

A short guide to: **Ransom by David Malouf**

written by Jonathan Wong

Author Bio

Name: David Malouf

Key facts:

- Multi-award winning author from Brisbane, Australia
- Was first published as a poet
- His writing style is melodic, lyrical, incisive

Mini Plot Summary:

The events in Ransom play out over the course of one day, in the time of the legendary Trojan War. The story is based on the final passages of Homer's The Iliad. The main thread of the novella follows **King Priam** as he journeys to reclaim the body of his son, **Hector**, from **Achilles**.

Extended Plot Summary:

Hector (Prince of Troy) kills Patroclus in battle. Patroclus is Achilles' 'adoptive brother', and is beloved by him. As revenge for Patroclus' death, Achilles kills Hector.

After killing Hector, Achilles attempts to desecrate his body over the course of eleven days. He ties Hector up by his feet, and drags him behind his chariot. However, Achilles is frustrated, because the gods intervene: they keep restoring Hector's body so that it looks untouched.

Sidenote: Achilles feels partly responsible for Patroclus' death. He had refused to fight for Agamemnon, the King of the Greeks, because Agamemnon had taken Briseis from him (Briseis was a slave girl that Achilles had grown fond of). Since Achilles wasn't fighting, he allowed Patroclus to lead the Myrmidons (Greek army) into the battle in his stead, wearing Achilles' armor. Patroclus was killed in that battle by Hector.

For the eleven days following Hector's death, Priam (King of Troy) is consumed by grief. 'The grief that racks him is not only for his son Hector. It is also for a kingdom ravaged and threatened with extinction, for his wife, Hecuba, and the many sons of daughters and their children who stand under his weak protection.'

Priam sees the goddess Iris, who is seated close by him on the couch. He believes that everything in his life is a mockery: the humiliation of Hector, whose corpse has been dragged through the dust, his reduction in this moment to the 'abandoned child, all grime and stinking; a child now with seventy years on his back', and the 'extravagant pageant of his days as Priam, King of Troy'.

Iris responds, with a whisper in his ear, that what has happened is 'not a mockery, my friend, but the way things are. Not the way they must be, but the way they have turned out. In a world that is also subject to chance.'

Priam is 'bewildered, but also strangely excited' by this mention of 'chance' by the goddess Iris. His mind becomes clear. He has a vision. 'The picture that forms before him is of himself seated just as he is here, but in full sunlight on the crossbench of a cart. A plain wooden cart ... draw by two coal-black mules.'

He has an unprecedented plan, which he relays to his wife Hecuba. He tells her that he will travel by mule and cart, carrying a ransom of treasure to Achilles, who is residing in the camp of the Greek army, and exchange it for the body of Hector.

He explains to her that, in the past, 'to be seen as a man like other men ... would have suggested that [he] was impermanent and weak', and that the most important thing had been to be 'still here ... Fixed and permanent'. He considers that 'to others I am what what I have always been - great Priam. But only because they have never really looked at me. And when they do look, what they see is what they are meant to see. The fixed mark

to which everything else in my kingdom refers. A ceremonial figurehead that might just as well be of stone or wood.'

In other words, Priam has always been a symbolic figure to the people, as opposed to a normal human being, with weakness and vulnerability.

He plans to change all of this by carrying out his vision. He wants to do 'something new'. He will 'go today, immediately, to Achilles ... plainly dressed and with no attendant but a driver for the cart - not as a king but as an ordinary man, a father, and offer him a ransom'.

Hecuba is very sceptical of Priam's plan, and tells him that it is 'folly'. She argues that Priam will likely be struck down before he gets even halfway to the Greek camp.

Priam contends that 'what seems foolish is just what is most sensible sometimes' and that 'the fact that it has never been done, that it is novel, unthinkable ... makes me believe it should be attempted'. He also ponders: 'Why do we think always that the simple thing is beneath us? Because we are kings? What I do is what any man might do'.

He wants to offer Achilles 'the chance to break free of the obligation of being always the hero, as [he is] expected always to be the king. To take on the lighter bond of being simply a man.' He states that 'perhaps that is the real gift I have to bring him. Perhaps that is the ransom'.

Priam recounts to Hecuba the story of his early life. His original name was Podarces. His parents and family had been slaughtered by Heracles, so he had been hidden amongst slave children - 'one of a horde of wailing infants ... who [had] been driven like geese out of the blazing citadel' - in order to protect him from being killed alongside them. He was about to be carried off, to live his life as a slave: 'I stand looking at [the road]. [It] leads to slavery ... I look up now and I can still see it. It's the road my other self went down' - when he was suddenly saved by his sister, Hesione, who had agreed to an unwanted marriage with Heracles, and had asked for him as a wedding gift.

