

# The Narrow Road to the Deep North

## Author Background

### Richard Flanagan

**Born:** July 1961, Longford, Tasmania

**Raised:** Roseberry, Tasmania

**Lives:** Hobart, Tasmania

Richard Flanagan was born in Longford and grew up in the remote mining town of Roseberry on the west coast of Tasmania. He left school at 16 and went on to win a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford, where he took a Master of Letters degree. Flanagan has also worked as a labourer and river guide.

Flanagan has won numerous literary awards for his work, including the Booker Prize for *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013) and the Commonwealth Writers Prize for *Gould's Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish* (2002). He has received critical praise for having “single-handedly given voice to Tasmania” and “for [his novels’] imaginative range, their risk taking, and their insistence upon the foregrounding of love at the heart of human experience”.<sup>1</sup>

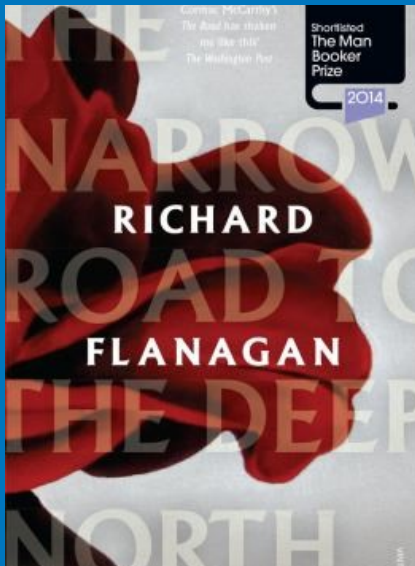
*The Narrow Road to the Deep North* grew out of an extraordinary story of wartime love and loss that was known to Flanagan’s family, and also his father’s Second World War experiences on the Burma railway. The book features an Australian surgeon who unwittingly becomes a national hero for his courage in standing up to his Japanese captors. After completing the novel, which took five fully formed and completely different drafts, Flanagan said “I feel finally free” adding that “writing about the ‘huge cosmos’ that was left unsaid by his father ... had been enormously cathartic”.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Garan Halcombe, British Council Literature website

<sup>2</sup> Richard Flanagan, interviewed by Marta Bausells, *The Guardian*, 2015

# The Narrow Road to the Deep North

## Book Summary



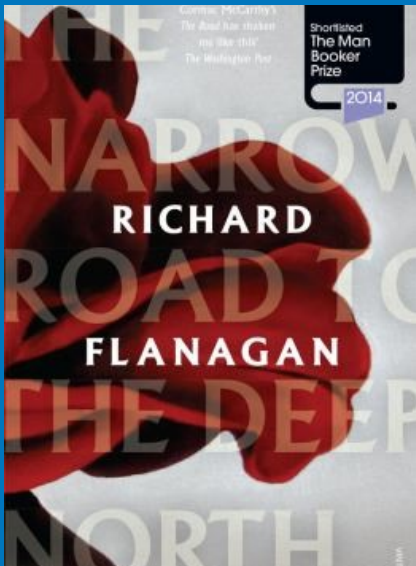
Winner of the Man Booker Prize 2014. A novel of the cruelty of war, tenuousness of life and the impossibility of love.

August, 1943. In the despair of a Japanese POW camp on the Thai-Burma death railway, Australian surgeon Dorrigo Evans is haunted by his love affair with his uncle's young wife two years earlier. Struggling to save the men under his command from starvation, from cholera, from beatings, he receives a letter that will change his life forever.

This savagely beautiful novel is a story about the many forms of love and death, of war and truth, as one man comes of age, prospers, only to discover all that he has lost.

Source: Penguin Books website

# The Narrow Road to the Deep North

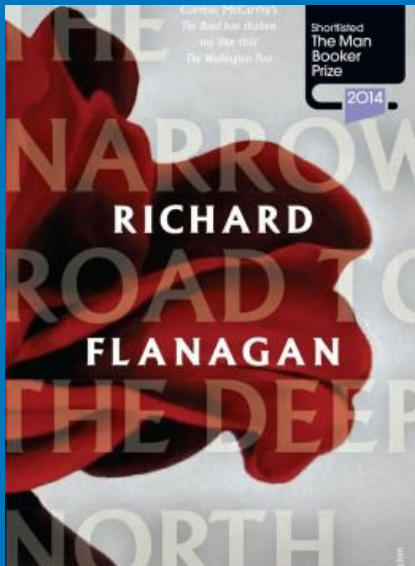


## Discussion Questions

1. *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is in part a novel about memory. How does the book explore different notions of memory?
2. Dorrigo Evans is a study in contrasts. What sort of character do you find him?
3. Is it better to remember and even speak about one's past or to remain silent and try to forget? What examples of this from the novel support your point of view?
4. What is the significance of the name of the novel, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*? Why might Flanagan have chosen to name his book after Basho's well-known travelogue by the same name?
5. How does the author's "visual" portrait of the characters and the places they inhabit inform us about the state of the characters and shape our reaction to their story?

