk about it?

MALOUF: No. A lot of the early part of Johnno is certainly a description of what Brisbane was like when I was growing up and what it was like to grow up in my own family. In a way this new piece, on the house, will make more clear than I quite intended what facts lie behind what I have written. But that's what all writing is like. There are always the facts. It's the relationship between mere fact and what you produce that's so mysterious, even to you. If it makes people happy when they can point to something and say, ‘Ah, that's where it all started’, OK. But of course it isn't really where it started. I can tell you, for example, that story of finding the illustrations of the sheep children. But that's not the beginning. In a way my remembering it only tells me that it fitted in somehow with what was already there before I even found the illustration. I don't see it as a source and I don't think readers should. Facts are not facts in the end. What I keep wanting to say is, that the further you go with writing the more you are thrown back absolutely on your imagination, even when you are dealing with ‘facts’. If it's experienced at all strongly, so that the writing is convincing and strong, then it has happened to you, it has become a fact, like the things in your own life. There is no distinction between what happened and what has been made up, and what happened and the way you changed it. It is all your experience, and you can't make the distinction. Even with Johnno I can't remember what was strictly true. I can't remember which one of the ‘me’s’ those things happened to—the one who had a real historical existence or the one who made it all up.
INTERVIEWER: John Mortimer, in *Clinging to the Wreckage*, mentions exactly that. How he used his blind father as a source for so much material that it disturbs him now that he can't differentiate between the fact and the fiction he'd created.

MALOUF: But this is also true of things that we don't write about. Not just for writers but for everybody. Think of the things that you are told about that happened to you when you were a child. Over and over again people tell you how such and such happened, when you were two say, or three, and you 'remember' it. You don't in fact, but you have been told so often, ‘when you were little you did this’, it's become so much a part of your history, that you can actually 'remember' being there physically—and you were. Then too, as soon as we start ‘remembering’ things that happened to us, we change their shape. We re-work them each time in the telling. We shape them differently. So even people who are not writers are dealing with their real experience and shaping and reshaping it, so that in the end it would be difficult for anybody to know or swear that what they 'remember' is what actually happened. Of course, that is even more true of writing, because you let happen at least some of the things that didn't happen but ought to have. In the world of creation you let them occur.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think writers are compulsive liars then?

MALOUF: Well, I've always wanted to say yes to that. But I think we're all compulsive *shapers*, depending on what our culture has given us as a notion of how history should be, and how fiction should be as well. I think, for example, that people's lives are immensely influenced by the novel. People actually live their lives according to the conventions that fiction has created in our culture since the eighteenth century, and our view of reality is shaped of course by what we see as the shape of history. Different cultures see these things differently.

INTERVIEWER: When you talk about moving from place to place, and with your belief in changing forms, it seems to me you are saying nothing needs to stagnate, or remain stationary. Yet people often want to pin you down, like asking you how you've lived in Italy, why you left Australia, how long you'll stay in Italy … all quantifiable questions, the answers to which don't seem to interest you at all.

MALOUF: They don't. But that notion of 'where you're going' is again part of our way of reading things. Both fiction and history tell us that there's always a chronology, a line, and people keep wanting to know which line it is you're on. But while that might be our shape for reality, it's not necessarily so. So when people say to me, ‘Ah, that's where you've got to, that's where you're going’, I always want to say, ‘Not at all. I'm really going somewhere completely different’. In that sense I'm always trying to escape from the last book, the last house, and escape, as well, from where people think I'm moving to. It's like the way people keep saying to me, ‘Oh you're coming back to Australia now,’ or ‘Oh so you've left Australia’. That might be what I'm doing now, but I've no idea what I'll be doing in one, two or five years time. One wants to say, ‘Stop trying to read everything as if it were final, as if I've now committed myself to one thing’.

INTERVIEWER: Are you a restless person?