Heracles renamed him Priam - meaning 'the price paid' - to remind Hesione that 'till I allowed you to choose him out of this filthy rabble, he was a slave like any other, a nameless thing, with no other life before him but the dirt and sweat of a slave's life'.

This event had a profound effect on Priam. From then on, he had understood that his life was just one outcome of many possibilities, and that things could have turned out very different, but for chance.

Priam explains his plan - to personally offer Achilles a ransom for Hector's body - to his sons, his daughters, his councillors and his advisors. They (like Hecuba) are sceptical. They are worried his plan will 'put [his] precious life at risk' and will '[expose] to insult [Priam's] royal image'. Polydamas ('one of the wisest of Trojans') says to Priam: 'I beg you, spare yourself this ordeal. Do not, for the affection we all bear you, expose yourself to the hazards of war and of the road, or to the indignities that Achilles and any other Greek who happens along might heap upon you. Be kind to your old age. Relieve yourself of this unnecessary task.'

In response to their scepticism, Priam replies with the following: 'You ask me to stand, as I have always done, at a kingly distance from the human, which in my kingly role, as you say, I can have no part in. But I am also a father. Mightn't it be time for me to expose myself at last to what is merely human? To learn a little of what that might be, and what it is to bear it as others do?'

In the end, Priam's family (and councillors) see that there is no use trying to persuade their king. They let him proceed with his plan. However, they prepare for Priam his usual splendid chariot rather than the plain one he requested, and he rages at them to bring him what he'd asked for.

Soon they bring in a man named Somax ('a stocky fellow of fifty or so'), who owns a plain cart that is pulled by two strong black mules, named Beauty and Shock. Priam assigns Somax the role of herald, and tells him he will call him Idaeus (which is the name of his usual herald). They set off on their journey, receiving strange looks from the crowd. Somax feels uncomfortable with being assigned the name 'Idaeus', and he feels that 'something about the life he has lived all these years, the hardships, the losses he has suffered, and the way he has forced himself to go on and endure, is being set aside and made light of'.

As the sun begins to fall, Priam and Somax stop by the River Scamander to rest. Somax helps Priam down from the cart and helps him wash his feet. Priam begins to appreciate

Somax's good nature: 'there was so much simple modesty and goodwill in the man, and so much tact in the way he made his suggestions, that Priam found nothing objectionable in him'. They also have a conversation about 'unnecessary' things (such as 'griddlecakes', and how they are made), which Priam finds very intriguing, because 'in his own world a man spoke only to give shape to a decision he had come to, or to lay out an argument for or against'. He is not used to smalltalk.

Somax talks about his family. His infant granddaughter has a bad fever at the moment, and his two full-grown sons are both dead. Somax is filled with regret, and pain, but he concludes that: 'the worst happens, and there, it's done. The fleas go on biting. The sun comes up again.' Priam is touched by Somax's life story, and in particular, he '[wonders] if the phrase he had taken up so easily, that he knew what it was to lose a son, really did mean the same for him as it did for the driver'.

They continue their journey to the Greek camp. Priam and Somax are soon visited by a mysterious, charming man, who introduces himself as a Greek soldier sent to escort them to the camp. However, he soon admits he is the god Hermes after Priam realises his true identity. Hermes leads them to the Greek camp.

Priam and Somax meet Achilles in the camp. Achilles asks Priam how he arrived in their camp, and Priam says he was 'guided', which impresses Achilles.

Achilles sends Somax away, to eat something, then he listens to what Priam has to say.

Priam appeals to Achilles' humanity. 'Think, Achilles. Think of your son, Neoptolemus. Would you not do for him what I am doing here for Hector? Would your father, Peleus, not do the same for you? Strip himself of all the ornaments of power, and with no concern any longer for pride or distinction, do what is most human - come as I do, a plain man white-haired and old, and entreat the killer of his son, with whatever small dignity is left him, to remember his own death, and the death of his father, and do as these things are honourably done among us, to take the ransom I bring and give me back my son'.

Achilles is touched by Priam's appeal. He has sudden visions, of his own death, and Priam's (at the hands of his son, Neoptolemus) and 'sits soul-struck'. He agrees to give Priam what he came for, Hector's body. Priam will be given lodgings in which to rest while the body is washed and prepared.

Achilles goes to collect the body. It remains unmarked and unblemished. This used to anger him - because he felt like the gods, by constantly restoring it, were defying him - but now he feels a 'cleansing emotion'.

