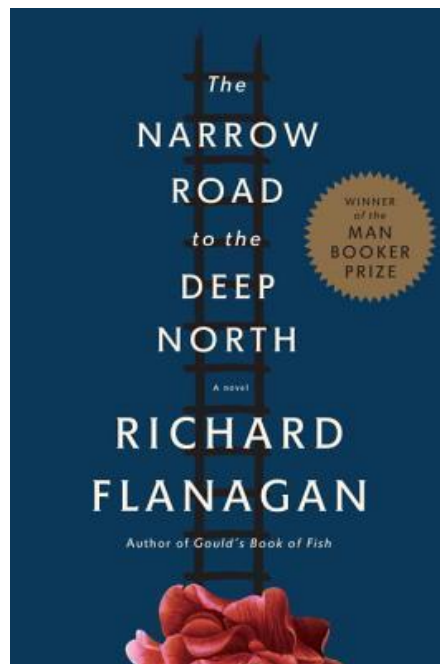




The Narrow Road to the Deep North

Richard Flanagan

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The Narrow Road to the Deep North Richard Flanagan

A novel of the cruelty of war, and tenuousness of life and the impossibility of love.

Richard Flanagan's story — of Dorrigo Evans, an Australian doctor haunted by a love affair with his uncle's wife — journeys from the caves of Tasmanian trappers in the early twentieth century to a crumbling pre-war beachside hotel, from a Thai jungle prison to a Japanese snow festival, from the Changi gallows to a chance meeting of lovers on the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

Taking its title from 17th-century haiku poet Basho's travel journal, *The Narrow Road To The Deep North* is about the impossibility of love. At its heart is one day in a Japanese slave labour camp in August 1943. As the day builds to its horrific climax, Dorrigo Evans battles and fails in his quest to save the lives of his fellow POWs, a man is killed for no reason, and a love story unfolds.

The Narrow Road to the Deep North Details

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Author : Richard Flanagan

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From Reader Review The Narrow Road to the Deep North for online ebook

Sally Howes says

I cannot find the right word, or even collection of words, to describe Richard Flanagan's THE NARROW ROAD TO THE DEEP NORTH - it is more than "moving," more than "gut-wrenching," more than "provocative," more than "beautiful." All I can really say is that it is a more than worthy winner of the 2014 Man Booker Prize. And if you are looking for a book that will wring every possible emotion out of you, a book that will not only make you feel but teach you anew the depths to which a story can induce you to feel, this is that book. In fact, I don't say this very often, but this is one of those rare and precious books that I believe everyone in the world should read, especially Australians. As Flanagan says, "A good book ... leaves you wanting to reread the book. A great book compels you to reread your own soul."

Focusing on a surgeon, officer, and reluctant war hero called Dorrigo Evans in order to describe the experiences of both Australian POWs and Japanese army servicemen in the construction of the Thai-Burma "Death Railway" in 1943, it may seem that it goes without saying that this book is not for the faint-hearted, but that is quite a considerable understatement. So much cruelty, so much pain, so much soul-destroying sadness. There is a particular surgical scene that left me shattered. The author must have had nerves of steel to write this book and a truly driving passion to tell this story. Yet I keep coming back to the thought: As hard as it must have been to write, and as hard as it is to read, how much harder must it have been to live? This story is devastating. Devastating. Yet it is also beautiful - terrible and beautiful - thanks to Flanagan's mastery of his craft. There is a certain "call-a-spade-a-spade" pragmatism and forthrightness that is part of the Australian psyche, and this is a constant presence in Flanagan's writing, yet at the same time, the style, language, word usage, and even cadence of his prose is so pure and exquisite that it rivals that of any nationality and even any era. He is a maestro whose art would be among the greats of any time or place.

THE NARROW ROAD TO THE DEEP NORTH has a loose structure that is ostensibly based on an elderly Dorrigo reminiscing about his time in the POW camp and the people he knew there, although the book goes off on a few other tangents as well. This device of looking back over a life makes the story feel very fragmented but beautifully so - it is comprised of fragments of great beauty, great pain, and great ordinariness. Thus, in a chronological sense, the story jumps and skitters from one place to another, and Dorrigo constantly belabors the point that he is the most unreliable of narrators. All this is true. This is not a book about the Death Railway, it is a book about people's experiences and memories of the Death Railway and how they live with it. As Dorrigo says, "A happy man has no past, while an unhappy man has nothing else."

Occasionally we are told about a prisoner's long future life, but rather than feeling cheated of seeing their story through to the end, I felt the opposite: that this book was not about what happened to the characters in the end, it was about a single thing, the one thing that affected them all. Australian or Japanese, male POW or female lover left behind to fret, they all experienced the Death Railway; and the point is not whether they survived it or not, the point is that they were all there. In this book, there are melancholy accounts of what came after, because they show the futility and sheer bloody wastefulness of what came before. And always in the background is the whispered refrain: "Lest we forget."

Its characterization is one of the book's greatest strengths. Dorrigo hates being viewed as a war hero and says that: "One man's feeling is not always equal to all life is. Sometimes it's not equal to anything much at all." And so, there is a sense that Dorrigo's warring emotions of vanity and self-loathing make him turn outward to study other people in a way that provides poignant and fundamental insights into their souls. Or perhaps he has just always been enthralled by people and their uniqueness. Either way, this book is nothing so much

as a cavalcade of individual lives and personalities, and the infinite shades of gray they personify.

However, despite his attempts to focus on others, or perhaps because of them, Dorrigo himself is the most deeply realized character in the book. He is also an exquisite study in survivor's guilt: "He understood that he shared certain features, habits and history with the war hero. But he was not him. He'd just had more success at living than at dying ..." During his time in the camp, as his company's officer as well as surgeon, Dorrigo both found himself and came to hate himself, as so many perfectionists do. "Dorrigo Evans understood himself as a weak man who was entitled to nothing, a weak man whom the thousand were forming into the shape of their expectations of him as a strong man. It defied sense. They were captives of the Japanese and he was the prisoner of their hope." Despite the pressure and duty placed on him by his men, he would "... come to love them, and every day he understands that he is failing in his love, for every day more and more of them die." Yet, "He refused to stop trying to help them live. He was not a good surgeon, he was not a good doctor; he was not, he believed in his heart, a good man. But he refused to stop trying."

Dorrigo is forever searching for what makes a person fully human, and he is very much afraid that the perfect mixture of suffering, brutality, and madness found on the Death Railway represents the only time in which man realized his full humanity. This story contains one character in particular, Colonel Kota, who is straight out of the most evil of nightmares. A coolly sadistic, matter-of-fact psychopath, he is a character I will not easily forget, if I ever do: "Colonel Kota knew he was in the power of something demented, inhuman, that had left a trail of endings through Asia. And the more he killed, so casually, so joyfully, the more he realised his own ending would be the one death beyond his own control. To control the deaths of others - when, where, the craft of ensuring it was a cleanly sliced ending - that was possible. And in some strange way, such killing felt like controlling whatever remained of his own life."

The sort of character development and depth that takes most authors an entire book to achieve, if they're lucky, Flanagan pulls off in the smallest vignettes, sometimes in just a handful of pages. And it says something about the author's greatness that in this book that is brimming with the vilest hate and prejudice, there is absolutely no bias in the terrible beauty he wrings out of each character, from Dorrigo Evans to Colonel Kota, from Amy Mulvaney to Rooster MacNeice, from "the Goanna" to Darky Gardiner. It is abundantly clear that each in turn has received the author's heart and soul, and most likely blood, sweat, and tears, too.

