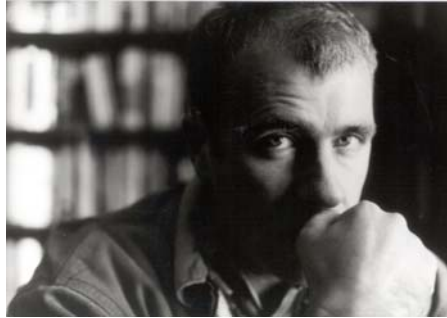


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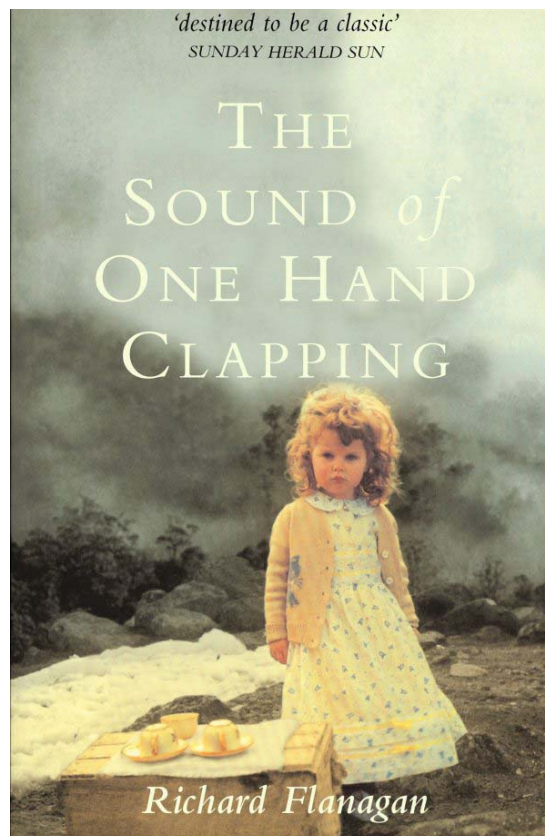
AUSTRALIA

NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Richard Flanagan

THE SOUND OF ONE HAND CLAPPING



**WINNER OF
THE 1998 ABA BOOK OF THE YEAR AWARD**

Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'who would hope for love?' (p. 63)

The words 'Aja, aja', a Slovenian mother's expression of endearment, echo over the landscape of this narrative, which describes with beauty and brutality how three-year-old Sonja Buloh is abandoned by her mother and spends the next thirty years seeking answers to her loss. It also describes her father Bojan's monumental suffering, and their joint rescue via the *'redeeming power of love'*. (p. 25) But more than this, the novel symbolises the sufferings of an entire race of people - those displaced by war, who have endured, *'an eternity of suffering'* (p. 65) and still managed to piece together their shattered lives once more.

In 1954, Maria Buloh, a Slovenian refugee whose husband Bojan is working at Butlers Gorge, a Tasmanian Hydro-Electric Commission construction camp, simply walks out into the snowy night and is never seen alive again. Her daughter Sonja spends several years as a boarder with two families, before being returned to her father, Bojan, who physically abuses her. She leaves him in her late teens, but returns twenty-two years later, seeking answers to their past. Bojan refuses to respond to her, so she visits their old friends, Helvi and Jiri, who convince her not to terminate her pregnancy. It is their intervention, and the power of memory, which awakens long-buried emotions in Sonja and Bojan's hearts.

The spectre of death hangs over these characters, who have either lost their loved ones in geographic displacement, or watched them brutally killed. Bojan drowns his sorrows in alcohol, and Sonja in an emotional void. *'And nothing can help the dead.'* (p. 96) If you don't feel, nothing can hurt you; if you don't hope, nothing can disappoint, for *'tomorrow only ever brought worse things.'* (p. 90) The only emotion they can countenance is fear, *'Because not to fear was to imagine a world beyond experience. And that was too much for anybody.'* (p. 4) Pieces of glass and Sonja's broken tea-set symbolise their shattered spirits. They're people convinced that *'to have a future you must forget the past'*. (p. 31)

For Bojan's past is one of atrocity. The novel tells in chilling terms of the casual frequency of violence in his youth. The expression, *'she had predicted that the rivers would run with blood'* (p. 185) is not a metaphorical but a literal expression in Slovenia, where mass killings and atrocities became commonplace. These things are too terrible to discuss, and yet Bojan seeks out those who shared them. *'Bojan's friendships now, such as they were, were with strangers who without being told, knew the horror of each other's story, that people are horrific and evil beyond imagining.'* (p. 109) Pavel and the other workers are dangerous men, and he is *'frightened most by how much like them he had become'*. (p. 106)