MALOUF: For a long time I've resisted the notion, I've always thought it was a shameful thing to be. So I kept saying, 'Of course I'm not restless'. But in fact I am. I'm prepared to admit that now. I don't know why I should have felt that it was something to be ashamed of. I think it's because I didn't seem to be committing myself strongly enough to any place or thing.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that has anything to do with your background—the restlessness of a migrant?

MALOUF: Although my father was Lebanese, he was born in Australia, and my mother came to Australia from England when she was thirteen so I don't think that has anything to do with it. I think it's more a personal restlessness, a dislike of things that are fixed or finished. The moment I realise that the house I've moved into is set, that everything has become stable and the pictures are all in place, I want to get out again as quickly as possible! I think my mother was very much like that. There's something about her I've never used anywhere, but it constantly surprised us. We would wake up one morning and all the furniture would be in a different place. At three in the morning she would have woken my father and insisted that all the furniture be moved around. I only thought of that at this moment.
INTERVIEWER: You've said that you've used your family to help you create characters. What about Harland, in *Harland's Half Acre*, was he based on a real painter? Tom Shapcott has mentioned Ian Fairweather …

MALOUF: Well, it's a bit like the writer in *Child's Play*. I started off with a painter whose background was nothing like Ian Fairweather's, and I had no idea where the book was going. What often tells me are metaphors I've used. There seemed to be something going on in the book whereby the geographical centre of it was going to be the Bay. The notion of moving from one side to the other was inevitably going to lead that painter from the south end of the Bay, at Southport, to the north end, and then there was a lot of stuff about centres and peripheries, so it became clear to me he was going to have to move to an island. *Then* I was left with a ready-made situation, the Fairweather situation. So I opportunistically made use of it. I could see the problem it presented. That people would read back from the last part and decide it was Ian Fairweather all through, but it wasn't. The book actually began when I picked up a Penguin picture book called *The Male Nude*. I saw it in somebody's apartment in Florence, on the way back to Campagnatico. So I read it and I got to the chapter where the writer—she's an Australian actually—was talking about Michelangelo. She talks about his early life, how he'd had two families and was sent away by the first family to spend some time with a man who had a quarry which probably influenced his sculpture. Later he was admitted back into his original family and was quite happy there, but spent the rest of his life looking after all these scapegrace brothers and a father who was a neer-do-well, with aristocratic pretentions. In the back of my mind I thought it was quite amusing, to be dealing secretly with an Australian version of the Michelangelo story. Nobody would ever guess that from anything in the book itself—or at least, I hoped they wouldn't. But that would sustain me in the rest of it, as a notion of the kind of artist I was dealing with. A sub-text that would never appear.

INTERVIEWER: The reason I asked that question about Harland—which might not have seemed to have much to do with your mother moving furniture but it does—is that Harland himself is the quintessence of a man who discards, and his discarding goes on and on until he …

MALOUF: Nothing. Yes. Well, that was certainly there. There's always aspects of yourself in these things and I suppose he is a character who has turned up over and over again in what I write; the person who moves out to the edge of everything. But of course Frank is the character who takes it the furthest. He becomes a hermit. But there's an aspect of that in the Johnno character, and in *An Imaginary Life*, and an aspect of it in the terrorist. He too has abstracted himself from life.

INTERVIEWER: Jim too perhaps, in *Fly Away Peter* …

MALOUF: Yes, and it's not irrelevant to what we were talking about when we began. To wonder how one might locate oneself in the middle of things in a place like Sydney and at the same time be abstracted. I think they do represent two pulls in me, and in some ways that's best articulated in *Harland's Half Acre* because what's standing in opposition to him are all those households where people exist in forced interaction and close proximity with one another. That swing from promiscuity to complete isolation, is, like a lot of the swings I'm interested in, a move from the centre to the edge. Which again, I've at last become aware of in my own thinking. That is the shape you impose on experience, and it is obviously one that has been there, for me, from the beginning: the question of what is at the edge and what is at the centre and what you can make of the space between.

