

# This one's personal

## Writing a tale of suffering and love has taken its toll on Richard Flanagan

**A**fter finishing his magnum opus, is author Richard Flanagan all washed up? You'd hope not because if you were naming Australia's greatest living writers, Richard, 52, would definitely be on the short list, even though he is feeling a little odd after finishing the book that probably means most to him.

*The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is the story of a man, Dorrigo Evans, a moving love story and a tale of death and suffering on the Thai-Burma Death Railway in World War II. It's not his father Archie's story, but was inspired by his dad's experiences as a prisoner of war who survived one of the most infamous events in Australian history.

Richard, in Brisbane for an event to promote his new book, says finishing such a labour of love was satisfying, but that he has been left with a vaguely empty feeling.

"There's a great story by F. Scott Fitzgerald called *The Crack-Up* in which he talks about this," Richard says. "In that story he says that the more you write the less there is of you and, in the end, what is left is a rather empty, unattractive man. He suggests writers slowly leach out the best in themselves until there's nothing left."

The fact that the book took almost a decade to write and was a highly charged experience for Richard may have something to do with his emotional deflation. But no sooner has he finished identifying with F. Scott Fitzgerald than he becomes animated again and says he is gratified by the public response to his new novel.

"I have never known such excitement about one of my books," Richard says. "But it was terrifying to write, probably because it's such a personal book. This is the book I had to write if I was ever to write another book. It was also a book I had to have written several other books to write. I was doing one of those email interviews for a magazine recently and they asked me how I researched it and I just wrote back – I lived."

Richard, who lives in Hobart, has written some of our finest literature – *Death of a River Guide*, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, Gould's *Book of Fish*, *The Unknown Terrorist* and *Wanting*.

He has an international reputation and has also written for the screen, notably as screenwriter on Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*. He has won awards and critical acclaim, but the drive to succeed is not what motivates him. There are simply stories that need to be told and Richard Flanagan is compelled to tell them. He had grown up listening to his father's stories about his experiences as a POW and over the decades these inspired the formation of his masterpiece, which has already been described by one critic as "the winner of the Miles Franklin Award for 2014".

Richard says that he was lucky his father, Archie, who died recently, aged 98, talked about the war. "He was quite open to us asking him about it and as he grew older he became more interested himself because he came to see what a rich thing it was for a human to try to divine what it all meant. He told me once he felt he and the other prisoners were lucky because they only had to suffer, whereas other soldiers had to go out and inflict suffering and live with the terrible torment that created in their souls."

Richard's book involves a love story on the home front, and as well as the mundane daily horrors of slave labour, he gives insights into the psychology of the Japanese. He went to Japan to meet former guards and visited the Thai-Burma Death Railway sites to help enrich his fiction.

He says he used everything he's ever learnt and, inspired by a Japanese literary classic, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* by the great Haiku poet Basho (using the same title is a tribute, he says), he was able to write the book he feels he was born to write.

When he finished he told his father it was finally completed and Archie Flanagan died the very next day. That may have something to do with how Richard is feeling now, of course. We don't believe he's wrung out at all, but he is certainly grieving. Meanwhile, readers hope there is another book in him, if not more.

This is  
the book I had  
to write if I was  
ever to write  
another book

**THE NARROW ROAD TO THE DEEP NORTH**  
by Richard Flanagan (Knopf, \$32.95)

PHOTOGRAPH • Ric Frearson



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