

An Imaginary Life by David Malouf

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An Imaginary Life by David Malouf is a beautiful, poetic novel published in 1978. It is historical fiction based on the real Roman poet Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso), but Malouf imagines his inner life and transformation during exile. The story is told in the first person from Ovid's perspective, like a personal journal or reflection.

About the Author: David Malouf

David Malouf is an Australian writer, born in 1934 in Brisbane. He was a professor before becoming a full-time writer. His first novel was *Johnno* (1975), semi-autobiographical. *An Imaginary Life* was his second novel and got a lot of praise for its poetic style. Other famous works include *Remembering Babylon* (shortlisted for Booker Prize), which deals with European settlers in Australia and their struggles with nature and indigenous people. Malouf often explores themes like humanity's relationship with nature, exile, unlikely friendships between different worlds, and personal transformation. He retired from writing in 2018 and lives privately in Sydney.

Historical Background: The Real Ovid

Ovid was a real famous Roman poet (43 BCE – 17 CE). Born in a wealthy family near Rome, he studied rhetoric but chose poetry. His works like *Amores* (love poems), *Ars Amatoria* (The Art of Love – advice on romance), and *Metamorphoses* (stories of transformations) made him popular. But his playful, pleasure-focused writing offended Emperor Augustus. In 8 CE, Augustus exiled him to Tomis (a remote village on the Black Sea, now in Romania), at the edge of the Roman Empire. The exact reason is unknown – maybe *Ars Amatoria* was seen as immoral, or involvement in a scandal with Augustus's granddaughter. In exile, Ovid wrote sad letters (*Epistulae ex Ponto*) begging to return, but he died there in 17 CE. Malouf

uses this real history but invents a fictional inner journey where Ovid undergoes a "metamorphosis" (change), inspired by his own *Metamorphoses*.

Plot Summary

The novel opens and closes with memories of a mysterious Child (called the "wild boy" by locals).

Childhood Memory: As a young boy in Rome, Ovid saw this ageless Child in the woods. They communicated in some unknown language. As Ovid grew older, the Child stayed the same age. Ovid never told anyone, and when he became an adult, the Child disappeared.

Exile in Tomis: As an adult, Ovid is exiled to Tomis – a small, colorless village far from any city. The landscape is barren, harsh winters last long, summers bring little growth. Villagers speak a local language (Getae tribe), not Latin, so Ovid feels completely isolated. He lives under the care of the village headman, Ryzak, who is tough and powerful. Ovid feels weak and useless compared to these practical people – his Roman life was full of comfort and leisure.

Ovid hates Tomis at first. One day, he sees a single red poppy flower. The color and the name "poppy" in his mind excite him – he decides he must transform himself to fit this new world.

Hunting and First Sighting: Ovid joins Ryzak and hunters on a deer hunt in the birchwoods. They visit ancient burial mounds and perform a ritual (riding, shouting, throwing grain) to honor the dead. Ovid doesn't believe in gods but feels a thrill. In the snow, they find a barefoot human footprint among deer tracks – it's the "wild boy" villagers have seen for two years. Ovid spots the Child in the bushes, but hunters can't catch him.

Passing Seasons: Harsh winters pass with people huddled in huts, fearing barbarian raids. Ovid believes this is the same Child from his childhood. He asks for search parties in spring, but villagers are busy with survival. In fall hunts, no sign of the Child – Ovid fears he died.

Ovid slowly learns the local language. He realizes Latin divides the world (separates things, explains), but the villagers' language observes and accepts life as one whole thing. This changes how he sees the world. He plants a small garden of

wildflowers – villagers think it's foolish because flowers have no practical use. They have no idea of "play" or beauty for its own sake.

Capturing the Child: Ovid convinces Ryzak to send hunters in spring. They catch the Child, who howls and shrieks. The shaman chants, putting him into a deep sleep.

