

Dreaming Australia

... further from the far, safe place where I began, the green lands of my father's farm, further from the last inhabited outpost of the known world, further from speech even, into the sighing grasslands that are silence ...
(David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*).

David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* (1978) is not set in Australia and has no Australian characters. It is set at the edge of the Roman Empire, in the first century AD. Australia as "Australia" would not exist for almost 2,000 years. This lack of identifiably Australian components is probably why *An Imaginary Life* is rarely mentioned as a great Australian book that deserves more attention. To create this story so far removed from contemporary Australian experience, Malouf had to imagine a life vastly different from his own. In doing so he has dreamed a novel into existence that is exceptionally well written, rich in poetry and evocative detail. It is a work reminiscent of the writings of a mountain hermit or nature mystic. Its central themes also resonate with ongoing debates about what it means to be Australian.

What kind of Australian literature is this?

At first glance, Malouf's second novel does not look like an Australian story at all. It doesn't strongly feature the Australian landscape or sense of place, nor does it offer us characters of the type we have come to expect of typically Australian writing. There are no larrikins, no diggers, no Aussie battlers, no indefatigable blokes, and no tough yet world-wise women with hearts of gold.

To me, though, *An Imaginary Life* reflects a significant aspect of the Australian story – a sense of exile. *An Imaginary Life* tells the story of Ovid, the most famous and most irreverent poet of Imperial Rome. Ovid's irreverence leads to his banishment to an isolated village on the shores of the Black Sea in current day Romania, a place occupying the literal edge of the Roman Empire. Exiled to the limit of the known world, Ovid is cut off from his own culture, even from his language. Slowly, the poet learns to depend on and respect those around him, those he once saw as unsophisticated barbarians because of their inability to speak Latin, their poverty, and their closeness to nature.

Ovid sees nature as something somehow frightening, wild, unless it is cultivated, transformed and made productive by human hands. The Australian bush seemed just as frightening to the early European settlers, among them colonial writers such as Barbara Baynton (1857 – 1929), whose gothic tales of the Australian landscape imagined it as a threatening, even malicious, force. Modern Australian writers are offering a different perspective. There is still a deep awe for the vastness and strangeness of this place, but the fear has transmuted into respect and even love, as in Gerard Munane's *The Plains* (1982) and Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth* (2004).

An encounter with a wild boy

In Malouf's novel, the poet Ovid's worldview is challenged when he encounters an untamed boy who has lived out in the wilderness with wild creatures. Ovid captures and tries to

“civilise” the boy – but this backfires on the poet in unexpected ways. By observing the wild boy, and then following him into the wilderness, Ovid realises Rome is not the whole world, and not even the centre of it. Ovid’s predicament should be familiar to many Australians. Like the poet, many of us are acquainted with the feeling of being at the edge of things, on the wild borders of regions and empires to which we do not quite belong, or do not belong any more.

For the first century or so after colonisation, Australia was on the periphery of the British Empire. Then, from the Second World War to the 1990s, we understood ourselves to be on the outer limits of the USA’s “sphere of influence”. Now we see ourselves as on the edge of the Asian region, but not really part of it. We seem always to be a part of something that has a very distant centre, so much so that we sometimes feel more apart from it than a part of it.

When non-indigenous Australians think about the history of their belonging to this place, they inevitably come to a moment of arrival; either recent or generations back, either as free migrants, refugees or exiled convicts. They also come to a moment of departure from somewhere else, the places where their ancestors, or they themselves, once belonged.

Indigenous Australians also know exile. European colonisation dispossessed them of their country. Over the decades that followed, many of them were forcibly moved to missions in places as foreign to them as the Old World. They are Australian citizens but the pervasive and institutionalised racism they experience makes them feel that they do not truly belong, that they are not permitted to belong. There is in indigenous communities a deep yearning and mourning for lost places; places locked behind gates and fences, places buried beneath cities and suburbs, roads and farms. Much indigenous writing and story-telling concerns those lost places, or the difficulties and challenges of being away from one’s home country, of being Australian and yet not fully accepted as such, not treated equally. This writing about troubled belonging could be seen as a new indigenous dreaming, not another creation story but a story of survival. Indigenous writers such as Alexis Wright and Anita Heiss, both exemplary storytellers, deal with these themes of alienation, belonging/un-belonging and race in their work (among many other things).

