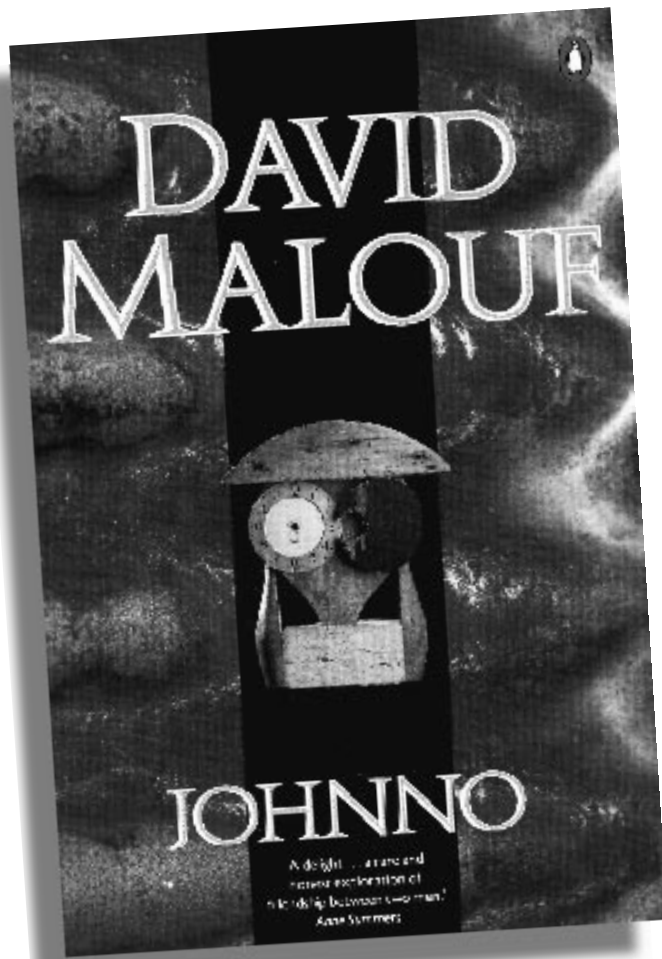


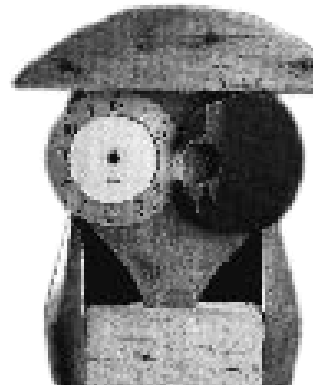
# PENGUIN NOTES for READING GROUPS

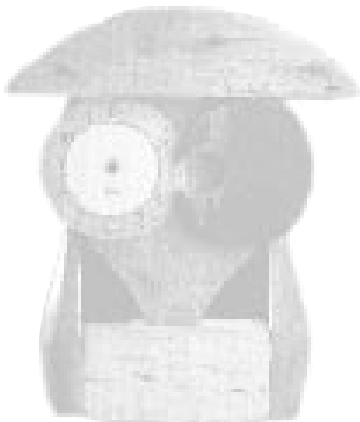
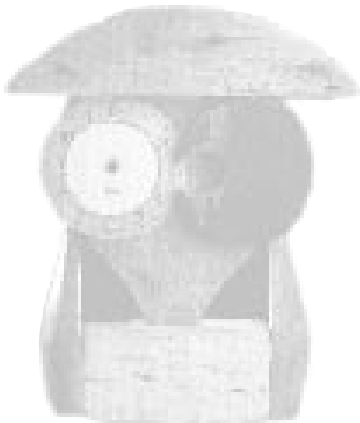
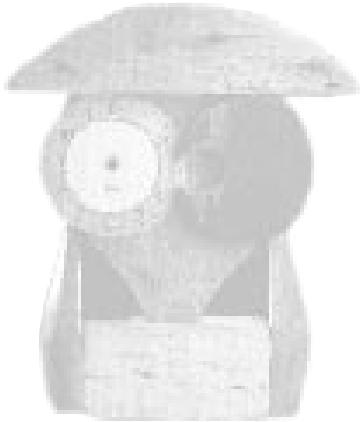


