The setting

Darwin, 1967. The setting of this book represents many things. Firstly, Darwin in 1967 is a place of isolation – far away from the ‘civilisation’ of southern Australia. People who came here “sought forgetfulness, not remembrance...A town populated by men who had run as far as they could flee”. It’s a place populated by, “All the drifters, the misfits.” These things, of course, apply very obviously to Keller, a man fleeing from the memory of the death of his Jewish wife at the hands of the Nazis, but fleeing also from the role he had in her death. But these things are also true of other characters. Paul, for example, very much sees himself as a ‘misfit’ – (“All of which left me – their crossbreed, their mulatto – where?”). Then there is Paul’s father – “Medicine increasingly bored him. He felt burnt out, needed to recharge the emotional reservoirs. Each evening he sat over his evening meal imagining some hilltop dream plantation...” – a character wanting to be something other than what he is. There are also other minor characters, like Rick Whiteley – “Various rumours held that he had fled North for various unspeakable reasons.” What’s similar about all these characters? They’re all men, and this is very much a novel about masculine identity.

However, the setting of Darwin is not just important because of its isolation. It’s tropical environment is also important in understanding the characters and their inner lives. “I wanted to be out in the warm rain, pushing through the wet vegetation, physically part of it...I closed my eyes and listened to the sounds of the night, to the wet earth smearing itself with greenness,” Paul says. For him, the lush green of the tropics represents his sexual awakening and his relationship with Rosie. "Each day my eyes seemed to be opened just a little wider, and more of that sun drenched town of lush gardens, scents, and sexuality seemed to cram itself in." The greenness of the tropics is also at odds with Keller whose face is repeatedly described as being “parched”, like “ruined leather,” “terracotta,” and filled with “deep fissures.” Something inside Keller has emotionally withered – and the contrast of the tropical setting of Darwin provides a constant reminder of this.

Narrative structure

The narrative of Maestro is driven by Paul’s quest for his identity. How can he fit in at school? What is his sexual identity? How much does it mean to him to be successful as a musician? What will define this success? And how, importantly, does Keller fit into this picture? Looking through a summary of the chapters, we see that Paul’s journey, at critical times, becomes a selfish one – where he thinks about his own identity-needs to the exclusion of all else. In this journey he is paralleled with Keller, whose belief in his own identity was once so great that he refused to believe that his wife would be taken by the Nazis, and then his identity crisis so great, that his emotions shut down. In the end, Paul finds acceptance in his identity. Keller doesn’t.
• **Darwin, 1967:** The first part of *Maestro* is an orientation to the main characters of Keller, Paul, and his parents John and Nancy Crabbe. Paul begins lessons with Keller who he initially dislikes, frustrated that Keller won't affirm his talent. We learn about how Paul is bullied at school, and how he is rejected by his first crush – Megan Murray. The first section ends with Paul turning 16 and completing his music exams successfully.

• **Intermezzo:** In this brief section Paul and his family return to Adelaide for the summer holidays. Two important things happen – Paul finds out that Keller’s wife Mathilde was gassed by the Nazis during the holocaust; he witnesses a couple having sex in the library. It is the second event which leaves a lasting impact on Paul and begins to set up one of the key complications in the novel – exploring his own, sometimes selfish desires vs. his relationship with Keller.

• **1968:** During this year Paul meets Rosie, and after overcoming his initial contempt for her, begins an intense relationship with her. Physically he is growing and changing. His relationship with Rosie makes him more confident with his own peer group and he joins a rock band with Jimmy, Reggie and Scotty. They are successful in a battle of the bands competition.

• **Adelaide:** Seeing that he is making a trip to Adelaide to perform in a battle of the bands competition there, Keller also enters Paul into a piano competition. He accompanies Paul to Adelaide. Ultimately, Paul fails in both competitions. This chapter ends on the last night of Paul’s schooling. He visits Keller to say good-bye to him. Keller is drunk and wants to talk about the war but Paul wants to leave to join the reveling on the last night of school – “Only now can I recognize the scene for what it was: a confessional, a privilege that I, through selfishness and sensual addiction, failed to accept”.

