

Wanting

Richard Flanagan



Author Background

- Birth— 1961
- Where— Longford, Tasmania
- Education—B.A. , University of Tasmania, M.Litt Oxford University
- Awards—Commonwealth Writers' Prize

Descended from Irish convicts transported to Van Diemens Land (later renamed Tasmania) during the Great Famine, Richard Flanagan was born in his native island in 1961, the fifth of six children. He spent his childhood in the mining town of Rosebery and left school at sixteen to work as a bush laborer. He later attended the University of Tasmania, graduating with first class honours in 1982. The following year he was awarded a Rhodes Scholar to Oxford University. He later worked as a laborer and river guide.

He wrote four history books before turning to fiction. His first novel, the much celebrated *Death of a River Guide* (1994), tells the tale of Aljaz Cosini, a guide on the Franklin River who lies drowning as he relives his life and the lives of his forbears. It won major Australian literary prizes including the 1996 National Fiction Award and was described by the *Times Literary Supplement* as 'one of the most auspicious debuts in Australian writing.'

His second novel, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997), set in the Central Highlands of Tasmania, tells the story of Slovenian immigrants. It was similarly critically acclaimed and has sold over 150,000 copies in Australia, an unprecedented figure there for a literary novel. It won the Australian Booksellers Book of the Year Award and the Vance Palmer Prize for Fiction. Flanagan's first two novels, declared *Kirkus Reviews*, 'rank with the finest fiction out of Australia since the heyday of Patrick White.'

His third novel, *Gould's Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish* (2001), is set at the Macquarie Harbour Penal Station and is based on the life of Billy Gould, a convict artist who has a love affair with a young black woman in 1828. It won Best Book for the 2002 Commonwealth Writers Prize in the South East Asia & South Pacific Region.

In addition to Australia and the USA, his novels have been, or will be, published in Spain, Portugal, Italy, Sweden, Britain, Germany, Holland, and France. He directed an acclaimed feature film based on *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, which had its world premiere in competition at the 1998 Berlin Film Festival, where it was nominated for the Golden Bear for best film.

His recent books include *The Unknown Terrorist*, (2007), set in contemporary Sydney, and *Wanting* (2008), set in both nineteenth century Tasmania and Britain.

Richard Flanagan lives in Tasmania with his wife and three children. He is a keen canoeist, having canoed the Franklin River thirteen times, and was a member of the first expedition to canoe the Jane River and Gordon Gorge (one of his nonfiction works is *A Terrible Beauty - History of the Gordon* (1985).

(from Book Browse)

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Book Summary

Wanting

Richard Flanagan, 2012

Vintage Australia

272 pp.

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The bestselling, universally lauded novel of desire and its denial from acclaimed writer Richard Flanagan.

It is 1839. A young Aboriginal girl, Mathinna, is running through the long wet grass of an island at the end of the world to get help for her dying father, an Aboriginal chieftain.

Twenty years later, on an island at the centre of the world, the most famous novelist of the day, Charles Dickens, realises he is about to abandon his wife, risk his name and forever after be altered because of his inability any longer to control his intense passion.

Connecting the two events are the most celebrated explorer of the age, Sir John Franklin - then governor of Van Diemen's Land - and his wife, Lady Jane, who adopt Mathinna, seen as one of the last of a dying race, as an experiment. Lady Jane believes the distance between savagery and civilisation is the learned capacity to control wanting. The experiment fails, Sir John disappears into the blue ice of the Arctic seeking the Northwest Passage, and a decade later Lady Jane enlists Dickens's aid to put an end to the scandalous suggestions that Sir John's expedition ended in cannibalism.

Dickens becomes ever more entranced in the story of men entombed in ice, recognising in its terrible image his own frozen inner life. He produces and stars in a play inspired by Franklin's fate to give story to his central belief that discipline and will can conquer desire. And yet the play will bring him to the point where he is no longer able to control his own passion and the consequences it brings.

Inspired by historical events, *Wanting* is a novel about art, love, and the way in which life is finally determined never by reason, but only ever by wanting.

WANTING was the New Yorker Notable Book of the Year; Library Journal Notable Book of the Year, London Observer Book of the Year, Washington Post Book of the Year, Winner of the Queensland Premier's Award, Winner of the WA Premier's Award and Winner of the Tasmanian Book Prize.

