You don’t look Chinese,” said one of a small group of boys who had encircled me.

“I’m not,” I said, stating the obvious.

“But ya come from Hong Kong?”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“What language do they speak there?” asked one of the others.

“Cantonese.”

“Well can you say something in Camponese,” said the one who appeared to be the ringleader. “Go on … Chink.”

I obliged, feeling like an act in a cruel circus sideshow. It was my first day at Miami State High School on Queensland’s Gold Coast in late 1969 and I may as well have come from the moon. Nowadays, immigrants from the southern states stream into the Sunshine State (or Smart State, as the Premier would have it) at the rate of around a thousand a week, heading for the booming southeast. Queensland has had the largest net migration of any state since 1971, when about 250 more people arrived than left the state each week.

So, even when I arrived, there were other newcomers – but few from Hong Kong. Nowadays the hordes that flood across the Tweed River have a pretty good idea about the place they are moving to. I came completely unprepared. I felt like Billy Bunter might had he been lowered on to the set of Lord of the Flies.

Pallid, bespectacled and with an international accent that was not quite British – but British enough – I was a stranger in a strange land where I should have belonged. We were, after all, Australian. I had lived in Hong Kong for all my primary schooling and two years of high school. I had been tutored in British history by British teachers, discovered literacy with a little help from Enid Blyton and A.A. Milne and comics like The Beano and Dandy. We were members of the exclusive and rather colonial Kowloon Cricket Club, had servants at home, and at night my transistor would lull me to sleep with the sounds of the BBC.
Our migration back to Australia and to the Gold Coast – our promised land (we had holidayed there and my parents fell in love with the place) – was a jolt. It gave me an enduring window of understanding into what it is like to be displaced and divided from the dominant culture and people of a place – a place you hope to call home. At least I looked vaguely the same, despite minor anomalies – thickish spectacles, hair too short and a refined accent that had to be expunged as soon as possible.

I was appreciated as an oddity, though my ability to curse in Cantonese did give me some cachet. But I was different.

For a start, I was actually from New South Wales, although I recalled little about the place that I now know is a reviled state where the people are riven with envy of their cousins in the land of the cane toad. Decades later I find the clarion call “Queenslander” rising in my throat around State of Origin time and, though I have never joined the boo-a-blue campaign, I understand the urge to do so.

But not back then, on the cusp of my teens. I was marooned in the dusty surfside schoolyard with no cultural terms of reference and little understanding of the lingo. Colloquialisms left me dumbfounded. I didn’t know how to respond to even the simplest “G’day” and the surfing sub-culture to which most boys were hip was entirely foreign to me.

Gingerly, I felt my way, – mastering phrases like “fair dinkum” and beginning to understand what “board shorts” were and what “stoked” meant. I began to lose the smooth tones with which I had come equipped from King George V School in Kowloon.

I realised I was totally cut off from my fellows by my inability to surf. Riding a surfboard at Miami – where good waves meant mass truancy and surfing ability established your status – was a vital ingredient for belonging.

I talked my father into buying me a surfboard and spent difficult months humiliating myself in the shore breaks south of Surfers Paradise, away from the crowds, trying to gain some mastery of the sport. Blond hair was de rigueur and, after long enough in the sun, the top layer of my hair lightened and the constant exposure to the sun turned my skin a deeper brown than it had been. I started to look like I belonged.

But a feeling of being an outsider lingered, even as I climbed the ranks of the surfing subculture. In the final years at high school, I was accepted into a fraternity of local surfers around Broadbeach – by invitation only – but still felt like an outsider looking in, even though I had mastered the equipment and the language of my chosen milieu.

Once experienced, that feeling of displacement, of otherness, remains. It has been rekindled in country towns and cities in the decades since my initial displacement.
It resurfaced when my wife and I moved to Melbourne in the early 1990s. I felt that same sense of isolation I had experienced when I arrived on the Gold Coast for that dusty school year. We landed in Melbourne the month Jeff Kennett was elected premier in 1992. At the time, Victoria was bleeding northwards as the climate migrants were joined by the economic migrants on the road north.

Driving into the city, past Pentridge Prison, down Sydney Road, through Coburg, we were amazed to find ourselves jockeying with trams for space on the narrow road. We sensed that we were going in the wrong direction. A Queenslander in Victoria felt like being a boy from Hong Kong on the Gold Coast.

During those first months in Melbourne – months when it barely stopped raining – I worked casual reporting shifts at The Sunday Age, where my co-workers seemed amazed that I could use a computer and that I wasn’t still scratching my name in the ground with a stick. To those Victorians who didn’t aspire to become Queenslanders, we banana benders (I counted myself as one by then) seemed a near-Simian species, relics of a pre-Neanderthal world, heathens who didn’t worship the Gods of aerial ping pong – a crude people ruled over by an inarticulate dictator who grew peanuts when he wasn’t lording it over the populace.

Back in Brisbane several years later, I found that I actually felt at home. I had only moved to Brisbane in 1986, but had been living in Queensland – despite a couple of forays to Sydney and that three-year stretch (I sometimes find myself describing it as a “sentence”) in Melbourne – since 1970. But I still felt like a foreigner at times.

As welcoming as Brisbane has always seemed to me, I am aware that I am not a native. However much I feel like one at times, I know I am not, and this divides me – in fact, us – from our neighbours. My wife is from Townsville – a place even Brisbane folk feel they can look down on – and she feels the same.

