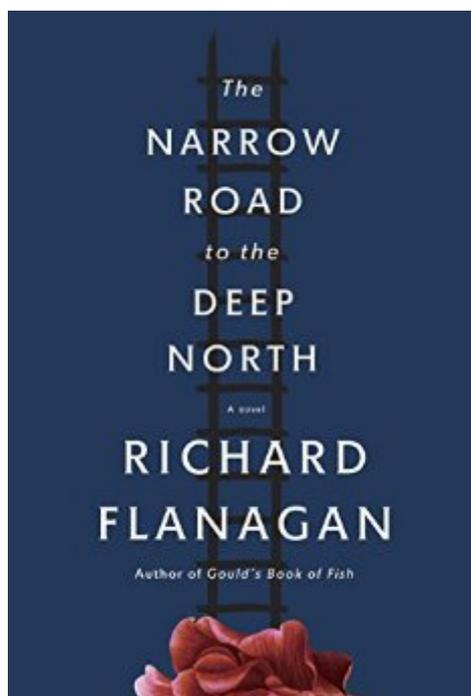


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The Narrow Road To The Deep North: A Novel (Vintage International)



Synopsis

Winner of the Man Booker Prize "Nothing since Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* has shaken me like this." *The Washington Post* From the author of the acclaimed *Book of Fish*, a magisterial novel of love and war that traces the life of one man from World War II to the present. August, 1943: Australian surgeon Dorrigo Evans is haunted by his affair with his uncle's young wife two years earlier. His life, in a brutal Japanese POW camp on the Thai-Burma Death Railway, is a daily struggle to save the men under his command. Until he receives a letter that will change him forever. A savagely beautiful novel about the many forms of good and evil, of truth and transcendence, as one man comes of age, prospers, only to discover all that he has lost.

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Customer Reviews

The very best books don't just entertain, uplift or educate us. They enfold us in their world and make us step outside of ourselves and become transformed. And sometimes, if we're really lucky, they ennoble and affirm us. *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is such a book. Once I got past the first 60 or 70 pages, there was no turning back. I turned the last page marveling at Mr. Flanagan's skill

and agreeing with historian Barbara Tuchman that, "Without books, history is silent, literature dumb, science crippled, thought and speculation at a standstill." *The Narrow Road* is based on an actual event: the building of the Thai-Burma death railway in 1943 by POWs commanded to the Japanese. The title comes from famed haiku poet Matsuo Basho's most famous work and sets up a truism of the human condition: even those who can admire the concise and exquisite portrayal of life can become the agents of death. The key character, Australian surgeon Dorrigo Evans, a larger-than-life POW, is also a study in contradictions: as "Big Fella", he protects those under his command from starvation, heinous deaths and senseless dehumanizing while struggling with his own demons. The passages are haunting and heartbreaking: the skeletal bodies covered in their own excrement, the bulging ulcers, the breaking of mind and spirit. Yet Mr. Flanagan does not depict these scenes to shock the reader. Rather, he reveals how all is ephemeral, mythologized, or forgotten: "Nothing endures. Don't you see? That's what Kipling meant. Not empires, not memories. We remember nothing. Maybe for a year or two. Maybe most of a life, if we live. Maybe. But then we will die, and who will ever understand any of this?"

This novel shares its title with a poetic travelogue by the 17th century haiku poet Matsuo Basho which was published in 1694. In many respects, the journey undertaken by Matsuo Basho is very different from that undertaken by Dorrigo Evans in this novel. Matsuo Basho is largely focussed on the beauty of the world around him, whereas Dorrigo Evans's odyssey is of evolving self, and place. "A happy man has no past, while an unhappy man has nothing else." Dorrigo Evans is the central character in Richard Flanagan's novel. His story moves in place and time, between different aspects of his lives in a way that made me think about the kind of man Dorrigo Evans was, and about how complex humans can be. The core of the story, and of Evans's heroism, is about his experiences as a doctor in a prisoner of war camp on the infamous Thai-Burma railway during World War II. Evans loves literature, and especially Tennyson's "Ulysses" which he reads and rereads. Evans's memories are triggered by writing a foreword for a collection of sketches done by one of the men (Guy "Rabbit" Hendricks) who did not survive the camp. We read Dorrigo Evans's memories of the camp together with his childhood in Tasmania, his life in Melbourne, and his posting to Adelaide where he has an affair with his Uncle Keith's much younger wife, Amy. Although Evans becomes engaged to the conventional Ella before being posted overseas, it is his affair with Amy that sustains him through his camp experiences. We are not spared from graphic descriptions of the physical consequences of life in the camps: malnutrition, minimal hygiene and physical brutality are all covered. But in all the squalor and hardship, pain and

suffering, there are men who try to support each other.

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