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This is the author’s radio script of this article.
The Second World War is a seemingly endless source of stories, and perhaps none are more harrowing for Australians than those of the prisoners of the Japanese in Southeast Asia. Mark Dapin’s novel *The Spirit House* tells the story of a survivor of the Thailand-Burma railway and Changi, one of a small group of Jewish men who still meet and while away their lives and try to forget.

Structurally the novel is in two asymmetric parts. It begins with a horrific scene from a work camp, headed Siam Diary May 1944, and then moves to Bondi, covering a few weeks in 1990, when David, a young Jewish boy, is staying with his grandparents while his mother sorts out her relationship with her new boyfriend. His grandfather, Jimmy Rubens, and his friends Solomon, Katz and Myer meet regularly at their club, drink, and engage in verbal sparring, and soon David is tagging along, listening and only half-understanding: ‘The old men’s speech shared a rhythm and tone. After a while, their voices blended into a chorus and I couldn’t separate their words.’ The diary sections, on the other hand, are short and sparse and anonymous: the mystery of their authorship is not revealed until the end of the novel, and even then it remains somewhat of a puzzle.

The Sydney part of the novel only slowly reveals its power. At first there are perhaps rather too many long conversations between the old men – they’re witty and full of affection disguised as invective, but don’t seem to be leading anywhere. Jimmy, however, is finding it increasingly hard to suppress his memories, which he hasn’t spoken about to anyone. He’s driving his wife crazy, and seeing ghosts everywhere. After Anzac Day, he begins to tell David about what happened in Singapore and Thailand.

Therefore the novel, though nominally narrated by the thirteen-year-old David, is largely told by Jimmy, as David, though a reluctant listener in the beginning, is drawn into his story. David has always liked hearing war stories and enjoyed playing with guns, and at first he finds Jimmy’s experiences ‘disappointing. It seemed Jimmy had spent most of the war surrendering, in prison, or thinking about his girlfriend.’ Soon he is finding the stories more disturbing than disappointing: ‘Sometimes, listening to Jimmy’s stories got too much for me. All the pain and hunger and disappointment started to seem real, and I had to ask him to stop.’ David’s problems take a back seat, though Jimmy does think to ask him to talk one day when he’s tired of the sound of his own voice, and he talks briefly of the pain of his parents’ separation and being bullied at school. But David is soon prompting Jimmy to continue his story, and hears it to its bitter end, back in Singapore when he ‘couldn’t make sense of what had happened, couldn’t learn the lesson, couldn’t force it to be worth something.’

This is an unusual version of the digger legend. *Spirit House* is a very Jewish novel, full of Yiddish humour, anger and pain. It is also a very masculine novel. The old men are prolix, profane, sexist and racist. Women are minor characters – as Jimmy says, he spent three years of his twenties without women, though they weren’t absent from his thoughts. His life, and those of his friends, were wasted, not only those who died under the Japanese, but also the survivors, tormented by the spirits of the dead for the rest of their lives. It’s not without its flaws, but it’s an ambitious, powerful novel.