Probably the greatest mistake a reader of THE NARROW ROAD TO THE DEEP NORTH can make is to think they know what to expect from it. This very serious-minded book has occasional pieces of sly, wry, ironic humor that are mildly startling for their cropping up in the midst of much graver musings. In the middle of his own self-deprecation, for example, Dorrigo suddenly points out that: "He had avoided what he regarded as some obvious errors of life, such as politics and golf." The laconic Australian humor of the "diggers" (Australian soldiers) crackles and sparkles in exquisite one-liners. For some reason, a simple sentence like this really tickled my funny bone: "It's a good plan, Wat, said Chum Fagan. Only it isn't." And who would not smile at a description like this: "He had the presence of a precarious telegraph pole."

Something else I never expected to find in the pages of this book was a love affair that was so organic, conflicted, full of confusion and passion and doubt that it was all too devastatingly authentic. The word that most often springs to my mind in relation to THE NARROW ROAD TO THE DEEP NORTH is "real," and Amy Mulvaney and Dorrigo's mad, irresistible, forbidden love is as real as love ever gets. It is also pleasing to find that there is room given in this all-inclusive tale to the women who loved the men we meet in the POW camp, and to the ways in which their hearts broke every bit as painfully and completely as the men's did. And it occurs to me that the path of this story is littered with hearts that have broken not for themselves but for others. There is a strong theme in this book that we can bear whatever happens to us, but what breaks us is seeing it happen to others and being powerless to prevent it.

And so, there is, of course, no escaping the fact that the heart of this story is the horror, suffering, and death

that stalked the POW camp that supplied the slave labor expended so heedlessly on the construction of the impossible Thai-Burma Railway in the Second World War. These pages are littered with so much death that each incident is included as just one more sentence in the narrative - after all, if every death was given the lamentation it deserved, the book would never end. We have only to encounter and pass over it in a book; the truly sobering thought, of course, is that men just like the ones in this book lived through the reality of it. "Horror can be contained within a book, given form and meaning. But in life horror has no more form than it does meaning. Horror just is. And while it reigns, it is as if there is nothing in the universe that it is not."

The story is very effective at portraying the gradual but inexorable breaking down of the POWs' spirit, moving them from defiant larrikinism to every individual conserving their own food and their own strength, yet still looking out for their comrades in suffering. "Starvation stalked the Australians. It hid in each man's every act and every thought. Against it they could proffer only their Australian wisdom which was really no more than opinions emptier than their bellies. They tried to hold together with their Australian dryness and their Australian curses, their Australian memories and their Australian mateship. But suddenly Australia meant little against lice and hunger and beri-beri, against thieving and beatings and yet ever more slave labour." In the end, "... they together staggered through those days that built like a scream that never ended, a wet, green shriek ..." Yet they still knew that their only hope of salvation was in unity: "... courage, survival, love - all these things didn't live in one man. They lived in them all or they died and every man with them; they had come to believe that to abandon one man was to abandon themselves."

THE NARROW ROAD TO THE DEEP NORTH is realistic fiction based very much on actual events, and as I read of the events of 1946 and later, I was struck forcibly with how closely this work of realistic, historical fiction resembles the best the literary world has to offer in dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction. At no point in this book does the reader have their hand held or their feelings spared, and the stories of what happened to the survivors of the Death Railway is no exception. When someone returns home from Hell, there can be no happily ever after.

This book surprised me at every turn, perhaps none more so than in its narration of the war crimes trials of the Japanese after the war. This material raises some very uncomfortable questions: If the Japanese culture was so different from Western culture that they were literally incapable of seeing their actions toward the POWs as wrong, much less criminal, how culpable were they? If the Japanese army brutalized its own people as a right and proper part of their training, how could these men see brutality meted out to prisoners as wrong? "The punishment wasn't about guilt but honour. There was no choice in any of this: one existed for the Emperor and for the railway - which was, after all, the embodiment of the Emperor's will - or one had no reason to live or even die." Did the fact that the Japanese saw suicide as the only honorable response to being captured, and those who did not respond in this way as without honor and therefore sub-human, mitigate their crimes at all? Major Nakamura gives this perspective with disconcerting frankness: "What was a prisoner of war anyway? Less than a man, just material to be used to make the railways, like the teak sleepers and steel rails and dog spikes. If he, a Japanese officer, allowed himself to be captured, he would be executed on his ultimate return to the home islands anyway." Is it true that the greatest monsters, like Colonel Kota, were set free because they were Japanese nobility, while lowly Koreans and Formosans who served in the Japanese army were scapegoated? "If they and all their actions were simply expressions of the Emperor's will, why then was the Emperor still free? Why did the Americans support the Emperor but hang them, who had only ever been the Emperor's tools?" Flanagan worries at the truth of such questions with the same relentless tenacity he applies to every other aspect of this extraordinarily brave, bold book.

It wasn't until I had almost finished reading THE NARROW ROAD TO THE DEEP NORTH that I was able to admit to myself that with a few notable exceptions, the parts of the story that had moved me most and would likely stay with me most clearly afterward were those told from the Japanese point of view. As an Australian myself, it was an intensely uncomfortable feeling to realize that the characters and stories I was most drawn to were Japanese. However, when I say that they moved me and drew me in, for the most part, I do not mean that they elicited positive feelings in me. Colonel Kota usually provoked intense hatred in me,

as did "the Goanna," and Tenji Nakamura usually left me profoundly uncomfortable and confused. Yet for my whole life, I've heard of the unspeakable atrocities perpetrated by the Japanese against the Australians on the Death Railway, and I have never been able to even begin to understand how the Japanese could justify their actions to themselves. This is the first story I have ever read that was able to begin to explain this to me, and that may be one of the most special things about this extraordinary book.

Even though it makes me feel unclean to say so, in a small handful of places in this narrative, I felt the tiniest glimmer of pity for the Japanese characters as victims of an insane culture of hero worship and everyday brutality that very deliberately stifled such feelings as empathy and compassion, and molded men into monsters. "Too much was made of killing, thought Nakamura. Maybe one should feel remorse, guilt, and at first in Manchukuo he had. But the dead soon ceased to be faces. He struggled to remember any of them. The dead are dead, he thought, and that's it." Choi Sang-min, whom the Australians called "the Goanna," gives the perspective of a Korean forced into the lowly position of a guard in the POW camp: "... when he was a guard, he lived like an animal, he behaved as an animal, he understood as an animal, he thought as an animal. And he understood that such an animal was the only human thing he had ever been allowed to be."

Major Nakamura perfectly illustrates what the Japanese mindset was, a mindset so completely incomprehensible to Australians then or now: "Nakamura had shed the blood of others and would willingly have shed his own. He told himself that, through his service of this cosmic goodness, he had discovered he was not one man but many, that he could do the most terrible things he might otherwise have thought were evil if he had not known that they were in the service of the ultimate goodness. For he loved poetry above all, and the Emperor was a poem of one word - perhaps, he thought, the greatest poem - a poem that encompassed the universe and transcended all morality and all suffering. And like all great art, it was beyond good and evil."

The ending of the book is as perfectly real as everything that comes before it. It is as multi-layered as life, and I am grateful to have found a book and an author that understand such authenticity, especially at the end, where we find that: "People kept on longing for meaning and hope, but the annals of the past are a muddy story of chaos only." A few of the layers are happy or at least peaceful; many are quietly tragic; some are unresolved; many are full of regret. Because life is like that. And so is death.

This review was first posted to my blog, The Power of Story, at <http://feelthepowerofstory.wordpress.com>.

Dem says

The 2014 Booker prize-winning story is powerful, harrowing and a quite difficult read but a book that will stay with me for a long time.

In the despair of a Japanese POW camp on the Burma Death Railway, surgeon Dorrigo Evans is haunted by his love affair with his uncle's young wife two years earlier. Struggling to save the men under his command from starvation, from cholera and from beatings, he receives a letter that will change his life forever. This is a story about the many forms of love and death, of war and truth, as one man comes of age, prospers, only to discover all that he has lost.

This was a book that I had on my radar for a couple of years but I kept putting it to the bottom of the pile as I knew it would be an emotional read and possibly quite challenging.