INTERVIEWER: I find that your male characters involve me in that sort of dilemma, but sometimes it's hard to feel as much sympathy for your female characters …

MALOUF: I wonder why …

INTERVIEWER: I don't know, somehow they don't seem quite as real.

MALOUF: Well, they aren't, I suppose. I wish they were. If you're a writer you work with your weaknesses and I think most male writers over the last few years have become selfconscious about stepping too easily into the female point of view. I mean people like Henry James did it all the time and there were no difficulties there. But over these last years we've become very sensitive about that issue. We stick to what
we see and know. In fact it was one of the things that I was interested in trying to do in Harland's Half Acre. I wanted to show a suffocatingly all-male household in which the absence of women would be strongly felt, then I wanted a household where women would not only have all the power but would be the moving figures, and the second household in the book is something like that. Two households, two cultures. I've always been interested in where the power lies, what kind of power it is, and what kind of power the men have and what kind of power the women have. One of the things that happens in An Imaginary Life is that Ovid mistakes that. He fails to see that the power is really with …

INTERVIEWER: The women.

MALOUF: That's right, and he's put all his eggs in the other basket. But there's something of that going on in Harland's Half Acre. At the very end of that I wanted to move to a position outside the male world. The painter has died, but Aunt Connie, the weakest person in the book, has never heard of his fame. ‘Oh, Frank Harland’, she says, ‘Whatever happened to him?’ That was an attempt to locate the end of the novel in someone who is not interested in what happened in the male world of achievement because it's not her world. Maybe that doesn't work, but I wanted to try it. To set Frank Harland, and Art, and Fame, in some sort of perspective. The way in which, in that novel, people are either possessors or the dispossessed meant trying to see the point of view of someone who has always been dispossessed, not in terms of land and goods, but in terms of power. Sometimes though, those things don't work as well as you'd like them to. I was trying to see things from different places rather than settle in one consciousness. Though the narrative point of view, I admit, is a male one.

INTERVIEWER: I see.

MALOUF: I'd interested to see what you think of the stories—Antipodes—because a good half of those are written from the women's point of view, though not in the first person. You may not find them any more convincing, and it may seem presumptuous, but it's an imaginative possibility I want to keep open—that of entering into the viewpoint of either sex.

INTERVIEWER: Are they the first stories you've written?

MALOUF: Yes, but they were written over a long period. They were actually ready before Harland's Half Acre. Usually the writing chronology in my case is unlike the publishing chronology. The stories were written between 1975 and 1981 and the ones written from the women's point of view were a tryout for something I wanted to do in Harland.

INTERVIEWER: How do you see the difference between the structure of a short story and a novel?

MALOUF: Well, my short stories don't have conventional structures. People tend to say things I don't understand. Like, ‘This is not a story, this is an essay’. I don't understand what that means. But to use their terms, I suppose some of the stories are essay-like and some of the stories are single incidents, and some of them are rather erratic in form—that's something I quite like, I like things that go off at a tangent. But I must say that none of them has a turn-around at the end, which is something I hate, and none of them contains a ‘surprise’. I can't be bothered with that sort of thing. I suppose what I thought of Antipodes as doing was presenting something of my own view of how complex the world is, how different people's experiences are in it. That's the good thing about the story. If offers you a marvellously different world each time. In a way they are a showcase for a writer. They show how wide your range can be, how wide your sympathies are, what kind of barriers you are willing to cross, what kind of worlds you are willing to explore...

INTERVIEWER: You've always been published by English publishers, haven't you?

MALOUF: Yes. Apart from Johnno which had an entirely Australian life until recently. That was my first novel. It was published by U.Q.P., which is where I'd always published poetry and then it was taken up by Australian Penguin. But then I wrote An Imaginary Life and I didn't know what to do with it. It seemed to me to be a book that no publisher would be interested in. Anyway, quite by accident, when Mark Strand was here as Writer-in-Residence, he and his wife came to dinner and Bruce Beaver said to Julie, ‘Oh, you should read David's new book’. She said, ‘I'd be very interested. Could I?’ She turned out to be an editor at Braziller in New York, and she wrote to me some months later saying that she'd shown the manuscript
to George Braziller and that he wanted to do it. So I got an American publisher for that book. It was a good year before any English publisher took it up. That was Chatto & Windus in London. So since then all the books have come out with Chatto, and the American publishers have picked them up afterwards.