DAVID  
MALOUF  

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JOHNNO





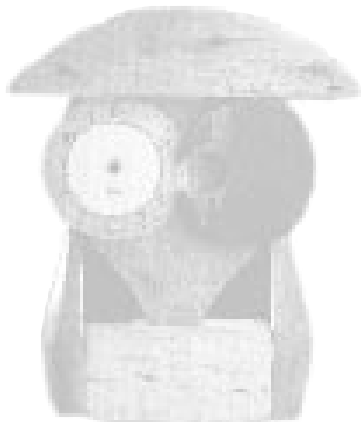
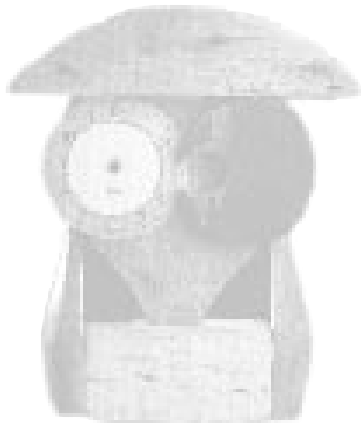
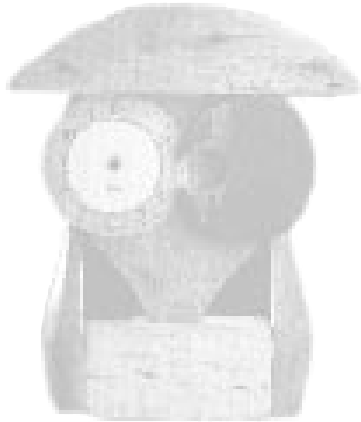
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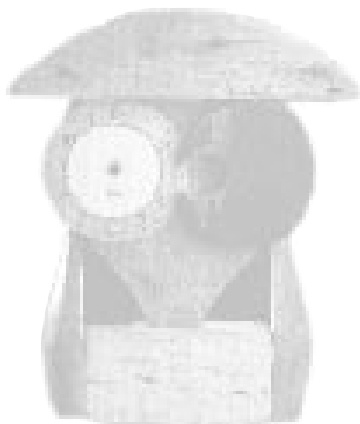
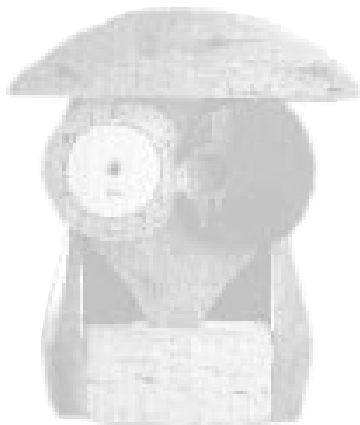
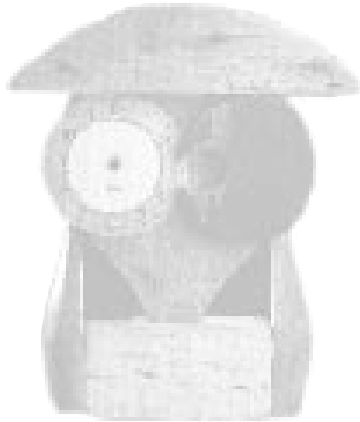


## A HERO OF OUR TIME? AN INTRODUCTION TO *JOHNNO*

**B**y 're-entering the past in an imaginative way' David Malouf has taken us into the world of his own childhood and early adulthood, but he has also taken us on a journey way beyond this world. *Johnno's* and the narrator's (Dante's) lives could be those of many Australians; the book forces us to consider what it is to be an Australian - and a Queenslander at that - and also what it is to be an Australian living abroad.

*Johnno* evokes the Brisbane that existed during the Second World War. Not yet a city, the war brought the town to life, as its geographical proximity to the Pacific arena of the war assured its prominence: 'Our sleepy sub-tropical town, with its feathery palm trees and its miles of sprawling weatherboard, was on the news-reels' (p. 28).

