

***The Narrow Road to the Deep North* by Richard Flanagan: Imagined journeys taken into the memories of past**

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**Abstract**

*The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, is a novel by Australian author Richard Flanagan. He won the Man Booker Prize for this novel in 2014. The title of the novel is a significant metaphor, taken from the 17th century epic *Oku no Hosomichi*, the travel diary and magnum opus of Japanese poet Matsuo Basho, written in 1694. Basho's text combines haiku poetry and prose to record fleeting moments and journeys. The title of Basho's text has also been translated as *Narrow Road to the Interior*. Similarly the novel takes us to imagined journeys taken into the memories of past exploring individual, historical and cultural contexts within and without, however the path is narrow and not taken by many. The author exhibits a multifaceted existence of imperial regimes that came together and clash during World War II in the Asia-Pacific, involving both rising and declining powers. Similarly the novel unfolds the psychological conflicts within the protagonist by bringing out the troublesome past in his life. The protagonist of the novel is an Australian doctor preoccupied by troubled memories of a love affair with his uncle's wife and of his subsequent experiences as a Far East prisoner of war during the construction of the Burma Railway. Later in his life, he becomes a celebrity but not satisfied at all, as he thinks his growing popularity is futile. He has worst feelings of failure and guilt. The novel poetically records the experiences of Australian prisoners of war in the Japanese labour camps on the Thai-Burma railway.

**Key Words:** The Narrow Road, World War II, Prisoners of War

*The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, is a novel by Australian author Richard Flanagan. He won the Man Booker Prize for this novel in 2014. The title of the novel is a significant metaphor, taken from the 17th century epic *Oku no Hosomichi*, the travel diary and magnum opus of Japanese poet Matsuo Basho, written in 1694. Basho's text combines haiku poetry and prose to record fleeting moments and journeys. The title of Basho's text has also been translated as *Narrow Road to the Interior*. Similarly the novel takes us to imagined journeys taken into the memories of past exploring individual, historical and cultural contexts within and without, however the path is narrow and not taken by many. The author exhibits a multifaceted existence of imperial regimes that came together and clash during World War II

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The novel is set on the historical background of World War II. Perhaps Richard Flanagan's initial training as an historian clearly influenced his tendency to write predominantly historical fiction. Most of his published novels have explored Australia's history over the past two centuries. *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, however, gives a broader historical purview. Similarly, the novel examines intercontinental historical forces and their effects upon individual lives, although this time beyond the British-European-Australian nexus, and takes into account Southeast and East Asia, regions much closer geographically to the author's home. The novel is an examination of the consequences of war, regret, loneliness, adultery, and love. The book unfolds through brief chapters that span five parts and multiple decades. The experiences of the men in the World War II Japanese prisoner of war camp represent the experiences of Richard Flanagan's father, who was himself a prisoner of war. Thus the novel also has a personal touch as the theme is dear to the heart of author.

*The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, is an excellent outcome of the influence of his father's experience as a Japanese prisoner of war. The character of Evans was also partially based on the Australian hero Edward Weary Dunlop, an Australian Army doctor who struggled despite overwhelming odds to care for the men who suffered and died during the construction of the Burma Death Railroad. Like Dorrigo, Dunlop bargained with the Japanese officers in attempts to improve conditions for the living skeletons that were his fellow prisoners of war. And like Dorrigo, Dunlop found that many of the Japanese and Korean guards were sadists who thoroughly enjoyed inflicting misery on others. While Flanagan's father may be the basis for one of the minor characters in this novel, probably Jimmy Bigelow, Flanagan chooses a different kind of character for the central role, a doctor called Dorrigo Evans, partly based on Edward Weary Dunlop, one of the heroes of the prison camps.

Alwyn Dorrigo Evans, an Australian soldier-surgeon who serves the cause of the British Empire, is the protagonist in the novel. It was the period when British Empire was rapidly losing its territories to an expansionist, military Japan. He fights in a series of foreign battles effectively on behalf of his country's former colonizer, Britain. Coincidentally Empire's adversity is symbolized in Dorrigo's fate when he is taken prisoner by the Japanese and forced to work on the infamous Thai-Burma 'Death Railway,' an unrealistic engineering enterprise born of nationalist ideology that ultimately results in mass fatalities and failure.

