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THINK PHYSICALLY: DAVID MALOUF ON THE WRITER'S PROCESS

Interview with David Malouf, Broadcast live on 4K1G/JCU's *Exposure* program, Sunday, May 6, 2001

Last Thursday evening, 3.5.01, one of Australia's best-known, and most-loved authors, David Malouf, gave an address at the Pinnacles Gallery in Thuringowa, North Queensland. Malouf has written ten pieces of fiction, one autobiography, six books of poetry and at least two librettos. He's won numerous awards for his work. Some of his fiction includes: *Johnno*, *An Imaginary Life*, *Antipodes* and *Remembering Babylon*.

His autobiography is *12 Edmonstone Street* and his latest, generous offering, is *Dreamstuff*, a collection of short stories (2001).

LYNDA – Thanks so much for giving us some of your time. I wonder if you could remember back to your earlier talk ... One of the things you said that enchanted me was about your capacity, an extremely disciplined capacity, to sink into a child-like state for two hours every morning in order to revisit memories that come to life in your books. Can you explain how this works?

DAVID – Well, when I say “child-like state” I mean, ... children ... don't come with any information about the world; they have to look around and try to make sense of it as they go along and they do that by eavesdropping and by observing and watching what adults do ... trying to put everything together. And they don't have any answers; they really only have questions. And what they are trying to do all the time is crack codes. And in a way that's what writers do. I'm always astonished by the way people other than writers seem to know how everything works, or they no longer ask questions about how things work. They seem to have answers that I as a writer don't have. And I think writers are people who retain something of that child-like inability to come to conclusions about things; to be always looking at things and finding everything a puzzle. And keeping hold of that is an important thing to the writer because you don't give in to received ideas; you don't have the easy-answers that other people have. And being in that kind of state of endless questioning also keeps your mind open in a way to whatever happens to come in. ... When you're writing, you don't want to write about what you already know; you want to write about what you don't yet know. And you discover what you know by getting words down on the page.

LYNDA – It sounds like you can remain in a kind of wonder-world where you are continually exploring but you're also gathering-up pieces of information like a sponge... you continually consume observations that you then bring to life in the books. Is that how it works?

DAVID – Yes, yes. That's absolutely so, and in fact, all that information goes into your head somewhere as memory, and part of what writing is about is being able to recall what you need for the particular bit of writing. You know, often there are things that I couldn't have recalled at all ten minutes before, but at the moment of actually writing, something I need for the story, some little detail that will make it more real, convincing, that will make it alive, so that the reader can get into that world, will come into my head at the moment when I need it. But you know, if somebody had asked me to recall that ten minutes before, I couldn't have done so. And I think that's because when you're writing you're in a very, very interesting state of being very passive, so that things can happen, and at the same time, you're very tentative and alert.

LYNDA – You are also reflecting on the way memory works. And you must trust very much the sorts of ideas that come to mind. I mean you clearly "go with" the things that come to mind rather than questioning them.

DAVID – Absolutely. Yes, you have to do that. I mean, there's a point afterwards, when you've finished the writing when you need to look at it critically and you need to say, "does this ring true or not ring true"? But the moment of actual writing, you have to trust things in that kind of way.

Memory is not just a matter of being nostalgic about the past. What you are trying to do in the writing is to take a piece of the past that has already gone, or a house, in the case of say 12 Edmonstone Street, which no longer exists, or a time that no longer exists, and you want to bring them back to life, so that for the reader, when they enter that world, it's as if they were actually there. You could actually, through memory and through creating it in a very dense way in the writing, prevent all that stuff from passing out of existence.

LYNDA – Your attention to detail does bring the space back to life. People must feel like they're entering a virtual house; that they know they could walk into a certain room and touch certain things when they read your descriptions. And you also talked about those connections allowing you to learn things about yourself that you perhaps wouldn't if you weren't going through the process of writing. Can you elaborate on that a little?

