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Brought back to Australia by the death of his father, Dante is sorting through his father's belongings when he comes across a photograph of Johnno, a long-time friend. The photograph stirs up a lifetime of memories for Dante, leading him to finally set Johnno's story--which has haunted him for years--on paper. An outrageous character of legendary proportions, Johnno is brought to life in all his complexity, beginning with his days at Brisbane Grammar School, when he and Dante first become friends, to the days they spend together in Paris. Johnno's inexplicable rages and periodic transformations are recounted until we come to know him--without ever quite understanding him. Daring, impossible, and unpredictable, Johnno is a fascinating character. His shocking behavior awes some, annoys others, and provokes a good many more. Above all, though, he is thoroughly unforgettable.

Johnno Details

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Bradley Baker says

A nostalgic novel in regard to setting, that for me, made the characters and plot insignificant. Malouf has such a rich command of language, and I enjoyed the book in this regard. However, at the end I found myself asking, what was this book trying to say? It's hard to criticize a master writer like Malouf, but this book left me wanting something more. The main character seemed to lack empathy - but was this the intention? And what did the narrator really think of Johnno? I felt like there was too much holding back around the topic of male friendship, as if it was too afraid to call it love. Maybe this is the point - but for what purpose?

Jeremy says

An interesting exploration of the post war Australian generation through the eyes of the burgeoning intelligentsia. The names of our protagonist, Dante; and our titular character, Johnno, immediately evoke the depth of our European cultural and social traditions with our Australian-ness ... our sense of difference. And this antagonism is explored with some depth in the novel. There is a self-loathing at work, something that must be overcome, or it must ... overcome. Malouf packs in much delicious detail and colour, and the bildungsroman rolls along toward a conclusion that is well-orchestrated, expected and yet ... unfulfilling. Which might just be the point.

Mary says

I've spent years writing letters to you and you never answer, even when you write back.

This was one of the most achingly nostalgic novels I've read. Almost everything about it seemed to be underlying. For an autobiographic novel it was fairly restrained and I never had the sense that the author/Dante knew Johnno very well, which begs the question - do we ever really know anyone? How much of Johnno was accurate? How much was 'what-if' and 'should've been'?

The writing was beautifully sad and filled with subtle yearning for things that never were and for things that can never be again. Malouf wonderfully captured the love-hate for home, the need to escape it and then that inexplicable feeling upon returning. This book is all emotion.

"The trouble with you, Dante," Johnno told me severely, "is you're a romantic. All you see is what you feel..."

Karen says

I had mixed feelings for this novel, perhaps like Dante's feelings towards Johnno, but overall I believe it was a decent book, very descriptive in some parts which I believed was a little too much for my liking but I really

liked how it ended. I think it was by the second half that the book interested me more, it made me think about certain things and about the idea of friendship.

Bill says

This is a deeply personal little book, filled with the poignant and sometimes contradictory emotions that often come with reflection upon people and places once known. David Malouf's quietly poetic writing style works perfectly here, evoking the dual personality of Dante and Johnno's Brisbane: a warm, familiar and safe anchorage at times, and a decaying and culturally bereft subtropical prison at others. As a character Johnno is hugely appealing, always enhancing his own roguery, mayhem and confounding unpredictability with a self-aware sense of theatrical flourish. As the story progresses, of course, some of Johnno's deeper and darker currents begin to surface. It's hard to read this book without thinking about some of the Johnnos in your own life, and I suppose that's part of what makes it so appealing.

Wilton314 says

I first read David Malouf's Johnno when I was at Uni when we had to do a 'cultural elective'. I found it on my bookshelf years later and re-read it. I thought it was much better the second time around. (Older definitely, perhaps even wiser?) It resonated with me because it is about kids growing up and getting into trouble (boys will be boys) in Brisbane during the Second World War. I remembered stories from my father from when he was growing up in the same town and time. Very good. I would read it again.

Deborah Pickstone says

Astonishingly well written for a debut novel. Malouf has always denied that this is gay fiction but my thoughts are that the problem with that category is that it is about 'sexual' orientation rather than 'gender' orientation: that is, people focus on who x has sex with rather than on whom they are able to love/ create a relationship with. This, I believe, is the truth of what sexual orientation means and can account for everything from a mutually celibate relationship to a committed life-long sexual partnership and marriage. What it is largely *not* about is promiscuous behaviour; it refers to a person's capacity for relationship. Within my understanding, then, this story is about a deep, abiding and often difficult love between two men which was not characterised by being sexual but was probably the full extent of either of their capacity for love and commitment. Who cares what label we put on that?