To be honest I was right on both accounts but the payoff was rewarding. This is a book that affects the reader on many levels, the writing is descriptive and real, the sense of time and place terrific and all the characters, even the minor ones are beautifully written. I had a face for every character in this book and they all felt so

real. While I am aware this is a novel I am sure Flanagan must have based some of these characters on men that his father talked about during his time in the POW Camp. He doesn't disclose this in the book but I have to imagine he drew something from his fathers stories to create such real and well drawn characters.

This is a deep book and its the sort of book on finishing I would love to have had a discussion on with a book group. Its certainly not going to be everyone's cup of tea as its harrowing in detail and the cruelty and misery of the camps is relentless and makes for very difficult reading but I only had to read it as these poor men had to endure it and the ones that "survived" seemed to have survived in name only as life for them was never the same.

A great educational read and a really well written book. Harrowing reading but a book that deserves the awards it has received.

Emily May says

"I shall be a carrion monster, he whispered into the coral shell of her ear, an organ of women he found unspeakably moving in its soft, whorling vortex, and which always seemed to him to be an invitation to adventure."

I guess I'm inviting haters and trolls by reviewing this much-loved Booker Prize winner, but the eye rolls started somewhere halfway through chapter one and they just wouldn't stop.

It makes me feel bad saying this about a book which was clearly inspired by the author's father's own experiences on the Burma death railway. How can you criticise a work that sets out to tell such an horrific story of war and violence? But this book is drowning itself in its own pretentious language. A woman's ear is an invitation to adventure? Give me a break.

If the story had been less dressed-up with fancy trimmings, in my opinion it would have been better, had no Man Booker Prize, and sold far fewer copies. Which is sad, really. But I guess when you strip it down, The Narrow Road to the Deep North is yet another war story with plenty of gore and sadness; it achieves differentiation by waxing poetic about life, love and ears.

And: ***"He found her nipples wondrous."***

Oh, come on. They. Are. Nipples. They might be a lot of things, but... "wondrous"? Forgive me if I'm somewhat skeptical. Or perhaps I'm just jealous and wish I had wondrous nipples; I didn't realise it was something I was missing out on until now.

Then there's Dorrigo Evans who, despite the flowery language and metaphors floating around, feels like a Gary Stu worthy of some YA books I've read. I just don't buy into his self-deprecation. He's like one of those people who is humble just so he can wait around to be applauded for being humble. Like he fancies himself as a modern Socrates: "I know nothing. Therefore I'm more intelligent than you because I know that I know nothing." Let's all step out of the way and make room for Dorrigo's lack of ego.

The Man Booker Prize is such a huge award that I'm always intrigued by its winners, but I find myself liking them less and less. Whatever they're being judged on is clearly not something I'm looking to read.

Oh well, there are thousands of positive reviews of this book if you want to go see why you should love it.

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Rebecca Foster says

(4.5) A new classic of war fiction in the making, this kaleidoscopic, empathetic portrait of Australian POWs working on the Burma Death Railway during World War II was a deserving Man Booker Prize winner. Flanagan's challenge here is to give literary form to the horrors of war, without resorting to despair or simple us-versus-them dichotomies. He maintains a careful balance of sympathy by shifting between the perspectives of the POWs and their Japanese captors, and by setting up a tripartite structure: a before, during and after that shows how war affects the whole of life.

An absence of speech marks can at times foster detachment from the characters, but the writing is unfailingly beautiful. Japanese death poems and Tennyson's "Ulysses" weave through as refrains, and the language is lyrical even when describing atrocities: corpses are "drying dark-red meat and fly-blown viscera." As the poem by Issa used as an epigraph reads, "In this world / we walk on the roof of hell / gazing at flowers" – finding whatever shards of beauty and love we can, even in nightmarish circumstances.

(Flanagan's father, a survivor of the Burma Death Railway, died on the day Flanagan finished writing this novel.)

See my full review at The Bookbag.

Steve lovell says

From the slurry that are my earliest memories there is a night of pluvial rain out into which my father went. On the road below our house a taxi had come to some form of grief. I remember looking out a window and seeing static car lights. My father came back and reported it was his friend, an old army mate, now cabbie - Ray. In response to my mother's query, he reported that his pal would be okay - given a little time. I knew Ray had been 'on the Railway' during the war, without knowing exactly what that meant – only that he and Dad discussed it over beers. It seems to me that in today's parlance he would have had some form of 'melt down' and parked by our house; he was coming to someone who 'understood' – my father.

It wasn't till later in life that I came to know what being 'on the Railway' meant. To me the railway, in those earlier years, was the one running by the foreshore of our Tasmanian town and back then, in the days of steam, one actually bearing trains carrying passengers hither and thither. Later I knew 'the Railway' was another line far away in the jungles of Asia, the horrors of the building of which were linked to the game-changing conflict that figured so hugely in the life of both my old man and Ray. Nothing of 'the Railway' ever featured in my father's stories, told to me perched on his knee – that wasn't part of his war- as were the battles in Palestine and the Western Desert. His yarns were highly sanitised for juvenile consumption. There is, however, nothing sanitised in 'The Narrow Road to the True North'.

As I progressed through my pre to mid-teens I became fixated on those 'great adventures' – World Wars 1 and 11. There was 'Combat' on the tele, with our dominant allies, the GIs, always coming out ahead of those foul, deviant 'Krauts'. Through another source, the public library, I discovered how foul those Germans were – though not particularly those on the front line. I saw pictures in books of concentrations camps, pictures that gave me the horrors. These did not feature in any of my Dad's stories either. It was then I started to discover the true nature of war. It had little of the American good guys coming to the world's rescue with some micro-assistance from Aussie diggers. It was a hell – one only had to read of Stalingrad or Iwo Jima to

know that.

In recent days I have attended the launch by Tim Winton of his new tome 'Eyrie'. The great man will no doubt be a contender for the Miles Franklin with it, but during his talk he genuflected to Richard Flanagan, who, with 'The Narrow Road...', will no doubt be his major competitor. He used the M word to describe it – Masterpiece. That word came to the lips of Jennifer Byrne on the 'First Tuesday Book Club' as well. Her panelist, the divine Marieke Hardy, informed us that, at another launch, when she went to congratulate Flanagan on the book, all she could do was cry in his presence so deeply was she moved by what she had read. The first act she did on completing the novel was to ring her own father.

Could White in his pomp; Kenneally, Alex Miller or even Winton himself produce the burnished word-smithery this author uses in this book? The Tasmanian has honed the words on his pages to a sheen so as to have his desired effect on the reader. They are mesmerising; they are simply unputdownable. His mastery of the vernacular entraps from the get-go and never lets up until the last page is done with. One takes a deep breath as Flanagan beautifully, if not quite happily, ties up the loose ends, then one simply wants to start from the beginning again. There is a symmetry to the whole opus as Flanagan pulls us away from the fecund, oozing passages of horror on 'the Railway', then immerses the reader in it yet again.

I knew from his previous offerings, such as 'The Sound of One Hand Clapping' and the exquisite 'Wanting', that this writer has the promise of literary greatness about him, but 'The Road to the Deep North' raises him to another level. It seems all before for him has been moving to this – this being reportedly twelve years in the making. It will become a seminal Australian epic.

Two aspects of the book did surprise. I knew from the pre-publicity that Flanagan was not going to shirk from the utter vileness of the under-resourced, impossible task that befell the slave labourers on the Burma Railway. Its descriptions of the squalid conditions and Japanese cruelty were a test for me – a good friend couldn't cope and had to skip those pages. I made it through – but it wasn't pretty. Even in these, though, there is a beauty in the 'mateship' between the men – a notion that has been somewhat disrespected in recent times. Surely not now after this book. Of course, I was moved to tears by his portrayal of the privations in the middle sections of the book – it was no surprise to me that I would be. I was forewarned that Flanagan presents the other side as well – in some cases, if not entirely sympathetically, at least there is an understanding there. There is a Japanese – and a touch of Korean – perspective. In doing so – does he makes it easier to forgive?