• **1974:** The last three chapters of the book pass quickly. Firstly, in 1974 Paul attends the Conservatorium in Adelaide. He is arrogant from the teaching of Keller. He has some success in Piano competitions and travels overseas to compete – but there he is unsuccessful.

• **Vienna, 1975:** After two years unsuccessfully competing overseas, Paul finds himself near Vienna. Again, he is curious about Keller's personal history and begins to ask questions about him. He finds out that Keller followed his wife into the concentration camps, and, on a death march, reportedly died.

• **1977:** In the final chapter Keller dies. In the years since leaving Darwin Paul has not visited. Now, with Keller dying in hospital, he does.
Major Characters

Paul Crabbe:

The crab is an animal that moves side ways, and in this novel, as Paul’s surname, it symbolizes aspects of his character. He is a talented piano player, but, as Keller points out a number of times – “spoilt” and – “too given to self satisfaction.” Paul is driven by the idea of achieving “perfection” as a pianist – “I redoubled my efforts to defy the theory of limits and approach ever more closely – and finally grasp – the ideal I was sure he felt me incapable of reaching.” But in trying so hard to move forward, Paul seems to only end up, like the crab, moving sideways. “To search too long for perfection can also paralyse,” Keller says. Certainly Paul never finds perfection as a pianist – which he measures by international success – and the affirmation of his teacher. He becomes disillusioned about his quest for perfection – “Honourable mention became the story of my life, no matter how much I practiced. I had found my level” and “now I was faced with myself for the first time: Paul Crabbe, greying, dissatisfied, fast approaching mid life, my backside stuck fast to a minor chair in a minor music school.” However, as dissatisfied as he is, Keller’s death marks a point in Paul’s journey where he reaches acceptance – “While Keller had lived – no matter how many years since our last consultation – he had been a safety net, offering a faint last hope; there has always been the possibility of returning to his room at the Swan, and preparing myself for a last assault on the world of music.” With Keller’s death, he knows that that “last assault on the world of music” is a “delusion” and “foolish...ridiculous dreams.”

Paul’s journey as a piano player is only half of the story, though. The other half is a story about male role models and fatherhood. That Paul comes to see Keller as a father is clear – “You are my teacher...You've been like a father. Taught me everything I know.” Paul comes to identify the emotional turmoil in Keller: “His contempt was fuelled by feelings far more complicated and contradictory than I had thought.” In a way, Paul’s feelings about Keller aren’t at all complicated – he wants to feel that he is making his teacher - his father - proud, and it hurts him deeply that Keller doesn’t communicate this with him – “One voice was always missing from the chorus of praise: my teacher’s.” Parallel to this, is Paul’s relationship with his actual father. The whole reason for Paul having lessons with Keller in the first place, was because John Crabbe wanted his son to be “better than me. Much better.”

John Crabbe:

Of his parents, Paul spends more time reflecting on his father than he does on his mother. Fathers, sons and male role models are important in this book. Keller has lost his son Eric in the holocaust, and we can see how Paul operates as a substitute for him at times. But Keller isn’t the only one to have suffered. A steady back story is built up around John Crabbe throughout the novel. We know that he wants his son to achieve because of what he wasn’t able to do. As Nancy says to Paul, “Your father never had your opportunities...He always regretted
it...we lost so much in the war.” We find out more: “My father’s father had died when he was young. He had no role model.” Paul finds himself locked within “the confines of a life that I hated,” at the end of a novel. His father, too, seems to have ended up with a life that isn’t quite him. But watching him act in musicals, Paul sees, “some part of him that had long been repressed: some frivolous, joyous core that hardship, childhood tragedy and the War had buried inside him too long.”

Nancy Crabbe:

We don’t find out nearly as much about Nancy as we do about John. We know that she is a former librarian, that she stays home to look after Paul, and that what connects her and her husband is their common passion for the piano – in everything else, Paul only sees “polarities. Hard, and soft. Fair, and dark. Thin, and thick.”

