

Ransom by David Malouf
Chatto and Windus 2009

Sometimes the smallest books pack the biggest punches, and Ransom, a mere 219 pages of superb prose, does precisely that.

Ransom concerns the aftermath of the heroic battle between Achilles and Hector beneath the walls of Troy. The theme that runs through the entire story is grief and loss, but it is handled in such a brilliant way by David Malouf that, contrary to what might be expected, it is both uplifting and full of hope.

Achilles is deranged with grief at the death of his childhood friend Patroclus, the victim of Hector's martial prowess; his pursuit and killing of Hector, and then his humiliation of the latter's body is bitter, ferocious and terrifying, but it fails to assuage his sense of loss and guilt. In addition, his inability to inflict the destruction he wishes on Hector's body forces him to repeat his dragging of his body round Troy on a daily basis, to the deep concern of his own elite troops.

Within Troy, Priam its king and Hector's father has to grapple with many things; his fears for the future of his city, the grief of his wife, his own grief, and a desperate desire to ransom Hector's body and give his son an honourable funeral.

The climax of the book details Priam's effort to retrieve his son's body, a course of action that, although the reader knows Troy's destruction is inevitable, is powerful and redemptive for him and Achilles.

This is writing of the very best quality from one of modern literature's finest craftsmen.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh