

**Richard Flanagan: *And What Do You Do, Mr Gable?*** Short Pieces (Non-Fiction). Vintage Books Australia, 2011, A\$ 19.95. ISBN 978 1 742 752723. **Wanting.** Vintage Books Australia, 2008. A\$ 24.95, pb. ISBN 978 1 74166 668 7. **Reviewed by Adi Wimmer,** University of Klagenfurt.

*Richard Flanagan has single-handedly given voice to Tasmania, a penal colony and one of the further-most outposts of the British Empire.* (British Council homepage)

In 2011 Flanagan published this volume with its curious title. Clark Gable once attended a cocktail party and got into a conversation with a writer whom he asked what he was doing for a living. An answer was given, together with the cheeky counter-question that is now the title of his essay volume. Well, some of the essays reveal what else Richard Flanagan does apart from writing. Those of us familiar with his first successful novel *Death of a River Guide* know that he is a keen kayaker who almost drowned in the rapids of the Franklin river. The first essay of the collection ("Out of a Wild Sea") tells us of another near-fatal kayaking adventure: when he was 21, Flanagan and a fellow kayaker insanely set out to cross Bass Strait in their kayaks – to attend the wedding of one of their mates in Melbourne. Bass Strait is feared for its turbulent waters as well as its foul weather. Soon they encountered a storm front. They were too far away from Tasmania's north shore and so they pressed on. They became separated and both kayaks capsized. Rescue boats found them, but only after hours of search and with the daylight fading: "They were five minutes away from abandoning their search" (4).

Richard Flanagan has a reputation of a firebrand in Tasmania; he helped to create the Green Party back in the 1970s and he is a close friend and advisor to Bob Brown, the head of the Australian Greens and like Flanagan a Tasmanian. All those who were hoping

to meet Bob Brown at the forthcoming GAST conference in Stuttgart in September 2012 ought to read Flanagan's loving account of Bob Brown's picaresque life. Called "Metamorphoses" (153-67), it reads like a fabulation by someone like Jonathan Swift and I am not totally convinced that all of it is really true.

When *The Bulletin* was still around (it went out of business in 2005) Flanagan occasionally wrote for it. At Christmas 2004 he published a blistering attack on Jim Bacon and his secret dealings with Gunns, Tasmania's biggest logging company. In the essay "Gunns: The Tragedy of Tasmania" – at 40 pages it is the longest of the volume – he returns to the theme with renewed anger and vigour. His concern is the unchanged and allegedly corrupt connection of the Tasmanian Labor Party to the multi-billionaire family Gunns. Gunns is big in the woodchips industry and in job-starved Tasmania, they are the single biggest job provider. The family is much hated amongst environmentalists because of the practice of clear-felling, in which everything that grows, including for instance wonderful and rare satinwood trees or Huon Pines, gets eaten up by gigantic machines that spew them out as woodchips. I have seen these machines myself and I have also seen the devastation they produce in Tasmania's interior. But it does not remain with the felling: afterwards and in order to prevent unsupervised re-growth, the land is sprayed with a deadly cocktail of toxins, including Agent Orange. In 2002, Labour Premier Jim Bacon pledged to end the clear-felling of old stands in 2009. In 2008, that pledge was quietly forgotten and Gunns were given a renewed license. What is particularly galling is that the public does not even know how much – or how little – Gunns pays for that right. The information has been embargoed by the ruling Labor Party and one really wonders how in the face of such blatant evidence of corruption the people of Tasmania go on voting for it.

The second-longest contribution is a loving biography of Nelson Algren, the American novelist and essayist. It is full of love and admiration for a man who always remained an outsider in America's writing circles, maybe because he was born into the

Depression and became only famous after WWII, when the crassest forms of American materialism ravaged American thinking. America dreamt of the magic transformation of rags into riches; "Algren's dream is one of humanity, of how you might live a fully human life when you have lost everything and nothing can be regained." In the low-down climate of the McCarthy years, he did not hesitate to attack his nation as "an imperialist son-of-a-bitch", which helps to explain why in 1953 the State Department did not renew his passport. In the end he was defeated by "Moloch USA", defeated in mind and body and financially, because he "threw down a question to the fundamental nature of the USA". Like Flanagan, Nelson Algren thought that merely telling the unadulterated truth was good enough for a writer to be respected by his readers. Even Leslie Fiedler, who would in his enlightened old-age years devote a whole book to the depiction of *Freaks*, categorized Algren as such: "our literature has moved on and left him almost a museum piece – the Last of the Proletarian Writers." This truly remarkable essay was originally written for the re-issue of Algren's masterpiece *A Walk on the Wild Side*, which Doubleday rejected in 1956. The location is the seedy underside of New Orleans, its characters are whores, pimps, madams, gamblers, small-time crooks, fetishists, cross-dressers and drunks. Losers all, like their creator. Algren called it "an American fantasy written to an American beat as true as Huckleberry Finn".

