

## Readers' Guide: *WANTING*, by Richard Flanagan

Guide by Rose Kernochan

- 1) In this artfully structured book, the stories of Mathinna, an Australian aborigine girl, and the middle-aged Charles Dickens are placed adroitly side by side. Though their lives are tragic and unruly, the novel itself is as neatly laid out as an eighteenth-century garden. How does Flanagan link these two very different tales? What techniques does he use? What themes or characters do these stories share?
- 2) George Augustus Robinson, known as the “Protector,” reigns over a small and desolate island colony. Though he has brought a group of aborigines here to save them, he dimly suspects that the measures he is taking to “civilize” them may be killing them instead. Do you think the Protector's intentions are good? Do you blame him for the results of his actions? Does he seem to embody some of the flaws and virtues of civilization itself—a well-meant effort to improve human life, which can instead wreak untold damage?
- 3) “Above all else, the Protector prided himself on his realism” (p. 17). Do you find him realistic, both in his perceptions of others and of himself? In what ways is he a better—or worse—governor than Lord John Franklin, his viceroy, who oversees a more conventional colony?
- 4) The English characters in this novel have a strong sense of what is or isn't “English.” What are the qualities that they so firmly believe they possess? What other less attractive traits do you see in them? Are the characters who seem most “English” also the most eager to tame the savages?
- 5) “A book should serve as an axe for the frozen sea within us,” Franz Kafka famously wrote. In Flanagan's portrait, the novelist Charles Dickens seems to contain a whole Antarctic's worth of frozen emotion. In recurring, involuntary flashes, he sees the white stretch of a polar landscape, and feels “lost in the thickening ice floes of his own life” (p. 72). Why does his life feel so cold to him?
- 6) Dickens dreams of the North in a kind of despair; Sir John Franklin, by contrast, craves the cold of the Arctic. In the Polar Regions, he remembers, “the choices were straightforward: to explore, to chart, to survive, to return” (p. 144). What does he have to gain from going to the North again? What in particular is he trying to escape? Like Dickens, is he doomed to freeze over in a different way, if he stays at home?
- 7) History books glorify the explorers who left home's comforts behind to explore and map the world's Polar Regions. Flanagan has a different spin on the story. The explorers in *Wanting* head North because they don't fit in at home. “You set out to discover a new land because you sense you have always been lost,” Crozier confesses (p. 171). In *Wanting*, these heroes of history become “lost children whose failures were celebrated as the triumphs of men” (p. 183). Do you agree with this? What other professions might attract this type of misfit?

8) In a glorious, magnanimous—and entirely Victorian—spirit of experiment, Lady Jane Franklin decides to adopt an orphaned aborigine, Mathinna, and raise her with many of the privileges of an upper-middle-class white girl. In some ways, this doomed venture forms the centerpiece of the book. Why does Mathinna fail to learn “civilized” ways? Is it her fault, or the fault of her tutors? Are her teachers in fact more savage than she is?

9) To Mathinna’s tribesman father, Towterer, Nature’s limitlessness seems welcome, like a kind of bounty. The island where he lives is “a cosmos where time and the world were infinite, and all things were revealed by sacred stories” (p. 58). Robinson’s explorers, like other civilized men in the book, see this same landscape as aching “emptiness” (p. 59), a source of desolate feeling. What does this attitude say about the explorers and their culture? Does the landscape mirror their own inner emptiness? What does the savages’ attitude say about their society? Which society would you rather live in, and why?

10) As Mathinna grows, and becomes a graceful girl, Sir John Franklin becomes enthralled by her playful beauty. Relaxing in her presence, he thinks: “with the aboriginal child, he felt he could be himself” (p. 136). As he plays and sings with her, and grows happier, his judgments as governor become less harsh and more forgiving. Are these changes good for him? Are they good for his ability to govern?

11) Many of the characters have two names—Mathinna/Leda, Forster/the Mammoth, Towterer/King Romeo. Do you think Flanagan’s Victorians need “false identities” in order to survive in their highly conventional society?

12) In a family-oriented age, Dickens is known as “the very bard of family” (p. 32). How does his cozy reputation contrast with the reality of his home life? His wife Catherine feels that Dickens is to blame for their discontented marriage—that he has transformed her into a dull domestic figure, “that boring woman of his novels” (p. 159). Do you agree with her, or do you feel she is also to blame? Do you feel more sympathy for Dickens, or for his wife?