What I didn't expect was the sheer readability of the thing. It draws the reader in deep – normal pre-occupations are put aside whilst one devours it. The mind never wanders, causing a reread of paragraphs, one is so immersed. Even though it is not a linear narrative, Flanagan has somehow made it all so seamless. There is real power in the story, not just of the abominations of the jungle camps, but in the parallel magnetism of the affair that is also at the heart of this great Australian novel. As the main protagonist struggles to abide, let alone like, himself, women are drawn to him in the same way as his men were on 'the Railway' A novel of this magnitude would usually take me a couple of weeks to complete what with all the other enjoyable attractions of retirement – this, though, took precedence and I flew through it in a couple of sittings.

I went to see a film very early in the year called 'Armour' – a story of a hard singular death. That movie has retained a hold on me, not an entirely pleasant one either. I thought there could be no more pitiful going than that old woman's on that movie screen that night. Of course, there are multiple deaths in 'The Narrow Road...' The double one, though, of Darky Gardiner would seemingly be so heart/gut wrenchingly that it would be beyond adjectives – yet Flanagan seems to find them to do justice to the brutality of it. Jack Rainbow's demise under the surgeon's knife is almost as potent, if that's the right word? Then there's the Japanese fixation on beheading – how the author describes the tantric of it in the mind of one of his Asian characters in particular makes the skin crawl. It is something seemingly beyond human understanding – yet Flanagan

somehow makes it comprehensible.

The character whose war provides the fulcrum for the tale survives and presumably is an amalgam of Arch, the author's own remarkable father, a former 'slave'; as well as the legendary Weary Dunlop. That he had to make it through another test, albeit a briefer one, was also a surprise to me. It was yet another black period of time in my island's dark history – the '67 bushfires. These are indelibly etched into the minds of all Tasmanians of my vintage when the hills around where I am sitting now scribing this piece were in the grip of dry-heated, gale driven hellfires. Over sixty lives were lost. It was another Hades altogether that the by now the living legend had to summon the strength to come to terms with.

It's the names - the names of his characters that truly, truly grabbed as well – the range of wonderful appellations were Dickensian in their aptness – Sheephead Morton; Jimmy Bigelow; Rooster MacNiece; Bonox Baker; the priceless Gallipoli von Kessler. Does a woman's name roll off the tongue more sweetly than Amy Mulvaney. No wonder she dominated the great man's mind with a nomenclature like that! She was his uncle's wife; his unquenchable passion, despite a more than suitable, if long suffering, wife in Ella.

And finally, is Dorrigio Evans the greatest Australian literary creation this century?

Kate Gordon says

I've read it. I'm in awe. But now I don't want to talk about it ever again.

Ron Charles says

Beware Richard Flanagan's new novel, "The Narrow Road to the Deep North." His story about a group of Australian POWs during World War II will cast a shadow over your summer and draw you away from friends and family into dark contemplation the way only the most extraordinary books can. Nothing since Cormac McCarthy's "The Road" has shaken me like this — all the more so because it's based on recorded history, rather than apocalyptic speculation.

A finalist for this year's Man Booker Prize, "The Narrow Road to the Deeper North" portrays a singular episode of manic brutality: imperial Japan's construction of the Thailand-Burma Death Railway in the early 1940s. The British had long investigated this route, but they deemed the jungle impenetrable. Once the Japanese captured Burma, though, its army needed a more efficient resupply route, and so the impossible became possible in just over a year by using some 300,000 people as disposable labor. Flanagan's late father was a survivor of that atrocity, which took the lives of more than 12,000 Allied prisoners.

"I had known for a long time that this was the book I had to write if I was to keep on writing," Flanagan said recently. "Other novels came and went as I continued to fail to write this one." Those "other novels" that he refers to so modestly include his 2001 masterpiece, "Gould's Book of Fish," which also dealt with the unfathomable abuse of prisoners. But the horrors of that story about a 19th-century convict kept in a partially submerged cage in Tasmania were leavened by ribald humor and a style so lush that the sentences seemed to send tendrils off the pages, which were printed in several different colors. "The Narrow Road to the Deep North" sports none of that dazzling showmanship. Its magic is darker and more subtle, its impact more devastating. Here, Flanagan is writing about events that outstrip surrealism. His quiet, unrelenting style is often unbearably powerful. Not just an enlivened historical documentary or a corrective to Pierre Boulle's

“The Bridge over the River Kwai,” this is a classic work of war fiction from a world-class writer.

The story casts its roving eye on 77-year-old Dr. Dorrigo Evans, a celebrated war hero whose life has been an unsatisfying string of sterile affairs and public honors. He loved a woman once, but tragedy intervened, and since then each new award and commendation only makes Dorrigo feel undeserving and fraudulent. “The more he was accused of virtue as he grew older, the more he hated it,” Flanagan writes. “Virtue was vanity dressed up and waiting for applause.” Asked to write the introduction to a collection of once-contraband sketches by one of the servicemen imprisoned with him in Siam, he begins to recall the experiences of that hellacious period.

Flanagan has always bent time to his art in the most captivating ways. His first novel, “Death of a River Guide,” played out the history of Tasmania in the few minutes it takes a man to drown. “The Narrow Road to the Deep North” has a more complex, impressionistic structure as it moves fluidly forward and backward, changing perspectives and locales, keeping us mesmerized but never confused. For many pages, the novel shimmers over the decades of Dorrigo’s life, only flashing on the horrors of war and the ghosts who haunt him.

But soon enough, that unspeakable period comes into focus in a series of blistering episodes you will never get out of your mind. As more senior captured officers succumb to disease, Dorrigo finds himself placed in command of 700 sickly prisoners who he “held, nursed, cajoled, begged, hoodwinked and organised into surviving, whose needs he always put before his own.” (This character bears some resemblance to the Australian war hero Col. Edward “Weary” Dunlop.) The hospital tent, equipped only with rags and saws, is a theater of magical thinking and unfathomable gore. During one operation scene, I confess that I forced my eyes down the page in a blur.

What stretches the story beyond the visceral pain it brings to life is the attention paid to these men as individuals, their pettiness and their courage, their acts of betrayal and affection, and their efforts to cling to trappings of civilization no matter how slight or futile. The greatest burden and the one most affectingly portrayed is Dorrigo’s moral conundrum: Every morning he begins bargaining with his Japanese captors, who insist that dying for the emperor is an honor sufficient to raise his men from the “shame” of being captured. Dorrigo must select the healthiest prisoners for that day’s crushing labor. But his men — “like a muddy bundle of broken sticks” — are starving, suffering from cholera, and, in the never-ending rain, their ulcer-covered bodies are rotting away. The ceaseless torture described here is strikingly uncreative: no water boarding, no electrodes, nothing from the Dick Cheney Handbook for Liberators. Instead, the prisoners are simply kicked to death or beaten with bamboo poles to bloody mush. Dorrigo must strive to save each one, knowing that, ultimately, he can’t rescue any of them and that their deaths here in the jungle in service to an insane ambition mean nothing and will quickly be forgotten.

Among the novel’s most daring strategies is its periodic shift to the Japanese and Korean guards’ points of view — both during and long after the war. Flanagan pulls us right into the minds of these men raised on emperor worship, trained in a system of ritualized brutality and wholly invested in the necessity of their cause. It’s a harrowing portrayal of the force of culture and the way twisted political logic inflated by religious zeal can render obscene atrocities routine, even necessary. The novel doesn’t exonerate these war criminals, but it forces us to admit that history conspired to place them in a situation where cruelty would thrive, where the natural responses of human kindness and sympathy were short-circuited. And in its final move, the story makes us confront the conundrum of evil men who later become kind and gentle under the cleansing shower of their own denial. How infinite are our ways of absolving ourselves, of rendering our crimes irrelevant, of mitigating the magnitude of others’ pain.

