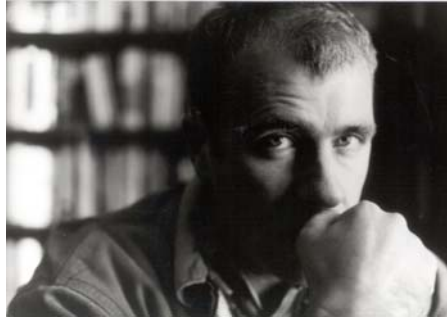


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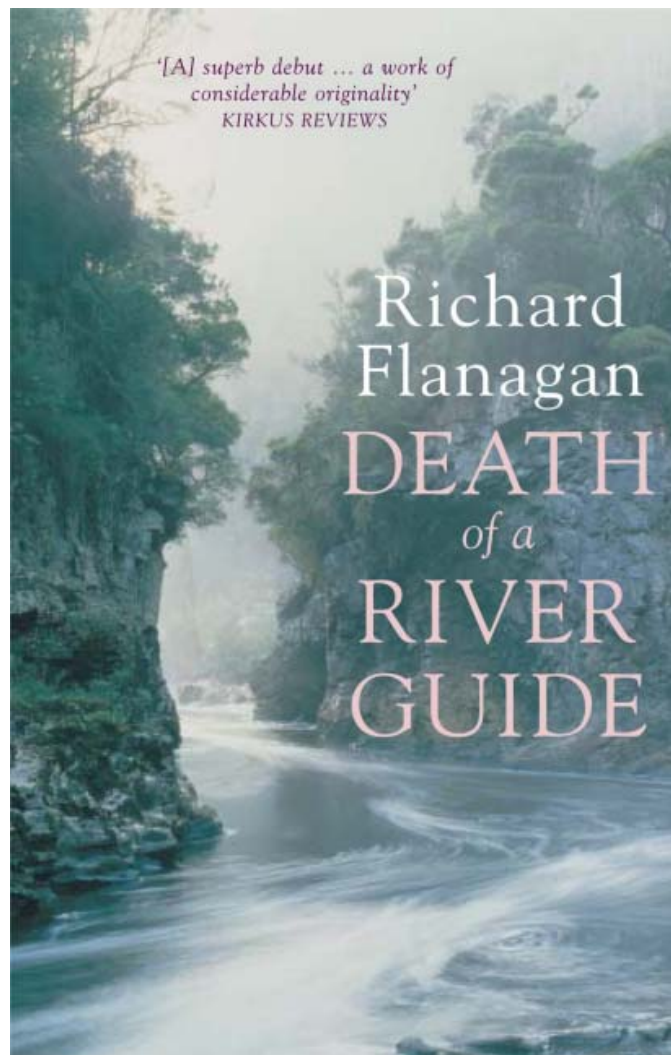
**AUSTRALIA**

**NOTES FOR READING GROUPS**



**Richard Flanagan**

**DEATH OF A RIVER GUIDE**



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## THE SPIRIT OF TASMANIA

### An introduction to *Death of a River Guide*

*'Stories, stories, stories. A world and a land and even a river full of the damn slippery things'.* (p. 94)

Aljaz Cosini is drowning. And we are watching him drown. As the river guide lies wedged below the rushing waters of a waterfall on the Franklin River in western Tasmania, he has visions: of images and faces from his own past and from the lives of his family and forebears; they rush past him, carried by the river that washes over him. Aljaz sees Tasmania's history since European settlement but he also sees his own weaknesses and failures, and those of his family, and he declares that it is a *'far from easy thing for a drowning bloke to watch the wretched truths of his family unfold'* (p. 53). The weaker he gets, and the more the river rises, the more bizarre the visions become - *'These visions, these crazy crazy visions'* (p. 320) - until he sees drunken animals and his father's weekly barbecues - for phantoms (p. 217).

In this superbly well-crafted novel, we travel full circle with Aljaz - from birth to death. Born in Trieste, Italy, to a Slovenian mother, Sonja Cosini, and a Tasmanian father, Harry Lewis, a huon pine cutter and wallaby trapper, the novel begins with Aljaz's birth and also with his imminent death. Despite this knowledge, the reader feels compelled to read on with both fascination and horror, as the tension is sustained throughout the novel, beginning to rise in a crescendo until its resolution. Despite the horror of Derek's death (p. 277), there is always hope that Aljaz will not die. The irony is that it can only be in his death that he is really saved.

Moving episodically between the past and the present, the immediate action of the novel involves the three-day rafting trip along the Franklin, led by Aljaz and the Cockroach. There is humour as we meet the punters on the trip - anyone who has ever been on an organised holiday will know the types he describes. They want to capture the landscape on film but the rainforest does not cooperate, the land cannot be reduced to what they see as *'its rightful role of decoration'* (p. 20).

But there is also fear. Throughout his life Aljaz has been afraid. The punters set off on their holiday without fear as they do not know the river like Aljaz and the Cockroach. They trust their leaders to look after them. But by the third day, *'They felt consumed by the river...it frightened them...it terrified them'* (p. 81). A *'quiet failure'* at school (p. 95), Aljaz drifted into no work and trouble (drunk and disorderly). Football and working on the river were to be his way out of the mire. And yet there is always something that holds him back, something unresolved, he was *'pursued by a terrible fear... that sat behind him like a shadow'* (p. 140). *'...beyond his family nothing had seemed important and yet he had turned his back upon his family'* (p. 140). He desperately loves Couta Ho and yet he is unable to tell her so, or support her after the baby Jemma dies, and her love for him terrifies him (p. 266). Aljaz is not even surprised to be drowning, *'Things have never really gone right for me'* (p. 12).