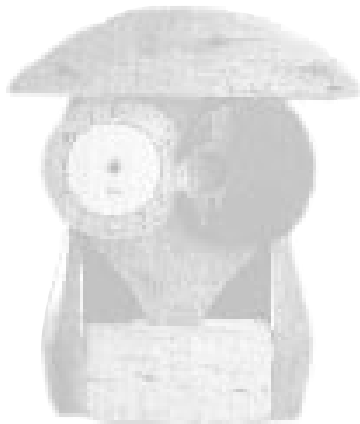
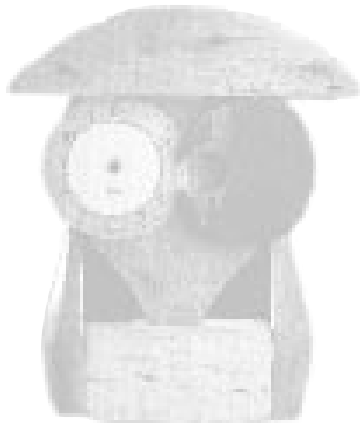
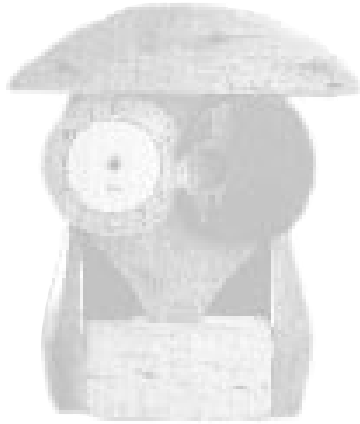
**M**alouf delights in describing his hometown: the shady verandahs where daytime visitors were entertained, the nearby river with its mudflats and mangrove swamps, summer storms on tin roofs - and always the heat, references to the sticky, humid Brisbane heat abound throughout the novel as he describes a



town where, even at night, 'the pavements gave off a heat that rose right up through your shoes' (p. 136). It is a palpable heat we can feel.

**B**ut as the city grows up, develops and changes, so too do the chief protagonists. *Johnno* is the story of two mates who grow up in steamy wartime Brisbane going to school and university together, progressing from childhood pranks to the pubs and brothels of the 1950s, and eventually travelling overseas. For both it is important to gain wisdom through life rather than study, and this means making the great Australian pilgrimage overseas. Johnno, who unlike the narrator has always despised his hometown (his life is a 'denunciation of the city', (p. 104), leaves first. He encourages Dante to also leave, to 'give up shadow boxing in the suburbs of limbo and follow him before it was too late' (p. 107). Although Dante's feelings towards his hometown have always been warm ones, he too felt the need to go elsewhere: 'I had always known [London] was *my* destination' (p. 127).

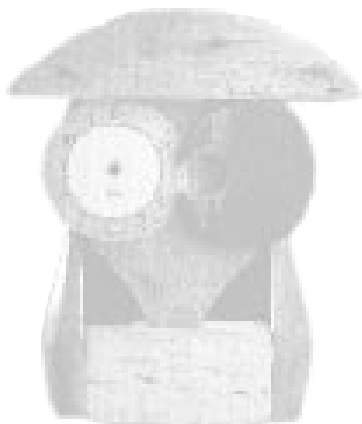
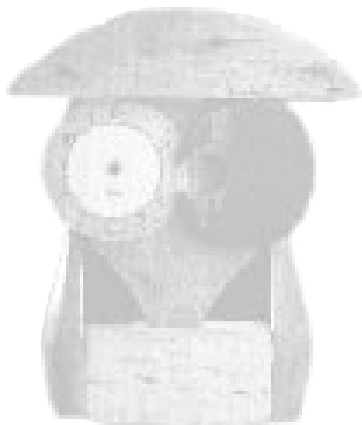
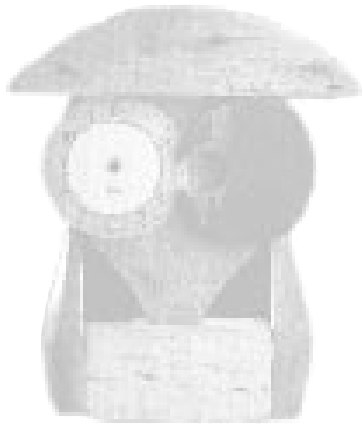
**T**he relationship between the narrator Dante and Johnno is the main focus of the novel, yet it is a sporadic and unlikely relationship. At the start of the novel it is Dante who seeks acceptance by Johnno, and yet it is Johnno who seeks to maintain contact later in life. Dante didn't even bother to respond to Johnno's



letters: 'There was always someone else I cared for more' (p. 153). Their personalities are quite different; Dante is often embarrassed by Johnno.

