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Flanagan novel condemns modern Australia

KERRY O'BRIEN: Tasmanian writer Richard Flanagan has to be Australia's most unlikely Rhodes Scholar and looking at his life before and after Oxford, it is no surprise that he hated the experience. Something of an iconoclast, whose award winning books have the opportunity to polarise critics but nonetheless win him awards, Flanagan started his adult life as a daredevil kayaker who has survived near-death experiences on previously unexplored rapids and trying to row Bass Strait to become one of his country's most celebrated authors. He also wrote and directed the film version of his early book 'The Sound of One Hand Clapping'. A subsequent novel, 'Gould's Book of Fish' won the 2002 Commonwealth Writers Prize for what the judges described as "a touch of genius". His work has been published in 25 countries and he is currently working on a script for Baz Luhrmann's latest film on Australia. But 'The Unknown Terrorist' could be the most contentious for his harsh critique of what he believes modern Australia has become. I spoke with Flanagan in Sydney.

KERRY O'BRIEN: When you started 'The Unknown Terrorist', did you really intend to write such a bleak book?

RICHARD FLANAGAN: I wanted to write a book that was a mirror to these times and a book that I hoped might be a warning to people about what I feel are a series of frightening tendencies in our society.

KERRY O'BRIEN: You describe two thugs beating up an old vagrant in Sydney's King's Cross, "They kept on for a few minutes more, kicking him as if he were to blame for everything in that dirty, dead decade their were all condemned to live through. A sack of shit that had once been a man in a place that had once been a community in a country that had once been a society." Is that what Australia has become for you?

RICHARD FLANAGAN: I think it's become that for many people. We are more frightened, we are more frightening, we are less free, we are more unjust, we are more callous, there's a greater divide of wealth and power and the truth gets ever harder to get out. So, that was very much how I felt and that story sort of captured it in a few sentences.

KERRY O'BRIEN: That's a pretty grim view.

RICHARD FLANAGAN: It is, but it is hard to have any other view at this point in time. But I think there are always sources for hope and I try and take my compass from the hope, but this book, there's been too much faked jubilation about our prosperity and I'm tired of hearing about how to invest our super and about rising property prices. There is something else that's going on in Australia, a sort of spiritual malaise that I find sickening, in a word. At the end of the day it is our Australia, too, and a lot of people want it back. They want a gentler, more generous, kinder Australia, not the kind of Australia they are getting presented with every day at the moment.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Not possible to have both, your Australia and an Australia where people do care about super for retirement and do care about a comfortable lifestyle?

RICHARD FLANAGAN: Of course it is possible to have both, but I think when this period is judged by historians it will be seen that we had a moment of great prosperity when we could have done so much to build a better, stronger, more democratic society and, because of fear, we went the other way.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Your book has a drug mule named Tariq who is mistaken for a terrorist and a rather sad pole dancer who couldn't be further from the terrorist stereotype but who gets sucked into the vortex anyway. What are you saying? That the whole terrorist fear in Australia is a myth, that there is no real threat of terrorism?

RICHARD FLANAGAN: There is a threat of terrorism. There is obviously a very real threat of terrorism, but I think as a society we ought be fearful when that is used to attack our freedoms and to attack the truth and really we've got from reds under the bed to tea towels under the table and it's been used to subvert our democracy and that frightens me just as much as a terrorist attack, because we now have a society that's capable of doing quite horrific things to innocent people and it is very difficult for those people to get justice.

KERRY O'BRIEN: And, yet, I mean, that's a subjective view and I know it is shared by some others, but government in these circumstances does find itself having to walk a fine line, doesn't it, between protecting its citizens and going a step too far?

RICHARD FLANAGAN: Of course it does, but I don't think we achieve it by constantly using fear to subvert what we ought be defending, our principles of freedom and truth telling.

KERRY O'BRIEN: But when you talk about a lack of freedom of expression these days, what do you mean?

