

Review by David Masiel, *The Washington Post*

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The standard model of good and evil is simple if not simplistic: Everybody on our side is good, and everybody on their side is bad. For anyone in the post-9/11 world who still believes this, Richard Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist* should be required reading -- with eyelids pinned open, if necessary, and forced to look. Flanagan, whose previous works are set in his native Tasmania, turns his unflinching gaze toward modern-day Sydney, in the aftermath of a terror bomb scare. Over three scorching summer days, we follow a dissolute cast: an exotic dancer, an opportunistic journalist and a populace blinded by the politics of fear.

The dancer is a mysterious girl trying to remake her life following personal tragedy. Though she has a full name -- Gina Davies -- she is known simply as the Doll. Objectified and alluring, she lives her life in a semi-robotic attempt to reject romantic dreams and embrace life's hard realities. Life is something she can and will control, the way she controls a man by making him want her, and then slipping away, unattainable.

Her circumstances are nothing like ours, yet her tastes are all-too familiar. She hungers for the Versace this and the Prada that, pops Zoloft and Stemetil, designer labels and designer tranquilizers melding into the same illusion of meaning and security. She saves to buy a house, the Australian dream, a \$50,000 down-payment almost in her grasp. She keeps her savings in cash, ill-gotten gains that will be used against her in ways she can't imagine. Nightly she engages in an outlandish routine, covering her naked body in \$100 bills, as if the money or the ritual itself can somehow shield her. Despite these and other eccentricities, the Doll is emotionally fragile and utterly human. But not to Richard Cody, an on-camera reporter for a Fox-like news station, yellow journalist to the core. Cody isn't evil, but he is desperate. His job in television news is not about truth, but about "the art of making a sow's ear out of a silk purse." He faces demotion within a conglomerate that produces news by the credo that "people don't want the truth." People want a story, and Cody's looking for that story even as he pays the Doll to take her clothes off.

He finds it after the Doll meets a handsome young Arab named Tariq. They run into each other at Mardi Gras, amid an evening of parading excess, of "Dykes on Bikes" and "Scats with Hats." When they sleep together, the Doll is unexpectedly moved. But after a passionate one-nighter, Tariq disappears, and the Doll glides through the next day on the fringes of police barricades and storming SWAT teams, a terrorist search that brings Sydney to the brink of hysteria. Then, on television, she sees grainy security-camera footage of herself with Tariq, entering his apartment building, beneath a strident voice-over: "Terrorist suspect . . . with a female accomplice."

Tariq is obviously a terrorist -- or is he? After he is fingered by ASIO, Australia's version of Homeland Security, his guilt slides along runners well-oiled by ethnic prejudice and faith in authority. When Cody sees that video, he not only recognizes the Doll, he sees his professional salvation, and the inexorable train-wreck begins.

Flanagan ushers us through a modern-day looking glass, with Cody "piecing together not so much the truth of Gina Davies' life as rehearsing the story he would present about it." The mysteries that once made the Doll inscrutable and even successful become the lies that make her Australia's "Unknown Terrorist." Shock-jocks rant, spies manipulate the truth, terror experts pontificate, and the entire nation cries for blood in a thunderstorm of fear. The Doll's fate is as inevitable as it is horrible, grinding toward a bloody end -- or so it would seem.

Flanagan's tightly crafted narrative is akin to the oppressive power of Kafka's *Trial*, or Capote's *In Cold Blood*, stark realism revealing underlying sickness. His prose glitters and shrieks with spare vitality: "Anyone not working had retreated indoors and taken refuge near their air con vents and in cold beer and chilled wines. Some watched something on television and afterwards couldn't remember whether it was sport or reality tv or a documentary on Hitler. Some surfed the net looking at porn or eBay. . . . Most did nothing. It was difficult to sleep, yet almost impossible to move. It was easy to be irritated about everything that was of no consequence, yet care about nothing that mattered."

Here lies Flanagan's real point: In a world of terror and the ensuing decay of personal liberties, the fault lies not in remote devils or political adversaries, but in ourselves. He moves his plot at a thriller's pace, and we can't take our eyes off it. It's about us, after all, and our new realities, a disturbing gaze at the social and psychological mechanisms of terror. In this world, violent necessity dominates, and someone -- maybe anyone -- must be tracked and killed for people to feel safe for a little while longer.

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