**D**ante is the writer and yet it is Johnno who is unable to distinguish between fact and fiction. Even as a child he pretended to be someone he wasn't - a no-hoper when he was really quite bright. In France he pretends to be a Scot, and he never gives Dante his correct address ('Johnno had always liked mysteries', p. 134). Johnno lived for the thrill of the pretence and yet it is Johnno who tells Dante that Dante has 'a terror of real experience that [he] would obviously never outgrow' (p. 122). But when Dante plays along with Johnno's fantasies, Johnno's enthusiasm cools (p. 122). Did Johnno really set fire to churches (p. 136)? Did he really steal cars from the German autobahn (p. 130)?

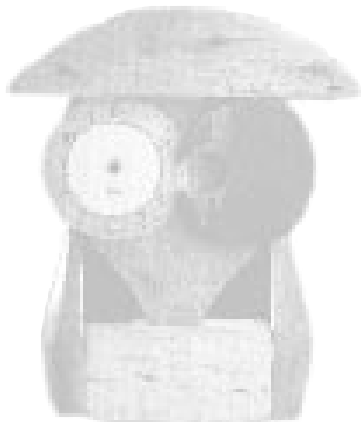
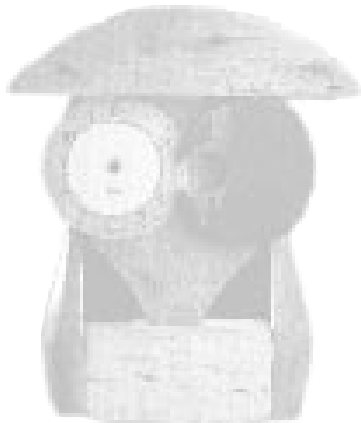
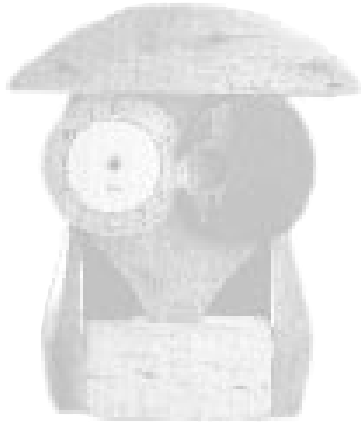
**J**ohnno's life was a 'gesture of defiance' (p. 136) - a railing against the world while he attempts to find his place in it. His drinking problem is a sign of his inability to cope with the real world, a desire that there be much more to life than there really is. There is nothing straightforward about this character and this is much more than a story of two mates growing up together. Even Johnnos death is ambiguous - did he drown or was it suicide?



**S**omething...expected to produce failed to eventuate' (p. 153) sums up the relationship between Johnno and Dante, although it is the unifying thread running through the novel and appears strong enough to maintain the connection albeit at times distant over the years.

**T**he narrator, while reporting with fondness on the events of his and Johnno's lives, appears curiously detached from people family and friends and the events he is describing. Despite admitting that he has always known London was where he wanted to be, he follows this up with: 'It wasn't something I had chosen. I was here, that's all. I had never left *anywhere*...' (p. 129). Dante is a follower rather than an instigator of action and appears to live vicariously through Johnno's exploits. Does he have the 'terror of real experience' (p. 122) Johnno credits him with? Like Johnno, the narrator also hides the truth. At thirteen he appeared 'a neat, darkly serious, well-brought up little figure' (p. 38), yet 'I wasn't true of course. I had too many secrets' (p. 39).

