

# It's hell out there

Booker winner's misjudged overdose of the horrors ahead.

by CHARLOTTE GRIMSHAW

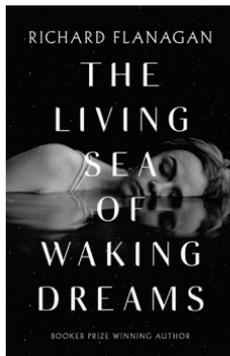
**W**hen Francie is admitted to a Tasmanian hospital, her adult children, Anna, Tommy and Terzo, refuse to let her die, instead subjecting her to the pain and distress of aggressive medical interventions. She spends the whole of Richard Flanagan's new novel trapped in a pitiful state while her children ignore her pleas for release. As Francie suffers, nature is in crisis, climate change is happening and Australia is going up in flames. We move from Francie's awful

plight to burnt koalas screaming in the bush, to the corpses of birds, to firestorms, to extinctions, to smoky hell on Earth.

The hospital rules out more treatment, so the wealthy Terzo resorts to pulling strings, and the old woman's torture resumes. The dying gets more graphic and the attempts to prolong life more technical, but still her children refuse to let nature take its course. Outside, the bush is burning, and everything that matters is being allowed to die.

The novel quickly becomes so gruelling it's like fighting your way through the apocalypse and running into a prophet who subjects you to a hell-fire harangue while brandishing his totems. This twee and ersatz device, for example: as Francie deteriorates, bits of Anna start disappearing. A finger, a knee. Eventually one of her breasts. Like all fictional gimmicks, it's a bit tricky to maintain. Anna goes to a doctor, who doesn't notice the missing parts. Some people do notice, but react in a puzzlingly low-key way. Anna limps

about, unnerved, but not reacting with the hysterics one would expect. At this stage the reader, having got the symbolism, is so harassed and irritated and depressed that the reaction is similarly low-key; oh, right, another bit of Anna's fallen off. Indeed,



how meaningful. Because we're all dying. And nature's dying. And the bush is burning, and extinction's coming.

Now, grimly, Flanagan takes things up a notch. The horror intensifies. Relationships are shallow, people are transfixed and dehumanised by screens. By the time Anna's estranged hermit son's face falls off (you could see it coming), the reader's mood has shifted from depression to incredulity.

It can surely only be Flanagan's Booker-winning success with earlier novels that has licensed this nightmare. I reviewed his last novel, *First Person*, with respect. It seemed worthy of a good review and not too tyrannical, or sadistic.

It's not that we're frivolous and don't want to face the truth. We get it and we agree. We get climate change and the

deadening effect of screens, and the death of love, and the disconnection from nature. We understand that the wrong questions are being asked, the wrong things are being valued. The world: it's insane, nasty and everybody dies.

The answer to "the future of the novel" (which Flanagan has written about) is surely not to produce something so unreadable that people are put off altogether. The answer is not to pin us down and show us reels of hell and screaming koalas and tortured flesh and unnatural dying, to reflect so defeatedly the inhumanity and nihilism that you sink beneath the surface of your own protest; the answer is surely to transcend, because "the novel" allows you to.

You don't have to paint a false picture. But you don't have to write like a relentless, dust-streaked prophet, raving at the converted. It's like being beaten up by the harbinger of doom. Mr Doom the novelist, eyes full of smoke, mad with power, putting us straight, laying it on like hell. ■

**THE LIVING SEA OF WAKING DREAMS**, by Richard Flanagan (Knopf Australia, \$37)