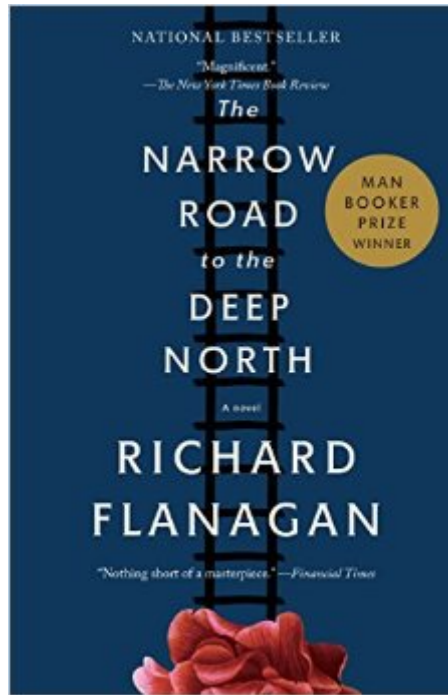


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The Narrow Road To The Deep North



Synopsis

Winner of the Man Booker Prize "Nothing since Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* has shaken me like this." "The Washington Post" In *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Richard Flanagan displays the gifts that have made him one of the most acclaimed writers of contemporary fiction. Moving deftly from a Japanese POW camp to present-day Australia, from the experiences of Dorrigo Evans and his fellow prisoners to that of the Japanese guards, this savagely beautiful novel tells a story of 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.

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

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 crippled, 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, a larger-than-life POW, is also a study in contradictions: as "Big Fella", he protects those under his command from

starvation, heinous deceases 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 how all is ephemeral, mythologized, or forgotten: "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 were it not for poems, sketches, and narratives, the truth of an experience is gone forevermore; it is the ancient haikus that endure and prevail more than, say, a railroad that cost thousands of lives. 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.

Goodness eludes the characters... The protagonist, Dorrigo Evans, is a womanizer, an unloving husband, an unsatisfactory father, a somewhat reckless surgeon, and a war hero who considers himself a man without virtue. The Japanese soldiers who tormented him and his men in a POW jungle camp in Siam consider themselves good men, heroically devoted to the Emperor and faithful to their idea of duty. Years later they actually do develop compassion (too late to benefit the POWs). These shifting sands of morality are a recurrent theme in the book. It's clear that Dorrigo protected his men as best he could and saved many lives. His personal failings pale beside this. And the insane cruelty of the Japanese soldiers, although inexcusable, is clearly the result of their military training and indoctrination. So everyone can be seen as a victim of war and circumstances. Dorrigo's experiences in the jungle camp are the most fascinating pages of the book. The vivid accounts of hunger, beatings, dysentery, lice "and surgery with improvised

implements and homemade anesthetic are unforgettable. Compared to camp life, I found the account of Dorrigo's guilty love affair with his uncle's young wife to be a bit tedious. Perhaps I'm losing my romanticism. There is a certain incoherence to the narrative; on the other hand there are some very moving scenes. So my enjoyment of this book was on and off. Certainly it's a very ambitious novel, a valiant effort to decipher an indecipherable world.

This novel shares its title with a poetic travelogue by the 17th century haiku poet Matsuo Basho which was published in 1694. In many respects, the journey undertaken by Matsuo Basho is very different from that undertaken by Dorrigo Evans in this novel. Matsuo Basho is largely focussed on the beauty of the world around him, whereas Dorrigo Evans's odyssey is of evolving self, and place. "A happy man has no past, while an unhappy man has nothing else." Dorrigo Evans is the central character in Richard Flanagan's novel. His story moves in place and time, between different aspects of his lives in a way that made me think about the kind of man Dorrigo Evans was, and about how complex humans can be. The core of the story, and of Evans's heroism, is about his experiences as a doctor in a prisoner of war camp on the infamous Thai-Burma railway during World War II. Evans loves literature, and especially Tennyson's *Ulysses* which he reads and rereads. Evans's memories are triggered by writing a foreword for a collection of sketches done by one of the men (Guy Rabbit Hendricks) who did not survive the camp. We read Dorrigo Evans's memories of the camp together with his childhood in Tasmania, his life in Melbourne, and his posting to Adelaide where he has an affair with his Uncle Keith's much younger wife, Amy. Although Evans becomes engaged to the conventional Ella before being posted overseas, it is his affair with Amy that sustains him through his camp experiences. We are not spared from graphic descriptions of the physical consequences of life in the camps: malnutrition, minimal hygiene and physical brutality are all covered. But in all the squalor and hardship, pain and suffering, there are men who try to support each other. "Because 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." Others see Dorrigo Evans as a hero for his kindness to them and self-sacrifice for them, and he comes to feel trapped by the weight of their expectations. A sense of duty weighs him down, even after he has returned to civilian life. Dorrigo Evans is not always likeable, especially once he returns to civilian life and acquires a collection of mistresses. And yet, the man whose heroic efforts made a difference to so many in the camps cannot be easily dismissed. Back in

Australia, we still need (and want) our heroes. This is a beautifully written novel which is at times harrowing to read. The descriptions of suffering in the camp are necessary to the story, but not easy to absorb. Many of the experiences are heart-wrenching, and yet Australian larrikin humour is at times on display. I came to care for many of the characters, and to cry for them. This is a novel that invites you to think about life, about situations and accommodations, and about the strengths and weaknesses in each of us. It is not an easy read, but I found it a rewarding one.   He could never admit to himself that it was death that had given his life meaning.   Jennifer Cameron-Smith

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