**A**s if to prove the cyclical nature of life, the book physically ends where it had begun. The narrator's father has died and he is sorting through his father's things. He comes across a photo showing Johnno in the lifesaving team and wearing glasses - both of which are lies. Johnno was never in the team and he did not wear glasses.



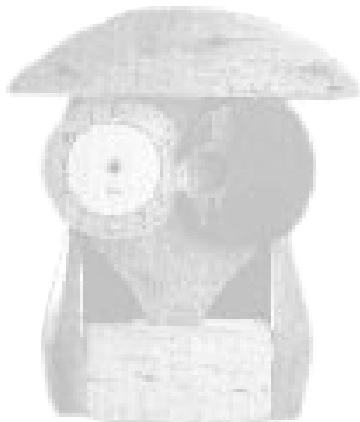
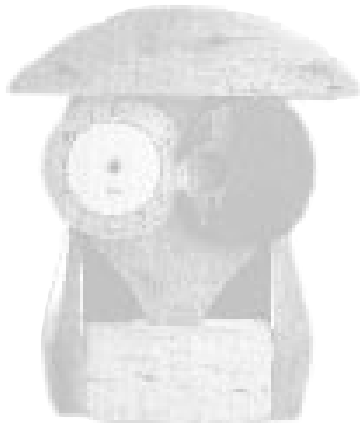
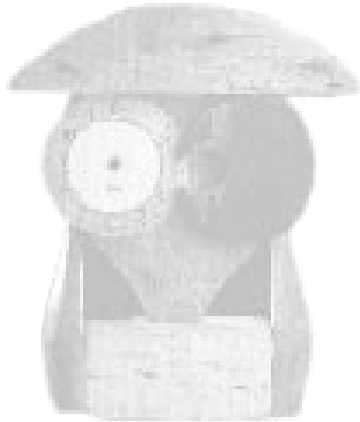
It was 'a joke with a time fuse' (p. 110). The story of Johnno takes up the bulk of the book, for Dante '...had been writing my book about Johnno from the moment we met' (p. 12). But in the end, ' "It's all lies," Johnno would say. And in the end, perhaps, it is. Johnno's false disguise is the one image of him that has lasted' (p. 170).

#### ABOUT DAVID MALOUF

**D**avid Malouf was born in Brisbane in 1934. His father's family came to Australia from Lebanon in the late 1880s and his mother's family from London just before the First World War.

**J***ohnno*, first published in 1975, is Malouf's first novel. It was written while Malouf was in Florence in 1972, although he first started work on the book in 1963. He worked on several drafts over the next ten years, crafting the writing before submitting the book for publication.

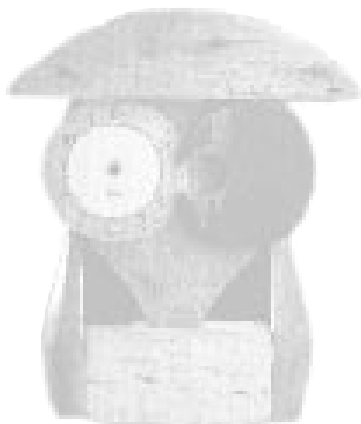
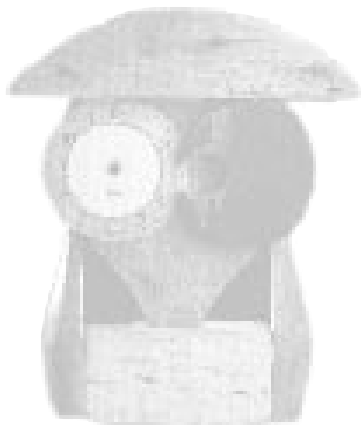
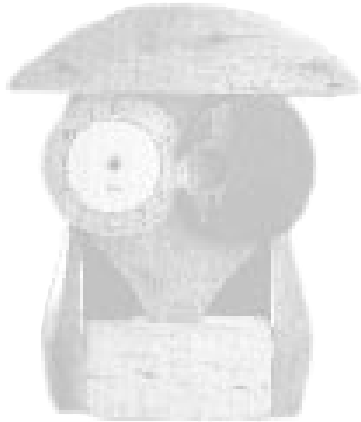
**J***ohnno* is heavily autobiographical. Like the main characters Dante and Johnno, Malouf was educated at Brisbane Grammar School and the University of Queensland. His education took place during and immediately after the Second World War, the period described in the novel. Malouf later taught at the