Eduard Keller:

Paul spends much time physically describing Keller. His face is “red”, “pitted”, “coarsened”, “cheap leather”, filled with “deep fissures” and “cracks”, “corrugated,” the texture of “crudely fired pottery.” His hand, too, is like a “claw” or a “paw.” The “deep fissures” on the outside, reflect the disintegration and decay of the inside. Keller knows he had the opportunity to flee from Vienna with his wife and young child, but he was “too insensitive” – “He had played for Hitler…so who would harm his wife and child?” Now, in Darwin, “Contempt and self hatred fuelled the singing in the voice…” This self hatred springs not only from his grief and guilt. He cut off his own finger, but says to Paul – “I could not...finish the job.” His drunkenness is about forgetting. Emotionally he has shut down, so he shuts himself of from the world – when all others have their windows wide open, he has his shut - “The Swan was a monastery, of a kind: a place of retreat, of renunciation of the world. A place for atonement...a place for examination of the heart.” However, he hasn’t completely retreated from the world. He compiles great scrapbooks of news stories that chronicle “a bleak human landscape located somewhere between Tragedy and Dumb Stupidity.” He calls these scrapbooks “textbooks” – “He read those newspapers as closely as Bible texts, as though some sort of answer, or final explanation, or even cure could be discerned there, given enough time.” The holocaust was the bleakest of all human landscapes, a tragedy that defies explanation. But that is what Keller seeks to find.

Minor Characters

The minor characters serve an important purpose in illustrating Paul’s views and values through the attitude he has to them. The minor male characters are defined by one or two core attributes – usually negative – which at various times Paul demonstrates through his own behaviour.
Rosie Zollo:

Like Nancy Crabbe, Rosie’s character isn’t described in great detail in *Maestro*. However, Paul’s relationship with her – his sexual awakening – is important – “Each day my eyes seemed to be opened just a little wider, and more of that sun drenched town of lush gardens, scents, and sexuality seemed to cram itself in. Nothing I heard in that dark, humid room in the Swan had much place in my new world....” He comes to love Rosie, finding in his intimacy with her the very opposite of what he has with Keller: “I felt ‘affection’ for him certainly – I loved him, in many ways – but I loved Rosie more.”

Reggie Lim:

“Reggie looked fiercer than he was – a follower, not a leader.” Reggie is the “third” member of the rock band – “dark skinned, his flat face pocked with the craters of largely extinct acne.” His character is the victim in the end to the egos and ambition of the other two members of the band – Jimmy and Scotty – who replace him with Rick Whiteley – “There wasn’t room in the van, Paul. We took a vote. Reggie went along with it. We need Rick – he has contacts in the South.” Reggie’s character shows us how some people can be expendable in the road to success – a parallel to how Paul treats others around him at times.

Jimmy Pappas:

“Short, squat Jimmy Pappas” was the bully boy of Darwin and the right hand man of the more popular, jock like Scotty Mitchell. He is a thug.

Scotty Mitchell:

“Mitchell was taller, curly haired and good looking...Scotty believed in Just Causes...if he beat up someone half his size...it was...to teach his victim a lesson.” Mitchell is the ring-leader. He doesn't believe he is a bully, but that is in fact just what he is.

Rick Whiteley:

Rick Whiteley is the local rock radio announcer from the South who has spurned the usual Country music of the station in favour of rock. His character bears some similarities to that of Keller’s: he has contempt for the traditional musical opinions of people; there are “Various rumours” that suggest “he had fled North for various unspeakable reasons...”; he has Jimmy and Scotty around to his house one night to “Get drunk...then he got weepy.” Unlike Keller, Whiteley wants to be successful and joins the band as a replacement for Reggie. Like Keller, though, his outside reveals something about the inside: “his face has aged twenty years: an accumulation of morning-after faces, perhaps, each applied directly to the ruins of the previous morning...”
Bennie Reid:

“In memory Bennie always remains middle-aged – paunchy, puffy-faced, balding...” A nerdy outcast, Bennie Reid was the type of teenager that Paul’s parents felt he should be friends with. However, although Paul was “happy enough in Bennie’s company” in private, he “shunned any public association with Bennie Reid.” Paul views Bennie as pathetic – the opposite of what he wants to be.