Somewhere else

The somewhere else in our personal histories – those places we lost or left – plays a big part in how we think about and write about ourselves. It produces a sense of national belonging that is never quite secure. A common response to that insecurity is a kind of aloofness, a standing apart from the rest of the world. We like to single ourselves out, to brandish our physical and cultural distance from other places, our un-belonging as it were, as a mark of uniqueness, and of national identity that distinguishes us from others. This is also Ovid’s initial response to his exile, to cling firmly to that which makes him different, to refuse to truly belong either to his community of exile or to Rome, which has cast him out.

A lot of Australian writing, both indigenous and non-indigenous, has been concerned with describing our difference to the world, with establishing who we are as a people, as much for ourselves as for others. Films like *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) and *Australia* (2008) do this poorly, focussing on the persistent myth of the indefatigable bloke. On the other hand, films like *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (1994) and *Spider and Rose* (1994) do this rather well. The writers of all of these stories are reflecting different dreams of Australia, some of them more welcoming and open than others. Much Australian

screenwriting has made a mark on audiences and critics as distinctive and unique, almost always it is the writing that explores the sense of alienation and un-belonging that exists in our society.

Another common response to this insecurity, that sense of un-belonging, is to turn to nature, to the environment. That may be why so much Australian writing has a strong sense of place, and why when we think of important Australian novels they are often ones that feature landscape as a character in its own right. Indigenous Australians have shown other Australians the way in this regard. It is their profound understanding and love of this place that has, over time, transformed the non-Indigenous view of it from something to be feared and tamed, to something to love and protect.

Unfortunately, the landscape is still a contested space: the site of ongoing Indigenous dispossession, the site of mass species extinctions and environmental degradation. When we turn for a sense of belonging to the land, to the country, we are inevitably reminded of our un-belonging, or of our dispossession. Even so, nature, perhaps because it is undeniably a healing thing, continues to anchor us here, to ground us as “Australians”. For many, contested though it is, the beauty of the land eases that sense of exile, of not quite belonging, whether their families have been here for just a few years or a few thousand years.

For Ovid, it is the same. Slowly he comes to see the wild world as something to embrace, to cling to even, rather than something to fear. Ovid’s great epiphany is that the untamed world is not a hostile place, but a new home where he can be free of the rigid structures of Imperial Rome. By venturing into an even further place, a greater exile, he becomes free. Australia’s colonial and migrant history is full of similar stories, in which immigrants face their fear of this continent’s vast landscape and Australian society’s unique structures and, slowly, come to identify with and embrace both the Australian way of life and the land itself. To do this, they had to imagine what their new life might be like after making that embrace. They had to dream themselves anew.

The poet in the world

An Imaginary Life is, in part, about an individual journey from a state of being cut off and apart from the environment – of wishing to tame and exploit nature, of being totally entangled in language and culture – to a state of being in intimate contact with the untrained, wild things of the world. It is also about a poet, in thrall of civilisation, realising that there are other ways to live and experience; ways that are beautiful and fulfilling. Ovid comes to this realisation by following the example of the wild boy, someone for whom the environment is not something outside of himself but an expression of his own nature.

Those themes – of belonging and exile, of how to relate to the environment and to those who are different to us – are core to the debate about what it means to be Australian today. *An Imaginary Life* does not provide a workable template for how to navigate the complexity of belonging and un-belonging, nor should it. It’s a novel not a policy document.

It does, however, show us it is possible to imagine and dream ways to do things differently, ways to live differently with each other and with nature. And once imagined, those other ways of living seem all the more possible. This is the challenge and the skill of great storytellers, who must bring those quintessential Australian elements of dreaming, belonging and exile to their stories whether they are set here at home, in the here and now, or in a

completely different place or time. This is the kind of writing that will enrich our national discussion about what it means to be Australian.

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