Ultimately, though, the tale belongs to Dorrigo, whose heroism is never sufficient to satisfy his own ideals. His ordeal as “part of a Pharaonic slave system that had at its apex a divine sun king” seems the kind of psychic injury that never heals, but Flanagan insists that the real source of the doctor’s chronic despair is the

loss of his one true love. That's a mystery spun here in prose as haunting and evocative as the haiku by 17th-century Japanese poet Basho that gives this novel its title. No other author draws us into "the strange, terrible neverendingness of human beings" the way Flanagan does.

This review was first published in The Washington Post:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/enterta...>

Jen says

This narrative was magnificent on so many levels.

The structure - told in present and past. The themes - love, loss, survival, good vs evil. The history - of a railroad being built in the deep jungles of Java. Built by POWs with their bare hands as they staved off disease, starvation and brutal beatings.

The character - a man so strong, so broken searching for the meaning in his life.

The language - to feel the emotions attached to these characters. Exquisite. Authentic. Undeniably devastating.

The relationships of these men - what these soldiers endured and what they would do for each other.

The disruption and destruction of war: on the soldiers, their families; their lives.

It is a story of survival. Surviving the brutal ordeal of being captured and held prisoner in the deep, dark and dank jungle. The acute starvation. The mandated work to build a railway that defied being built. The hopelessness; the disease. The heart breaking triumph of stealing food that only makes one ill.

The devastation of war and the costs and sacrifices made.

And the hope to find the world again with the goodness that once existed.

This was one intense and difficult read. My heart hurts.5★

Candi says

"For an instant he thought he grasped the truth of a terrifying world in which one could not escape horror, in which violence was eternal, the great and only verity, greater than the civilizations it created, greater than any god man worshipped, for it was the only true god. It was as if man existed only to transmit violence to ensure its domain is eternal. For the world did not change, this violence had always existed and would never be eradicated, men would die under the boot and fists and horror of other men until the end of time, and all human history was a history of violence."

While reading this powerful novel about the Australian POWs during World War II, I couldn't help but fall victim to the same dark sentiment expressed above. I may switch the television on to the news or read a headline in the newspaper and it does seem to fit. The senseless violence in our own communities or in the world at large – it seems to be a never-ending cycle. Flanagan rather bluntly depicts the brutality of beatings, starvation, horrific disease and gruesome deaths of the prisoners at the hands of their captors, the Japanese brandishing a wartime mentality and a pride for country in the service of their emperor. Central to this story is Dorrigo Evans, an officer and a surgeon, one who could repeatedly betray his vows of marriage but could never forsake his men. Dorrigo, as a human being, is an obviously flawed character. He doesn't even believe in his own calling to lead men. But, his men put their lives in his hands and never question his rank or his ability. Forced under grueling and unbelievable conditions to build a railway for the Japanese through the rugged landscape of the Asian jungle, the POWs honor Dorrigo with their unwavering respect. He never quite seems to grasp why they do so. *"As if rather than him leading them by example they were leading him through adulation."* But, this is one key to survival – finding something or someone in which to believe.

Without it, one would undoubtedly give up. But what motivates Dorrigo to survive and carry on with his duties? Well, of course, back home there exists his one true love – a love that should be out of reach, but not for the ambitions of Dorrigo Evans. Amy will wait for him when he returns from the war... or won't she?

I think perhaps what I found to be the most compelling point of this novel was not the shocking events that we were obligated to witness in the camp itself, but the aftermath of the experience on all those involved, from the Japanese officers to the Korean guards to the Australian prisoners. What did these men feel after the war – sorrow, joy, guilt, or self-contempt? Would they be able to resume life as usual? Would the captors atone for what they had done to the prisoners? Well, in real life, we would probably see a range of outcomes, and that is exactly what Flanagan so masterfully recounts in these portions of the book. Some would never quite understand the blame placed on them for their crimes against humanity, others would perhaps try to come to terms with their guilt and find peace in the end. The POWs may block the evil from their minds and never turn back; others may never find true happiness again, always searching for it in the wrong places. Some would seek salvation in their family life; others would emotionally neglect their families.

I should note here that this novel is not written in a chronological timeframe, but rather with constant shifts in time and also between multiple characters. I have mixed feelings about this approach. In one way I found this to detract a bit from my understanding of the book. I often felt that perhaps I should go back and make sure I didn't miss something important at an earlier point in the book. Since I didn't have all the information up front, could I not have read enough into certain passages at the beginning to take away what Flanagan was trying to say? The prose was far from being cut and dry and maybe I missed some subtlety that initially did not seem to matter. However, the shift in time did help break up some of the more disturbing scenes within these pages. Just when I thought I could read no more of a certain grisly event, the narrative would switch to another time, another person. A little reprieve, if you will. The only other little quibble that I had bears pointing out. At times I felt it was overly dramatic, but in a visual sort of way. Not in a way that added to my understanding of individual motives or to aid with characterization, but in a manner that perhaps was used to increase the shock value a bit. I know others may not agree, as after all this is a book about a harrowing event in history and perhaps should be painted as such.

Overall, this book was excellent and one that I would not hesitate to recommend to others, as long as the reader is okay with some of the more graphic passages. I learned a lot about another piece of World War II that I previously knew nothing about, and the author is clearly well-versed on the subject. There are great moments of superb writing and keen insight into the minds of men we would otherwise fail to penetrate. In the end, when pondering life and death and why bad things happen to good people, why people can endure and survive such atrocities, only to later die a meaningless and senseless death, I have to agree with the POW Darky Gardiner's reflection, *"Life wasn't about ideas. Life was a bit about luck. Mostly though, it was a stacked deck. Life was only about getting the next footstep right."*

Jill says

The very best books don't just entertain, uplift or educate us. They enfold us in their world and make us step outside of ourselves and become transformed. And sometimes, if we're really lucky, they ennoble and affirm us.

The Narrow Road to the Deep North is such a book. Once I got past the first 60 or 70 pages, there was no turning back. I turned the last page marveling at Mr. Flanagan's skill and agreeing with historian Barbara Tuchman that, "Without books, history is silent, literature dumb, science cripples, thought and speculation at a standstill."

The Narrow Road is based on an actual event: the building of the Thai-Burma death railway in 1943 by POWs commanded to the Japanese. The title comes from famed haiku poet Matsuo Basho's most famous work and sets up a truism of the human condition: even those who can admire the concise and exquisite portrayal of life can become the agents of death.

The key character, Australian surgeon Dorrigo Evans, is also a study in contradictions: a man called "Big Fella" who protects those under his command from starvation, heinous diseases and senseless dehumanizing while struggling with his own demons. The passages are haunting and heartbreaking: the skeletal bodies covered in their own excrement, the bulging ulcers, the breaking of mind and spirit.

Yet Mr. Flanagan does not depict these scenes to shock the reader. Rather, he reveals the senselessness of it all: "Nothing endures. Don't you see? That's what Kipling meant. Not empires, not memories. We remember nothing. Maybe for a year or two. Maybe most of a life, if we live. Maybe. But then we will die, and who will ever understand any of this?"

And later: "For an instant, he thought he grasped the truth of a terrifying world in which one could not escape horror, in which violence was eternal, the great and only verity, greater than the civilizations it created, greater than any god man worshipped." Richard Flanagan implies again and again that only books and poems survive.

One of the book's strengths is that it never resorts to "us" and "them." After depositing us in the midst of hell, he delivers us back to a post-war world where Japanese and POWs alike struggle to justify and endure. The only weakness is an overwrought love affair at the beginning of the book but to Richard Flanagan's credit, he doesn't take the easy way out in crafting its culmination.

