

Item 3.2

Vale David Malouf AO

File No: S051491

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

Australia's reading public and our arts and cultural communities are the poorer with the death of novelist, poet, playwright and essayist David George Joseph Malouf AO on 22 April 2026.

Born on 20 March 1934 in Brisbane to a Lebanese Christian father and an English-born mother of Sephardi Jewish descent, David began his literary career at an early age, reading classic English children's books when he was 4. He first read Shakespeare aged 8, and by the time he was 12 was reading *Wuthering Heights*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Vanity Fair* and *Moby Dick*, his favourite novel. As a child, he wrote for the neighbourhood newspaper, and after reading Kenneth Slessor at age 16, wrote his first poetry. He widened his cultural interests, learning to play the violin and piano and retained a lifelong interest in music.

His first 24 years were spent in Brisbane, as a student at Brisbane Grammar School and the University of Queensland. After graduating with honours in Arts in 1955, he lectured at the University.

In 1959, he moved to England, teaching in secondary schools for much of the next decade. In 1962, he published his first work, a collection of poetry in an anthology with 3 other Australian poets.

In 1968, he returned to Australia to lecture in English at the University of Sydney but continued writing. His collection, *Neighbours in a Thicket: Poems* was published in 1974. It featured childhood memories of his mother, his sister, travelling in Europe and war. The following year he published his first novel, the semi-autobiographical *Johnno*, about a young man growing up in Brisbane during the Second World War.

In 1978, he became a full-time writer. He moved to an isolated Italian village, where he spent 10 months each year writing without distraction. He would return to Sydney in the other months, often staying in Newtown with the late Bill Hunt, who served with me as an Alderman on Sydney City Council between 1984 and 1987, and Bill's partner, the linguistic historian Dr Gary Simes. The time spent in Italy was highly productive, resulting in the novels, *An Imaginary Life*, *Fly Away Peter*, *Child's Play* and *Harland's Half Acre* and the short story collection, *Antipodes*.

He returned to Australia in the 1980s, settling in a terrace house in Chippendale, close to Sydney University. I had the fortune of meeting him a number of times when I was doorknocking in the area.

His prolific literary output continued, with more novels and poetry collections, but expanding to include essays, theatre criticism, lectures, opera libretti including *Voss*, based on the Patrick White novel, and a play, *Blood Relations*, jointly presented by the Sydney Theatre Company and State Theatre Company of South Australia at Sydney Opera House in 1987.

In 1998, he delivered the Boyer lectures, *A Spirit of Play: The Making of Australian Consciousness*. The following year, he and Jackie Huggins co-wrote the draft *Declaration for Reconciliation*, intended for consultation with the Australian people.

Beyond his own writing, David actively involved himself in Australia's literary community, and broader cultural matters. He advocated for the freedom of writers around the world through his long involvement in PEN Sydney. He was a member of the Australia Council's Literature Board and the Opera Australia board. He took a pivotal role in the campaign to prevent the State Library of NSW from removing researchers and books from the Mitchell Library's Reading Room. He made regular visits to literature classes for disadvantaged and homeless students organised by Mission Australia and Australian Catholic University's Clemente Program and was a lifetime ambassador of the Indigenous Literacy Foundation. Many younger writers remember him for the encouragement, support and mentoring he gave them.

His Chippendale home welcomed other writers, opera singers, musicians, sculptors, photographers and poets. Bob Carr would phone asking where to start with Balzac as he had finally finished Proust. Thomas Keneally was another caller, talking to him about novel writing. In his later years, he returned to his home state of Queensland, living in a Gold Coast apartment with wraparound views of the Pacific. It overlooked the beach where he often took walks, setting a cracking pace for those with him.

During his long career, David received many awards and was shortlisted for several others. In 1987 he was made an Officer of the Order of Australia for services to literature. These awards were matched by the many tributes which followed his death. The cultural critic Peter Craven said he was "arguably the most accomplished Australian writer of his generation" adding "He was, in various ways, a modest man, but a man of immense culture. He was more cultivated than any of us."

Sarah Holland-Batt, head of creative writing at the University of Technology Sydney, observed: "David has been a lodestar for so many writers, not only because of his brilliance but also because he was profoundly humane, decent, modest, kind to a fault and always remained keenly interested in new writing. This enormous, unparalleled generosity is a significant piece of his legacy as he leaves behind scores of writers whose lives he has touched through a genuine interest and engagement with their work."

Recommendation

It is resolved that all persons attending this meeting of Council observe one minute's silence to commemorate the life of David Malouf AO and his contribution to world literature and Australia's cultural and civic life.

THE RT HON CLOVER MOORE AO

Lord Mayor of Sydney