INTERVIEWER: How was a book like *Harland's Half Acre*, which was perhaps more consciously Australian than most of the others, received in England?

MALOUF: Quite well. Of course, some of the reviews were less good than others. The English have a lot of trouble about form. They like things to be well-shaped, or what they think of as well-shaped. Even my original editor there, Nora Small-wood, was worried about that book because characters kept turning up and disappearing. But that seems to me to be what life is like as well. The English like books which have a plot-shape, whereas my books tend to have a poetic shape. That is what holds them together. Not the continuing plot but the working out of the metaphor, the working out of a set of correspondences or affinities. English reviewers found *Harland* fragmented. What they tended to like best was the stuff about painting and painters. Critics with some sort of structuralist bent were the most appreciative readers; Stephen Bann, for example, in the *London Review of Books*. He did a very good analytical review. Mind you, none of that worried the Americans at all. It was quite heartening to see the way they just took the book as having whatever shape it presented itself in. Instead of starting with the notion of how a book should be done and saying, ‘Why couldn't he do that?’, they tried to work out why a writer would give it that shape. So the best American reviews were excellent.

INTERVIEWER: How would you compare British and American reviewing with Australian reviewing?

MALOUF: I'm always interested in English and American reviews because they come from people who don't know me from Adam. So they're starting out with a particular book in front of them—or two or three books of mine that they might have read—and they review what's there. They just look at the books. That's what I like. I wish that's how I could be seen in Australia, but it's a small place and after a certain time the people who review you here know you. So mixed up with their review of your book, however honest and objective they might be, is the notion of who they think you are, what place they think you occupy in the literary to-ing and fro-ing. Some very good reviews get written here—we have some excellent reviewers—but those are the conditions. Then too, at a certain point here, again because it is a small place, you become 'established', you became a sacred or not-so-sacred cow. I like the attention of course—anyone would—you're grateful that people think of the books as being especially their own—and Australian writing is in that position; it's nice when people 'out there' feel that the books you've written speak out of their own lives. But that sort of approval can be too comforting, too comfortable. It would be easy here to keep on writing the kind of books people want you to write. What I think is useful about being published in other places is that you're always in the ruck there trying to be heard—each book that comes out in England or the States has to fight for a place. My main readership is Australian, and I'm mainly talking to Australians, but the difficulty of the American or English scene keeps me worried about what I'm doing.

INTERVIEWER: You started by writing poetry. When did you actually decide that you wanted to be a writer?

MALOUF: I think I should say that I've always wanted to write. I've always tried to write prose. But the first stories I wrote were rotten, and all the attempts that I made to write the book that became *Johnno* were hopeless. I suppose I started writing prose when I was still at school, for the school magazine, that sort of thing, and I didn't start writing poetry until I was at university. But what happened was that my poetry reached a publishable point before the prose did. In fact I don't see such a great gap between the two. I don't see why we've got ourselves into a bind about these forms; you know, what is poetry? What is the essay? What is the novel? I think the forms are open to us in any way we want to use them. Something that has happened in the last ten years in Australia, however, is that the centre of Australian writing appears to have shifted from poetry towards fiction. There was a period between 1968 and 1975 when one would have had to say that most people beginning to write in Australia were interested in poetry, that poetry was the place where the most important things were being done—that's given that you had Patrick White writing at the same time, and Frank Moorhouse and David Ireland—nevertheless poetry was what seemed to be at the centre, and out of that came one enormously important writer, Les Murray. Les Murray has sustained that as
a centre, and I suppose you could say that while somebody like him is working at his best the centre is still with poetry. But I don't think poetry gets either the same attention or creates the same excitement now as prose. So many prose writers have come along in the last ten years who are doing interesting and important work.