A natural corollary of atrocity is abuse. The drunken Bojan beats his daughter, because of his unbearable sadness - it's *'a painfully eloquent attempt to find what they had in common by sculpting with violent intent all that he felt. But there are good ways of describing pain and bad; and his only increased the agony.'* (p. 14) Bojan hits Sonja because he is desperate for some emotional response, *'Please I say, with each blow, please say something.'* (p. 279) Even the response of fear is enough, for *'as long as he felt that pain he knew there still remained within him a soul'*. (p. 54) Sonja, instead, *'learnt the art of smallness'*, (p. 11) and how to hide her feelings. An unnaturally blank-faced child, as an adult she continued to ward off connections, and to bury her memories. She learned to *'look open when she knew herself to be closed'*. (p. 38) She learned to *'immerse herself in surfaces'*. (p. 22) Her love affairs are just as calculated, for she never allows lovers too

close, *'Don't touch me while I dream, I cannot bear it, to be touched so while I dream.'* (p. 60) She has learned to block out feelings, *'No matter how bad you feel, you never cry.'* (p. 134) Yet another result of abuse is guilt and self-loathing. Sonja believes that she had ruined her father's one chance at happiness, *'In dreams Sonja hoped to find the innocence she felt evaded her in life. For she felt guilt in her waking life, felt that all things were her fault, a person who was ultimately incapable of good.'* (p. 101)

The broken promises and the wrecked lives and dreams of the refugees who came expecting a better life in Australia are poignantly conveyed. Bojan's FJ Holden is symbolic of his desire to become an Australian. The dreams of his compatriots were often desperate ones, *'for a world that might be ordered with the hope that the order would last long enough to build a home and raise a family, without having to suffer cataclysmic wars, occupations, revolutions, destruction of homes, cities, nations, countries, languages, peoples.'* (p. 116) 'Security', though, meant losing their self-respect; their culture; their connection with their land. They took 'temporary' jobs which very often lasted for the rest of their lives. They became fragmented people, with lives shattered by the patronising attitudes of politicians who presumed that this new land was infinitely better than the old, and by the racist attitudes of union officials and co-workers, who talk of *'wog work'* (p. 5) and *'the reffos'*. (p. 6) In reality, they were offered this 'great' opportunity because the ordinary Australian worker wouldn't do this sort of work! Officialdom had no concept that, *'For the Australian officials the naturalisation ceremony was a joyous, celebratory moment. For those being naturalised it was a sad but necessary step to take.'* (p. 42) The novel charts the course of Bojan's generation who grew old and hard, waiting for the big breaks which never came their way, and who in turn put fear into the hearts of the younger workers, who saw their own destiny in them. It is fitting that these exiles find themselves in Tasmania, the former penal colony, for it represents a metaphor for imprisonment, an idea evoked constantly, eg *'as if he is being imprisoned behind them bars forever'* (p. 69) or *'like prisoners shaking their bars in rising anger.'* (p. 79) Bojan and his co-refugees are doomed to servitude.

The novel is thus tangentially concerned with Australia's sense of nationhood; of what we do with our country as well as our people, *'civic ambition meant buying up old colonial buildings and bulldozing them quick'*. (p. 119) Issues of environmental heritage are discussed in relation to both urban and rural landscapes, and man's encroachment on natural wonders is described with disparity. eg *'Tasmanian madness - the bastard issue of a century and a half of despair cleaving to ever more outrageous fantasies.'* (p. 137) The power of the landscape which has resisted man's attempts to tame it, *'to bury its memory of a recent, often hideous past in future of heavy industry,'* (p. 21) is evoked strongly. The dam thirty years later looks like *'a relic from another age'* (p. 26) which is *'decaying back into the natural world.'* (p. 27) The interdependency of nature and man is thus cemented: *'And yet this land had shaped her, shaped them all, and they it.'* (p. 24)

