



**Miles Franklin Literary Award 2009
Shortlist
Judges' Formal Comments**

***Wanting*, Richard Flanagan
(Knopf, Random House Australia)**

For Richard Flanagan the past is full-bodied, pulsing with irreconcilable facts, desires and intentions – banal, malign, meretricious, occasionally good. Flanagan paves his novel with them. *Wanting* is not a history. Rather it is, as its writer claims, a meditation on the consequences of human beings' repressing, denying, failing to understand or subverting the impulses of their hearts.

In Van Diemen's Land, the protector of Aborigines, Charles Augustus Robinson is cleft by contrary instincts. He loves the people he is charged with protecting, with 'bringing in', yet they are dying around him, victims of contact with the colonising society that is supposed to elevate them. When he dances naked with 'his' people, he is prey to passions he does not understand and exhilarated in ways that both pleasure and alarm him.

The governor of Van Diemen's Land and his ambitious wife turn the colony into a scientific experiment. Sir John and Lady Franklin hold improving soirees, institute lectures, and displease their staff and colonial society by not licensing a benign decadence as compensation for dutiful exile at the other end of the earth. The childless Lady Jane adopts a beautiful native child, Mathinna, ostensibly to educate her in white ways. But black ways prove intractable, and the child grows into a fascinating, tragic hybrid, at once a reproach and a temptation.

Flanagan crisscrosses events in the colony with contemporary London life, playing free with time and place. His London is the London of Charles Dickens, of extravagant exploration, of science, of ambition, of misery. Dickens, stalled in a marriage that has blocked love, walks the streets at night in a fever: 'Looking, thinking, improvising scenes, rehearsing monologues and dialogues and inventing plots.'

When he meets Lady Jane, now old, and obsessively concerned for the reputation of the husband she has never loved, Dickens is persuaded to use his fabled rhetorical sway to absolve Sir John from rumours that his latest experiment, an exploratory voyage to find the Northwest Passage, has ended in cannibalism. And Dickens's own 'civilized' life? Flanagan explores its contradictions and impactions as he details the great writer's fateful meeting with the young actress, Ellen Ternan. And like the great moral ringmaster himself, Flanagan marshals his diverse characters, ideas, and locales – physical and metaphorical – with gusto and compassion.

16 April 2009 - Miles Franklin Literary Award 2009 Judging Panel
Professor Robert Dixon
Morag Fraser AM
Lesley McKay
Regina Sutton
Murray Waldren