INTERVIEWER: Are you currently writing poetry?

MALOUF: For a while I found myself doing both, and I still do on occasions. But I tend to write poetry now when I can reserve time only for that. Then too, I began to see ways—with An Imaginary Life for instance—in which I could do what I wanted to do in poetry just as well in prose. There are other languages where people don't make these distinctions. I'm always interested by the fact that German has just one word for people who are writing seriously or imaginatively and that is ‘Dichter’. It's used equally for people who write poetry and prose. It is a term that has to do only with the imaginative quality of what is written. I suppose the literal translation is ‘poet’, but somebody like Thomas Mann for example, would have thought of himself as a ‘Dichter’ because the other word, ‘Schriftsteller’ is for a more utilitarian kind of writing. So German is a language in which both activities, poetry and fiction, are seen to be products of the same kind of spirit and the same imaginative force, which is why it doesn't surprise Germans at all that Goethe is not only the greatest poet in the language but also the greatest novelist—that's just taken for granted. And we've had people in English, of course, who might have made us believe that that was true. Hardy and Lawrence for example. But generally speaking some kind of formalism in our minds has meant that we associate writers with different categories, and crossing over those categories is something to be suspicious of.

INTERVIEWER: What are you working on at the moment?

MALOUF: I'm trying to put a book of poems together, and I've got a novel I'm mulling over which I'd rather not talk about. And I've also got some longish stories. I don't quite know how all these things will fit together, and I'm caught by something that has nothing to do with writing but which I must take account of just the same. My publishing history and my writing are out of kilter. I really can't have another book published in the States until I have a novel. Just in terms of what the publishers see as how I ought to be presented, and how I ought to establish myself there. So my next book in the States must be a novel. Which may not be for quite some time.

INTERVIEWER: What literature has influenced you and your writing?

MALOUF: I was never very interested either as a child or later on in books that dealt with the life immediately around me. I've always wanted books that were imaginative and excessive in some way. At school in Queensland we read a lot of Australian writing. Probably a third of what appeared in our class-readers was Australian, both poetry and prose, and when I was twelve and a half and did the scholarship which was the entrance exam for secondary school, the set book was We of the Never-Never. I suppose people would have argued that it was good to give Australian kids Australian books. But the world of that book was immensely far from any world I was growing up in as a child. The relationship between me and whatever Australia We of the Never-Never represented was unbridgeable. So I found it most extraordinarily boring. It just did not stimulate or interest me in any way. But I was reading other books at the same time that threw me into a state of almost hysterical excitement. Things like The Hunchback of Notre Dame, Wuthering Heights, Moby Dick, Dickens … These books were telling me what I actually wanted to know at that moment. They were telling me how monstrous and strange the world could be. How odd people could be and still somehow remain part of society. In a very closed and conformist place like Queensland in the forties that was essential. They were telling me how monstrous and strange the world could be. How odd people could be and still somehow remain part of society. In a very closed and conformist place like Queensland in the forties that was essential. They were telling me how monstrous and strange the world could be. How odd people could be and still somehow remain part of society. In a very closed and conformist place like Queensland in the forties that was essential. They also told me a lot of about sex. Victorian books do tell one a lot about sex, but they tell you what you really want to know. Which is not how it's actually done but, as Dickens describes it, how sex gets into all sorts of objects, all sorts of ordinary social activities. I think Dickens is amazing for that. So I was enormously excited by Oliver Twist and Barnaby Rudge and Bleak House, all of which seemed to me to be books that dealt with the fetishisation of activities and objects in a way a child recognises as absolutely true. I've always wanted books that were of that kind. I've never been able to deal with purely realistic books of close observation. I need the mythologization of things that comes with the imagination. And books that are poetical. So I went straight from Dickens to Dostoevsky and Balzac, to Conrad, Lawrence and Melville, and they are the books I still go back to. I don't care for things that might seem like that but aren't really
—that is I don't like fantasy at all. I think fantasy is not a move inside but a move outward, whereas I like
the way you can look at ordinary acts or objects and discover how they have been transmuted by people's
perception of them into symbols, into myths, into dreams and so on. The business of fantasy, the move from
the so-called real towards the unreal, doesn't interest me. I think the imaginative world is to be discovered
further in, not further out.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think there's an atmosphere in Queensland, the ‘under-the-house feeling’ as you've
put it, that produces the kind of inward looking writer you're talking about?