The dignity of the human spirit is another predominant theme. The only spark of it left to Bojan is his woodcraft, *'He worked wood and he tried to make something of it and in his making make something of them.'* (p. 10) He believes that wood can heal, so that *'the chipboard was held together with his tears and the laminex with his love'*. (p. 334) Biblical or spiritual transcendence is also suggested from the beginning of the book with the local myth that Maria was blown into the sky, *'she rose with it like an angel into the forest beyond'*. (p. 1) Later Sonja has visions of herself as an angel eg *'for a brief glorious moment she thought she might begin to rise into the air like an angel and fly away.'* (p. 81) Again, a 'greater power' is suggested when the drunk stumbles upon the photograph (p. 258) of Maria's dead father and sees his spirit; when Sonja's eczema is healed by the Kamilica healing herb and a *'shower of petals'* (p. 154) suggests something magic; and earlier, when Bojan finds Sonja sleeping with *'starry white petals filling the room with a lunar luminosity'* (p. 408), a shower of edelweiss, the flower of love. The climactic moment of course is when Bojan drives through the wall of water, and becomes *'an angel granted a second life.'* (p. 349) The numinous is a very real part of the spirit's redemption, which is the central theme.

The other key to their rescue is memory. Sonja is haunted by *'broken pieces, fragments of lucidity'* (p 84) and curses the fact that *'pieces would not fit'*. (p. 49) She remembers certain things, but, *'Not the things that matter.'* (p. 83) In contrast, Bojan hates old

things, *'I like new, see, because it don't remember.'* (p. 111) He has sought vainly to blot out the memories, but *'his past will always claim him back completely like a swamp does withering sedges.'* (p. 149)

Words and language are crucial to salvation too. The migrant people are disadvantaged by their lack of English; but more importantly, are silenced by their inability - their abject refusal to express their emotions, *'I never had enough words to tell people what I think, what I feel. Never enough words for a good job. Never enough words for you.'* (p. 39-40) Words are no good for translating the *'unknown country of the heart'*. (p. 97) The terrible burden of sufferings too dreadful to mention is one of the achingly powerful elements of the story, *'There was too much to it, and no-one spoke about it.'* (p. 199)

Healing and redemption are also suggested by the concept of birth. The baby Sonja is expecting is one of many references to birth as a cathartic process. Sonja's tortured grasping after memory is, *'As if trying to give birth to that land lost within her skull.'* (p. 34) Imagery evoking birth also is used in relation to nature, eg *'womb of rain falling upon a tin roof'* (p. 103) and Helvi actually says that, *'Sometimes a baby can help heal.'* (p. 139)

Most of all though, redemption is located here in the Joycean idea of epiphany, and of grace found in an overriding consciousness of love at large in the world, *'she felt a pity and a love as infinite as the universe for all things, both the living and the dead'*. (p. 198-9) Bojan searches for evidence of *'the idea of people finding a measure of grace living together.'* (p. 228) The essential element in redemption is connection with those we love; of joining together missing pieces; the saucer and cup which was her mother and father and therefore Sonja's life broken asunder, *'Saucer and cup. Singing. Saucer and cup. Breaking.'* (p. 46) Each is symbolic of what is missing. *'The sound of one hand clapping.'* (p. 236) is the sound of silence. And the sound of love is the voice of Maria singing a Slovenian lullaby to the daughter she loved too dear, and the husband she could not love enough. In the closing scene, the idea comes full circle with Sonja singing to her daughter Maria, in the magic circle she has drawn for them on the place where once stood her childhood home.

WRITING STYLE AND TECHNIQUES

1. Rich similes and metaphors are redolent of the European culture being evoked, eg *'The song seemed to simmer tears, like a goulash stewed out of sadness'* (p. 7) or, *'The old had eyes like boiled saveloy water and the young had eyes like pin heads.'* (p. 51) The writer uses these expressions to ground the novel in Bojan's cultural background. Discuss.
2. Landscape is imbued with feelings: *'And the old, huge trees could be heard to crack and groan, and the new wires that scratched the vast night sky to whistle eerily'*. (p. 8) When Bojan takes Sonja from the Michniks the road is *'a threatening and frightening corridor'* (p. 90) with, *'trees washing them away into oblivion'*. (p. 91) The dam has *'its ongoing desire to render everything around it as industrial - even nature itself'*. (p. 27) How is landscape related to theme?
3. Food or *'wog tucker'* (p. 55) is a metaphor for spiritual health. *'Unless you stretch it, the bread won't grow.'* (p. 243) Find/discuss other examples.
4. Language is deliberately suggestive of myth. From its epic beginning, the novel's tragic proportions are evoked. *'Back then, it was the summer of the great fire the monstrous like of which even the oldest could not remember.'* (p. 321) 1989 is the *'year of revolutions'* (p. 20) and 1959 is the year the *'world was sensing change. Like the trembling of the earth announcing the arrival of a yet to be seen locomotive'*. (p. 117) This technique shows that catastrophic events of history document the ordinary miseries of people like Bojan and Maria. They did not happen to 'someone else'; but to all of us. Every life is punctuated by events which can have catastrophic emotional effects. Bojan is described as *'heroic'* (p. 67) when filmed; the archetypal is also suggested by the use of fairy tale motifs eg *'no giants, no guilt, no happy endings.'* (p. 16) Discuss.
5. Another response to atrocity is the black humour. Jiri's Polish friend, the Professor, dies in a zinc works, which was *'the punchline, the pay-off to the interminable gag that he had up until then been forced to suffer.'* (p. 117) Did you find much to laugh at in this book?
6. Religious imagery is another strong element of the writing eg The final vision of Maria is like a crucifixion. Discuss other examples.