The dedication – to prisoner san byaku san ju go (335) was so enticing I Googled it, only to find that the prisoner alluded to was actually Richard Flanagan's father. As he states early on when describing the unofficial national war memorial commemorating the railroad, "There are no names of the hundreds of thousands who died building the railway... Their names are already forgotten. There is no book for their lost souls. Let them have this fragment." Richard Flanagan does honor to these unsung heroes.

Catriona (LittleBookOwl) says

I received this book for free from Bookworld in exchange for an honest review.

This book... Where do I even start?

The Narrow Road to the Deep North had such a profound impact on me. I often had to stop mid-sentence and contemplate everything; this book, people, life. I didn't even realise at first that it had drawn me in so deeply, but when I finished I was catatonic.

Richard Flanagan is extremely talented. He has such a way with words - his style is so unassuming, but then I find myself needing to take a step back from the book and just breathe for a moment. Every single character is illustrated so vividly, and in such a short amount of time, that I found myself empathising with people that seem to have no sense of humanity.

Stunning. Absolutely stunning. One of the best books I have read.

Full review *HERE*

Seemita says

When I turned the final page, I was relieved and sad at the same instant; relieved to have finally let the fates of POWs take wings to better skies and sad to not be living an alternate life, altogether.

This exquisite work of Flanagan is so “terrifyingly beautiful” that it redefined both the words for me. I was surprised to find my mind working at two levels.

One level drew shudders - the ulcerated limbs, the beri-beri attacks, the cholera ridden bodies, the virulent lashes, the shitty camps, the fatal frostbites; their strangling hold was so difficult to visualize that I found myself keeping the book away several times to just get my hands and mind steady. Knowing somewhere at the back of my mind that this story is weaved with the solid knots of the author’s father’s first-hand experience of war days, didn’t help either. Above all the visualization, there hovered over them, like a nasty black cloud, the victims’ helplessness. Their best efforts, drawn from the deepest wells of reserve, were never enough to buy a single day of comfort. And the cloud was no passing cloud.

However the other level drew comfort.

‘The path to survival was to never give up on the small things.’

The cloud can darken the day but it cannot darken the spirit that throbs inside every heart; that spirit which is connected to a love somewhere. In spite of the inhuman conditions, the prisoners held the flame of emotions aglow; keeping relationships, dancing madly, forging friendships, sharing heartbreaks, fighting trivial, crying together, helping gladly, nurturing hope and living a parallel life, elsewhere, far away, in their minds.

When life comes full circle and the war days are behind, each survivor remembers those days, with a certain tint of *fondness* since love, courage and friendship can sparkle even in a muck of inhumanity and death.

When life is killed everyday yet one wishes to live and when hope is crushed every hour yet one continues to hope, we see the greatest example of human courage. That courage, Flanagan, tenderly places amidst the sheets of this book.

For those who are interested, here is an article where Flanagan talks about the story behind this marvelous book.

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/b...>

I got the link from the review of fellow GR user, Kim whose wonderful review can be found here - <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Cheryl says

The prose was flat, mundane, the love story was pedestrian and could probably be bested by many Harlequin romance novels, and the war imagery, while horrific, has been done (and kept provoking memories of the movie *Bridge on the River Kwai*, accompanied by the ear-worm whistling of the Coloney Bogey march). Unsatisfying and disappointing.

Kim says

Although Richard Flanagan has been on the edge of my consciousness for years, this is the first of his novels I've read and I may not have read it at all (or at least not so soon after publication) if it hadn't been given to me as a gift.

The novel is about what? Life, death, despair, loneliness, love, connection, redemption, poetry. It's a grim work, centred on the experiences of the Australian prisoners of war who were used as slave labour in the construction of the Thailand-Burma railway during World War II. In writing the novel, Flanagan drew on the experiences of his father, a survivor of that horrific ordeal, and the public life of his central protagonist is clearly inspired by that of the legendary Weary Dunlop.

The narrative moves back and forward in time and is mostly from the point of view of Dorrigo Evans, an Australian surgeon whose life is shaped by a love of literature, by an early, passionate affair with his uncle's wife and by his wartime experiences. There are other perspectives as well: those of fellow prisoners, of Japanese guards, of Evans' wife and of his lover. The prose is poetic but unflinching in its description of the unspeakable horrors faced by prisoners of war who worked on "the Line".

This is a grim tale, with few light moments. It's not an enjoyable book to read, but it is a powerful one. For me, though, the emotional effect of the work came not from developing a connection with the characters, from whom I felt a certain distance, but from the situation they found themselves in. That said, this is a novel which will haunt me for some time. I've given it five stars for that reason alone.

ETA: Readers interested in what inspired this work may like to read this article by the author.

Vit Babenco says

The Narrow Road to the Deep North is an encyclopedia of death and compendium of love... Love comes like a strike of a lightning, electrical and doomed love at first sight, a brief love affair with a lifelong echo...

A wild, almost violent intensity took hold of their lovemaking and turned the strangeness of their bodies into a single thing. He forgot those short, sharp shrieks, that horror of ceaseless solitude, his dread of a nameless future. Her body transformed for him again. It was no longer desire or repulsion, but another element of him, without which he was incomplete. In her he felt the most powerful and necessary return. And without her, his life felt to him no longer any life at all.

Death is senseless, pitiless and it knows no quarter... Grim Reaper harvests indiscriminately...

It was a fabled railway that was the issue of desperation and fanaticism, made as much of myth

and unreality as it was to be of wood and iron and the thousands upon thousands of lives that were to be laid down over the next year to build it. But what reality was ever made by realists?

Building this railway is a crime against humanity. It is a factory of death.

Necks, continued Colonel Kota, looking away to where an open door framed the rainswept night. That's all I really see of people now. Their necks. It's not right to think this way, is it? I don't know. It's how I am now. I meet someone new, I look at his neck, I size it up – easy to cut or hard to cut. And that's all I want of people, their necks, that blow, this life, those colours, the red, the white, the yellow.

This is a samurai's valour... This is an executioner's honour...

War is a great transformer – it turns ordinary people into torturers and martyrs, into heroes and cowards, into executioners and victims.

Laura says

I'm actually surprised that I didn't like this book, not so much because of the critical acclaim but because I have yet to see it get less than 5 stars from any of my Goodreads friends. So I am clearly the odd one here, left proverbially scratching my head to figure out why my reaction is so divergent from those I usually agree with, and with similar taste for weighty historical fiction.

The author is talented, and there are some very powerful lines in the midst of detailed, gritty, historical realism. But there is something missing for me, and as is typically the case when I don't fully connect with a book, it comes down to the characters. While I pitied the characters in this work (it would be hard not to, as they face torture and horror of every description constantly) few of the "men of the line" stood out to me distinctly (and even less were likable), and I had a hard time keeping them separate in my mind. Also, I never grew attached to the main characters, and found myself mostly disliking both Dorrigio and Amy.

This is a book filled to bursting with ugliness- all the terrible traits of humanity, and all the ways we destroy and degrade and torment each other. It gets incredibly gratuitous at times, and while I don't mind darkness and violence in historical fiction that warrants it, I did feel like the author was trying to use shock value and repulsive, minute detail as a too-easy way to lend power and gravity to the book. There was also something about the style of the writing that struck me as too contrived, like I could *feel* the author's desperation to be weighty and artsy, like a painting with all the strategic, careful brush strokes but missing something bigger. Some of my favorite books wade just as deep into the horror of human experience (*A Fine Balance* comes immediately to mind) but with a complex beauty, too, which (in my humble, and clearly unpopular opinion) renders those works more authentic power and depth.

Dolors says

Be warned, some spoilers ahead

Dorrigio Evans is the protagonist of this dramatic novel; an Australian surgeon who serves in WWII and is finally captured by the Japanese and sent to Burma as a prisoner of a labor camp to assemble a railway that

will connect Bangkok with Yangon.