'He regards Hector's body now, and the clean-limbed perfection of it, the splendour of the warrior who has won an honourable death, is no longer an affront. The affection of the gods for a man whose end it was part of his own accomplished life to accomplish he can now take as an honour intended also to himself.'

Achilles and Priam decide to hold a truce in honour of Hector: 'Nine days for the Trojans to make a journey into the forests of Mount Ida and fell the pine logs for Hector's pyre. In the city, nine days of ceremonial mourning. On the tenth the burning of Hector's body. The eleventh for the raising of his burial mound. On the twelfth the war would resume.'

Achilles accompanies Priam and Somax to the gate of the Greek camp. They begin their trip back to Trojan.

Priam believes 'he has done something for which he will be remembered for as long as such stories are told. He has stepped into a space that till now was uninhabited and found a way to fill it. Not as he filled his old role as king, since all he had to do in that case was follow convention, slip his arms into the sleeves of an empty garment and stand still, but as one for whom every gesture had still to be hit upon, every word discovered anew, to say nothing of the conviction needed to carry all its conclusion.'

Achilles also feels more content after giving Priam Hector's body.

Somax is excited to have been part of this journey: '... what a tale he will have to tell! He will tell it often over the years.'

The narrative momentarily ponders the future of Troy, and how Somax's story will be remembered in that distant world. 'Later - when Troy has become just another long, windswept hilltop, its towers reduced to rubble, its citizens scattered or carried off ... - all he has to tell, which was once as real as the itch under his tunic ... will have become the stuff of legend, half folktale, half an old man's empty bragging.' ... 'Even the memory

then, of what once was, will have grown dim in the minds of a generation who, for the whole of their lives, have known nothing but chaos and lawlessness’.

For the remainder of Somax’s life, he tells the story, over and over, about how he was chosen as the king’s herald for one day. No-one believes him. ‘What he has to tell did happen - or so they say - but to someone else. Idaeus, the man was called, King Priam’s herald. Is it likely that such a figure, a king’s herald, would have griddlecakes in his satchel? Do great kings dabble their feet in icy streams?’

People believe that the most remarkable thing about Somax was his little black mule, named Beauty, ‘who is still remembered in this part of the country and much talked about’.

In an afterword, the author mentions that Ransom’s ‘primary interest is in storytelling itself - why stories are told and why we need to hear them, how stories get changed in the telling - and much of what it has to tell are ‘untold tales’ found only in the margins of earlier writers.’

Overarching Themes:

- *Honourable leadership*
 - As the story progresses, Priam gains a deeper understanding of what it means to be a good leader. He has spent the majority of his life as a symbolic figure (as opposed to a normal, vulnerable human being), which has left him disconnected from his people. He seeks to change this by doing ‘something new’. He will go to Achilles as an ‘ordinary man, a father and offer him a ransom’.
 - Priam believes that his position of power should not preclude him from doing the ‘simple thing’, and that doing such things should not be ‘beneath [him]’. In this instance he is referring to his plan to ransom for Hector’s body, travelling by mule and cart. He has no time for pride anymore, nor for ceremony, and will do whatever he can to pursue what he thinks is the right path.
 - Priam thinks that a king should do ‘what any man might do’, if it is the right thing to do. He believes that morality is consistent at all levels of society, whether one is a poor labourer at the local market, or a revered king who rules the lives and fates of millions.

- When Priam meets Achilles and explains his intention, Achilles is ‘soul-struck’ by Priam’s passionate request. Achilles is the leader of the Myrmidons (the Greek army), so agreeing to give away the body of their sworn enemy, Hector, could be viewed as a sign of weakness. But Achilles is convinced by Priam that doing so is a compassionate act - a sign of honourable and humble leadership.
- *Empathy & Humility*
 - Priam knows that his best chance of retrieving Hector’s body is to rid himself of all the grand titles, and the ceremony, and to seek out Achilles as a man and as a father. He understands the power of humility.
 - Humans have a tendency to be proud; we place great emphasis on our personal dignity, and status, oftentimes to our detriment. Priam knows he must relinquish his pride, and gain humility instead, if he is to become a better leader. Doing so does not make him ‘impermanent and weak’.
 - Priam: ‘You ask me to stand, as I have always done, at a kingly distance from the human, which in my kingly role, as you say, I can have no part in. But I am also a father. Mightn’t it be time for me to expose myself at last to what is merely human? To learn a little of what that might be, and what it is to bear it as others do?’
 - When Priam was a child, he almost lived a life of slavery. He sees it as ‘the road my other self went down’. This experience, early in his life, may explain why Priam possesses empathy and humility.
 - Achilles also shows great empathy. He understands how difficult it must have been for Priam to journey to the camp of his enemy, and to ‘entreat with the killer of his son’. He gains respect for King Priam, and for his conquered enemy, Hector, who he views now as honourable.
- *Fate & chance*
 - Priam understands that the life he has lived, as a king, was conditional. He would have been destined for slavery if not for his sister, Hesione, who came to his rescue at the last moment. From then on, Priam had knowledge that his life was just one outcome of many possibilities, and that things could have turned out very different, but for chance.
 - Near the beginning, Priam believes his life is a mockery, but the goddess Iris tells him that it is ‘not a mockery, my friend, but the way things are.’