Not having grown up and been schooled in the place where you live is one way you are always separated from those who have that experience. It becomes obvious when people talk of local loyalties. The private school old boys’ and girls’ network is the most obvious example, and demonstrates how a certain foreignness can never be overcome. Our son Hamish, born in Brisbane’s Mater Mothers Hospital and a true native of this subtropical city, goes to a small Catholic school in Brisbane’s inner north. Many of the parents who have kids at this school went to school together in the surrounding suburbs. Their networks, based on this shared history, seem impenetrable to us. Through shared experience, they have strong bonds of locality and fraternity, and outsiders like us can never quite get inside.

The private school network is strong in Brisbane, and separates an echelon of society from the rest of the populace. I went to a rugby game at Ballymore once and felt isolated in a sea of people, most of whom had the private school system in common. The men who surrounded me – doctors, lawyers, dentists, bankers – all
shared school and sporting bonds that had lasted through university and on into their business and family lives.

One cannot under-estimate the importance and power of the ties – literally, the old school ties – that bind these people.

As an outsider, you clutch at straws to try to establish credibility as a sort of local. I’m lucky: my mother is a Queenslander – born in Bundaberg, the second daughter of an Ipswich-bred bank manager from an established family. The family’s roots go back to the early colony when an ancestor, John Scott, arrived in Brisbane from Scotland. He started a school in the fledgling city and later another in Ipswich, and is noted as a man of achievement in the book Moreton Bay Scots. I quote this regularly in attempt to establish my bona fides as a member of a founding family. My mother went to Brisbane Girls’ Grammar as a boarder, which is also helpful in establishing a line of credibility in the social strata of Brisbane. Still, deep down, there is unease and a feeling that, despite her pedigree, I will never truly belong in the way others do.

Mind you some of those who really belong also feel they don’t. If anyone has earned the right to belong, it is David Malouf, who is lauded as the quintessential Brisbane author, even though he hasn’t lived here since he was a young man. His Johnno is still recognised as the great Brisbane novel and was recently dramatised. His Queensland roots resurfaced in his last two superb collections of short fiction, the brooding Dream Stuff and Every Move You Make.

But Malouf is an insider who always seems to have felt like an outsider, and this underpins the consciousness of Dante, the protagonist in Johnno. Perhaps there is some value in this. Certainly the feeling of otherness provides perspective that is valuable for a writer. Being relaxed and comfortable, feeling part of a place and happy, connected and at home probably don’t help engender the creative tension a writer needs – which makes one look and question, rather than accepting the status quo.

Being an outsider can be uncomfortable, even painful. In a city, you can be invisible. But there are plenty of others in the same boat.

In a small country town, an outsider stands out. When I lived in the Central Queensland town of Monto for a year in my early twenties, I felt this intensely. I had long hair, an earring and John Lennon glasses, and was a distinct oddity on the local scene. In my first weeks, I was an object of interest and ridicule. What passed for the town bikie gang leader challenged me for being in “his town” on one occasion, and I narrowly escaped a beating thanks to the intervention of a larger, friendly local.

I joined another small group of outsiders – bank Johnnies, teachers and the local dentist – as a bulwark against the alienation. Luckily, a close friend from uni days lived in the town, and this gave me an entrée.
In Brisbane, things are different. I have now been here long enough to feel like a real resident. I have spoken to other immigrants – I know I will always be one – and they suggest that after a decade or so they too felt they began to belong. This expresses itself as a change of loyalties: I should probably support the Newcastle Knights (as I was born in the Hunter Valley) and the Blues, but some time in the early ‘90s I noticed I had become a rabid Maroons fan. As an outsider, you tend to cling to things that connect you to the culture. Sport is a good shortcut.

One of the reasons we felt alien in Melbourne was disinterest in the local sporting religion – AFL. When challenged about which team we supported, we looked blank and said “none”. This was usually met with utter disbelief, sometimes anger, followed by abuse. We knew we were undesirable aliens.

There is a lesson to be learnt from this. When I’m at lunch and I hear someone talking about the ripping try they scored in a GPS rugby match between Nudgee and Terrace in 1974, perhaps I should nod knowingly. But I would probably give myself away sooner or later. Those who truly belong have a shared language that connects them to their common past. Only the initiates speak this language; it is the verbal equivalent of a secret handshake.

In a different way, many of those who come to Queensland from Victoria have developed their own sense of belonging by continuing to act as if they still live in Victoria. When you move to Victoria, you are supposed to convert to AFL football, for example, and blend in with the culture; when the Victorians came here they brought their own football. They flock to support the Brisbane Lions and, at The Gabba, imagine they are still at the MCG shouting “c’arn, c’arn” until hoarse. Some hang on to their traditional teams as well, and still live in a virtual Victoria, oblivious to local customs and culture. The Brisbane Broncos or the Queensland Reds are, to them, proponents of “cross-country wrestling”. They will never understand why Queenslanders bother with such foolish games.

I have even heard Victorians claiming to have invented Queensland, as a place to escape to when the grey days of winter become intolerable. Noosa, a Victorian newspaper once posited, is a Victorian invention – an enclave in a foreign state set up largely for and by them, a place to share their culture with the inferior long-term locals.

A superiority complex is a novel way of overcoming the problems of being a stranger in a strange land.