

Richard Flanagan. *The Unknown Terrorist*. Atlantic Books, 2007, 320pp., plus notes. A\$ 24.95 (pb.), ISBN: 978 1 84354 598 9.

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My first reaction to reading *The Unknown Terrorist* was a sense of overwhelming sadness for what Australia, the country of my birth, had become in the late Howard era. At the same time I felt that his story was simply too exaggerated. A second reading made me much less certain of this.

The novel is set in Sydney, Australia, in the grip of an unrelenting heat wave and unbridled materialism. It is not a pretty sight. The city is smug and self-satisfied. Its gods, money and success, provide a superficial glow of prosperity. Beneath this veneer of prosperity, the city's underbelly is ugly; social disintegration rife. As shown by Flanagan's frequent references to skin riddled with illness or disease in the novel, social disease continually disrupts the superficial gloss. Self-complacency becomes tainted with fear at the beginning of the novel as terrorist bombs are discovered at the Homebush Olympic Stadium.

The heroine is Gina Davies generally called 'the Doll', an exotic looking, 26 year old pole dancer in King's Cross who hopes for better things. After years of saving she is a few days short of achieving her dream of a deposit on an apartment as the novel begins. A one night stand with an attractive Middle Eastern stranger, Tariq, changes everything. Wrongly accused of being a terrorist, the Doll's life over the next three days descends into a hellish vortex beyond her control with a suddenness that pulls the reader into the story at a breathless pace. A relentless trial by media occurs with TV stations, shock jocks and tabloid newspapers vying with one another to produce the most sensationalised take on the story. Grainy security film footage of her and Tariq entering his apartment is linked first with scenes of the recent bomb scare at Homebush and subsequently with scenes from the Twin Towers, Madrid, Beslan, London and Baghdad, creating a visually compelling, if totally spurious, logic of cause and effect.

The initial means of the Doll's catastrophic misfortune is Richard Cody, regular customer at the Chairman's Lounge, where the Doll works, and whose sexual advances she rejects the night before the 'unknown terrorist' story explodes. Cody is a conceited, middle aged, has-been current affairs anchor man facing demotion at 'Six', a News Corporation-like commercial television station. He is desperate to be the centre of his image-driven botoxed media world again, and sees in the Doll's story his professional and personal salvation. The first to recognise her when the initial grainy footage is televised, he also recognises the story's potential. Truth, justice and journalistic integrity are sacrificed to the greater need of personal fame. Where the Doll's story lacks dramatic elements Cody embellishes, implausible details become plausible when explained by so called experts, facts are created out of dubious proof supplied by a manipulative ASIO keen to ensure anti-terrorism propaganda does not lose its impact.

In the media-cum-security frenzy that follows, the Doll at first tries to ignore the story as irrelevant, as a joke. After all, as her friend Wilder says "This is Australia, not Nazi Germany" (252). Panic, despair, resignation and finally anger set in. The Doll, as her none too subtle nickname suggests, is dressed up and her image manipulated to become the unknown terrorist. As a result of her experiences the Doll begins to see herself as a kind of ritual sacrifice necessary for the relief of a fearful populace numbed by endless terrorist threats. She understands that until recently she too had been the same, implicitly believing stories presented by those in authority. "To her horror she saw that, as she had never cared or wondered or questioned, nor now would anyone care or wonder or question the stories they heard about her" (186).

The Unknown Terrorist could simply be read as a thriller in the classical sense of the word: as a tense, exciting, tautly plotted sensational novel where the action is swift and suspense continual - plus sex and violence. Flanagan's book has all these elements and more. It parodies modern Australia within the thriller genre with its exaggerated cinematographic presentation of contemporary consumer culture, grasping materialism and tabloid scaremongering. It is loud, vivid and entirely in the reader's face. The narrative is spliced with advertisements spruiking products, seminars, lifestyles, etc. 'Congratulations Australia' yell the shock jocks, pandering to a xenophobic population, as they compete with the barrage of advertising and brand names for the reader's attention.

What sets Flanagan's novel apart from formulaic thrillers is the relentless sense of anger and sadness, almost despair, that accompanies the reader page after page. This is a book with a political point to make. For all its title, *The Unknown Terrorist* is not so much about terrorism per se as a critique of how the fear of

terrorism is manipulated and exploited, how spin is presented as truth and in particular how hard-won civil liberties are being eroded in the name of national security. While Cody is the means of the Doll's nightmare, it is the novel's broad backdrop of mind-numbing fear, political manipulation and an acquiescing populace that ultimately provides the substance for her tragedy. Flanagan does not mess about in repeatedly making his point throughout the narrative. As one of the vote hungry politicians in the novel, in a vein that is entirely reminiscent of G. W. Bush, says. "Either you are with Australia or you are no longer Australian and have lost your right to the rights of other citizens" (158-159) It should come as no surprise that Flanagan dedicates his book to David Hicks, Australia's first Guantánamo Bay detainee.