DAVID – Yes, well when we are living through all of this stuff, we're living with muddle, because what we're at the centre of is always muddle; I mean, it's never clear to us. And we don't know what things mean at the moment. But sometimes when you go back and re-enter that moment from a distance of numbers of years or whatever it is, you can see at last, or you discover at last, what the "real" significance of those moments were. When you're writing about it you're choosing only the significant details and your mind can then sometimes see what was really happening, what you really felt at that moment. And the great thing about writing, you can swell it up, so that, you know, two paragraphs of writing may deal with only a second of actual existence and in that real second, you don't have time to take everything in. But in the writing, and in memory, you can put yourself there as if you had time now to take everything in and sort it out.

LYNDA – In this creative process of yours too, you don't start at the beginning of the book, as some people may think. You don't begin at page 1, and finish at page 500. This notion that people write from beginning to end, as a stream of consciousness, is clearly not the case for you (I imagine some people do). But the other thing that you do, is you write with pen and paper.

DAVID – Yes, I mean that's partly because I didn't become skilled at typing and didn't move on from an ordinary typewriter to an electric typewriter to a computer.

LYNDA – Are you a Luddite, David?

DAVID – Well, I don't think I'm a Luddite. I mean if people want to do that it seems to me to be good. And clearly it's a quicker process. But I actually like the slowness with which your hand has to move over the paper, and that for me means that there's some kind of relationship—it sounds a bit mystical—you know, mind and hand, moving at the same pace. And also it seems to me to keep the thinking physical.

But, you know, sometimes it's not good to leap at the first thing that comes into your head. Often the best thing that comes to your head is the second or the third thing. And if you're writing at a certain pace, you can look at all three and make a choice. Whereas sometimes when you're working very quickly on the computer the first thing that comes to your head is what goes down, and once a thing has gone down, it's very difficult to replace it with something else.

LYNDA – Yes, you've spoken about editing. And of course, I suppose for most young writers, or ... for new writers no matter how old or young they are, the editing of their own work is quite difficult, it's hard to cut stuff that you've actually laid down as you say, once it's on the page, it must be good and you don't want to remove it. But you've become, as you said, a fairly ruthless editor of your own work.

DAVID – You really do have to be ruthless. If you don't do that job, somebody else is going to do it. And that can be another editor, but if it's not done by you or another editor, certainly the first reviewer that comes along is going to do it! And you're better off doing it painfully in private, than having it done to you, painfully, in public.

LYNDA – Absolutely. Did that take time for you learn though? Were you ever precious about your first draft?

DAVID – No. I think I've always been very self-critical. And, you know, I think it's quite good for a writer to be doubtful. I think it's quite good for the writer to wonder if he's making the thing clear, whether what he's saying is interesting enough, whether he's really worked through all the possible significance of what he's doing, so I'm fairly critical and maybe a bit obsessive about that. And I think that's probably a good thing. But, you know, there are always very, very good editors as well. That is people who question the writer, and say, are you sure you mean this? Or are you sure you've considered all the possibilities in this piece of writing? There are other aspects that you're leaving out, or failing to take account of. And that can be a very, very helpful process of discussion with an editor.

LYNDA – And in your case, the one who transcribes initially becomes that first editor, and then perhaps there are others, but you have that first person as well.

DAVID – Yes, I'm very lucky in having someone who types, makes a final version of the thing, for me, and puts it onto a disk—as it has to be these days—and he's somebody who knows the work very well and has known it for 25 years or so, he was originally a student of mine at University, and he knows the work very well. He knows what fits within my, the way I do things. You know, I'm sure there are things that he would himself do differently, but he is sensitive enough to know how I do things and if he asks questions or suggests that something is not right, I would really, really listen to that.

It's very useful to have such a person.

LYNDA – Absolutely, intimately aware of your work but also able to be quietly critical.

Look, you talked also about loathing plot. Is that true?

DAVID – Well ... it's just that I think plot tends to eat up more interesting aspects of writing: you know, to either eat up character, or eat up observation. Once you get to the point where the plot has to unfold, then that tends to become a thing in itself. And you don't have time to do anything else. You know you see that often. You even see it in someone like Dickens.

Dickens, he serialised the books. And in the very, very early episodes—he usually wrote about five episodes before the printing began—and in those five episodes you see him laying things out in a very leisurely way and having time to create characters, and have wonderful observations and all the rest of it. And then, later on, when all of those books appeared in serial parts, sometimes over a year or year and a half, later on, when he realizes that the book now has to be tied up in some way, you see the plot taking up most of the space and he doesn't have time to do the same interesting things that he was doing earlier.