University of Queensland before travelling overseas, just like Dante and Johnno, except that Malouf remained abroad for nearly ten years while he taught in England and travelled in Europe. In 1968 Malouf returned to Australia and took up the position of senior tutor and then lecturer at the University of Sydney. He has been a full-time writer since 1978. For many years he lived primarily in Tuscany, Italy, although he returned frequently to Australia, but he now spends most of his time in Sydney.

**D**avid Malouf has received numerous awards for his writing both in Australia and overseas, including the following prizes: his second novel, *An Imaginary Life* won the NSW Premier's Literary Award for Fiction in 1979. *The Great World* (1990) has won the Commonwealth Writers Prize 1991, the Miles Franklin Award 1991 and the Prix Femina. *Remembering Babylon* (1993) was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won the NSW Premier's Literary Award 1993, Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction 1994, the French Prix Baudelaire 1995 and was the first winner of the richest literary prize of all the \$200,000 IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Malouf's latest novel is *Conversations at Curlow Creek* (1996).





## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

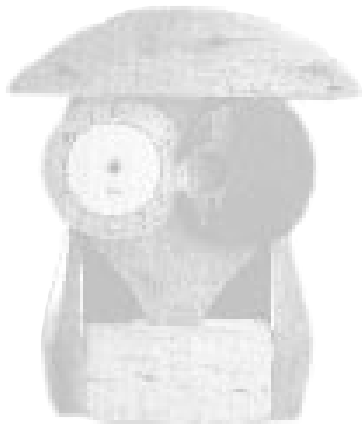
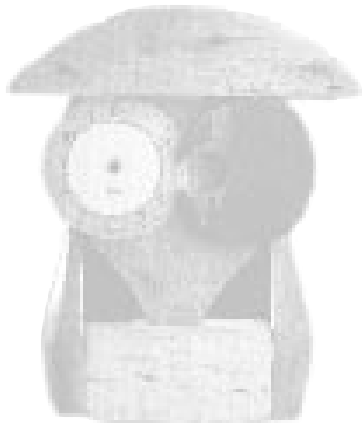
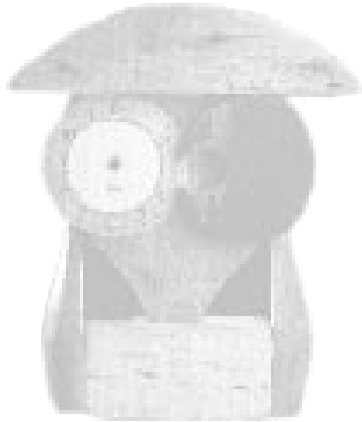
1. What do you think is meant by the statement 'Johnno was locked in combat with the elusive Australian dream'?

2. The title of the book Johnno gives to Dante is ***A Hero of our Time***. Is this how you see Johnno? Consider the following very different descriptions of him: slightly pathetic; a romantic figure; an ordinary person trying to survive in a difficult world.

3. David Malouf has said that ***Johnno*** is an autobiographical work. If you are familiar with his other works, consider why he might have moved away in his writing from intimate and revealing works until his latest novel, ***Conversations at Carlow Creek***.

4. 'Central as Johnno is to the novel he rarely comes alive' (Judah Watten, ***The Age***, 26 April 1975). Do you agree with this statement?

5. Is ***Johnno*** essentially just another 'growing up in ...' story, which happens to be set in Brisbane?



6. Why were Johnno's fantasies so important to him? Consider the final lines of the novel: 'Maybe, in the end, even the lies we tell define us. And better, some of them, than our most earnest attempts at the truth' (p. 170).

