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Review: A subtle revisioning of an ancient epic

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## FICTION

*A subtle revisioning of an ancient epic*

David Malouf. *Ransom*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2009. 224 pp. UK£14. ISBN 9780701184155

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On initial reading, there seems something anomalous about the central conceit of this novel, Malouf's first foray into a sustained narrative form in more than a decade. Although a poet, playwright, and librettist of considerable renown, it is as a writer of fiction that Malouf is perhaps best known; this is an author who has always been keen to craft his own imaginative responses and to tell his own stories, whether in the poetic and elliptical short fiction of recent years or the more sustained meditations of earlier novels such as *Remembering Babylon* and *The Great World*. There is, then, something superficially and uncharacteristically tentative about his decision to go head-to-head, as it were, with Western literature's most famous storyteller, choosing to offer us a rewriting of a fragment of Homer's *Iliad*, one of history's best known and frequently mined narratives.

*Ransom* takes as its narrative material the climactic scenes of Homer's sprawling, gory chronicle of the Trojan War. The novel opens with the death of Achilles's friend and boyhood companion Patroclus at the hands of Hector, Homer's "breaker of horses" and Prince of Troy. Maddened by grief, the great Greek warrior defeats Hector in single combat, refusing to grant his enemy dignity even in death by dragging Hector's body behind his chariot to assuage his own anguish and to taunt the besieged Trojans. Hector's father, Priam, King of Troy, is driven to attempt to reclaim his son's body, coming to believe that he can do so by only doing "something that has never before been done or thought of. Something impossible. Something new" (58). Thus the stage is set for the ransom of the novel's title.

The story has been often told, and the

key elements of this episode have served as inspiration for literary responses as diverse as Northern Irish poet Michael Longley's post-troubles "Ceasefire" to Dan Simmons's science-fiction epic *Ilium*, and Malouf's own early poem "Episode from an Early War," in which "Hector, hero of Troy, raw-bloody-boned is dragged across the scene." The summary above, however, is only the merest skeleton of the tale, and it is what Malouf does with this set of circumstances that makes *Ransom* so potent and moving. Malouf has, of course, revisited antiquity before; in his second novel, *An Imaginary Life*, of which this novel is so strongly reminiscent, he narrates the exile of another great poet, Ovid, in a densely poetic exploration of the fluidity of identity, the potential for transformation, and the necessary and beautiful moments of epiphany that bring about new modes of experiencing the world. *Ransom* can, in many ways, be read as a mature companion piece to the earlier novel, and a fitting continuation of Malouf's fictional project; it is a poetic, thematically incisive novel exploring issues of marginalization and reconciliation in the context of great events. In scaling back the breadth and panoramic scope of the Homeric original, Malouf succeeds instead in foregrounding the humanistic and emotional aspects of our existence. Malouf's work has always displayed this interest in the power of originary myth and its more prosaic manifestations in everyday experience, but *Ransom* seems to mark a new maturity in his work, with a surprisingly precise and unostentatious prose style that, while lacking the brutal immediacy we associate with Homer's original and its translations, nonetheless seems more suited to the material than the overly dense and florid register that characterizes much of Malouf's earlier fiction. The novelist's parallel career as a poet still makes its influence felt in wonderfully compressed, naturalistic descriptive tableaux throughout the novel—"Tucked in between rocky outcrops there are . . . a clump of herbs where snails the size of a baby's fingernail are reborn in their dozens after a storm and hang like raindrops from every stalk"

(39–40)—but such tranquil moments of Wordsworthian reflection are juxtaposed with jarring images of the aftermath of human conflict—"Dogs lick up the spatter of their brains, gnaw at their shoulder-bones and skulls and on the small bones of their feet" (41).

This ability to fuse the poetic and the prosaic has always been one of Malouf's greatest strengths, and in *Ransom* he has come close to achieving the ideal balance between the two, suggesting that the short novel may in fact be the author's natural and most expressive milieu. *Ransom* carries off the idiosyncratically Maloufian sleight-of-hand, which seems effortlessly to reconcile the macro- and microcosmic, the epic with the mundane; one of the more notable ways in which this theme finds expression is in a bravura exploration of Priam's royal body as both physical entity and abstract site of signification, exploring the burden of kingly representation and the human dimension of epic narratives—"He is obliged, in his role as king, to think of the king's sacred body, this brief six feet of earth he moves and breathes in—aches and sneezes and all—as at once a body like any other and an abstract of the lands he represents, their living map" (43). Similarly, the novel engages with that broadest of literary themes—human conflict through history—and manages to, almost cinematically, shift its focus from heroic acts and epic battles to more subtly and persuasively trace their effects on individuals, friendships, and families. Malouf has, of course, done this throughout his career, most notably in *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World*, and the homosocial diads of Achilles/Patroclus, Priam/Somax, and Achilles/Priam will be structural devices familiar to those who have read Malouf before; but, in coupling his insight into human nature with the raw material of Homer's original, Malouf has created something both timeless and relevant.