MALOUF: Well, I don't believe we've sufficiently explored here the sharp difference between the states in
all ways. The political forms in the states are all utterly different. So are the social structures. I think all sorts
of factors—architecture, atmosphere, weather, colour, greenness, all of those, can translate quite ordinary
happenings into a different reality, so we need to look at these ordinary factors in some detail. Queensland is
peculiar, different from other Australian places, in many, many ways. Firstly it's tropical. Then, in a way that
isn't true of Sydney or Melbourne, Queensland still has a Victorian society. By that I mean that everything
that happens in Sydney or Melbourne may happen in Brisbane as well, but you have this double standard
—what is publicly recognised and what everybody knows is there but won't recognise. I read Victorian
novels, and I recognise immediately what is seen as Victorian hypocrisy. I understand it, because it's entirely
the way Brisbane was when I was growing up, and it's still like that today. It's a place that has always been
extraordinarily repressive. It's also energetic and bursting out all over, full of exuberant new forms, because
it's tropical and hot. But the social forms have always been conservative and the political forms have always
been repressive. It doesn't matter which side is in, left or right. It's a place that has not got—never has had—a
tradition of democratic rule. It's always been rule of a paternalistic kind.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think Queensland sees itself as different from other states then?

MALOUF: Well, the fact is that Queensland has never been federated. It's never accepted the shift of power
from the states to the centre. And it's never accepted, either, that Federation meant that its ties would be
closer to the other states than to England. Queensland goes on believing that somehow it is still tied directly
to London. Which obviously affected us when we were growing up, because when a point came in your life
when you thought, ‘What the hell am I going to do next?’, the thing to do, of course, was to go overseas,
and the place to go was England. I did it, everybody did it. Also I would want to say that geographically,
climatically, architecturally, but also in its social and political history, Queensland is different. I'm convinced
that our notions of the world are determined by the earliest spatial forms we encounter—by the kind of
architecture we grew up with. Those wooden houses, their openness, the verandah half way between the
house and the rest of the world, that sense of what's closed in at the centre and what's at the periphery and
half open—I think that determines forever your reading of how space is to be seen, of how the world's
structures work…

INTERVIEWER: Do you dream about Queensland?

MALOUF: Yes. Particularly if I lapse into that half-waking state where dreams are so vivid. I frequently find
myself at the top of the back-stairs in that first house. There are stairs going down and it's all wooden, and
there's the under-the-house there. I suppose that first reading of the world is the one that we move out from,
but also the one we keep moving back to.

INTERVIEWER: In Harland's Half Acre under-the-house becomes a sinister, creepy place…

MALOUF: Well, it is—Queensland's a very sinister place. Under-the-house is a lot of things. It's like the
English attic and the English cellar combined. It's not symbolic in Harland in the sense of suggesting that
it transcends the real—it's something real that through generations of feeling and use has developed a
significance beyond itself.

INTERVIEWER: Thea Astley is good at summing up the hypocrisy and the paternalistic rule of the country
town, with its supposedly normal Victorian normality and the sinister under-currents that exist…

MALOUF: Yes, she's very good at that. I heard her read recently in New York. she was terrific. What is
often not seen around here is that we have a lot of very good writers who are telling us a lot of different
things about the country. Writers tend to be interested in different styles of living. What you're getting when you put it all together is variant readings of our Australian experiences that reflect the enormous variety of the place. Somehow, stupidly, we keep wanting it to be all one. I suppose in the most crude way, in an Oz lit kind of way, we want the writer, or the novel, that will speak for all of it. But that isn't very likely. What's great about the writing that is happening now is just how different Thea Astley's reports of our Australian world are from, say, Helen Garner's. That's the strength of Australian writing.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think Australian literature gets enough attention?