Duncan says

This is my favourite Australian novel. It's hard to explain why, and my reasons may be too personal to persuade any newcomers to this book, but all I know is that Malouf's simple sounding sentences, written in that tender, inward-evoking manner, have held my interest for twenty years now.

I was seventeen when I had this book prescribed to me for my Year 11 Literature class. Our list of books to read included 'Gulliver's Travels', 'A Man for All Seasons', and 'Johnno'. The only book I read to the end was

'Johnno'. In the meantime I sat as quietly as possible while the other students recounted the many merits, crucial characters, events and plot developments that you notice when you read an entire book. My literature teacher was aware of my neglect. Anybody who suggests Jonathan Swift, Robert Bolt and David Malouf as required reading can't be that inattentive. I'm sure the reason why he didn't reprimand me for such literary laziness was that he didn't want to interrupt the flow of interest I had, we all have, when a piece of great writing eventually makes contact.

I don't want to turn this into a ponderous, sentimental book review. But David Malouf's 'Johnno' brought me into contact with all the kinds of uncertainty of feeling, doubt, and misunderstanding that can occur among your closest friends. Just when you think you understand someone, just when you think you understand yourself, you do or say something that throws both of you off the rails. Or did he do that? Did we just think it?

Mysteriousness was the prevailing feeling for me when I first read it. The kind that is elicited not by an author's desire to keep the reader in the dark, but to remind them that our own perception of events are concealed further by our vivid yet unreliable memories. The inner states of consciousness are what David Malouf conveys so well in his writing. And I'm grateful that I spotted it while I was a daydreaming and detached young man. Much like Johnno.

Cate says

I liked this. I LOVED the descriptions of Brisbane. Admittedly, not the Brisbane I grew up in, but its rambling predecessor. I don't know what it is about Brisbane but its writer/residents are drawn to try to understand the town and how it has shaped those who've lived there in a way quite distinct from those who've lived and grown up in other places. There is this desperate need to come to grips with Brisbane, understand its nuances and delve deeply into how it's made us all different. I was back there, wandering my old home town in my memory, trying to bring that sub-tropical wilderness to mind. Johnno & Dante are mirrors in a way - who can't relate to the primal scream - railing against the oddness that is Brisbane yet loving it roughly, violently, wanting to leave, get a life somewhere else, yet clinging & staying. That duality is well captured. The end is heartbreakingly sad - Johnno's last plea to Dante: I loved you, but you've never given a fuck. That is a crystal moment when the novel makes sense. I'd recommend this for so many reasons. A good read.

Velvetink says

Johnno is Malouf's first novel and is written in the first person past tense and the narrator is only ever known by the nickname "Dante".

Apparently the book is very heavily autobiographical. It starts with Dante clearing out his father's house after his death. He finds a photograph of his friend Johnno, and the rest is for the most part reverie.

The story is centred upon the friendship between Dante and a schoolmate known as "Johnno" in their discontented adolescence and early adulthood in the 1940s and 1950s in Brisbane and of their travels

overseas.

Malouf's detailed account of Brisbane is very evocative of the times and his way with words very much places you within the hot streets of Brisbane – which seem to offer no relief or excitement. It wasn't a city then. Just a dusty humid mosquito ridden small time town and that sultry lethargy sinks into your bones by the distinctive way Malouf writes. I was very impressed with Malouf's "The Great World" (about two Australian men who went to war and their lives following) and thought that "Johnno" might suit my father who is more of the era of the characters in "Johnno" While "The Great World" is of the generation before... (however now that I have finished – not so sure my father would enjoy Johnno).

As in "The Great World" – "Johnno" also highlights the class differences of two growing up, one poor, one middle class - their outcomes and friendship between two men. (It's not the class differences my father wouldn't 'enjoy' but the swearing and the underlying sense of the love between the two main characters.) (I did mention to Evan and Liam my father is old fashioned. Stuck in a much earlier era where such things were never mentioned).

In any event anyone interested in the sights & local history of Brisbane would find the early chapters interesting. To some extent it mirrors many outback towns and the pervading feeling that life in them wasn't real, that REAL LIFE was out there, over in Europe. For many Australian men both wars (however hideous in outcomes were) in the beginning spelt escape and freedom. That feeling is what powered "Johnno". I can't deny in myself that the feeling that the Antipodes is at the bottom of the world, & that we are secluded from things. I think for many Australians there is still that need.

