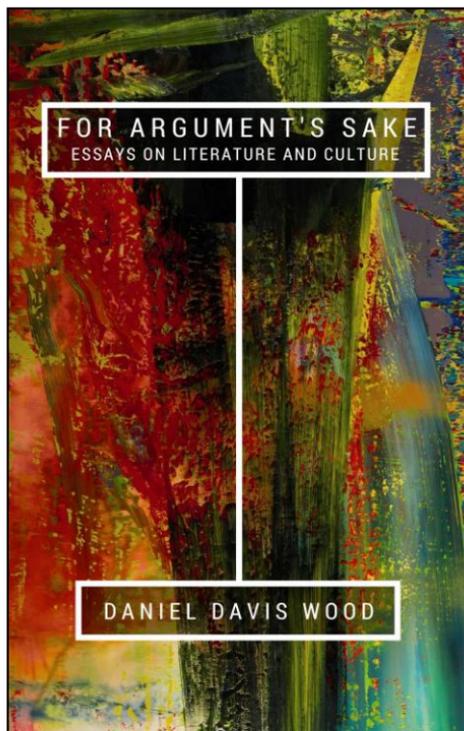


The following document is an extract from *For Argument's Sake: Essays on Literature and Culture* by Daniel Davis Wood, pages 387-389.

It appears here, in PDF format, exactly as it appears in print.



www.danieldaviswood.com

A TALE OF TWO CITIES: POSTSCRIPT

This note was commissioned by the Melbourne Emerging Writers' Festival
and originally appeared online at *EWTdigital* (31 May 2011).

IN ITS OFFICIAL BID TO HAVE MELBOURNE DESIGNATED THE second UNESCO City of Literature, the Victorian State Government pinpointed a dozen of the city's most celebratory literary qualities. The problem? Half of those qualities were pure make-believe. Melbourne, apparently, is Athens on the Yarra, boasting "an urban panorama in which literature, drama and/or poetry play an integral role" and brimming with "notable literary monuments" and "birth-place[s], residence[s] and/or workplace[s] of renowned writers, poets and philosophers" (Anon., 'City of Literature Status'). Aside from the few underwhelming literary monuments I have written about before, that's all news to me. To say that Melbourne is failing its City of Literature status is to miss the greater part of the story. Having floated its City of Literature bid on hot air, Melbourne received a blessing it didn't really deserve and continues to fail to justify that unwarranted honour.

UNESCO Cities of Literature have one primary objective: to ensure the thriving of a citywide literary culture. As Edinburgh has demonstrated, this objective is best achieved by two means: first by publicly commemorating the city's literary past, then by actively encouraging city residents to see themselves both as heirs to the city's literary heritage and as participants in its present-day literary community. Set foot in a city that does these two things and you'll feel yourself in the midst of countless others for whom literary appreciation is a communal practice tethered to a communal literary tradition. Downtown Edinburgh, as I have already noted, is littered with plaques and monuments commemorating every literary accomplishment to which the city can stake a claim, while libraries, schools, and cafes everywhere from the city centre out to the city fringe participate in the 'One Book — One Edinburgh' campaign, annually offering a free copy of a particular book to anyone who wants to read it and thus encouraging locals to join what amounts to a citywide reading group (Anon., 'One Book — One Edinburgh').

Beyond lacklustre literary monuments, then, Melbourne's greater shortcoming is its failure to create that sense of literary community, to take literature into the streets and out to the people who aren't already engaged with it and then to bring those people into the fold. The Wheeler Centre and its resident organisations are fun and valuable, but ultimately they cater to the converted — they presuppose their audience's interest in literature — while the City of Literature initiative as a whole needs a more activist approach to its objective.

Works Cited

- Anon. 'City of Literature Status.' *Arts Victoria* (2008): <http://arts.vic.gov.au/Projects_Initiatives/Melbourne_-_City_of_Literature/City_of_Literature_Status>. Web.
- . 'One Book — One Edinburgh.' *Edinburgh: City of Literature* (2006): <<http://www.cityofliterature.com/projects.aspx?sec=6&pid=27&item=47>>. Web.