MALOUF: It's beginning to get attention. It's always difficult to know why people are interested in this or that sort of writing. You see, we're in a peculiar situation here. We've always been more interested in other people's writing than our own, so we expect other people to be interested in ours. But that's not the norm. Take a writer as good as Toni Morrison. There's no way she can break through in England. She has the same publisher as me and I remember Nora Smallwood saying to me a couple of years ago, 'Oh, she's such a wonderful writer, and I can't give her books away with a packet of tea'. That's the resistance of a place to any fiction which does not immediately reflect it. The English have to jog themselves to be interested in a novel that's set somewhere else. I think there has been a reasonable amount of interest in Australian fiction, particularly from the Americans. The difficulty is to persuade people here that their experience is authentic and valid without condition, and that writing about it is absolutely authentic too—it doesn't have to appeal to the Americans or the English, they don't have to put their stamp of approval on it.

INTERVIEWER: We only do it with England and America really, don't we?

malouf: That's because we speak English and have inherited English literature—although for heaven's sake 'English literature' didn't exist until about fifty years ago—there were just books. So what we feel is that we've got to belong to this hierarchy of great writers, and that only books that make it into the list of one hundred great works are of any importance. People have the strange notion that unless you're going to be in there with Shakespeare and Henry James you're no-one, it was barely worth doing. Europeans are a lot easier about the arts than that—so in fact are the English. They know more. They don't despise Luca Signorelli because he isn't, like Michelangelo, a household word from Tucson, Arizona to Alice Springs. In Australia we have been both fortunate and unfortunate in having English. It means we see ourselves as running in rivalry with the English and the Americans. But the Americans are two hundred and fifty million people, the English fifty million, and it's difficult for a place that's isolated with a society which is still in the process of working itself out, to compete—except of course that great individual artists can appear anywhere. If we didn't speak English we'd look around and say, 'How are the Roumanians doing? How are the Swedes doing?'. Still we've been fortunate to have English because it's given us access to a huge reading public and because it's made us more ambitious than we might otherwise have been. We've tried hard to break out of being only fifteen million people and that has been good for us. It has made us brash and arrogantly pushy, and all the rest of it, but it has made us want to be good.

INTERVIEWER: I'd like to ask you about your work-habits again, or rather ask you what you do when you're not working?

MALOUF: Well, when I've finished working I read and swim and walk. In some ways that's your best working period of all. When you sit down at the desk and actually focus on it all, you have to bring all your energies to bear, but in fact a lot of the work has been done unconsciously, sub-consciously, half-thinkingly, while you were having a break. People often say to writers, 'I don't know how you manage to produce all this stuff. You never seem to be working'. But of course you are working, all the time. It doesn't stop. You are preparing yourself for the moment when you sit down the next morning, when you have to have it all there. Which is why writers are awfully boring people. They're so abstracted. People keep wanting to kick you out of that abstraction, but you need to say, 'Hey, heaven's sake! This is where it all gets done!'. People expect you to commit yourself socially in all sorts of ways, and you have to tell them, 'Look I know this seems inhuman'—and I think there is something inhuman about the artist—'but this is how it is'. It was one of the things I was interested in in Child's Play, that relationship between the abstraction of the terrorist from society and the abstraction of the writer. In a way the writer is a kind of terrorist, and that may be a necessary condition—that distance—of what he does, but at the same time, as a writer or artist of any kind, you feel
enormously involved. You feel involved, and believe that the human and social thing is exactly what you're working with, even when you're most withdrawn.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you.

—Sydney, April 1985

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