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[Holland-Batt, Sarah](#)

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The Sydney Morning Herald, Spectrum(14 March 2008), p. 32.

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<http://www.smh.com.au/news/book-reviews/revolving-days/2008/03/14/1205126187098.html>



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Masterwork of Life and Land (Review of *Revolving Days*, by David Malouf)

Book review by Sarah Holland-Batt

Author: David Malouf

Genre: Poetry

Publisher: UQP

Pages: 204

RRP: \$26.95

Time in places as diverse as Queensland and Tuscany tell this writer's story.

"It's odd to think," Eugenio Montale once wrote of his native Cinque Terre, "that each of us has a countryside like this, however different, which must always remain his landscape." For Montale, one of the great Italian poets of the 20th century, it was the rocky outcrops and fractured sunlight at the Mediterranean's edge that formed his interior geography, suffusing his poems with a constant presence.

David Malouf, in common with Montale, is a poet who draws vital energy from his totemic places. In prose, he has written frequently and eloquently of his childhood home; and if you have ever spent time in a weatherboard Queensland house, where the house and garden exchange air like breath through lattice, windows and stilts, the resonance in Malouf's poetry is unmistakable.

Even in his earliest work, his characteristic stance is one where mind and landscape merge with a sublime lightness of touch. From the strict indoor tableaux of his debut *Interiors* to the roving coastlines and suburban sprawl of *Bicycle And Other Poems*, there is a sense that Malouf is awake not only to the minutiae of his surroundings but also to the way they always colour and transform the imagination.

Revolving Days, his first true selection of poems in more than 16 years, is perhaps the volume that pays closest attention to the terrain of its author's life.

In an unusual but deeply Maloufian gesture, the poems are arranged not in the order they were written but by the places that inspired them. It is an ample and lively selection, although early poems are represented sparsely (only three from *Interiors* appear).

The book begins with the talismanic Brisbane and Deception Bay landscapes of the poet's childhood and adolescence, the years spent "at the sheer edge / of a continent", then traverses northern England and Europe, Sydney and Tuscany. The result is a fragmentary autobiography where old and new poems interleave in luminous counterpoint: to read them is to travel, often mysteriously, through space and time.

In *Early Discoveries* we meet a typically deft layering of places past and present, personal and historical. As a young man, the poet finds his grandfather in the garden "hatchet in hand / as he martyrs chickens in the woodblock's dark". Yet the grandfather is both here and not here, split between his Brisbane backyard and his homeland valley in Lebanon. "He has never quite migrated," the speaker observes. "You can smell the cedars on his breath / and the blood

of massacres, the crescent flashing from ravines / to slice through half a family". Despite its complex meditation on home and belonging, the poem comes to rest in the quotidian:

*Later, fresh on the marble step in yesterday's newspaper (words of a tongue I cannot read)
his offering: two heads of new spring cabbage. I look under
the leaves (an ancient joke), there's nothing there. Just a sprinkling of black soil on the
headlines of another war,
shaken from the roots. That night I eat them, boiled, with oil and vinegar.*

If Malouf is a poet comfortable digging into memory and history's strata, then he is equally a poet who writes with a rare attentiveness and fidelity to the moment.

Poems such as *Wild Lemons*, *The Crab Feast*, *Afterword* and *Stars* celebrate the urgencies of the sensual life, where "the present is always / with us, always open" (*Wild Lemons*). Indeed, there are exuberant instances when the immediacy of the world is such that Malouf accelerates into sheer flights of language just to render it: rain becomes "leaf- / tap, a drip toccata"; a plane in the sky "beaten thin / quicksilver skin beaded / with cloud-lick"; and moonflowers "round crimped candescent / origami satellite-dishes / all cocked towards Venus".

One of the volume's substantial pleasures lies in the conversation between poems of different eras. Placed alongside each other, old and new poems form magnetic constellations. Then there is also the simple pleasure of spending time with a dazzlingly agile and original mind. *Revolving Days* is a masterwork from one of our greatest poets. It reveals the full range of Malouf's art with subtlety and grace, while providing the additional delight of his life story. But for all his technical virtuosity - his spritely syntactical play, his famous sense of the line as breath - the poems have an enigmatic life of their own.