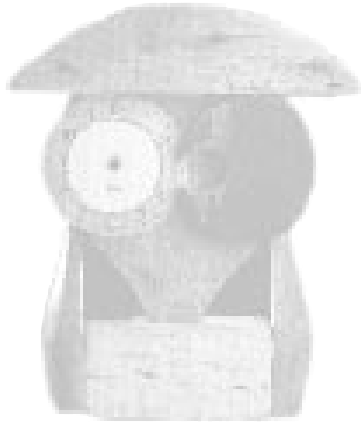
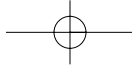
7. Do you empathise with either of the main characters, and did this allegiance switch during the course of the novel? Would you have liked to know more about their real feelings?

8. Is the relationship between Johnno and Dante essentially a case of opposites attract?

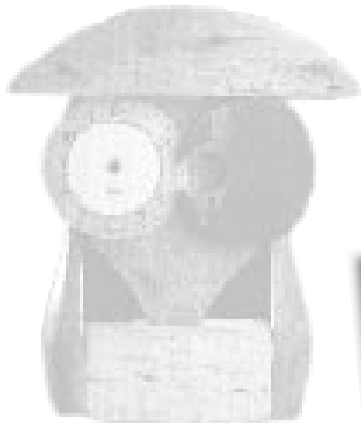
9. Discuss what you think is meant by the hero as anti-hero. Is this novel a good example of this phenomenon?

10. Compare what Johnno wants from life with what Dante wants. Remember that Johnno's story is being told by Dante.

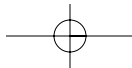
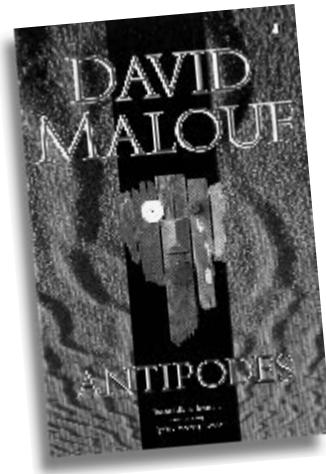
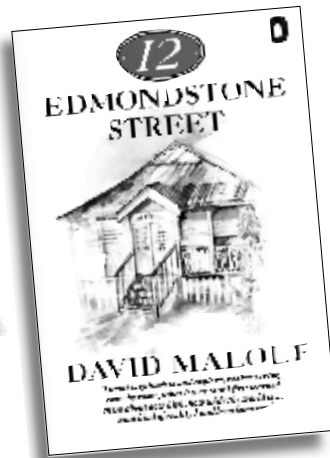
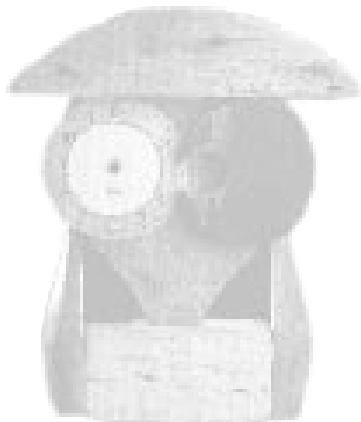
11. David Malouf has said that 'There is a sense, as I discovered when writing *Johnno*, in which places only become fully real to us when they have appeared in a book...' He has also said that in Australia, 'we've only recently discovered that our own past may be as interesting as other people's pasts'. Discuss these statements in view of your knowledge that Johnno is an autobiographical novel.



12. Dante says of his being born in Brisbane - 'simply the most ordinary place in the world' (p. 52) despite his obvious affection for it - 'What an extraordinary thing it is, that I should be here rather than somewhere else' (p. 52). How do you think Dante's personality would have been different if the novel had been set overseas rather than in Australia?



### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING



*Reading Notes are available for the  
following titles*

**A STRANGER HERE Gillian Bouras**

**DIGGING Sara Dowse**

**THE BEHOLDER Julian Davies**

**DEATH OF A RIVER GUIDE Richard Flanagan**

**THE ROOMS IN MY MOTHER'S HOUSE Olga Lorenzo**

**I FOR ISOBEL Amy Witting**

**IT'S RAINING IN MANGO Thea Astley**

**WHAT I HAVE WRITTEN John Scott**

**JOHNNO David Malouf**

**THE ORCHARD THIEVES Elizabeth Jolley**