RICHARD FLANAGAN: There are a lot of disturbing tendencies in Australian

public life. We have this language which I haven't heard used since the Stalinist era of elites, a word that was first used by Stalin when he wanted to attack Jewish intellectuals in 1948, the use of the idea that there are things that matter more than individual freedom. Again, that's a Stalinistic argument. We have the rise of hit men in the media who are there to do the Government's bidding and seem to have no conscience or scruple in attacking any individual who has a position different than that of the Government or is questioning government policy. We have an ever more conformist society. We have an ever more cowed media and we see daily anybody who rightly questions or simply interrogates the process of government or government policy being destroyed. Those sort of things, when people who are simply seeking the truth have to put their reputations on the line, when that starts happening, I become very frightened.

KERRY O'BRIEN: You said after writing 'The Sound of One Hand Clapping' that it was like disembowelling yourself and leaving yourself as a shaking, gutted cadaver. Are you sure there isn't something else you'd rather do?

RICHARD FLANAGAN: I've said some dreadful things, haven't I? If you pour yourself into a book, it's a bit like getting your gear off and running down the main street of your town. There's nowhere left to hide. Equally, there are moments of great euphoria and jubilation in it.

KERRY O'BRIEN: But are you one of those who does feel you've maybe given away something of yourself that you are uncomfortable about in the process?

RICHARD FLANAGAN: You always have to give away things, you are uncomfortable about yourself. If you don't, if you don't open yourself up to all that's not simply best, but worst in yourself - you have to canvass the full range of what it is to be human. So you can't simply pretend to be one sort of person. You have to open yourself up to all humanity can be and do, all good, all evil, everything that's funny and everything that is despairing. You have to open yourself up to everything. Of course you feel vulnerable and naked after that.

KERRY O'BRIEN: In fact, at the beginning and the end of the 'The Unknown Terrorist', you said that love is not enough, but it is all we have. You talk of the hopelessness and failure of human love. Yet, in the family you grew up in, and your own family now, it seems there's been a lot of love at the centre of your life. How do you explain that apparent contradiction?

RICHARD FLANAGAN: All of my books have been about love. But when I started writing this book I realised that we lived in a world where it was ever harder to manifest love, where people were increasingly isolated from the things that really fed their spirit in a positive way: family, friends, land and so on. We live in a world where we are ever more divorced from what makes us spiritually rich and of course we're materially rich, but spiritually impoverished. I wanted to have a character who wants to love, but is denied the chance to love and in the

end is presented as simply an object of hate. Look at what that person might do in those circumstances. Because I think as a society this epidemic of loneliness, of sadness, is really related to the way in so many ways we're stopped from being able to show love, express love and be love to one another.

KERRY O'BRIEN: When your brother, Martin Flanagan, was asked recently what quality he most associates with you, he said, "Sheer, naked courage". Do you recognise that in yourself and what particularly has taken courage in your life?

RICHARD FLANAGAN: I think the family is given to exaggeration, Kerry. I wouldn't believe that for a moment.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Some of what you did in your earlier life, trying to kayak against Bass Strait and going down unexplored rapids, is probably part of what he was talking about.

RICHARD FLANAGAN: I've just been lucky. I've never been much interested in myself, but I've always loved being with other people and hearing their stories. I've really only ever tried to give a bit of that back, I suppose, from when I was a very little kid sitting in the kitchen listening to my aunts and uncles telling these beautiful stories, I've just tried to radiate some of that back in my writings.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Books into the indefinite future?

RICHARD FLANAGAN: Yeah, I'll keep writing books and as soon as this interview is over I think I'll go and have a beer, I think, Kerry.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Richard Flanagan, thanks for talking with us.

RICHARD FLANAGAN: Thank you.

KERRY O'BRIEN: A man who would prefer a drink than to talk about himself. That's the program for tonight. We're back at the same time tomorrow but for now, goodnight.