The last essay of this volume is also the most recently written: "The Road to Kinglake." GAST's e-Newsletter of early 2009 (it can still be viewed on [www.australienstudien.org](http://www.australienstudien.org)) put together a number of newspaper articles on the "Black Saturday" bushfires of January 2009; here we have a report on what these communities in rural Victoria felt after the first shock of emerging from their shelters to a world of twisted metal and dead bodies. It is a moving and gripping account and makes you forget that it is also exploitative. Flanagan makes the occasional swipe at the "journos" that raced to the sites of the fire as soon as it was over – when he was doing exactly the same. He gathers up impressions, takes mental snapshots, turning them into a story that captures the

unique shock of Australia's biggest and costliest bush-fire in history.

But there is one short essay that moved me more than any other and it is curiously entitled "The History of Love." Here, Flanagan describes how his masterpiece *Wanting* started out. Let me return to that novel – even though it was very competently reviewed in *ZfA* 2009. Have a guess: Suesskind's million-seller *Das Parfum* apart, which German novel of the last 30 years sold the highest number of copies? It was Sten Nadolny's *Die Entdeckung der Langsamkeit* (1983). Over two million copies have been sold in Germany alone and the novel is still in print. And why should this be of interest for us Australianists? Because Nadolny's main protagonist is none other than John Franklin (1786-1847), who also turns up as one of two major characters in Flanagan's novel *Wanting*. Franklin was governor of Van Diemen's Land from 1836 – 1843. His wife Lady Jane fancied herself a philanthropist, rejecting the orthodox view that Tasmania's indigenous people were "savages". To prove her point, she adopts an orphan girl. The social experiment is not the shining success that she had hoped for. Far from being a loving mother, Lady Jane assumes the role of Gradgrindian teacher. When Sir John is relieved of his office, Mathinna is ditched into an orphanage, a hell-hole of unbearably Dickensian characteristics. Thrown out at the age of 15, she becomes a drifter and occasional prostitute. At seventeen, she is murdered.

The second half of the narrative is set in London. Lady Jane provides the link between the two sets. It is nine years after the disappearance of her husband's expedition to explore the fabled "North-West passage". A search party under the leadership of arctic explorer Dr Rae has discovered a tribe of Inuit who are in possession of some of the ship's items – and who have discovered that in the final days of their slow death, the crew resorted to cannibalism. Lady Jane turns to Charles Dickens, the greatest English storyteller of his time, to refute these "vile allegations". And Dickens throws himself into this enterprise with great gusto.

The novel's first narrative strand is more in line with Flanagan's political passions than the second. The question that haunts him is: How could the Franklins cruelly abandon Mathinna, their adopted dark-skinned daughter? Mathinna was an assignment. Which was meant to demonstrate that English manners and teaching would overcome savagery. Mathinna would be pulled up to the highest English standards of her class through grammar, spelling and religion. In his afterword Flanagan writes that the two stories of Dickens and Mathinna, with their "odd but undeniable connection", are ruminations on the forces of desire: Hence the title. It is also a brilliant fictional treatise on the reasons why the colonial project wrought such terrible consequences on the colonized, as well as twisting the colonizing psyche. These consequences are still palpable in Australia and other parts of the former empire, or else there would not be such a wave of "Writing Back" at it. And here is the link to Flanagan's book of essays. Decades ago he visited the Hobart Museum of Art in order to look at colonial paintings. There, the art curator told him the story of Mathinna and showed him a water-colour portrait of the girl in a red dress:

The curator detached the oval frame from the painting.

Look at this, he said.

Cut off at the ankles by the frame were two dark, shoeless feet. Embarrassed by her not wearing shoes, the Franklins had cut Mathinna off at the ankles. That picture remained with me. (121)

Dickens was a colonialist through and through; he believed that the difference between the English people and the savages was that the former were able to control their wanting. The story of Dickens and Mathinna was "really one: two poles of the same globe". When Dickens succumbs to his desires, all that happens is that he leaves his cared-for wife and takes up with a beautiful young actress. When Mathinna cannot or does not want to control *her* emotions, she is ruined and strangulated with the same red dress that she wears in the painting.