The narrative structure is divided in five sections set in fragmentary recollections that focus on the milestones in Evans' life: the archetypal affair with his uncle's young wife prior to war that saves and condemns him to perpetual loneliness, the brutal atrocities he witnesses and the inhuman decisions he is forced to make during the two years he serves as a leader of the Australian gang, his nihilist indifference as a war survivor and his torrid adulterous relationships with countless women, his later success as a public figure and his permanent failure as husband and father, and an overview of the post-war tragic reality from the perspective of the defeated Japanese officers.

Flanagan's prose is simple but mined with detail. His minute descriptions of scents, atmosphere, scenery and transcendental moments that recur as some sort of allegory throughout the story have the intention to be mindful and poetic.

To this baffled reader though, its sentimental undertone collided with the hypermasculinity of the protagonist, who on occasion appears as the prototype of the war hero only to later become the paragon of manliness understood as the classical combination between physical and mental strength, the kind of courage and mystery that explains his irresistible seductiveness.

In spite of the occasional reference to literature, which includes ancient Japanese poets like Basho or Issa, and the opening love story, the core of the novel is the succession of brutal episodes of gratuitous beatings, torture through persistent starvation and forced labor in barbaric conditions, sickness and degradation that killed the spirit of the prisoners of war in the Japanese camp.

Nevertheless, amidst the accurate, long-winded depiction of such cruelty, I failed to connect with Dorrigio Evans. His pretended strength didn't move me, and his inner vulnerability didn't convince me, his heroism left me somewhat incredulous. Doubtless, the fault must be mine, as I was reminded of the too many Hollywood movies where similar characters and scenes are portrayed with the same purpose.

On the other hand, I appreciated Flanagan's attempt to show that there are no honorable reasons to justify actions in war. The image of the defeated Japanese officer meandering in the streets of Tokyo, a vicious monster while ruling with steel hand in the camp, is telling of that premise. No other part in the novel moved me as much as Nakamura's contemplations on his harsh treatment of the prisoners and his motivation to act that way without questioning himself.

Whenever the Asian conception of honor and pathos was sporadically but successfully evoked, the narration sparkled in ways that bespoke of its unfulfilled potential.

Who knows... If Flanagan had used the vision of Basho's travel epic besides its title, I might have embraced the fire of the closing pages as purifying rather than a doomed, almost pointless, return to ashes.

Amalia Gavea says

"Why at the beginning of things is there always light?"

My head is full of a plethora of thoughts that, somehow, need to find their way into a text? Or do they? Probably not. This must be one of the most difficult reviews I have chosen to write and this is not a cliché. It's reality. Difficult because how can one possibly describe the horrors brought about by monsters in one of the darkest eras of History that, sadly seems not too far away or lost in time? Difficult because love and pain and lose are feelings that cannot be easily turned into paragraphs or measured by phrases "this is good", "this is bad". Difficult because no matter how hard I tried, no matter how mesmerizing the writing was at times, this book will not enter my favourites. We failed to form any kind of connection.

Dorrigio Evans is a surgeon in the Australian Army during the nightmare of the Second World War. He and

his regiment are now prisoners of war in a Japanese camp in Burma and the plague is quickly descending. So he is needed by friends and enemies alike, because there is a bridge that needs to be built and it won't wait. Dorrigo struggles to keep his men alive, physically and psychologically, and most of all, he tries to preserve his own will to live and not give up. Because he started feeling dead long before he became a POW. His mind travels back in time, to his younger days, and to the event that defined him and defeated him more than any other battle he had ever given. His relationship with Amy, a young woman, his uncle's wife.

"A happy man has no past, while an unhappy man has nothing else."

Dorrigo is the most complex, interesting character in those pages. He is a kind human being, considerate and brave. He loves with all his heart, he fights to keep his men with him, but he is never happy. He cannot find happiness, he feels that every joy is a fleeting moment for which he is somehow unworthy. There were parts when I felt that Dorrigo had actually fallen victim to a weird notion of self-depreciation, of self-pity. He was broken beyond repair. But why? For whom? For Amy? For himself?

"My disgraceful, wicked heart", thought Amy, "is braver than the world."

It seemed to me that Amy was the driving force of the story. She is definitely a controversial character, but she provides life. When I was reading Amy's POV, I was thinking that Flanagan had reserved the most beautiful language in this novel for her. There is a calmness and a tenderness, a childish spirit that suits Amy, although we somehow feel that the storm is about to break, on many levels. That the underlying terrors will soon become reality. And even though, many may call her "wicked", "selfish" or "manipulative", for me she is the breath of life in the book.

Flanagan provides many points of view. Too many, in my opinion. He divides the stories of the Australian and the Japanese characters almost equally and I found that this made the story significantly slower. I appreciated the Haiku references and the fact that he didn't omit the enemy's voice, creating a highly balanced narration. What I felt as a reader was that these characters weren't interesting enough to turn my mind away from Dorrigo and Amy's fate. As simple as that. They obviously served the purpose of the writer (and I don't dare to presume as to what it was) but they made me lose much of my initial connection to the story. I admit I skimmed quite a few pages of the Japanese chapters. I couldn't bring myself to care for them. In addition, the part of the book set after the end of the war felt slow, flat and melodramatic.

There were two things I deeply appreciated in the novel. First, Flanagan's use of the question of morality was exceptional. What is considered "moral"? What of the feelings that are experienced by all of us and may come in utter contrast with issues like fidelity or bravery or mercy? Especially in times of war when these things cease to matter. The second was the way the horrors of the camp were depicted. I found the chapters harrowing, haunting, raw, but not in any way disgusting or written for the sake of shock value. In fact, a minor issue I had was that there were times when I thought he played it safe, choosing the "easier" road. Sometimes, the situation called for language with more punch, more tension. There have been films and books about the subject that are more nightmarish, more realistic even.

The writing was at times exceptionally poignant and darkly poetic. Other times, I found it verbose, tiresome, melodramatic. Apart from the interactions in the camp, I felt that the dialogue resembled the old 40s films. Now, perhaps my stone-hearted self has taken over (once again...), but in my opinion, dialogue such as this is a bit unrealistic and inconsistent with the powerful themes dealt with in the rest of the novel. Keith and Ella's characters seemed copied out of clichés and I couldn't abide with this.

My journey with this Booker Prize winner started in anticipation and excitement, but somehow, my way fell flat. Yes, this is a special book, beautiful in a disturbing way. However, when I skipped too many pages, when I felt nothing, no connection throughout the story, when I compare it to other war novels, I cannot

bring myself to rate it more than 3 stars. Will I recommend it to a friend? Certainly. Do I consider it memorable? Yes. But I do not think this is the best war novel ever written and certainly not one of the best books ever written. It gave me nothing I hadn't read before....

°°.°...°°.°_ °??? Ροζουλ? Εωσφ?ρος :_.°°.°..° .°°°★.:~.★ ?????? ???????
 ?????? Ταμετο?ρο Αμ says

Καταραμ?νο βιβλ?ο.

Καταραμ?νο μονοπ?τι.

Γραμμ? σιδηροδρ?μου που ξεκιν?ει απο τον π?λεμο, περν?ει μ?σα απο ανθρ?πινες ψυχ?ς, φορτ?νει φρ?κη και π?νο, καταπ?νει βασανιστ?ρια ανδρ?ν,διασχ?ζει ζο?γκλες γεμ?τες λ?σπη,α?μα,πληγ?ς,βρ?μα,μο?χλα,σκοτ?δι.

Συνεχ?ζει,μ?σα σε μια τερ?στια ακατ?ληπτη φυλακ? για σκλ?βους αιχμ?λωτους πολ?μου που παλε?ουν το αν?φικτο.