Megan Murray:

Megan is the popular, attractive girl at school. She is the girl Paul first finds himself sexually attracted to. She initially rejects Paul’s invitation for a date, which leaves him deeply ashamed of himself. After he turns 16 – “a year older and a year taller” – and joins the band, Megan becomes more interested in Paul and sleeps with him. But far from being the girl of his “dreams” – “It was a disappointment...She was too selfish...As soon as I touched her, she became floppy, inert...”

Themes

- **Passion, lust & sex:**

  The characters who seem to most enjoy music in the novel, are those who find passion in it – from Paul’s father who finds a “frivolous, joyous core” when acting in musicals, to Paul himself listening to Keller play and being “transported again to that same sensual, aching zone. The music seemed nearer to lovemaking than music...” The passion in music is deeply connected here to sex. Paul sees all around him in the lush tropical greenness of Darwin, an earthy sexuality – and the passion of sex is a constantly recurring theme throughout the novel.

- **Perfection:**

  Paul's quest for success as a pianist sees him reaching for “the ideal I was sure [Keller] felt me incapable of reaching.” He practices for endless hours and finds technical perfection. But this is not musical perfection. Keller relates a story about a forgery of a famous painting: “The forgery must have taken many times longer than the original...It was technically better...And yet something was missing. Not much – but something.” It’s this “something” that stands between him and perfection that gnaws away at Paul – but it is a “something” that he can never gain.

- **Identity:**

  Many characters in the novel struggle with questions of identity – who they want to be, versus what they are and what they have done. This is clearly the case for Paul and Keller. Keller struggles with his great guilt and grief that seems to engulf his entire identity. Paul’s identity too is engulfed – his by the quest for
perfection and the constant failure to achieve it. Other characters, too, struggle with their identity – Paul’s father, Rick Whiteley, Bennie Reid – even Jimmy Pappas and Scotty Mitchell. At different times we can see how the quest for identity can engulf each of these characters, making them act in ways which may be entirely selfish – such is the struggle with identity.

Quotes

…the red glow of his face…the pitted, sun coarsened skin – a cheap, ruined leather. P. 3

No: if I were more the musician, if I had a better ear, I could surely capture it... p. 3

I was child enough – self centred enough – to think it likely. P. 5

That hair above that flaming face was white, sparse, downy...p. 5

He told me this so often in the following years that I soon realized that loss meant far more to him than that. P. 5

You are going to be better than me. Much better. P. 8

All the scum in the country has somehow risen to this one town...All the drifters, the misfits...p. 8

But the music, as always, drew me – that beautiful, tugging gravity...p. 9

I loved the town of booze and blow at first sight. And above all its smell: those hot, steamy perfumes that wrapped about me as we stepped off the plane...Moist, compost air. Sweet-and-sour air... p. 9

Everything grew larger than life in the steamy hothouse of Darwin, and the people were no exception. P. 11.

You are spoilt...First you must learn to listen. P. 12

I find it hard to understand how much I came to love the man, to depend on him. P. 13

You know so much for your age...and so little. P. 14

Your father never had your opportunities...He always regretted it...we lost so much in the war. P. 14

Apart from the piano they had little in common. When I think of my parents, I see only polarities. P. 15
Something bound them together...The sweet, sticky glue of sex perhaps...p. 16

All of which left me – their crossbreed, their mulatto – where? P. 16

They sought forgetfulness, not remembrance...A town populated by men who had run as far as they could flee. P. 17

You are too proud to play it again? P. 27

I performed...basking in an older, more adult acceptance that should have more than compensated for my own age group’s rejection. P. 29

Perhaps there can be no perfection. Only levels of imperfection. P. 31

You must know when to move on. To search too long for perfection can also paralyse. P. 31

I redoubled my efforts to defy the theory of limits and approach ever more closely – and finally grasp – the ideal I was sure he felt me incapable of reaching. P. 32

...in a fury of rejection I had hammered away...punishing myself for being myself. P. 33.

