

A Railroad Built Out of Prisoners' Pain and Sweat

Of the horrors experienced by Allied soldiers, forced by their Japanese captors to build a railway between Thailand and Burma under appalling slave labor

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conditions, the hero of Richard Flanagan's new novel observes that it's impossible to convey "the suffering, the deaths, the sorrow, the abject, pathetic pointlessness of such immense suffering by so many."

"Horror can be contained within a book, given form and meaning," he says. "But in life horror has no more form than it does meaning. Horror just is."

Mr. Flanagan's father, Archie — who died last year at 98 — was one of the 60,000-odd Allied prisoners of war who worked on that railway in 1943. And in "The Narrow Road to the Deep North" (the title comes from a travelogue written by the Japanese haiku master Basho), his son manages to convey with stomach-churning power the sheer awfulness of this chapter in World War II history, which claimed the lives of some 13,000 prisoners of war and 100,000 local workers.

Although "Narrow Road" turns out to be a deeply flawed novel, the chapters set in an Australian prisoner of war railway camp demonstrate his ability — showcased so brilliantly in his 2002 novel "Gould's Book of Fish," about a 19th-

Continued on Page 4

century forger and thief sentenced to 49 years in Tasmania's notorious Sarah Island prison — to communicate both the abominations that men are capable of inflicting upon one another, and the resilience many display in the face of utter misery.

Mr. Flanagan has said in an interview that he spent a lot of time with his father in his final years talking about his experiences working on the "death railway": about details like "the smell, say, of the ulcer hut" (where men were treated for festering wounds and gangrene) and more abstract things like the meaning of war and love. His novel also

appears to draw upon published histories, and memoirs like John Coast's "Railroad of Death" and H. Robert Charles's "Last Man Out: Surviving the Burma-Thailand Death Railway." Such harrowing accounts make the fictionalized David Lean movie "The Bridge on the River Kwai" — which used the building of the Burma Railway as a backdrop — seem gauzily romanticized.

"The Narrow Road," though fiction, is anything but sanitized. In the scenes set in the camp, Mr. Flanagan delineates the agony of daily life: the hours of grueling labor in the sweltering jungle heat on a starvation diet that left the men — suffering from malnutrition, on top of malaria, dysentery and cholera — divided into two categories, the sick and the dying. He describes the brutal beatings administered by their Japanese captors, the torrential rains that flooded the latrines and accelerated the spread of illness, and the shocking conditions in which the novel's hero, an Australian doctor named Dorrigo Evans, had to perform surgery on his ailing fellow prisoners. He describes how a lost shoe could be the tumbling domino that sealed a fate (foot injury, infection, sepsis), and how small mercies — an egg, an extra portion of gruel, a good sledgehammer that made work go a bit faster — could ensure another day's survival.

Mr. Flanagan's portraits of the Australians in this camp — including an amateur artist called Rabbit, who chronicles their travails in watercolors, and an optimist named Darcy, who drowns in a latrine after a terrible beating — are drawn with heartfelt emotion, showing how these ordinary men cope and fail to cope with the horrific circumstances of the war, and how they draw sustenance and courage from one another.

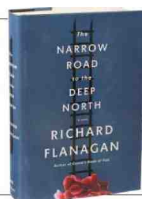
Unfortunately, his depiction of Dorrigo is a lot more dubious. The prisoner of war camp scenes, in which Dorrigo emerges as a kind and respected leader, despite his conviction that he is a coward and a fraud, are persuasive enough in an ersatz Conrad/Lord Jim sort of way. But the

flashbacks and flash-forwards feel as though they had been cut and pasted from another novel: a cheesy one that mashes up D. H. Lawrence and a Harlequin romance. Dorrigo, we're told, is obsessed with Amy, his uncle's wife, with whom he had a passionate affair shortly before going off to war. He loves the saucy and restless Amy in a way he will never love his devoted fiancée, Ella, and Mr. Flanagan describes his obsession in treacly prose: "Amy lay on her side as she gazed out toward the sea. Lying at her back, he felt jealous of her pillow." Or: "For him there was always about her the smell of musk and the erratic breath of sea wind puffing through the hotel's veranda and softly rattling the open French doors."

Dorrigo's memories of Amy help get him through his years as a prisoner, and Mr. Flanagan clearly wants their love or lust for each other to serve as a counterpoint to the death and cruelty of war. He also seems to want to use Dorrigo's difficulty in getting over Amy to serve as a sort of Jamesian excuse for failing to get on with the rest of his life. He remains detached and distant from Ella and everyone else because, he thinks, nothing can ever compare with what he had with Amy, the beast that has already leapt and receded into the past, leaving his days empty and lonely.

This novel would have been far more powerful and coherent if Amy were excised from the story. It is the story of Dorrigo, as one man among many P.O.W.'s in the Asian jungle, that is the beating heart of this book: an excruciating, terrifying, life-altering story that is an indelible fictional testament to the prisoners there. Taken by themselves, these chapters create a slim, compelling story: Odysseus's perseverance through a bloody war and his return home at last to Penelope (in this case, Ella) and his efforts, like his fellow soldiers', to see if he can put the horrors and suffering of war in the rearview mirror, and somehow construct a fulfilling Act II to a broken life.

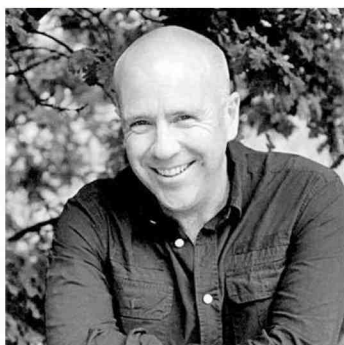




The Narrow Road to the Deep North

By Richard Flanagan

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