Διασχ?ζει και ξεσκ?ζει ανθρ?πινα σ?ματα και μυαλ?. Μεταφ?ρει αρρ?στιες που σαπ?ζουν και εξ?θλι?νουν.

Σταματ?ει για λ?γο,οι σκλ?βοι λιγοστε?ουν,πον?νε,πειν?νε,παρ?μορφ?νονται,
τσακ?ζονται,καταρρ?ουν. Δεν ?χουν δικα?ωμα στη λ?τρωση του θαν?του. ?σω και
μποςουλ?νταστην κ?λαση, θα συνεχ?σουν το ?ργο,τη γραμμ?,το μονοπ?τι της κτηνωδ?ας, της
σ?ψης, της απ?λυτης βαρβαρ?τητας.

Ξεκιν?ει π?λι. Οι δο?λοι λιγ?τεροι. Το μονοπ?τι στρ?νεται ομοι?μορφα με ανθρ?πινα
μ?λη,οστ?,βροχ?,πυκν? βλ?στηση και ?φθονη σοδει?.

Το λ?πασμα εκλεκτ? και πλο?σιο,το παρ?γουν τα ?φθονα ανθρ?πινα σωματικ?-υγρ? και στερε?-
 συστατικ?.

Πρέπει να ολοκληρώσει τη διαδρομή.

Πρ?πει να διδ?ξει μ?σος.

Και ο κ?σμος μαθα?νει να μισε?.

Μαθαίνει να σκοτίζει σαν κτένος και να σκοτίζεται.

Συνηθ?ζει το ανυπ?φορο.

Υποφ?ρει το αποτροπιαστικ?.

Η σιδηροδρομικ? γραμμ? του πολ?μου επιβ?λλεται.

Οδηγε? στο ?γνωστο,στο π?ρασμα του θαν?του. Στη σκοτεινι? της γης.

Κοντεύει να φθώσει. Χρειάζεται λίγο ακόμη καΐσιμο για να εγκαινιαστεί η ?φιξη της στα β?ρεια της αβ?σσου.

Λ?γο ακ?μη κινητ?ρια ?λη.

Ως εδ? ?λιωσε εκαντοντ?δες χιλι?μετρα ανδρ?v.

Περίσσευουν μερικοί για το τέλος.

Τα κορμι? τους ε?ναι σκελετωμ?να,πρησμ?να,μολυσμ?να,τρ?μουν απο ελονοσ?α. ?χουν τερ?στια ?λκη που τρ?νε τη σ?ρκα τους ως το κ?κκαλο. Λωρ?δες δ?ρματος κρ?μονται π?νω απο δ?σοσμες

πληγός.

Αυτός, οι ελπίστοι που απέρμαιναν, αυτός οι εκλεκτοί είναι το κάσιμο της επιβίωσης.

Το υλικό αντλείται από τον Β΄ παγκόσμιο πόλεμο. Ιαπωνικό

στρατοπέδο, 1943, Αυστραλός, αιχμαλώτοι πολέμου.

Σκλάβοι της ιαπωνικής αυτοκρατορίας πρέπει να κατασκευάσουν τον σιδηρόδρομο του ΘΑΝΑΤΟΥ.

Θα συνδύει Τάληνδη με Βιρμανία.

Αδελφόν;

Τίποτα δεν είναι αδελφόν ήταν τα ανθρώπινα ήρια και οι δυνατότητες του μυαλού εννοούνται στον εφίπτη της τρέλας, της παράσθησης, του ονέρου και της αγής.

ήνας κήλος η ανθρώπινη παρξη. Μία επανλήψη αναμνήσεων και πράξεων μέσα στο πλέρωμα του χρόνου.

Στο μονοπτι των Αυστραλών δεν υπάρχουν νικητές και νικημένοι. Δεν ζουν εκεί οι ήρωες του πολέμου, ούτε οι γενναίοι των μαχών. Σε αυτό το μονοπτι σφόνονται ήνθρωποι ήδιοι που πρέπει να συνεχίσουν τη διαδρομή, σιωπηλά, εξοντωτικά και ασυνέδητα μέχρι τη λήτρωση, μέχρι την καρδί της συνεδησης.

ήξω από το μονοπτι επέκτείνονται ήλλες πτυχές του εφίπτη και του ονέρου.

Ο ήρωτας, η παθιασμένη σχήση, η αγή, το μαρτύριο του απαγορευμένου που βασανίζει, αποκαλύπτει και απολαμβάνει την ουσία της παρξης.

Το απώθημένο... δεν ξεπερστήκε ποτέ. Αυτό είναι ήλλωστε η ιδιότητα του.

Πνήγηκε μέσα σε απεγνωσμένο και αναγκαστικό αίσθημα που προσποιήτ όνμασαν ήρωτα. Δεν ήταν.

ήταν μία συνωμοσία τρυφερήτητας, τραγωδία, ζωές, μήχθων, ρουτήνας.

ήταν ήνας ήμος. Μία οικογένεια. Το παρξένο ιδώμα της ανθρώπινης φήσης να προσποιείται.

Το απώθημένο.. ήταν αληθινό.

Πήθανε μαζί με αυτούς που τήλμησαν να φανταστούν πως το ξεπράσαν...

Καλή ανήγωση!

Πήρα πολλοές ασπασμούς!!

Glenn Sumi says

I have mixed feelings about Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road To The Deep North*, the winner of the 2014 Man Booker Prize.

- The book is obviously well-researched
- It was inspired by the author's father's gruelling experiences as a POW working on the notorious "Death Railway" during WW2, in which starving and dying prisoners were forced by the Japanese to hack through

the Burmese jungle and build a railway from Bangkok to Rangoon

- The novel took 12 years to finish. Side note: in interviews, Flanagan said his father died *the day the book was finished*. Touching, right?

- It has all the hallmarks of a classy, literary, *important* work about love, war, good, evil, the endurance of the human spirit, etc. etc.:

- handsome, tasteful cover
- enigmatic quotations (including that hard to remember title!) from poets like Basho, Tennyson and Issa (I had to look that last writer up) that are meant to be deep and meaningful
- multiple shifts (in time and place): our protagonist is a boy remembering light! now he's an old respected war hero and surgeon who sleeps with anything that breathes; now he's a young doctor in love, although the woman he's shunning is his uncle's (much younger) wife! now he's a soldier in Siam/Thailand! now he's performing gruesome surgery on his fellow soldiers with crude instruments and no sanitation! now, like Schindler (from another Booker Award-winning novel by an Australian), he's having to choose what prisoners get to live and die; now he's living with the AFTERMATH OF ALL OF THE ABOVE
- multiple shifts (in perspective): okay, there's our main protagonist/lover/war hero/conflicted family man, Dorrigo Evans; there's also his band of soldiers, who sport hearty names like Darky Gardiner, Sheephead Morton and Tiny Middleton and each have one characteristic that makes them stand out; oh yeah, plus we get to see through the beady eyes of the villainous, sadistic Japanese captors and a Korean guard, who of course all turn out to have their own fears and prejudices. How *democratic*, and, ya know, *fair* of Flanagan, right?

So there's all of that. And yet...

It's also highly repetitive. The shifts in time at the beginning are more confusing than effective. The characters, even our flawed hero Dorrigo, remain utterly opaque. There doesn't seem to be anything connecting him and his experiences with anything that happens later.

While there are passages of intensity, vigour and simple, almost Hemingwayesque beauty (a late scene in a fish restaurant brought me to tears with its understated power), there are also sections of clunky, overwritten, melodramatic and obvious prose. And some of the descriptions of women are howlingly bad.

There's also something contrived and self-conscious about the novel, as if it were written with a big, prestigious, important movie adaptation in mind: *The Australian Patient*?

I know I'm in the minority here, and some of the book's more harrowing scenes will, of course, stay with me. I do recommend the book. And perhaps I'll revisit it when that inevitable big budget film comes out.