The novelist draws a parallel in the internal situation of the protagonist and the pervaded reality. Evans is an educated man who loves literature. Evans reads and rereads Tennyson's *Ulysses*, one of the great Victorian celebrations of the hero, which depicts Ulysses in old age, bored by domesticity and longing for another chance 'to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield' in the famous phrase.

In his later life, Evans has become a celebrity when the broadcast of a documentary about his work in the prison camps receives great public attention. The novel particularly recalls his experiences in the context of this strange public attention. Dorrigo Evans has found fame and public recognition as a war veteran in old age, but inwardly he is weighed down by his own shortcomings. He considers his honour and recognition to be a failure of perception on the part of others. In peacetime he is not a great doctor; his experiments in treating colon cancer have had disastrous results. He knows that his colleagues consider him a reckless and dangerous surgeon, and he has habitually cheated on his faithful and adoring wife, though his public reputation has been undaunted by the air of scandal that trails him in his private life. He is not even a faithful husband or devoted father. Like Ulysses in Tennyson's poem, he remembers scenes from the bored outlook of a man caught up in a dull and peaceful domestic life, interspersed with moments of awkward acclaim. He seeks consolation in affairs with the wives of his colleagues, yet he remains a man who 'happily slept without women' but 'never slept without a book'. Flashbacks describe Dorrigo's early life in rural Tasmania and his love affair with Amy Mulvaney, the young wife of his uncle and the love of his life. Dorrigo meets Amy by chance in an Adelaide bookstore and he finds that her body was a poem beyond memorizing. Despite the fact that she is married to his uncle, Dorrigo felt the affair was justified because the war pressed, the war deranged, the war undid, the war excused. In a very amazing way he finds excuse for his civilized guilt, rather on the other hand it is but natural for two biological entities to come together and enjoy. In a metaphor for the novel's theme of fatalism, Amy observes while swimming a group of fish trying to escape the breaking wave's hold. And all the time the wave had them in its power and would take them where it would, and there was nothing that the glistening chain of fish could do to change their fate. After the end of the affair, Dorrigo joins the Australian Imperial Force. His regiment is captured during the Battle of Java and is sent to labour on the notorious Burma Death Railway. One out of every three workers engaged on the Burma Death Railroad died during its construction. During the construction of the railroad, Dorrigo is reluctantly bestowed the leadership over his fellow prisoners and fights a losing battle to protect his charges against disease, malnutrition and the violence of their captors. Dorrigo sadly observes as the bodies of his fellow prisoners of war break down and disintegrate with eyes that already seemed to be little more than black-shadowed sockets waiting for worms. The camp's commander, Major Nakamura, honest servant of the Emperor and a methamphetamine addict who pushes his prisoners harder and harder out of the fear of failing the Emperor, is in his own way just as much a prisoner of the railroad project as the men he

brutalises. Dorrigo Evan's memories are excavated from the depth of his heart by the task of writing the foreword for a collection of sketches done by Guy Rabbit Hendricks, one of the men who died in the camps. Engrossed in these memories, the novel recalls Evans's childhood in rural Tasmania, his brief university life in Melbourne, and then his posting to Adelaide where he embarks on an illicit affair with his uncle's young wife, Amy. Though he has become engaged to a more conventional suburban woman in Melbourne, this affair becomes the romantic dream that sustains him through his experiences in the camps. Dorrigo believes himself to be a fraud and a bad man. He is married to a woman named Ella but carries on constant affairs. Before leaving for the war, he meets a woman named Amy in a bookstore. Later he comes to know that she is married to his uncle Keith. They have an affair for the summer before he leaves for the war, and it is the memory of Amy that sustains him through much of his time in the camps. While Dorrigo is in the camp, he receives a letter from Ella with a newspaper clipping. A gas explosion has destroyed the hotel his uncle owned, and Ella presumes Amy to be among the dead.