One voice was always missing from the chorus of praise: my teacher’s. p. 35

Medicine was his job, music his life. P. 39

My father’s father had died when he was young. He had no role model. P. 41

I suspected I was glimpsing some part of him that had long been repressed: some frivolous, joyous core that hardship, childhood tragedy and the War had buried inside him too long. P. 42

The boy is too given to self satisfaction. P. 43

Nothing, dear lady, could make me homesick. P. 45

The forgery must have taken many times longer than the original...It was technically better...And yet something was missing. Not much – but something. P. 46

The Swan was a monastery, of a kind: a place of retreat, of renunciation of the world. A place for atonement...a place for examination of the heart. P. 49

It is insincere. So much showing off. P. 49

I suppose I disliked her for the usual reason: she was too much like me. P. 63.
...the accompanying photographs looked much the same whatever the language, a bleak human landscape located somewhere between Tragedy and Dumb Stupidity. P. 65

Medicine increasingly bored him. He felt burnt out, needed to recharge the emotional reservoirs. Each evening he sat over his evening meal imagining some hilltop dream plantation...p. 67

The sun beat down on him fiercely, magnifying all blemishes: the terracotta redness of his face, the deep fissures and cracks that gave his skin the texture of crudely fired pottery. P. 69

It is you who is ignorant. P. 71

Tears were filling the deep fissures of that parched landscape, Keller’s face...As suddenly as the tears had appeared, the tears had gone, sucked into the dry skin of his ravaged face. P. 72

Contempt and self hatred fuelled the singing in the voice...p. 73

The room was in darkness, the slats and the wooden louvres tightly shut, the lights off. P. 74

Each day my eyes seemed to be opened just a little wider, and more of that sun drenched town of lush gardens, scents, and sexuality seemed to cram itself in. Nothing I heard in that dark, humid room in the Swan had much place in my new world...p. 75

I was too insensitive. P. 86

Various rumours held that he had fled North for various unspeakable reasons...p. 87

I felt strangely empty, deflated. Nothing worthwhile was ever achieved so easily, a small voice – perhaps my father’s, perhaps Keller’s – nagged deeply inside. P. 91

His exile was chosen...p. 100

His red, corrugated face...p. 101

Fun was not a word that emerged easily from that wrinkled prune-mouth. P. 102

He read those newspapers as closely as Bible texts, as though some sort of answer, or final explanation, or even cure could be discerned there, given enough time. P. 103

His face had aged twenty years...p. 104
The ancient brick-faced Viennese virtuoso...p. 109

I wanted to be out in the warm rain, pushing through the wet vegetation, physically part of it...I closed my eyes and listened to the sounds of the night, to the wet earth smearing itself with greenness...p. 114

You are my teacher...You've been like a father. Taught me everything I know. P. 115

I felt ‘affection’ for him certainly – I loved him, in many ways – but I loved Rosie more. P. 117

Only now can I recognize the scene for what it was: a confessional, a privilege that I, through selfishness and sensual addiction, failed to accept. P. 117

Everything he had taught me – every opinion, every phrasing, every note – hardened into dogma. P. 123

I loved her – which, at a time when most of my love was wasted on myself, was no small achievement. P. 125

Honourable mention became the story of my life, no matter how much I practiced. I had found my level...p. 128

Now for the first time my self-preoccupations had diminished enough. P. 131.

He had played for Hitler...so who would harm his wife and child? P. 135

But I am sorry: you did not learn from Eduard Keller. His students played with...with far more...p. 139

Perhaps they were not the same man in a sense. P. 140

Where, when tired of wandering,
My last resting place will I find?
Under palm trees in the South?
Under lime trees on the Rhine? P. 145

Soon I would be flying back to the South: to the woman and child that I loved, within the confines of a life that I hated. P. 149