Not the way they must be, but the way they have turned out. In a world that is also subject to chance.’ She alludes to the notion that our fates are not written, and that we have an opportunity to write our own stories and histories.

- *Love & Family*

- Priam has a deep love for his greatest son, Hector, who died at the hands of Achilles’ blade. He is willing to risk his life - travelling to the Greek camp - to reclaim Hector’s body. His love for Hector drives him to be a better person, and to do what is right. He demonstrates that he possesses humility, and he in turn receives the same from Achilles.
- He also gains a newfound respect for the common people of Troy. This arises mainly through his interactions with the man named Somax.
- Achilles loved his ‘adoptive brother’, Patroclus, who died in battle, having taken Achilles’ place. Achilles sought revenge for Patroclus’ death, and obtained it by slaying the man who killed Patroclus - Hector. His actions demonstrate how love can sometimes drive us to the extreme, and that although it can often foster good, it can just as easily corrupt.
- When Priam and Somax rest by the River Scamander, Somax tells Priam about his life and his family. Priam learns that Somax has a granddaughter who is ill, and two full-grown sons who are both dead. The way that Somax talks about his family - with love and tenderness in his voice - makes Priam ‘[wonder] if the phrase he had taken up so easily, that he knew what it was to lose a son, really did mean the same for him as it did for the driver’. His interaction with Somax provides him with an appreciation for what it truly means to love.

- *Language & Storytelling*

- In an afterword, the author mentions that Ransom’s ‘primary interest is in storytelling itself - why stories are told and why we need to hear them, how stories get changed in the telling - and much of what it has to tell are “untold tales” found only in the margins of earlier writers.’
- Prior to his journey with Somax, Priam does not consider that words can be used for anything other than ‘to give shape to a decision he had come to, or to lay out an argument for or against’. He lives in a world that is defined by power and status and politics. He usually speaks ‘to offer

thanks to one who had done well, or a reproof, either in anger or gentle regret, to one who had not', and he even considers that speaking can reveal one's weakness: 'Silence, not speech, was what was expressive. Power lay in containment.' ... 'A child might prattle, till it learned better'.

- Priam soon realises, after speaking with Somax, that such 'prattle', which he believed to be 'unnecessary', actually forms an important function. Stories can be pleasurable. Stories can be the 'crack in the door' that allows one to glimpse the world of another. Stories allow us to see the world in another's shoes - to gain a greater sense of empathy and understanding.

Key Characters:

- *Priam*
 - Main protagonist
 - King of Troy, father of Hector
 - Journeys to the Greek camp to reclaim the body of his son from Achilles
 - Gains empathy and humility throughout the course of the novel
- *Achilles*
 - Other protagonist
 - The greatest Greek warrior of all time; half-human, half-god
 - Fierce, passionate, vengeful
 - Kills Hector
 - Allows Priam to take Hector's body
- *Somax*
 - New character: not present in Homer's *The Iliad*
 - Commoner who owns two mules and a cart
 - Children are dead
 - Humble
- *Hecuba*
 - Queen of Troy, Priam's wife
 - Sceptical of Priam's plan to ransom Hector's body

- Does not stop him in the end

Other characters:

- *Hermes/Greek soldier* (Assists Priam in journey)
- *Goddess Iris* (Comes to Priam with whispered advice)
- *Patroclus* (Achilles' adoptive brother)
- *Hector* (Troy's greatest warrior - dead)
- *Peleus* (Achilles' father)
- *Neoptolemus* (Achilles' son)

Key quotes:

‘The grief that racks him is not only for his son Hector. It is also for a kingdom ravaged and threatened with extinction, for his wife, Hecuba, and the many songs of daughters and their children who stand under his weak protection.’

(Priam, when he is suffering from grief) ‘... reduced once more to what he had been when they first reached down and plucked him out, an abandoned child, all grimed and stinking; a child now with seventy years on his back, and all that lies between, the extravagant pageant of his days as Priam, King of Troy, a mockery as they had all along intended.’

‘Not a mockery, my friend, but the way things are. Not the way they must be, but the way they have turned out. In a world that is also subject to chance.’