Life with the Child: The Child stays in Ovid's hut. Villagers fear him – think he has an animal spirit or is a werewolf. At first, the Child is passive. Then he gets curious about Ovid's writing tools. Ovid takes him to marshes near the River Ister (Danube). Ovid teaches human sounds/words; the Child teaches animal calls. When the Child makes a bird call, he seems to become the bird for a moment. Ovid hopes words will make him human. The Child shows Ovid plants and animals. Ovid decides to teach the local language, accepting he will never return to Rome.

Ovid struggles to understand the Child's way – identifying fully with nature, no separate "self." He wants to let go of his ego but finds it hard.

Winter Crisis: As winter comes, the Child panics inside the hut – screams, scratches walls, exhausts himself. He gets a high fever, convulsions. Ryzak's mother (the Old Woman) believes a demon is in him and might transfer. She warns everyone away.

The Child recovers slowly, but then Ryzak's grandson Lullo gets sick. Lullo's mother fears the demon jumped to her son. Lullo recovers, but then Ryzak falls ill – small teeth marks on his wrist (Old Woman says demon entry point). Ryzak convulses, makes inhuman sounds. Village elders decide to ritually kill Ryzak to stop the demon taking his spirit.

Ovid fears blame will fall on him and the Child, so he flees with the Child across the River Ister into the northern wilderness (barbarian lands).

Final Journey and Transformation: They travel for months with no goal – no counting days. The Child grows strong in the wild. Ovid now understands nature's unspoken language. He feels the universe is interconnected – he is just one small part, like a blade of grass. His body weakens with old age; he is dying. But the Child cares for him. Ovid feels "unbearably happy." Death is not an end – it's returning to earth, feeding the soil, becoming timeless and bodiless. This is his final metamorphosis – complete acceptance and unity with nature.

Key Facts:

Full Title: An Imaginary Life

Published: 1978

Genre: Historical Fiction

Setting: Roman Empire edges, around 1 CE (Tomis and beyond)

Climax: Crossing the River Ister

Antagonist: Ryzak's Mother (the Old Woman) – superstitious and fearful

Point of View: First Person (Ovid)

Main Characters

Ovid: The narrator. Starts as a soft, frivolous Roman poet. Through exile and the Child, he transforms – becomes strong, appreciates simplicity, connects to nature, accepts death.

The Child (Wild Boy): Feral child raised by animals. Symbol of pure nature, innocence, unity with the world. Teaches Ovid more than Ovid teaches him. Ageless, mysterious link to Ovid's childhood.

Ryzak: Village headman. Tough, practical, kind to Ovid but follows village fears.

The Old Woman (Ryzak's Mother): Superstitious, fears the Child as demon-possessed. Main antagonist.

Others: Villagers, Lullo (grandson), Ryzak's daughter-in-law.

Major Themes

Suffering and Personal Growth: Exile brings pain and isolation, but it forces Ovid to grow. Suffering leads to deeper understanding and change.

Language, Perception, and Nature: Language shapes how we see the world. Latin separates and analyzes; local language unites and accepts. Nature has its own universal language beyond words.

Frivolity vs. Practicality: Rome = luxury, play, love poetry (frivolous). Tomis = survival, no waste (practical). But Ovid learns beauty (flowers) and play have value.

Childhood, Fate, and Identity: The Child links past and present. Fate (exile) leads to true identity – not separate from nature, but part of it.

Civilization vs. Nature / Wild: Civilization tames and controls; wild is pure, free. Ovid learns civilized life is not superior – nature is deeper and more fulfilling.

Metamorphosis / Transformation: Central idea (from Ovid's own book). Ovid changes from arrogant poet to humble, nature-connected man. Death = final positive change.

Exile, Belonging, and Post-Colonial Angle: Exile is physical and mental. Ovid finds belonging in nature. Many see it as metaphor for Australia – Europeans as "exiles" struggling to connect with land and indigenous ways (like in Remembering Babylon).

This novel is short but deep – poetic prose, philosophical, about finding freedom through letting go. It's often studied for transformation, nature, and cultural differences.