(from publisher)

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Reviews

Richard Flanagan has assembled a group of historical figures around which to craft his most recent novel, *Wanting*. There is Sir John Franklin, one time Governor of Tasmania and Arctic explorer, his wife Lady Jane Franklin, George Robinson the 'Protector' of the Tasmanian Aborigines, the authors Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens, and Mathinna, an Aboriginal girl adopted by the Franklins.

Franklin's predecessor as Governor of Tasmania, George Arthur, had encouraged Robinson's policies leading to the removal and almost extinction of the Tasmanian Aborigines. On a visit to Robinson's Aboriginal settlement on remote Flinders Island, the childless Franklins are captivated by a young Aboriginal girl, Mathinna, daughter of Aboriginal chief King Romeo. For the ambitious Lady Franklin, it is not only the desire for a child, but also the desire to make a mark that leads her to adopt the girl. 'To raise one individual with every advantage of class and rank would be an experiment of the soul worth making, both for science and for God.'

In a parallel narrative set years later in England, Lady Franklin seeks the support and friendship of Charles Dickens; Sir John's expedition to find the North West Passage has been lost without a trace; rumours are spreading that the survivors resorted to cannibalism. The gallant Dickens springs to Franklin's defence and in a piece in his journal *Household Words*, suggests that the noble Franklin was probably eaten by the Esquimaux. His friend Wilkie Collins writes *The Frozen Deep*, a play inspired by Dickens piece; a play that Dickens reworks and decides to produce, direct and act in.

As Sir John and Lady Jane become obsessed with Mathinna, so Dickens becomes obsessed by *The Frozen Deep* and its theme of unbridled ambition and passion. Mathinna, the object of the Franklins' obsession, can never be a 'black' European or the child they never had, and their inability to come to terms with that leads them both to betray her in different ways. Franklin abandons her both physically and emotionally, while Lady Jane allows her to be taken away; to belong nowhere. *Wanting* is a powerful piece of writing that affects in many ways. Above all, it's about unbridled desire and its tragic consequences.

Wanting will confound Franklin's critics and delight and stimulate readers, as he shows his amazing virtuosity and ability to bring to life a distant past and make it relevant to us all. No one reading *Wanting* will be unaffected by it; don't miss reading it.

Readings.com.au

One of the jobs of historical novelists is to uncover those secret histories which, for one reason or another, professional historians have overlooked. Often this involves the apperception of a narrative where others might simply have seen discontinuities. Best known for 2001's internationally acclaimed *Gould's Book of Fish*, which considered life at a penal station on the west coast of Tasmania through the work of the convict painter William Buelow Gould, Richard Flanagan is a master of this particular art.

In his latest novel, one of the many threads of history Flanagan weaves into a complex and wide-ranging design hooks back to the previous title, in so far as Gould painted one of the characters who appears in *Wanting*. Towterer, aka King Romeo, is chieftain of a Tasmanian tribe. Along with his family, he comes under the sway of George Augustus Robinson, aka the Great Conciliator, aka the Protector – a former London builder who, as a colonial official with a conflicted relationship with the colonial state, conducted a notorious experiment involving the capture and removal of Aboriginal people from Tasmania in the 1830s.

From 1803 Tasmania had been a killing field. In 1829 the colonial government contracted Robinson to round up the remaining Aborigines. On his travels he noted: "There is not a boat harbour along the whole line of coast but what numbers of the unfortunate natives have been shot; their bones are to be seen strewed on the ground." Robinson imprisoned a couple of hundred people in camps, first at Wybalenna on Flinders Island and finally at Oyster Cove, in the south of mainland Tasmania. By 1860 only 15 of the imprisoned tribal people were left alive, and all were dead by 1876.

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Reviews (continued)

Among those in Robinson's charge was Mary, daughter of Towterer and his wife Wongerneep. Mary is renamed Mathinna when adopted by the governor of the colony from 1836 to 1843, Sir John Franklin, and his wife Jane. *Wanting* is Mathinna's story, but also that of Jane and her husband. He is better known as the Arctic explorer who perished during his 1845 expedition to find the Northwest Passage, that sea-route linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans which, as Flanagan himself has put it elsewhere, "loomed as large in the heyday of the English empire as winning the space race would for later imperiums".