Anyhooo onwards....

Johnno and Dante. Who are they?

You can almost smell the anticipation and burning need of these two young men to escape the small country town of Brisbane – to experience something "other". Johnno is adventurous, the appointed class clown at school, the rebel – never likely to do well – of course he is not from the middle class ranks like Dante whose father was too old to go to war. Johnno's father went to war and never came back. Missing. Dante was the studious, cautious one. Though they both graduate university, Johnno's interest is geology and books (highly unexpected considering his poverty). Rimbaud and Baudelaire are books he pressures Dante to read although Dante had not explored them, had no passion to find them himself. Johnno longs for culture which Brisbane doesn't have and he leaves for Paris and places exotic. Mining guides his choices.

Dante's future is less clearly defined. He seems to have no desire to leave or explore but eventually Dante follows Johnno to Paris. The visit isn't successful. Neither find in the other what they wanted. Dante teaches in the UK for a while and ends up in an office back in Brisbane. Their time together throughout the book centers on the great male Australian tradition of drinking and to a lesser extent visiting brothels and dare devil acts of defiance. Johnno often wants to burn buildings down somehow to quell his rage against what? – Dante is never sure. Their relationship is bound up in yearning, and regret.

Malouf totally denies that Johnno is a gay novel but both the main characters =seem to pine for each other in each other's absence. The cover photograph reminds one of the white Oxford style clothing as represented in Brideshead Revisited by Evelyn Waugh that is/was for a time synonymous with gay male culture especially pre-WW2. So I do wonder about the publisher's choice of photograph.

" Readers of a later and more knowing time have taken this to be a gay novel in disguise. It is not. If I had

meant to write a gay novel I would have done so. If there was more to tell about these characters I would have told it.”- Malouf

Spoiler;

In the end I am saddened. Life seems to cave in on Dante - he is captured by Brisbane. Johnno has a fatal accident rather than be captured. Before the accident he sends one more letter to Dante expressing his love. When you read that you realise the love between them that you sensed throughout was there, even if Malouf will continue to deny it. I think in many ways Malouf is as old fashioned as my father.

Adrian P says

p79: Every now and then the Madam would reach down under her plaited-cane chair, take out a mosquito spray and pump vigorously till a little cloud of droplets hung in the air. 'The mozzies are death to me,' she would explain delicately. 'If there's just one of them within a mile they'll find me out. It's the gardens being so close.' Occasionally in the long silence the animals could be heard from the garden menagerie, a sudden screeching of parrots, then the monkeys would start up, shrilling and jabbering, and hoarse-throated baboons and chimpanzees.

p50: Aaran Avenue Hamilton, as an address, seemed slightly false. My loyalties remain where my feelings are, at the old house, with the corrugated-iron fence at the bottom of the yard leaning uneasily into the next street, and Musgrave Park with its insect swarming darkness under the Moreton Bay figs still crowded with metho drinkers - disreputable, certainly, but warmer, more mysterious than Aaran Avenue Hamilton, where everything is glossy and modern.

Johnny G says

I was totally intrigued by the descriptions of Brisbane and its post-WWII socio-economic climate, but it's Dante's (the narrator's) has a love-hate relationship with the title character that is intended to drive the story. I'd say it mostly succeeds there, but Johnno (the character) just isn't that compelling. I mean, I got bored with Johnno for the same reason Dante did. Maybe that's a win for Malouf's ability to portray the character accurately.

I would've liked to have known more about Dante and his life away from Johnno. For most of the book, it seems like Johnno is Dante's sole social outlet and personal adviser. Late in the story, Malouf alludes to other relationships Dante has, and only then did I realize he was a better-rounded person.

Hannah says

This is a very quick, easy read. But at the same time it is full of trickery, mocking and great emotional depth. Its classic coming of age.

I think suburbia is a catalyst for the characters of Johnno and Dante. They have grown up in (different versions of) a suburban home and it has sculpted them into the young men they become. What is interesting is that both push for some sort of escapism. Johnno's violent hatred of it is confronting, but Dante seems almost resigned to his ultimate ending.