The heroism bestowed by the people on Dorrigo Evans, has turned brutal for him. He was caged in his own heroism. He sees his own heroism as a kind of weakness. Once he has become a legend of self-sacrifice and kindness among the men in the camps, he feels forced to act out their belief in him. At home, he feels a duty to those men to continue playing the role. He even feels a duty to his several mistresses, a passive acceptance of duty. Through Evans, Flanagan considers the peacetime hero, and the public need to believe in heroic figures long after their deeds have passed. But the heart of the novel is its depiction of the suffering and death of the Australians condemned to build the impossible railway. In its central section, the novel shifts from Evans's consciousness to the points of view of the enlisted men on the line, such as Darky Gardiner, Jimmy Bigelow and Rooster McNeice, and back again. It even gives us the thoughts of the Japanese officers, Colonel Kota and Major Nakamura, as they endure the privations of the jungle, bolster their spirits with drugs and alcohol, and administer brutal punishment as an inevitable consequence of the rigid system to which they owe commitment.

After the war, there was no difference between the destiny of the prisoners of the war and their captors. The Goanna, a Korean man renowned for his brutality in the prison camp who was himself forced into the Japanese army, is hanged for his crimes. His superior officer, Major Nakamura, returns to Tokyo and avoids capture as a war criminal by hiding among the ruins of Shinjuku. After a conversation with a Japanese doctor who served with Unit 731 in Manchukuo reveals to him the country's human experimentation program during the war, he gradually absolves himself of any sense of guilt for his actions. Other Australian soldiers imprisoned with Dorrigo live through the trauma of their experience as prisoners. Dorrigo's own acts of heroism, and the reverence of his fellow soldiers, fail to assuage his sense of shame and self-loathing. Dorrigo comes to feel the more people he is with, the more alone he

feels. The suffering of the prisoners of war is shown in great detail as they struggle to build the railroad. Flanagan also illustrates the experiences of the Japanese officers as they grapple with notions of duty and honor, even as they inflict torture and misery on the prisoners in service to the Empire. General Tenjin Nakamura often plays cards with Dorrigo, and the author uses their conversations about their respective roles in the war to show how differently the conflict was viewed through Western and Eastern perspectives.

Although the novel has many characters, even minor characters occasionally receive their own chapter. The narrative structure jumps back and forth between present and past, flashing between Dorrigo's experiences in the camp and his struggles as a contemporary man who is grappling with fame. Dorrigo would survive the camp but then go on to become a famous surgeon and the subject of documentaries about his perseverance in the camp. Dorrigo survives the war and marries Ella but grows increasingly unhappy as his life continues. He forgets about Amy for years, but then crosses her path on a bridge in Sydney. He is not sure that she saw him, but he chooses not to speak to her. Shortly afterwards, a firestorm traps Ella and Dorrigo's children in the town of New Fern. Dorrigo manages to rescue them by driving there in a borrowed car and driving them back out through a bonfire. When he hugs Ella afterwards, it is the only true moment of affection his children have ever seen him show their mother.

At the end of the novel, Dorrigo is hit by a car, full of drunken teenagers. He is admitted in the hospital for three days. During those three days, his memories interchange between the women he has loved and the experiences in the camp. While he is on the verge of death Dorrigo feels that finally death will be the beginning of his life. The last chapter of the book gives Dorrigo's memory of a day when he was forced to choose hundred men to march to another camp, knowing that not one of them would survive the trek. Each of the men shook his hand after the selection. That night, after weeping over their departure, Dorrigo sees a crimson flower growing in the mud. It reminds him of the flower that Amy was wearing in her hair the day they met. These highly emotional circumstances have been skillfully delineated in the novel.

Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is a literary endeavor to revitalize and focus on the Australian history and national culture. The novel strives to recreate the memories of the prisoners of war in a very emotional way so that it may evoke reverence for the victims of the World War II in the generations after the war. It exhibits the human weaknesses of the prisoners in the camps and also attempts to present an objective justification for the atrocious behaviour of the Japanese captors and the Korean guards. Sometimes it appears that the class seems to be more significant than nationality. The novel elaborates the way Australian officers are kept away from hardships of the manual labour while in the camp and the injustice of the war crimes trials that allowed men like Colonel Kota to go free. The study of Flanagan's novel, *The Narrow Road To The Deep North*,

allows to develop an understanding of language, culture and identity. The novel poetically records the experiences of Australian prisoners of war in the Japanese labour camps on the Thai-Burma railway. Flanagan's insightful novel purposely explores the significance of literature and the ways in which texts, as cultural products, represent ideas as well as past events.

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