LYNDA – One idea that you mentioned last Thursday, is that concepts come to your mind, that you think are good, that you cogitate on for a bit, and you decide they're good for a book, but they are not your books; they are not to be your books. You referred to your own books, sort of "talking" to each other, and creating a kind of corpus that only particular new works are appropriate company for. Can you elaborate on that again?

DAVID – Well, you can only see that when you have a body of work. But you then see that that body of work is coherent in some kind of way; that those books have a relationship with one another. What I think of it as being, is, you know they're like rooms of a single house. And you might add another room on but it would have to be a room that you could get to from the other rooms, and in the same way, would have to occupy the same land, and it would in some ways have to take in the same kind of view.

LYNDA – And be architecturally suitable?

DAVID – Ah, yes. And, 'cause you know, once you add a book to the body of work, like adding a room, then the other rooms in the house and the other books are changed by that. You know, some kind of subtle change—when you go back and read them, they're now different because the other book

has been added. There's a kind of necessity and coherence about your work as a whole. And that's because they're the product of a single consciousness, a single temperament, somebody with a single view of the world.

LYNDA – The *Australian Review of Books* ran a piece "Black, White & Red" in the April edition by Garry Kinnane, I'm sure you're aware of it (David: yes, yes) and it refers to your novel *Remembering Babylon*. And he claims you've made the mistake of keeping silent about the violent nature of the white and black relations in early Australia. I wonder if, without going into too much detail now, you might respond to that a little for us.

DAVID – Well, I was pretty astonished by that, because he's talking about a passing reference in which a character talking about a dispersal in which five or six or seven people, are killed, says "not enough to be a massacre." That is meant to be ironic, and sometimes people don't pick up irony. But also that passage goes on with a quite brutal description of seven or eight people, including women and two small children, being killed by people swinging a stirrup iron on the end of a stirrup strap, and it actually says, "a very effective way for smashing skulls." That doesn't seem to me to be avoiding the question of violence. And you know I think sometimes, what you really are talking about is people's inability to read what's there. You know, in an historical account you lay out very carefully what the background of violence is. You describe individual occasions and all the rest of it. In a novel, you put all that information within the lines of the thing. And people have got to read out of that. I mean there's quite an interesting moment in the book where someone says, that as far as he is concerned the best way of dealing with Blacks is to shoot the lot of them and get it over and done with at once. Now that seems to me to be talking about a prevailing world of violence towards Blacks. You know, in a novel you don't feel you have to do more than that. You know, I think what historians would do, and it seems to me what Garry Kinnane wanted was, you know, a whole series of violent episodes which would be shown. But what I was interested in was people who have not yet committed any acts of violence against "Gemmy" or the people around him, who are afraid of violence being practiced against them, but who are living in a world in which that kind of violence is always a possibility on both sides.

LYNDA – It's a time in history where the writing about our history is going on in all kinds of formats, and there seems to be a fair bit of debate about whether historians get a look in, or whether journalists are able to do it properly, or whether authors can do it, to the "right" extent, whatever that is ... It appears to me to be a good thing that the debate's going on, particularly about Australia's history.

DAVID – Oh yeah, absolutely. And I think that the difference is that if you write an historical work, of course you're expected to look at every bit of evidence you can find, and you're expected to lay that out and mostly historians have an attitude to that and what they're doing is, they want to change people's attitudes in that way. Now I think fiction also wants to change people's attitudes, but it wants to get under their guard, and it does that by putting them in complex situations and asking them to try and work out what's going on and make up their own minds about how you should behave. I don't think the novelist preaches, if that's the right term, or prosyletises or pushes the reader in quite the way that somebody writing an article or an historical thing does. And I think that often means that if people don't read carefully, they think the fiction has got no line at all. You see what I mean? By leaving it up to the reader, to gather what their attitude might be rather than telling them what their attitude might be, the fiction writer sometimes looks as if they don't have any attitude at all. And in some ways, fiction is more concerned with questions than answers.