What struck me most was the sense of escapism. Johnno is always running from something (or someone?) and he is always without certainty. He never has a real, fixed address and contact is sporadic and unreliable. There is an illusion to the absence of a father figure early in the text, something that is established as crucial for the development of a suburban male. Maybe this is the root of his problems? There are so many 'maybes' and 'what ifs' with Johnno.

There is a line in chapter two that summarises the book succinctly for me: "Australia was familiar and boring." Familiar has positive connotations (comfort, homely, etc.), but boring is negative – something you try to avoid and escape from. There is a conflict in suburbia, and we must decide to either run or embrace it.

Declan Melia says

The second time I've read this wonderful, short novel and I think I liked it even more the second time. This is a novel but it reads like a memoir and the atmosphere of nostalgia is so heavy you feel like you are breathing it in. From cover to cover every sentence almost aches with an intangible longing. No other book I can remember better articulates the melancholic loss that clouds adulthood.

The story is simple. Dante grows up in post war Brisbane. He watches the city change, he watches the nation change and he watches his friends change. All the while he stays and feels exactly the same. More than anything though, Dante watches Johnno, his outrageous friend and alter ego who seems to possess all the qualities that Dante lacks. He participates in and even antagonises reality while Dante remains forever an observer.

I have always adored novels in which the protagonist is not the narrator (On The Road, Breakfast at Tiffany's etc.). Why might this be? Perhaps it's because they articulate the feeling we all must get that life is something that happens to other people. The feeling that time is pushing us along by the small of the back and everything that happens to us was beyond our agency or will. That no one can ever know how we truly feel, that we are unknowable and alone forever.

This book is masterfully crafted. Every sentence counts towards the greater aching whole. An uncelebrated,

unvalued, utterly tragic but blissfully beautiful aspect of the human experience in 160 pages.

PattyMacDotComma says

5★

I loved it – the style, the descriptions of time and place, the feeling of impatient youth, the impetuousness of kids when they disobey to show off, the virtual shedding of parental shackles at uni – all of it. Most writers have been through their own versions of these things, but Malouf translates it to the page better than most.

This does not read like a first novel, but more like the work of a seasoned writer who is now looking back at some early experiences and weaving them into this story.

It reminded me of many other stories, the Hemingway years in Paris and all the dramatic searches by young people for The Meaning of Life, but “Johnno” is in a category of its own. The conflict and connection between the narrator and his subject are so clear that you’d like to warn them before they do something they’ll regret.

An old school photo prompts reminiscences of a steamy, post-WWII Brisbane childhood. They were exciting, but exasperating, times for kids desperate to explore the world after the privations of wartime Australia. Like most kids, they’re sure something better is happening somewhere – anywhere – else.

At school, Johnno’s frustrated teachers were as charmed as they were repelled by his mischief and crimes. *“We were all awed, I think, by his sheer recklessness. He would do ANYTHING. Get up with a shrug of his shoulders and accept any dare. Accept with the same lift of his shoulders any punishment. . . No crime was beyond him. He was a born liar and an elegant shoplifter . . .”*

‘Dante’, so christened by Johnno, never quite understood why he and his bookish ways were tolerated by this rebel. There were enough kids mesmerised by his exploits, but Johnno seemed almost to seek Dante’s acknowledgment that he was worth something. And Dante seemed to need the same in return.

Then suddenly, about the time other boys were leaving school at 15-16, Johnno stunned them by returning – tidy, sporty, and studious. An enigma wrapped in a riddle, as Churchill famously described Russia.

At uni, Friday night drinking sessions led both boys to fall unrequitedly in love (how could those girls resist them?) - to the point that Johnno shed Australia for the Congo, sending scrawled postcards to Dante now and then, often with no return address.

Dante stubbornly persevered at home but eventually felt himself stagnating and drawn to Europe. He found Johnno broke and living hand to mouth, sleeping till afternoon, and just because he couldn’t resist the challenge, taunting the local police while charming the Parisian madams and their girls.

After a few years in Paris and London, Dante returns to Queensland. He has trouble recognising his hometown, he’s not so sure about the new girlfriend he came back for, and then he discovers Johnno is back, also unrecognisable – gross and dishevelled. An awkward attempt to reconnect results in Dante pouring Johnno into a taxi and sending him home, as he did so often in the past.

The boyhood leader of the charge has disintegrated into a caricature while his admiring follower seems to

have grown up.

I can't do it justice. I know it's studied in Australian schools and book groups, and I certainly recommend it myself. Thought-provoking and real.
