

LOCUST SUMMER

DAVID ALLAN-PETALE

ABOUT THE BOOK

On the cusp of summer, 1986, Rowan Brockman's mother asks if he will come home to Septimus in the Western Australian Wheatbelt to help with the harvest. Rowan's brother Albert, the natural heir to the farm, has died, and Rowan's dad's health is failing.

Although he longs to, there is no way that Rowan can refuse his mother's request as she prepares the farm for sale.

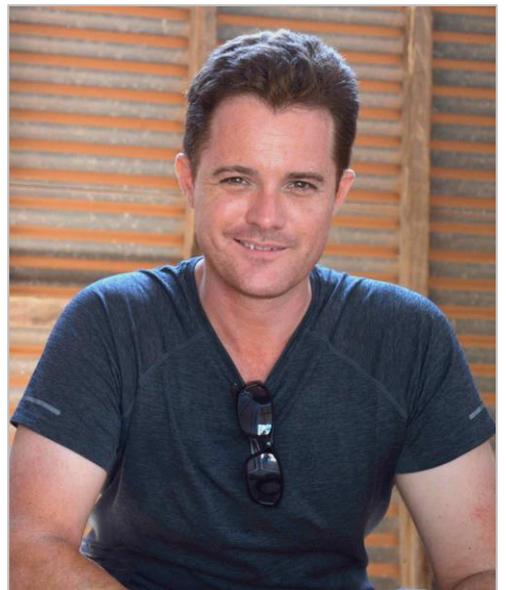
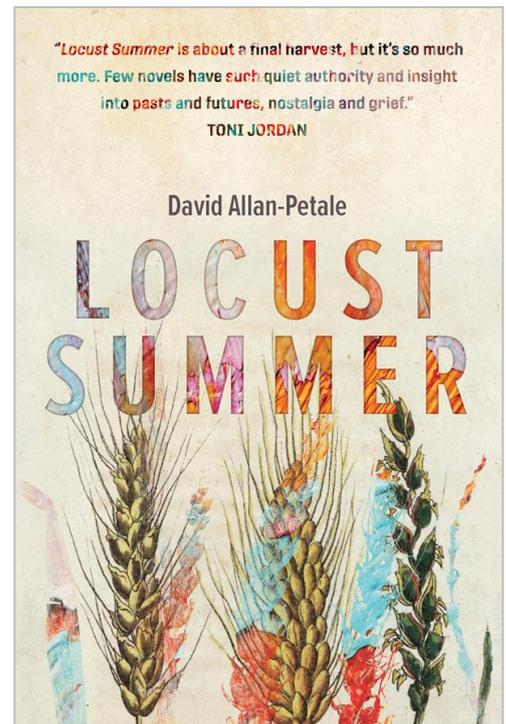
This is the story of the final harvest – the story of a young man in a place he doesn't want to be, being given one last chance to make peace before the past, and those he has loved, disappear.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Allan-Petale is a writer living between the bush and sea north of Perth, Western Australia. He worked for many years as a journalist in regional WA with the ABC and internationally with BBC World. Written while travelling the globe over five years, *Locust Summer* was shortlisted for the *Australian/Vogel's Literary Award* and selected for a fellowship at Varuna, the National Writers' House. The final drafts were crafted during an eighteen-month lap of Australia in a caravan, ranging from the red dirt of Wingellina to the tip of Cape York Peninsula. He's now back home restoring a yacht in the driveway, while his wife and daughters keep him busy planning their next adventures.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is this novel called *Locust Summer*?
2. What is Rowan's greatest challenge in coming home?
3. What does this work have in common with some of the tropes of coming-of-age novels? What is it that Rowan needs to learn?
4. How would you describe Rowan's relationship with his editor, Holt?
5. How would you describe Rowan's relationship to Sterlo, who directs the final harvest?
6. What does Rowan learn from Holt, and from Sterlo?
7. What do we learn about Bryce from the scene at Albert's wake where the power cuts out?
8. What do we learn of the Justine who we see through Rowan's eyes?
9. How would you describe Justine's relationship to Septimus, to farming, and to the land?
10. What do we learn about Rowan when we get to see him through Alison's eyes?
11. How does the presence of Albert make itself felt through the novel?
12. Does Rowan belong in Septimus?
13. At p. 114, sitting on the rock with his dad, Rowan says, *There are only a handful of moments I can truly say that the whole of my attention was focused, where no stray ounce of feeling was on autopilot, rendered of any distraction.* What is the importance of this moment, and this scene?
14. Why do Rowan and his mother decide to leave the library where it is?
15. What understanding do you take away from the final sentence in this novel?



INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What is the genesis of *Locust Summer*? What is your own connection to the mid-west where the fictional town of Septimus lies?

There are many strands that came together to inspire *Locust Summer*, and so many geneses. But the main ones I'll share are the land, and the father, as they form the cylinders of the story's engine.

When I was about twenty-four, I went over to Coonamble in the central-western plains of New South Wales to bring in a harvest of wheat on a mate's family farm. We had been working together as journalists in Kalgoorlie, and he would always talk about his love of the land and how much he enjoyed harvest. So when he floated the idea of me coming over for it I immediately said yes and booked time off from work, to the bemusement of my colleagues who thought I should go to Bali instead.

I'm glad I went though. Two weeks in the sun and heat and dust of regional Australia working my guts out. It was a life-defining experience that made me feel like a man, to put it simply. The setting of *Locust Summer* was deeply inspired by this experience, and my first-hand knowledge of the harvest was very useful in shaping the events of the book. That said, my experience of the harvest was much more positive than Rowan's, in that I wanted to be there and everyone was very welcoming!

Around 2008 I packed my job as a journo in and went travelling, right at the time my grandfather – who I called 'Parma' – began to fade from dementia and cancer. He died while I was in London, and I was unable to get back for the funeral. To assuage my grief, I began to write, and joined a writers group called Chalk the Sun, where I began my first novel, 'Redgate', about a returned soldier making a new life in the South West by clear-cutting a forest.

As the book progressed I got itchy feet again, and my girlfriend (now wife) and I planned a round-the-world trip, beginning at a travel conference in Porto, Portugal. It was there that all the strands that had been twisting away suddenly came together while I was bored witless in a seminar. I jotted down what became the first chapter in a notebook. Then after I finished my first book, I dared myself to write another. And I pulled that notebook out and kept going, thinking of my grandfather, thinking of the farm, and letting the rest happen.

This novel is the opposite of a 'tree-change' novel, in that it features a young man and a family walking away from the land. Were you setting out to explore aspects of Australian identity in laying out such a tale?

I love books that twist and confound story expectations. *The Quiet American*. *The Good Soldier*. *My Brother Jack*. From the start with *Locust Summer* I wanted to write something atypical of the Australian farming story – but also something atypical of the coming of age. But I didn't want to write something that rejected or went too contrary. So that was a fine balance. The relationship between Rowan and Justine really allowed me to explore this element of the story, where two people who feel out of place seek to rekindle their common bond.

With regard to Australian identity, I heard Don Watson – Paul Keating's speechwriter – say during an interview on his book *The Bush* that leaving the land was anathema to farmers, and therefore to all the rest of us. Great hook for drama. But it was a comment that really challenged me to look into the cultural and familial currents that shape our conception of the land and people within it.

I wanted my characters to be people, not archetypes or stereotypes, so that I could explore these identities and experiences with sympathy. There'd be few farmers who haven't thought about packing it in. It's an almost unspoken thing. Toughing it out is synonymous with being Australian. But that's not real life, which is far more complex and interesting than any stereotype we have of ourselves. So the book is my attempt at least to seek the characters' truth rather than challenge identities.

The story of the harvest is timeless, but it is also full of its own particular minutiae and dramas. How did you plot this particular story?

My favourite quote on writing is from Lawrence Durrell, who said, 'A novel should be an act of divination by entrails, not a careful record of a game of pat-ball on some vicarage lawn!'

The rhythm of the harvest formed a kind of spine for the story that compressed the action into a timeframe and also dictated it to a certain extent: strip, dump, terminus. So the plot's events were partly shaped by the need to adhere to certain things on the calendar. But nothing goes according to plan: wild dogs, sudden rain, immature twenty-somethings. Once I'd settled on a story then the plot unspooled along these tracks.

The real challenge was figuring out what it was actually about.

The first drafts focused on Rowan's relationship with his father. It wasn't until I considered Rowan's relationship with his mother, Justine, that the work changed from a careful record of a game of pat-ball on some vicarage lawn to an act of divination.

What is next for David Allan-Petale?

Since 2008 my wife and I have been out of Australia ten years. We lived in London four years, travelled the world for another four and then took our baby daughter on caravan trip round Australia that took the better part of two years.

So with our second daughter now on the scene, I'm putting out the bins, mowing the lawns and restoring a yacht called *Kirshi* in the driveway while we raise our daughters in Perth.

And I'm writing another novel. Not set in the country, though it's still in Western Australia, my home.