13) In one of the book’s most moving moments, the middle-aged Catherine breaks down in her husband’s study, overcome by the unhappiness of their union. “As though a thing infinitely precious had been stolen from her, she abruptly cried out—‘It hurts!’” (p. 160). What precious thing may have been taken from her? Does this scene strike a chord with you?

14) Both Mathinna and Ellen Ternan, before they are seduced, are beautiful girls just becoming aware of their own powers. Ellen, strolling through a hotel lobby in a silk dress, feels “a perfect balance between this glorious costume and her life, her soul and the world” (p. 163). Mathinna, dancing at the ball, feels “as though she was approaching some truth of herself” (p. 150). Do the adolescents in general seem happier, more at one with their bodies and hearts? Does the Franklins’ and the Dickens’ chilly sadness stem not just from civilization’s discontents, but also from the deepening disillusionment of middle age?

16) Images of birds are woven colorfully through the narrative, appearing and disappearing as if

at their own unpredictable will. Mathinna is raped by a man dressed as a swan; Ellen Ternan tenderly rescues a starling. What are other significant scenes in which birds appear? What do these birds seem to represent?

17) For Dickens, the theatre is his best refuge: “the place he loved above all others, where hearts can be at once disciplined and undisciplined” (p. 97). Does the theatre seem to represent a kind of middle road between civilization and savagery, a safe place where emotions can exist? Do other art forms—such as dance and music—also provide a way for the characters to connect with themselves, or others? Think of a few scenes in which this happens.

18) “We all have appetites and desires,” Dickens declares. “But only the savage agrees to sate them” (p. 79). The tension between self-control and giving in to desire—like the tug-of-war between civilization and savagery—is the pull that propels this novel forward. Life without desire is a kind of death; but the consequences of “wanting” are almost too hard to bear. How does Mathinna finally “let go,” at the ball, and what undeserved consequences does she face? When does Dickens finally give in to his heart’s yearnings? Will he be punished for it?

19) In earlier times, giving in to “wanting” could ruin one’s life. Do you think that, in today’s world, loss of self-control is still perceived as a terrible thing? Are our attitudes completely different now—or largely the same? Think of people who are shamed on the Internet, for instance, or public figures whose smallest missteps are criticized by the media.

20) Late in her vagrant life, Mathinna, drinking herself into a welcome stupor, wishes that she had more beliefs or desires—“some . . . fire to live by” (p. 230). Do you think that being less stoic and “wanting” more might have helped to save her?

21) Lady Jane Franklin, once Mathinna’s protector, is last seen fleeing alone into the dark air of a Manchester street. What knowledge is she running from—and what chance did she miss to mend her life? Do you feel that her story—and Mathinna’s—could have ended differently?

22) Hope, in this novel, is an ephemeral thing—as thin as the crack of light that Mathinna glimpses sometimes through her closed fingers. Toward the end, Dickens briefly believes—while onstage in the limelight—that he may be granted real love. It’s “the way we are denied love” which is wrong, he exclaims at the end (p. 239). Are any of the characters in *Wanting* allowed a seamless, unhindered love? Does Dickens seem to blame civilization for this? Would you?

23) “We have in our lives only a few good moments,” Dickens tells Ellen. “A moment of joy and wonder with another. Some might say beauty or transcendence” (p. 168). Do you agree with Dickens that only a small number of these “good moments” can come to each of us? Can we fall in love—or experience real closeness—only a few times in our lives?

24) Much of Richard Flanagan’s writing has an undercurrent of humor. His novel, *Gould’s Book of Fish* is tragicomic, whereas *The Unknown Terrorist* has been praised for its dry wit. Discuss the humor in *Wanting*.

25) Richard Flanagan has said that *Wanting* is not a historical novel, but rather a “soul history.” What do you think Flanagan means by “soul history”?

26) Unlike many novelists, Richard Flanagan seems to be constantly seeking to reinvent himself and his writing, more in the manner of an artist or musician than that of a writer. What similarities and differences are there between *Wanting* and Flanagan’s earlier novels, such as *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* or *Death of a River Guide*?

Suggestions for further reading: *Angels and Insects* by A. S. Byatt; *Invisible Woman* by Claire Tomalin; *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph* by Edgar Johnson; *Dickens: Public Life and Private Passion* by Peter Ackroyd; *Arthur and George* by Julian Barnes; *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville; *The Songlines* by Bruce Chatwin; *The Fatal Shore* by Robert Hughes; *Dreamkeepers* by Harvey Arden; *Gould’s Book of Fish* by Richard Flanagan; *In Tasmania* by Nicholas Shakespeare; *Frozen in Time* by Owen Beattie and John Geiger.