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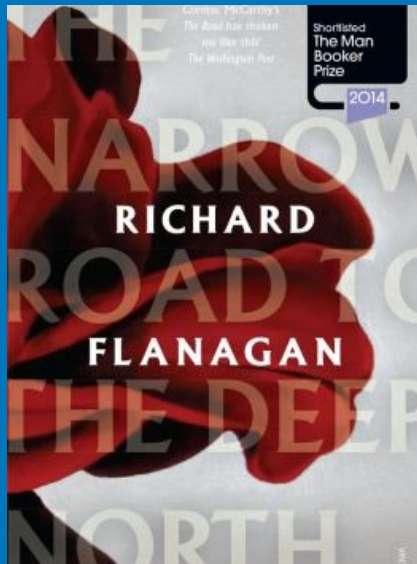


## Discussion Questions (continued)

6. Consider the structure of the novel. How does the division and organization of the passages help to underscore the themes of time and memory that are revisited throughout the book?
7. Evaluate Flanagan's depiction of the dual nature of human beings. Does it seem to be possible for us to resist this dual nature? Does the novel indicate whether someone can choose which side of their dual nature prevails over the other or is this beyond our control?
8. What does the chapter in which Dorrigo and Amy walk past each other on the Sydney Harbour Bridge say about love? What would you do if you found yourself in either of their shoes?
9. What messages does the novel impart about war and its aftermath? How do the former POWs respond to their new lives after the war is over? What are the lives of the Japanese soldiers like after the war?
10. At the conclusion of the story, Flanagan presents us with the image of Dorrigo opening a book only to find out that the final pages have been torn out. Why do you think that the author chooses to employ this image at the story's end?

# The Narrow Road to the Deep North

## Reviews



Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* shares its title with a work by the famous Edo period haiku poet Basho. This is a nod to the underlying themes of the book, which explore the capabilities of the human spirit: for the creation of both exquisite beauty, perfectly summed up by a haiku, and for the creation of terror, the atrocity that was the Burma death railway, which forms much of the novel's setting. Flanagan juxtaposes horror and love in a contrast that is so stark it can leave a reader breathless. ... The book is a howl into the silence of returned servicemen, often told that it is better to forget, to return to life as if nothing has happened – despite the "lest we forget" refrain.

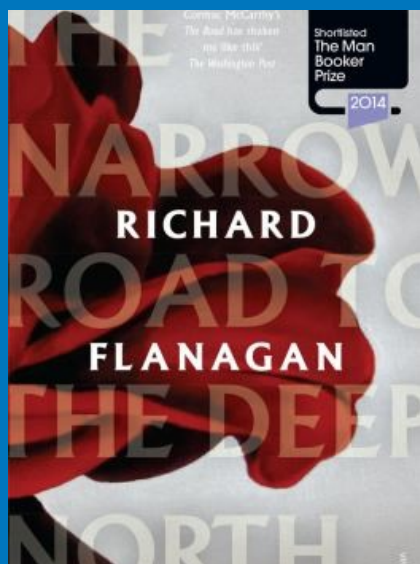
Romy Ash, *The Guardian Australia*, 29/10/13

It is a huge novel, ambitious, driven, multi-stranded, and unembarrassed by its documentary impulse. It is both record and tribute to the men who lived and died alongside his father, but tribute of the best kind a novelist son could pay - transmuting filial obligation into engrossing narrative. The novel's fictional characters, Australian and Japanese, shimmer with life; they are familiar yet finally unknowable, compromised, betrayed, fallible and credible.

Morag Fraser, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12/10/13

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# The Narrow Road to the Deep North



## Reviews (continued)

His language here seems restrained ... and yet it carries a sinewy incantatory power. On a spree after the war, some of Dorrigo's men "drank to make themselves feel as they should feel when they didn't drink, that way they had felt when they hadn't drunk before the war. For that night they felt ferocious and whole and not yet undone." But they are. None will have the lives they should have had, not even Dorrigo, who dislikes the pleasure he takes in his own fame. Basho wrote that "Days and months are travellers of eternity," and Flanagan's book, like the poet's own, will push us far down that path. This *"Narrow Road to the Deep North"* is both unforgiving and generous, a paradox that should earn it some fame of its own.

Michael Gorra, *The New York Times*, 29/08/2014

The exquisite haiku of the Japanese Edo-period poet Basho might seem an unusual touchstone in a novel about savagery and survival on the Burma death railway, which was constructed by prisoners-of-war and Asian slave labour in 1943. Yet Basho's crystalline brevity gives Richard Flanagan's novel not only its title but also its grace and unfathomability.

Flanagan's writing courses like a river, sometimes black with mud, sludge and corpses, sometimes bright with moonlight. Danger is omnipresent, even after combat recedes; nature careless and monumental in its rains, its bushfires. The hallucinations caused by privation, be it physical hunger or erotic yearning, are unapologetically evoked. The stories of these casualties of fate catch at the soul.

Catherine Taylor, *The Telegraph*, 14/10/14