First Person by Richard Flanagan (Chatto & Windus)

In the early nineties an aspiring young Tasmanian writer called Richard Flanagan was approached to ghost write the autobiography of the notorious conman John Friedrich, awaiting trial for defrauding banks and other institutions to the amount of nearly 300 million Australian dollars. The emolument would be 10 000 Australian dollars, the main condition being that the book had to be written in six weeks. Hard-pressed for cash, his wife expecting twins, Flanagan accepted. But in the course of the six weeks, Friedrich committed suicide, and Flanagan had to complete the autobiography on the strength of the very meagre information he'd managed to glean from Friedrich's evasive, contradictory narrative.

Flanagan completed the autobiography, and went on to publish six very successful novels, the most recent of which, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, won the Man Booker Prize. Now, in *First Person*, Flanagan gives us the story, in the first person, of an aspiring young Tasmanian writer called Kif Kehlman who, in the early nineties, is approached to ghost write, for a consideration of 10 000 dollars, the autobiography of the notorious conman Siegfried Heidl, awaiting trial for fraud amounting to millions of dollars. Kehlman is reluctant, but his own writing is getting nowhere and his wife is expecting twins ...

So where does fact stop and fiction start? The question is probably a distraction, in focusing on the origins rather than the actual contents of the novel: best to just get on with reading and judging the book as fiction. Even here, though, the reviewer is faced with origins: it doesn't take long to discern in Flanagan's novel the potent influence of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Heidle is Flanagan's version of Kurtz, the megalomaniac jungle potentate, as observed by the narrator Marlow. As in Flanagan's novel, Conrad's narrator is more than a device: he is drawn into the web of deceit and self-deception of his subject, and finds his moral preconceptions, his notions of good and evil, challenged and even destroyed. Both Kurtz and Heidl become representatives of the *Horror*, in Conrad's phrase, underlying what we regard as civilised society – in Conrad, colonialism, in Flanagan, capitalism. A possible additional point of reference is Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, with Gatsby, like Kurtz and Heidl, a self-made ruler of his demesne, in this instance the vapid, heedless, prosperous flapper generation of the 1920s.

All this is to say that Heidl is clearly a representative figure, a product as well as parasite of the world of high finance – with the offshoot of that world, the culture of publishing and television, greedily gorging itself on the sensation value of high crime.

Kif Kehlman is, like Conrad's Marlow and Fitzgerald's Nick Caraway, the outsider who is drawn into the vortex of amorality, finding his own moral notions challenged, indeed finding himself *becoming* Heidl, in becoming a writer. Kif's best friend, Ray, who is also Heidl's bodyguard and

factotum, says ‘He’s a bloody funhouse mirror …. Look at Heidl long enough and all you can see is yourself.’ And Kif himself starts to feel that ‘The more I invented Heidl on the page, the more the page became Heidl and the more Heidl me – and me the page and the book me and me Heidl.’

Thus Flanagan uses his own experience of writing the autobiography of a conman to explore the relation between the writer and his subject: as Heidl says, quoting his beloved Nietzsche,’And when you look long into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you.’ And what Heidl reveals to Kif is the illusory nature of all ideals and morality: ‘The point of all Heidl’s stories: to make me believe my life was based on illusions -- the illusions of goodness, of love, of hope. ‘

We must assume that it is at this point that Flanagan and Kif part company: where Flanagan went on from his encounter with his subject to become a respected author and a doughty fighter for environmental causes (so controversially so that the Premier of Tasmania has declared ‘Richard Flanagan and his fictions are not welcome in the New Tasmania’), Kif takes to producing television shows, the perfect medium for Heidl’s rock bottom view of life: ‘We made rubbish, and, in the Australian way, the more mediocre our work, the more awards and the more praise with which we garlanded ourselves. …. TV was the art of turning money into light and light into money.’

Ultimately, Kif comes to share Heidl’s view that ‘The evidence of the world is that the world is evil.’ This is the equivalent of Kurtz’ dying words: ‘The horror! The horror!’ and Kief (Flanagan?) finds that evil alive and well in his native land: ‘It was a land not infinitely perfectible, just infinitely corruptible. There was nothing of itself it wouldn’t sell, and always cheaper than last time.’

But if Flanagan is particularly acerbic on the subject of Australia, he extends, in the closing pages of the book, Heidl’s philosophy to the brave new global world of the twenty-first century: ‘He swindled the banks of seven hundred million, but soon enough the world would be swindled by so much more, the racket disarmingly the same taking and making money out of … junk bonds, no doc loans, derivatives… Enron, Lehman Brothers, Northern Rock and Bear Stearns.’ And when Kif says of Heidl,’He contradicted his own lies with fresh lies, and then he contradicted his contradictions,’ who does not think of The Most Powerful Man on Earth? At least Heidl had the grace and insight to shoot himself.

Flanagan’s book is a pungent fable for our times, as *Heart of Darkness* and *The Great Gatsby* were of theirs. It does not always make for pleasant reading, and in truth may at times be too moralistic in its questioning of morality, but there is no denying its power, or evading Heidl’s uncomfortable question: ‘Do you think the evidence of the world is that the good are rewarded?’