At times Aljaz tries to influence his visions, to steer them in a particular direction or to stay with a vision and follow it to its conclusion, but his visions are as capricious as the river. He rails against them: *'The past is a nightmare and I want to wake up and I can't ... for now I can see that is what I quite rightly was running away from'* (pp. 264 - 65). He has been granted X-ray vision to see beneath the surface of history and into the reality of

individual's lives and it is not a comfortable sight, encompassing convicts, cannibalism, the rape of Aboriginal women by Europeans, a past most people would want to forget, as well as personal failures where, with hindsight, he wishes that he had acted differently. But these are true stories that can no longer be repressed.

It is only at his death that Aljaz understands his own history *'and at last he knows the song and he knows'* (p. 326). When he asks himself *'Am I alone?'* (p. 321) He realises that his own small story is *'but part of so many other stories. Perhaps that is why these visions are not solely of me but of a whole world. That leads to where I am. And beyond. To where we all are going'* (p. 321). The sea eagle has returned to carry off his spirit to join those of his ancestors, just as his ancestors came back into the world as sea eagles (p.47).

Flanagan himself has described the novel as being about 'love and death ... a journey through the mystery of Tasmania'. He feels we are all connected to the land, the soul history of his country, which Aljaz has at last discovered when he has become one with the river. Simultaneously as he joins the river the knowledge he has gained releases him and the river grants him a savage liberation from his past.

## THE AUTHOR

Richard Flanagan was born in Longford, Tasmania in 1961, the fifth of six children. His childhood was spent in the mining town of Rosebery. He left school at sixteen to work as a bush labourer. He later attended Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar in history.

His first novel, the much-loved and celebrated *Death of a River Guide*, was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award, and won major Australian literary prizes including the 1996 National Fiction Award. It was described by the *Times Literary Supplement* as 'one of the most auspicious debuts in Australian writing'. His second novel, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, was similarly critically acclaimed and shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award. It has sold more than 150,000 copies in Australia, and won the Australian Booksellers' Book of the Year Award and the Vance Palmer Prize for Fiction. Flanagan's first two novels, declared *Kirkus Reviews*, 'rank with the finest fiction out of Australia since the heyday of Patrick White'. *Gould's Book of Fish*, his third novel, won the 2002 Commonwealth Writers' Prize as well as the Victorian Premiers Award for Fiction. His novels are published in 23 countries.

Flanagan directed a feature film based on *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, which had its world premiere in competition at the 1998 Berlin Film Festival, where it was nominated for the Golden Bear for best film. He lives in Tasmania with his wife Majda Smolej and their three children.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The land has always been important to Aborigines, a part of their being, not just something to be bought and sold, and their spirit lives in the land. Their Dreaming is their knowledge of the mythical time when the earth was born and their ancestors lived. Is this essentially a story about Aljaz's Dreaming? How important do you think is the Aboriginal element of the story?
2. Discuss how the river can be seen as a major character in the novel (see pp. 81 and 296 among others).
3. Consider the role of the Cockroach on the river journey, and as a catalyst for Aljaz's death. He has a premonition that the trip will end badly (p. 130).
4. Harry, age 12, asks why there is so much death (p. 201). There are a lot of deaths in this novel. At the end, were you left with a sense of relief that it was over or did you find reading it an uplifting experience? Is it ultimately a satisfying story?
5. What is Aljaz referring to when he says *'Those who refused to recognise the joke became part of it'* (p. 129)?
6. There is a lot of humour in the book: *'Having drunk animals tell stories, personal stories ... about yourself and your family, then getting too drunk to continue - well, it's wrong'* (p. 231). See what other examples you can find for discussion. Some of his descriptions of the punters on the rafting trip - the group dynamics and individual personalities are worth a look.
7. Consider Flanagan's writing style, how at times the narrator speaks directly to the reader and elsewhere he removes himself from what is happening (for example, *'I spy Aljaz'*, p. 239). Does this approach distance you from the action or is it appropriate for what is happening at the time?
8. How important is Aljaz's relationship with Couta Ho to the central themes of the novel?
9. Maria Magdalena Svevo is a minor character in the novel and yet it is her saying *Madonna Santa!* that is repeated as a motif throughout the novel (pp. 12, 37, 64, 151, 226, 264, 310, 320). Why is this important?  
Consider also the story of the tear-stained bedspread (pp. 163- 64, 185 and 273).
10. It has been said that the novel is written in the 'magical realism' style of South American writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, but it has also been frequently compared to the work of William Faulkner. Flanagan, however, has said that the novel is more influenced by the stories he heard as a child rather than any books. How would you describe its style?
11. First novels are often strongly autobiographical. How relevant is this to your reading of the novel, considering that fiction is usually based on real life?
12. What does Aljaz mean by the statement: *'And he knew this moment had been a long time coming?'* (p. 304)

## **DEATH OF A RIVER GUIDE**

**Richard Flanagan**

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