The novel's action moves between Jane's plucking of Mathinna from Wybalenna in 1839 to her efforts during the 1850s to find her husband or at least establish the nature of his fate. One part of the "wanting" of the title refers to the childless Jane's desire to take the pretty and spirited Mathinna back to England with her when her husband is removed from office. Instead she abandons the girl in an orphanage – launching Mathinna on a trajectory that eventually leads, via prostitution, alcoholism and cultural estrangement, to her dying face down while drunk in a puddle at the age of 21. She survives as a child in a red dress in a mysterious painting by another convict artist, Thomas Bock – surely part of Flanagan's inspiration for this book.

All this would be more than enough for any novel, but there is another thread entirely in *Wanting*. It involves Charles Dickens and his mistress, the actress Ellen Ternan, who were brought together in 1857 on *The Frozen Deep*. A play conceived by Dickens and Wilkie Collins (though largely written by the latter), it was loosely based on Franklin's expedition. Two years previously, at Jane's urging, Dickens had engaged in a debate in his periodical *Household Words* with the Hudson's Bay Company surveyor Dr John Rae, who had brought back Inuit reports of cannibalism among Franklin's dying men (Rae was very probably right: forensic examination of corpses found on the route of the expedition in 1997 showed sword marks on 90 human bones).

In the Dickens part of the story lie some of the other "wantings" of the title – Jane's wanting to turn her husband's disappearance into a triumph, and the middle-aged Dickens's desire for the 18-year-old Ternan. One of the triumphs of Flanagan's handling of this material, as indeed with the Robinson story, is that he has done it with flair and originality against a backdrop of other hands in both fictional and non-fictional narrative: Robert Drewe, Matthew Kneale and Nicholas Shakespeare in the case of Robinson, and Claire Tomalin and Simon Gray in the case of Ternan.

What Flanagan has done, and it does seem to be the current trend in the post-colonial novel, is show how the colonised and the home territories are inextricably linked, however far apart they might seem at first glance. The best post-colonial novels today are no longer framed as journeys into the brutal historical exotic, or even the former empire "writing back" to an apparent centre; what they do instead is display a constant duplex or indeed multiplex effect, the literary equivalent of globalisation. Biases of power and representation are still the fuel of the genre, but they have ceased to be its engine; although Mathinna remains the principal victim, the point here is that neither the Englishness of an English story nor the quiddity of a Tasmanian one can be taken for granted. There is a wanting everywhere, and it is not salved by recursion to the *echt* culture, only by brief connections between individuals. "We have in our lives only a few good moments," Dickens tells Ternan. "A moment of joy and wonder with another. Some might say beauty or transcendence."

In less capable hands the different strands of this artfully constructed novel could have made for bad neighbours, but here the affinity is made plain. In what does it consist? In dense, poetic prose, Flanagan characterises something that exists across human experience, above and beyond historical particulars and cultural differences: "The way we are denied love. And the way we suddenly discover it being offered us, in all its pain and infinite heartbreak."

The Guardian

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Discussion Questions

1. The unifying theme of *Wanting* is a yearning for something more. How is this expressed in the lives and desires of the central characters: Mathinna, Dickens, Lady Jane and Sir John?
2. 'A savage, be he Esquimau or Otaheitian, is someone who succumbs to his passions. An Englishman understands his passions in order to master them and turn them to powerful effect.' So says Charles Dickens as he prepares to defend the reputation of Sir John Franklin's lost Arctic expedition against charges of cannibalism. What does Dickens' statement mean for those like Mathinna in Van Diemen's Land? And what does it mean for Dickens' own life?
3. What are Lady Jane Franklin's true motivations in attempting to offer Mathinna 'every advantage of class and rank'? And why does she abandon the girl when the Franklins return to England?
4. Much of Richard Flanagan's writing has an undercurrent of humour. His novel, *Gould's book of fish* is tragic-comic, whereas *The unknown terrorist* has been praised for its dry wit. Discuss the humour in *Wanting*.
5. *Wanting* is without doubt a tragic story, but tragedy unfolds in different ways for Dickens and Mathinna. What are the parallels in their stories?
6. Richard Flanagan has said *Wanting* is not a historical novel, but rather a 'soul history'. What do you think Flanagan means by 'soul history'?
7. Unlike many novelists, Richard Flanagan seems to be constantly seeking to reinvent himself and his writing, more in the manner of an artist or musician than that of a writer. What similarities and differences are there between *Wanting* and Flanagan's earlier novels, such as *The sound of one hand clapping* or *Death of a river guide*?

(from the publisher)