
If there’s one thing war veterans can teach the young – and I firmly believe there must be many a thing worth learning from them – it is this: war dehumanises human beings.

Dapin’s novel – his second – brings us face to face with the horrors of World War II POWs in Changi and the Burma Railway, but the reader should be grateful that humanity remains a significant aspect throughout the whole novel. Dapin uses a skilful narrative ploy to achieve this. *Spirit House* is mostly told by thirteen-year-old David, whose parents have split up. Young David has been sent to stay at his grandparents’ house in Bondi, but digger Jimmy Rubens, his grandpa, is a basket case. He has kept the trauma, the loss, the pain, the grief bottled inside for many years.

David is curious about Jimmy’s war experience. He would like to understand why Jimmy would not march on Anzac Day; the allure of war stories is very strong and he keeps asking questions. Despite being only thirteen, he is always present at the RSL drinking sessions where Jimmy meets his three Jewish mates, Solomon, Myer and Katz, war veterans like Jimmy. These RSL sessions and their dinners at the Thai restaurant produce the funniest dialogues I have read in a long time.

The recollections of their times in Changi and Thailand are filled with shocking episodes of horror, of torture, of despair. However, Dapin demonstrates he can handle a story well and eventually lead it away from the likely truculence and despair of Jimmy’s memories thanks to the sharp sense of humour Dapin gives his POWs; obviously, this humour is but a defence mechanism against the nightmare life in the war concentration camps.

Intertwined in the novel are excerpts from someone’s Siam diary – the author’s name we only learn towards the end, and I can assure the reader it’s quite a surprise. These excerpts are tastefully written in a very poetic prose, a nice contrast to the explicit sexual banter, the swearing and the Yiddish with which Dapin sprinkles the Jewish diggers’ conversations.

*Spirit House* blends comic and horrible stories seamlessly: Dapin’s narrative depicts the era and the circumstances of an older generation of men who paid too high a price and
whose attitude to life may be met with incomprehension by the younger generations. Dapin seems to hint that, in fact, incomprehension may have taken place both ways.

I can attest myself to the fact that for traumatised people, telling and retelling one’s story is a necessity. In fiction, however (as opposed to real life), both characters and readers may enjoy the benefit of humour as a softening counterpoint. For Jimmy Rubens to feel at peace with himself, he needs to tell the story of these young Australian men who went to war as civilians, were ordered by his superiors to surrender to the Japanese Imperial Army, only to be treated as subhuman creatures while the officers received much more favourable treatment.

Despite the tonnes of jesting and hilarity in Spirit House, this is a serious novel that will not leave readers indifferent. Perhaps one day, we will be able to say with Myer, ‘I thought I’d wet myself, but it turned out to be the monsoon’.

**Jorge Salavert**