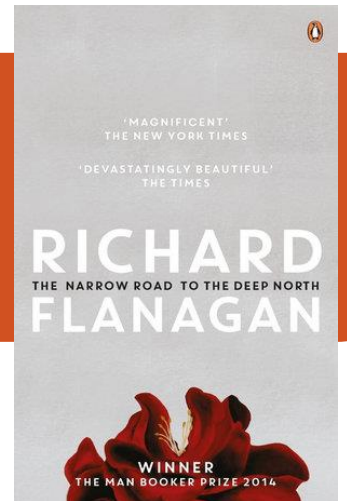




The Narrow Road to the Deep North

Richard Flanagan



Author Background

Richard Flanagan is one of Australia's most beloved novelists. Born in Tasmania in 1961, a hearing impediment meant he was virtually deaf for the first six years of his life. He left school at sixteen to work as a bush labourer, but returned to study at the University of Tasmania and later travelled to attend Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar in history.

He has worked as a journalist and wrote and directed the 1998 film *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* which was nominated for the highest prize at the Berlin International Film Festival.

Flanagan wrote four non-fiction works before moving to fiction, works he has called "his apprenticeship". His novels have received numerous honours and are published in forty-two countries. He won the Booker Prize for *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* and the Commonwealth Prize for *Gould's Book of Fish*. A rapid on the Franklin River is named after him.

The Narrow Road to the Deep North took twelve years to write and was influenced by his father's experience as a Japanese prisoner of war.

Book Summary

The Narrow Road to the Deep North is a novel of the cruelty of war, the tenuousness of life and the impossibility of love.

Set in August 1943, it poetically records the experiences of Australian prisoners of war in the Japanese labour camps on the Thai-Burma railway.

Australian surgeon, Dorrigo Evans, struggles to save the men under his command from starvation, cholera and pitiless beatings. But he is also haunted by his love affair with his uncle's young wife, Amy, two years earlier.

The novel moves adroitly from the POW camp to contemporary Australia, from the experiences of Dorrigo and his comrades to those of the Japanese guards. It explores the significance of literature and the ways in which texts represent ideas as well as past events.

Discussion Questions

- ❖ Discuss the many portraits of individuals in the act of survival, both prisoners and guards, on the Thai-Burma death railway.
- ❖ Does the novel ultimately answer the question "What is a hero?" Who in the novel can be defined as a hero and what are some of the heroic actions depicted in the book?
- ❖ Despite confronting and savage scenes, there are moments of humour. What does this humour say about humanity?
- ❖ Many of the characters in the book share a love of poetry and literature. How does our knowledge of their love of literature alter our perception of their character?
- ❖ What does the chapter in which Dorrigo and Amy, after twenty-five years of separation and thinking each other dead, walk past each other on the Sydney Harbour Bridge say about love?
- ❖ The title of the novel comes from a book by Japanese poet Matsuo Basho, written in 1694. The title of Basho's text has also been translated as *Narrow Road to the Interior*. How do understandings of Flanagan's choice of title change, shift or deepen when the title of Basho's text is translated as the 'Narrow Road to the Interior'?
- ❖ Flanagan's father came back sick and debilitated by his war experience, but the novel is not a fictionalised version of his father's life. Flanagan wrote: "As much as it was about my father and me, it had to escape us both." Discuss.

References

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