

# The Unknown Terrorist: A novel about the “war on terror”

Gabriela Zabala-Notaras, Ismet Redzovic  
8 May 2007

Richard Flanagan, *The Unknown Terrorist*, Sydney, Picador 2006, 325 pp.

Richard Flanagan is an Australian writer and an interesting figure. He was born in 1961 in Tasmania. After completing a first class honours degree at the University of Tasmania, he won a Rhodes scholarship and completed a Master of Letters degree at Oxford University. Flanagan also worked as a labourer and river guide. Before turning to fiction, he wrote several non-fiction books on various subjects, including the history of the Gordon River area and the story of conman John Friedrich.

Flanagan’s work demonstrates a healthy disregard for the establishment, and his sympathies lie firmly with the ordinary people.

His previous novels include *The Death of a River Guide* (1997), which attempts to demonstrate that most Tasmanians have some kind of connection to the island’s bloody past—as a penal colony and island notorious for the genocide of the Aboriginal population; *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1998), about the difficult life of a Slovenian migrant family, which he also turned into a critically acclaimed film; and *Gould’s Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish* (2002), for which he won the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize. Flanagan has a strong affinity for the Tasmanian landscape, which is expressed in his poetic descriptions. His strength as an author lies primarily in his depictions of Tasmanian life and its links with history.

His latest novel, *The Unknown Terrorist*, although dealing with significant and timely subject matter is, unhappily, an unconvincing and poor effort—in fact, much poorer than his previous three efforts. The novel can be described as an artistically failed attempt to warn Australians about the real implications of the so-called “war on terror.”

In Flanagan’s novel, “The Doll” is a pole dancer at the “Chairman’s Lounge,” a well-known club in Kings Cross in Sydney’s red light district frequented by businessmen, media personalities, politicians and other similar types, where she sometimes makes up to a thousand dollars a night. The Doll (her real name is Gina Davies) comes from the working class western suburbs of Sydney and lives alone in a dingy, cheap apartment in an inner-city suburb not too far from her work. Flanagan intentionally depicts her as something of a racist, obsessed with designer clothes. Her major ambition in life is to save enough money for a deposit on a home.

One evening after work, she joins the Mardi Gras parade, an annual gay and lesbian event in Sydney, where for the second time she meets Tariq, a handsome computer programmer of Middle Eastern origin.

He takes her to his nearby apartment where they spend the night together. In the morning, the Doll discovers via news bulletins while breakfasting at a local café, that police have surrounded Tariq’s apartment block, on suspicion that he is a terrorist. The story is taken up by all broadcasting stations with the accompanying hysterical sensationalism. Video footage of the Doll and Tariq hugging and kissing while entering the building the night before is on every television screen. The Doll fears she may be implicated and decides to go into hiding.

Meanwhile, Richard Cody, a popular media personality, who is undergoing a personal and career crisis (he’s just been dropped as an anchorman), decides to do a television special called the “Unknown Terrorist,” about Tariq and the Doll. Cody has another, more personal reason for fabricating a story that would ruin the Doll’s life: she rejected his advances following one of her performances at the club.

A series of tragic episodes follows (as well as revelations about the dancer’s troubled life), including a final confrontation between the Doll and Richard Cody at her old club.

Flanagan has dedicated the novel to David Hicks, the Australian Guantánamo Bay detainee. Flanagan is clearly and rightly alarmed by the measures taken in the name of so-called “war on terror,” including the passage of anti-democratic laws, which, as he correctly comments in one interview, “are more dangerous than the threat of terrorism.”

The novel doesn’t work on any artistic level, but rather reads like a poor detective novel with predictable scenarios and cardboard characters. It is a departure from his other works, which, notwithstanding their weaknesses, display the author’s skill for insightful depictions of social life.

There might be a number of reasons for the work’s weaknesses. First, this may be less familiar territory for the author. Unlike Flanagan’s previous novels, especially those portions of them dealing with Tasmania, its landscape and inhabitants, *The Unknown Terrorist* very rarely goes beyond the clichéd and obvious. An example is this description of Kings Cross: “Not far ahead, prominently sited on a crest at the intersection of several roads, the Doll could see the massive Coca-Cola sign looming ominously, the hailstorm having brought the dirty sky so low the red American sign was supporting black clouds along its ridge” (p. 297).

Flanagan’s lack of sympathy for and comprehension of Sydney and its inhabitants are expressed in his simplistic and shallow descriptions: “She [Doll] no more understood her new world than she could explain her loathing and fear of her old, but what did it matter? In Sydney, the five or more millions of westies detest the stinking snobbery of the north and the arrogance of the east, while the million or so of the rich north and east despise the grasping vulgarity and materialism of the poorer west. Nobody will admit they all think much the same, and that what moves and joins everyone in Sydney is one and the same thing: money; and nobody will admit that the only real difference is that up north and east they more or less have more, while out west they more or less have less” (pp. 9-10).

His depiction of Sydney’s working class and working class suburbs is even more lacking in complexity and, quite frankly, false. Everyone is reduced to either a redneck or suburban stereotype. The following example is one of many: “Their world was one of suburban verities, their world was that of today: the house, the job, the possessions and the cars, the friends and the renovations, the resort holidays and the latest gadgets—digital cameras, home cinemas, a new pool. The past was a garbage of outdated appliances: the foot spa; the turbo oven; the doughnut maker and the record player, the SLR and the VCR and the George Foreman grill. The past was an embarrassment of distressing colours and

styles about which to laugh: mullet haircuts and padded shoulders, top perms and kettle barbecues. Only this week's catalogue was good and worth getting, no deposit and twenty-four months to pay. Their lives were empty, their lives they regarded as good" (p. 8).

