

**Richard Flanagan, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (Chatto & Windus, 2014)**

Darky Gardiner loathed Tiny, thought him a fool and would do everything to keep him alive. 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. (186)

Such a paradox of nature would be amusing if read in a different context. But not in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, a stark novel that unveils the impossible realities of a POW camp on the Burma Death Railway. Written with the aid of his father's recollections as a POW, Flanagan's narrative is an assertion on humanity's immense need to survive despite despairing circumstances. Many other reviews have focused on Dorrigo Evans's love-affair with his uncle's young wife, although it is peripheral to the central theme of war. In fact, Amy Mulvaney is a prerequisite to a deeper understanding of Evans' post-war life as a womaniser. Nakamura's cold-blooded acts too are a precursor to a life full of complex atonement and extreme kindness, illustrated in his refusal to swat even a mosquito.

Only one word can correctly define this book: horrifying. A succession of paragraphs is exhaustingly descriptive and thorough. Flanagan's prose sometimes wrenches the reader away to places unimagined, disarmed by the shocking military overtones, and yet with no word and no intrusion from the author to tell the reader what to feel. It rightly claims the epithet that has been attributed to it: a masterpiece, no less. The words flow without any specific exaggeration, without even the usual punctuation marks, exhibiting the author's confidence in the ability of the increasingly stark physical setting to enhance the emotional setting. He makes 'belated witnesses' out of his readers, and draws them into events with a medium of representation that, on the surface, encourages dispassionate observation.

The POWs do not cry at any point throughout their suffering. They seem to reconcile to the impossibility of having anything better than the muddy and continually rainy forests, and the meagre amount of the sour old rice for breakfast, one-tenth of the normal quantity. Except for the imminent slapping or worse, their bodies, reduced to skin and bones, have nothing to pull themselves up with. A list of infectious diseases like cholera and beri-beri, in addition to the unhygienic surroundings, deepens Dorrigo Evans's helplessness in treating them. Catheters made of bamboo, drips made of kerosene tins, needles made from thorns – all caused by an acute scarcity of medicine and equipment – intensify the misery.

Governed by nothing but an ideal – and an unreal ideal at that – of devotion to the emperor and the Japanese spirit, the authorities who are involved in the making of the Death Railway are as 'free' as their captives. Personal discontent and regret have no place in their minds, though life in the camp is intolerable with its privations that make human survival impossible; rather than food, manipulative drugs are provided by the government to raise their benumbed spirits. Violence is as easy as watching beautiful water droplets rolling together on the bright surface of a shining metal sword, a sort of training given prior to their first beheading of a man. No matter how long they beat Darky Gardiner, or anybody else for that matter, there seems to be no revival of their long-dead consciences. Readers may wonder at the magnitude of the horror of it all, and be gripped with a desire to see it ended. But Flanagan does not want readers to forget all too quickly – there's the same incident exposing the savage in humans as seen through the eyes of yet another witness.

Book reviews: *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* by Richard Flanagan. P.S. Gayathri and P.L. Rani. *Transnational Literature* Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

After the war, the POWs attempt a normal life. But for many of them, neither the security of employment nor the comfort of a loving family can erase from their experiences the deep wounds of the past which have long-forgotten to bleed. They have nobody who will understand them, to expiate the wound with the sharp, hot knife. They can neither speak about it, nor forget it. Flanagan is subtle in bringing out their otherwise suppressed fears by portraying them as over-kind, over-careful fathers. A similar attempt at normal life by the Japanese officers, the perpetrators of the crime, is also overshadowed by their need to expunge themselves of their dark past. Nakamura's post-war success extends for a considerable time until death grants him 'poetic justice'. Death, after all, is the ultimate revelation of everybody to himself.

In this post-war recollection of the dreadful horrors of war, dominated by a note of death and suffering in a POW camp, Flanagan masterfully interweaves the influence of war on the human psyche, as well as the power of love and memory to create an extraordinary drive to go on with life.

**P.S. Gayathri and P.L. Rani**