The novel has some weak points where the narrative seems to flag; there is, for instance, Priam's lengthy justification of his actions to his wife Hecuba, which seems forced and expositional, and some of the characterization re-

mains vague and underdeveloped—we learn frustratingly little about Hector, and it is intriguing to think what Malouf would have made of this enigmatic figure had he devoted more attention to him. In its entirety, though, what may initially seem to be a fictional bagatelle turns out to be something considerably more substantial and important. The story at its center may be familiar, but in this finely drawn micronarrative, Malouf's latest provides us with a deceptively complex minor masterpiece.

## FICTION

### *The limited power of literature*

Peter Goldsworthy. *Everything I Knew*. Camberwell: Penguin, 2008. 297 pp. A\$24.95. ISBN 978-0-143-00963-4

Mark Klemens, SUNY Brockport

Life is slow in Penola, South Australia, in 1954. Robert James Burns, the policeman's son, has finished at the top of his primary school class and is about to enter high school. He gazes at the nighttime stars, rides his bike around town, is preoccupied with sex, and has an Aboriginal best friend named Billy. Robbie also breaks into houses. He also wants to be a writer.

The boredom that pervades Penola in Peter Goldsworthy's new novel *Everything I Knew* suddenly evaporates with the arrival of Miss Peach, the young university graduate who comes from the city to teach English, Latin, and Modern History at Robbie's school. Miss Peach rides a Vespa motor scooter. She is stylishly dressed—a student compares her to Audrey Hepburn—and she is “so perfectly proportioned she seems more doll-like than human” (24). But all too human she is, as we learn through the course of the novel. And there is a reason why she left the city for the town life of Penola.

Robbie Burns may be grappling with his burgeoning sexuality, but Miss Peach makes it her mission to help him discover the gifted writer within. Although he challenges Miss Peach on the first day of class, he quickly backs off and becomes

besotted with her. She begins reading his stories; he begins peeping in her windows. Is he a predator, or merely curious? The answer becomes clear during the course of the novel and is confirmed in the protracted epilogue. At the very least he is an opportunist, and halfway through the novel he puts into motion a devastating series of events that will have consequences for just about everyone, in one way or another.

There is a colorful and rich supporting cast of characters in *Everything I Knew*. This includes Doc McKenzie, the brainy, science fiction-reading town physician who gives the Penola schoolchildren a little more scientific detail on the birds and bees than anyone that age would want. Goldsworthy is a physician himself, so it comes as no surprise that the novel is punctuated with a series of anatomy lessons—some in an educational context and some not. One scene at the railroad tracks is unavoidably gruesome. It is a late encounter among the specimen jars in Doc McKenzie's office, though, that is genuinely shocking, and thought provoking. It leaves a lasting impression.

The character of Billy Currie, Robbie's Aboriginal friend and classmate, could have been more fully drawn. He is present mainly to underscore Robbie's growing interest in sex. But issues of race in 1964 Australia are barely touched upon. Robbie's parents are finely drawn. They evoke the smallness and the futility that pervade Penola.

It is literature—as an academic discipline, and as an avocation—that is at the heart of *Everything I Knew*. Miss Peach proudly tells her students that John Shaw Neilson was born in Penola: “He is *your* poet. Born here, in this very town—your town” (49). Her students are transfixed, as is the reader, when she reads the beautiful refrain of a Neilson poem, “[a]nd in that poor country no pauper was I” (51).

There are references to other writers as well—Shakespeare, Asimov, Tolstoy, Steinbeck, Orwell, and even Ern Malley. The book is, in part, Goldsworthy's testimonial to the transformative powers of literature in people's lives. Yet the arrival of a respected professor of Aus-

tralian literature from Adelaide shows that some characters are not salvageable, no matter how deep their fondness of literature may be. The professor's prurient interest in Miss Peach, combined with his dismissive attitude toward her obvious literary abilities, is jaw dropping. Australian literature insiders might speculate as to whether some of this character's attributes are based on actual individuals.

Ultimately, literature cannot save these characters from themselves. Decisions are made and impulses are acted upon that lead to awful consequences. Twin references to another Australian poet—quite different from Shaw Neilson—early and in the middle of the novel, though offhand, portend events that will determine the tragic outcome of the story. Some readers may take exception to the trajectory of events that follows a disastrous poetry reading for the Penola townsfolk, but Goldsworthy more than makes up for this lapse with the rich, carefully drawn details of his characters, especially the delectable and complicated Miss Peach.

Talking with Robbie, but thinking about another object of her affections, Miss Peach asks: “Why is there something instead of nothing? What is this mysterious thing we each wake up *inside* every morning, this thing we live in, called consciousness? The first thing we *know*?” (144). At the end of this memorable novel and its world of creative possibility, “everything they knew” is still not enough to prevent Robbie and Miss Peach from being swallowed up whole by the universe they inhabit.

## FICTION

*“all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave”*

Helen Garner. *The Spare Room*. New York: Henry Holt, 2009. 175 pp. US\$22.00. ISBN 978-0-8050-8888-5

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“First, in my spare room, I swiveled the bed onto a north-south axis. Isn't that supposed to align the sleeper with the