But it is the very force with which this attack is made that raises some doubts. There are no dissenting voices in the novel as the Doll's tragedy unfolds. Flanagan depicts a world without checks and balances. This is why I struggled when first reading the book as disbelief kept undermining the narrative. The novel seemed too one-sided, too exaggerated. Like the Doll's friend Wilder, I thought in "Australia things always get sorted out in the end" (250). I kept asking why the Doll simply didn't go to the police to clear up the problem. In the narrative itself, this is not a possibility for her. She is a character utterly alienated from society and its institutions. Everything she sees and hears reinforces her belief that there is no way out for her:

The chorus of radio and television, the slow build of plasma image and newspaper and magazine photograph, the rising leafstorm of banners and newsflashes not only made an error impossible to rectify, they made errors the truth, the truth became of no consequence, and the world a hell for those whom it randomly chose to persecute (290).

Hyperbole acts as a device reminding us that such devastating errors need not only apply within the fictional world of Flanagan's narrative. In this context it is worth sparing a thought for Mohamed Haneef and Izhar ul-Haque and their subsequent detention under Australia's new terrorism laws. While charges against both were subsequently dropped, the presiding judicial officer in ul-Haque's case was particularly scathing of ASIO methods, accusing ASIO officers of false imprisonment and kidnapping. The process of judicial review in Australia still works well, but Flanagan's novel is a timely reminder in this post 9/11 world not to be complacent. Neither should we be complacent about other laws recently passed in Australia such as the APEC Meeting (Police Powers) Act or the Law Enforcement Legislation Amendment (Public Safety) Act, originally set up to deal with the Cronulla riots with a 2 year sunset clause and now extended *indefinitely*.

While the erosion of freedoms, truth and integrity are key issues in the novel, ultimately *The Unknown Terrorist* is about love, the utter hopelessness of the human condition without it, and, as Flanagan writes in his postscript, a fear that “love is never enough, but it is all we have” (316). It is this that accounts for the all-pervading sense of emptiness and despair in the book, for the oppressive inevitability and horror of the Doll’s fate. It is this fear that love may not be enough that provides the real tension in the narrative. There can be no hope for someone like the Doll rejected by the very society that should nurture her. She is someone denied love, someone alienated from love. Flanagan’s Doll – an echo maybe of Sonja Buloh in his earlier novel *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* - represents all those who are excluded by society, all those denied love, affection, and companionship.

Flanagan unmistakably lays the blame on Australia during the Howard era. “They kept on for a few minutes more, kicking him as if he were to blame for everything in that dirty dead decade they 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” (280). This is possibly the most appallingly poignant passage in book. In the dock is a society suffering from such spiritual malaise that is condones suffering and tragedy. Also accused stands an ugly city lacking in generosity and empathy for its fellow human beings. A populace deadened to the suffering of others by their misguided pursuit of material wealth. A populace so numb to real emotion that they are unable to or simply disinterested in distinguishing reality from fiction. “Some watched something on television and afterwards couldn’t remember whether it was sport or reality TV or a documentary on Hitler” (225). Even beauty and art have been reduced to commodities, to be bought and sold like everything else.

While the book is set in Sydney, Flanagan is clearly commenting on the whole of Australia. The text itself is pointedly Australian in its use of slang, place names, and products ensuring the reader’s attention remains focused on contemporary Australia only. While a case can be made to draw parallels with world-wide trends, I do not believe this is Flanagan’s intention in localising the story so unequivocally in Sydney. The Doll’s story is the vehicle by which Flanagan angrily attacks an Australia he despairs of. The reader is forced to face up to some unpleasant truths about Australia without the option to relativise in any way. The SIEVX tragedy is a case to point. This was a time when significant parts of the country chose to look the other way. As they did when it was time to say ‘Sorry’ to Aboriginal people. This is the whole point of the book. As Flanagan himself said “I wanted it to be one of those books people read in one or two sittings and feel

like they had been in a car smash and their life ever after is a little changed. I wanted [...] that people once more begin to think and question” (ABC Radio National, 2006).

Reading the book *is* like being in a car crash. There is no relief at the end of the story, no happy ending, not even a glimpse of hope, just an incredible sense of *horror vacui*. Flanagan tempers this stark nihilism to some extent in his postscript to the novel. Love may never be enough he writes, but it is all we have to “balance the horror of life”. Power and money atrophy life. “Love, to the contrary, fills man with the universe,” offering a purpose to life in our connectedness with one another. (316) Nonetheless, it is a bleak book.

The November 2007 federal election result is hopefully an indication that this bleakness is set to pass, that more people in Australia are beginning to think and question again, that the country has regained “the ability to recognise that in the suffering of one might be the future suffering of us all and some diminishment of our own humanity” (Flanagan, ABC Radio National, 2006).