‘A plain wooden cart ... drawn by two coal-black mules’

‘To be seen as a man like other men ... would have suggested that [he] was impermanent and weak.’

‘Only that I am still here. Fixed and permanent.’

‘To others I am what I have always been - great Priam. But only because they have never really looked at me. And when they do look, what they see is what they are meant

to see. The fixed mark to which everything else in my kingdom refers. A ceremonial figurehead that might just as well be of stone or wood.’

‘[Hecuba] is more tied to convention than she believes’

‘...that is what I intend to do. To go today, immediately, to Achilles, just as I saw myself in my dream, plainly dressed and with no attendant but a driver for the cart - not as a king but as an ordinary man, a father, and offer him a ransom...’

(Hector) ‘a man with no blemish on his soul’

‘I believe ... that the thing that is needed to cut this knot we are all tied in is something that has never before been done or thought of. Something impossible. Something new.’

‘...what seems foolish is just what is most sensible sometimes. The fact that it has never been done, that it is novel, unthinkable ... makes me believe it should be attempted.’

‘Why do we think always that the simple thing is beneath us? Because we are kings? What I do is what any man might do.’

‘To take on the lighter bond of being simply a man. Perhaps that is the real gift I have to bring him. Perhaps that is the ransom’.

‘Words are powerful. They too can be the agents of what is new, of what is conceivable and can be thought and let loose upon the world.’

‘Imagine! To be at one moment the little pampered darling of your father’s court, never more than twenty paces from your nurse or some watchful steward, the pet of your mother’s maidservants - big girls with golden half-moons or butterflies in their ears that I liked to snatch at and jingle - and of slaves who had to approach me on their knees, even when all they were doing was offering a pile of shelled walnuts on a silver salver or a bowl to receive my tinkling piss. With a skin that had never known the touch of any but the finest cotton or silk, and in winter and lambswool undershirt. The possessor of a sleek bay pony, and a pet rabbit, and a wicker cage the size of my fist with a cricket in it to drum and chirp beside my pillow. To be at one moment Podarces, son of Laomedon, King of Troy, and in the next just one of a rabble of slave children, with a smell on me

that I had taken till then to be the smell of another order of beings. A foul slave-smell that I clung to now in the hope that it would cling to me, since it was the only thing that could save me from drowning like my brothers, up there in the citadel, in my own blood.'

'I stand looking at it. That road leads to slavery - that's what I tell myself. It's the road he will drag me down. Slung across his shoulders like a sheep. ... I look now and I can still see it. It's the road my other self went down.'

(Heracles) '... That till I allowed you to choose him out of this filthy rabble, he was a slave like any other ...'

'I had the smell on me, here in my head, but also - I can smell it now - in my armpits, on my hands ...'

(Somax, when he is renamed Idaeus) 'Something about the life he has lived all these years, the hardships, the losses he has suffered, and the way he has forced himself to go on and endure, is being set aside and made light of.'

'In his own world a man spoke only to give shape to a decision he had come to, or to lay out an argument for or against.'

(Somax) 'You'd think you could just give it to them, free, even if it meant a little tightening in your own chest.'

(Somax) "'We're tied that way, all of us. Tied here,'" and he closed his fist and brought it to his chest to indicate the heart.'

(Somax) 'But the truth is, we don't just lie down and die, do we, sir? We go on. For all our losses.'

(Somax) 'The worst happens, and there, it's done. The fleas go on biting. The sun comes up again.'

'Think, Achilles. Think of your son, Neoptolemus. Would you not do for him what I am doing here for Hector? Would your father, Peleus, not do the same for you? Strip himself of all the ornaments of power, and with no concern any longer for pride or distinction, do

what is most human - come as I do, a plain man white-haired and old, and entreat the killer of his son, with whatever small dignity is left him, to remember his own death, and the death of his father, and do as these things are honourably done among us, to take the ransom I bring and give me back my son.'

'What puzzles him is the desire he feels - curiosity again, that new impulse in him - to know more of what is hidden and contrary in this boldest, most ferocious, most unpredictable of the Greeks. Mightn't that be useful to him later? As a means to saving them - Hecuba, himself, his people - from what otherwise must surely come?'

'He has stepped into a space that till now was uninhabited and found a way to fill it. Not as he filled his old role as king, since all he had to do in that case was follow convention, slip his arms into the sleeves of an empty garment and stand still, but as one for whom every gesture had still to be hit upon, every word discovered anew, to say nothing of the conviction needed to carry all to its conclusion.'

'Even the memory then, of what once was, will have grown dim in the minds of a generation who, for the whole of their lives, have known nothing but chaos and lawlessness.'

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