The novel lacks particularity and concreteness, and reads as if the author has set himself the task of enlightening his audience demagogically rather than artistically.

Flanagan prepared for his novel, not by deepening or developing his understanding of the historical and social processes that have taken place over the last decades, but by hanging "out in Sydney with cops around Kings Cross, with junkies and with pole dancers, with homicide and counter terrorism police and set about making my mirror to what we had become. I took the book from everywhere—radio ads, infotainment programmes, newspaper headlines, pub talk. A lot of what is most disturbing in the novel are quotes from shock jocks and politicians."

The novelist seems to have taken the line of least resistance at every important juncture. He prefers the fast-paced detective genre, which naturally includes depictions of underworld connections. The reader is treated to long and unnecessary descriptions of the Doll stripteasing, as well as a gratuitous sex scene with Tariq. All of this seems a rather arbitrary (and sensational) means of establishing the interconnections of the characters and their situations.

Flanagan freely acknowledges that he took the skeleton of his book from the well-known 1974 novel by German writer Heinrich Böll, *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum or How Violence Can Develop and Where it Can Lead*. (In 1975, Volker Schlöndorff and Margaretha von Trotta directed a well-regarded film version of the book.)

However, Böll's novel—which deals with the way a tabloid newspaper and police investigation ruin a housekeeper's life during the climate of panic over the Red Army Faction terrorism in West Germany in the 1970s—is a convincing work, which at times very incisively and powerfully exposes the press, the state and, in fact, the whole political establishment.

The various aspects of Böll's novel—from the way the tabloid reporter manipulates truth to the way the wealthy opportunistic individuals who were implicated with the housekeeper quickly try to disassociate from her, to the stupidity and intimidating tactics of the police investigators and to the manner of Katharina Blum's revenge—are written in an ironic, matter-of-fact style. Even the choice of the detective genre is an inversion. Böll neither sensationalises nor does he try to shock. He satirises reality.

Having lived through the Nazi regime and been forced to fight in the German army in World War II, Böll (1917-1985) organically understands the role of and the connections between the state and media. The Nazi propaganda regime was infamous for whipping up hysteria, for manipulating truth for political ends. Nor does Böll blame ordinary people for allowing this situation to take place, but portrays them very sympathetically. Katharina Blum, although she comes from a very oppressed background, is a conscientious, hard-working housekeeper who is valued by her employers. She is intelligent, meticulous, and diligent; something that is evident from the way she weighs every word, every expression, when she is being investigated by the police.

Unfortunately, imitating the plot of *Katharina Blum* does not necessarily mean that Flanagan imparts to *The Unknown Terrorist* a similar aesthetic impact. Part of the reason may lie in the fact that the writer operates in something of an historical vacuum, seeing recent events as a departure from Australia's supposedly egalitarian and democratic ideals. He says: "It's a cliché but true that the world was different after September 2001. I felt I had become a stranger to my own time. The way I had of thinking about the world didn't seem to work anymore, and the way I had written books suddenly seemed no longer relevant."

The portrayal of the working class as unwitting accomplices in the "war on terror" and on attacks on democratic rights is bound up with

Flanagan's own impressions about these changes: "I wanted to make a mirror to what I felt Australia had become. I think it is a pretty bleak country at the moment. It was a land of such hope and possibility when I was younger, and in the past couple of years, like a lot of Australians, I've ended up feeling ashamed of what it had become. But we can't blame governments or parties or politicians; we have to accept in the end it was we as a people who happily went along with this. There was a loss of empathy. I don't know where that comes from. We're a migrant nation made up of people who've been torn out of other worlds, and you'd think we would have some compassion."

One can and ought to be troubled by developments, including the moods in sections of the population, but this is not a serious or thoughtful approach. Flanagan turns things on their head. He blames the people for the present situation and sees the current attacks on democratic rights and the drive to war as an aberration from the days when Australia was a "land of such hope."

In fact, the postwar economic boom and stability were something of an aberration. The first five decades of the twentieth century were convulsive, dominated by war and revolution. Capitalism subjected the world's population to two world wars, the Great Depression, the rise of fascism and the Holocaust. The first successful socialist revolution took place, in Russia, which was then thrown back by the emergence of Stalinism.

History has once again placed convulsion on the agenda. Flanagan's own work reflects that process, as it has obliged him to treat the "war on terror." A longing for the good, old days is out of place. The "new, bad ones" have to be faced up to, with all their dangers and immense possibilities. Rather than lament what's passed away, history and the historical process need to be studied and learned from.

Flanagan's outlook has aesthetic consequences. These are inadvertently revealed by the novelist himself: "For this new subject I changed my style, writing in a different way to my previous books. The sentences are short, the words small, and I want the reader to pass through the words as the eye does through a window, and see straight into the story. I wanted it to be one of those books people read in one or two sittings and feel like they have been in car smash and their life ever after is a little changed. I wanted it to be a Trojan horse of a book, a book that everyone would want to read, but having read it, some ideas escape into the citadels of suburban lounge rooms and people once more begin to think and question."

One has to question why literary technique has to become less sophisticated to sensitise readers to the complex issues the novel treats. Form and content are inseparable, and unfortunately the result is a work that is superficial and lifelessly didactic.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**