THE AUTHOR

With just two novels Richard Flanagan has established himself nationally and internationally as one of Australia's foremost writers, combining critical acclaim with mass market sales. His novels are published in Germany, Holland, France, Britain and the USA.

He burst onto the literary stage in 1994 with his first novel, *DEATH OF A RIVER GUIDE*, hailed by the *Times Literary Supplement* as 'one of the most auspicious debuts in Australian literature', compared by *Liberation* in France to the work of Faulkner, and described as 'a novel of consummate artistry and towering humanity' by the *Baltimore Sun*. In Australia, it was shortlisted for most major awards, won the 1995 Victorian Premier's Prize for First Fiction, the 1996 South Australian Premier's National Fiction Award, and lost the controversial 1995 Miles Franklin to Helen Demidenko.

His second novel, the multiple award-winning **THE SOUND OF ONE HAND CLAPPING**, was published to even greater critical and popular acclaim in 1997 and went on to achieve sales in Australia in excess of 150,000 copies. By 1999 Flanagan was the biggest selling Australian fiction author after Bryce Courtenay, a remarkable feat for a highly literary novel dealing with the dark underbelly of the Australian experience. The celebrated feature film of the same name, written and directed by Flanagan, had its world premiere at the 1998 Berlin Film Festival where it was nominated for the Golden Bear for Best Film.

Richard Flanagan was born in Tasmania in 1961, the fifth of six children. He was educated at state schools until the age of sixteen when he left to become a bush labourer. He later furthered his education at the universities of Tasmania and Oxford (the latter as a Rhodes Scholar). He lives in Hobart, Tasmania, with his family.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *'Some of the strangeness of this tale may have been a consequence of character. We choose to live our life as a poem or a tragedy'*. (p. 180) Could Bojan and Sonja have weathered the storm of their despair with more fortitude had they been different characters?
2. Cities are *'some huge fraternity of the fallen'*. (p. 244) Do you agree?
3. *'She wished to stay skipping in the shallows, where escape was always a possibility'*. (p. 244) Is such escape possible?
4. View Richard Flanagan's film of this book, and listen to the soundtrack written by composer Cezary Skubiskewki. Compare both to the novel.
5. *'the lace disappeared in the wind.'* (p. 260) Lace is a symbol continually called upon in this text. What does it represent?
6. *'There are things that matter more than words'*. (p. 39) Discuss.
7. *'The truth is rarely worth knowing. Lies are easier.'* (p. 139) Do you agree?
8. The notion of how parents visit their sufferings on their children is vividly conveyed. How do you envisage Sonja's baby's future?
9. Jean is *'unsure if she had the strength any more to seek out such brittle solace'* (p. 229) after Bojan leaves her. Do you think love is a brittle solace?
10. *'somehow because of what he had lived through he had acquired an innocence'*. (p. 358) Can you acquire innocence via experience?
11. *'tears were to the living what flowers were to the dead: proof only of the futility of feeling.'* (p. 149) Is consolation so meaningless?
12. *'Love is a bridge, and there are some weights bridges cannot bear without breaking.'* (p. 179) Discuss the centrality of love in the novel.

THE SOUND OF ONE HAND CLAPPING

Richard Flanagan

Picador Australia

ISBN: 0330360426

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Level 18, St Martin's Tower
31 Market Street,
Sydney NSW 2000

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