

What to do if morality and loyalty pull in opposite directions: A review of Nicholas Jose, *The Idealist*

The 2023 blockbuster movie *Oppenheimer* broke box office records in Australia and garnered many Academy Awards. The biographical thriller features a conflicted hero, physicist Robert Oppenheimer. At the first atomic bomb explosion in the American desert, Oppenheimer recited from the Bhagavad Gita, “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds”, but later, after the end of the Second World War, he discussed the need to control the development of atomic weapons with President Truman, saying, “I feel I have blood on my hands”.

*Oppenheimer* is a story of a profound ethical dilemma with potential consequences for the whole of humanity. Even if today we do not have to wrestle with such enormous issues, there are always moral choices to be made. Should medical research be funded by the defence industry? Do national security concerns justify invasion of privacy? What is the individual to do when his or her company, university or government espouses an immoral or bad policy? Australian academic and author Nicholas Jose had to make difficult decisions when he was working as Cultural Counsellor in the Australian Embassy in Beijing in 1989. He had many friends among the artists and writers who participated in the protests in Tiananmen Square. Their lives were in danger when the tanks rolled in. Should he as a diplomat have remained aloof and dispassionate, or should he have offered them shelter?

Jose describes the events of 1989 and some of these issues in his novel *Avenue of Eternal Peace*, written and published in the months immediately after the massacre. Now he returns to the same theme in a brilliant new book, *The Idealist* (Giramondo Press 2023). A political thriller, it is set in East Timor in the lead up to the independence referendum in 1999. The central character Jake Treweek is a defence analyst working undercover to collect intelligence on Fretilin, the militia and the movements of the Indonesia army. Jake has to balance his career aspirations, his loyalty to his patron, the Minister, a blossoming romantic attachment to a Timorese activist, his work relationships with American and Australian colleagues, his family upbringing and values, and his growing personal commitment to international justice and democratic rights.

Anyone who has worked in the public service will have experienced a similar dilemma, or will know of some cases. The tensions arising from these conflicting obligations can lead to spiritual torment, particularly in times of crisis, when bureaucrats’ natural tendency towards equivocation is no longer an option.

Younger readers may not know the history of East Timor, so let me give a brief recap. The largely Catholic former Portuguese colony was occupied by Indonesia, nominally secular but in practice Muslim, for more than 20 years, during which time the Indonesian government was responsible for perhaps 180 thousand deaths in a virtual genocide. This led to widespread resistance and pro-independence movements led by Fretilin and other organisations, and these were widely supported internationally. Successive Australian governments however supported Indonesia, arguing that East

Timor was too small a community to be self-governing. There were also commercial considerations that influenced Canberra's position, including access to potentially valuable offshore oil and gas reserves.

Eventually, in 1999, Indonesian President BJ Habibie announced that an independence referendum would be held. Jose's story revolves around the preparations for this. It suggests obliquely that Prime Minister John Howard and President Habibie might have colluded in the timing of the referendum, knowing that it would cause a popular uprising that would justify bringing in the army, and scheming to keep the oil barons happy.

The novel is set in Adelaide, Washington and Dili. Jake Treweek's widow Anne believes that his suicide in Washington was connected with his undercover work as a defence analyst. The main part of the story is drawn from Jake's diary, recording his contacts with freedom fighters in the Timor hinterland. He is an eyewitness of atrocities committed by the pro-Indonesian militia and is horrified by the abuse of women and children. He is the protégé of his Minister (a thinly disguised Alexander Downer) but unable to persuade him that the government should prioritise human rights over economic profit. He agonises over what course of action he should take and receives death threats from the CIA.

Jose's narrative reminds me of the cold war novels of John le Carré. George Smiley also writes about tensions arising from the personal commitments of the spy and diplomat and his (yes, masculine) national interest and international cause. In the le Carré novels, however, there is no ultimate right or wrong, no absolute hero or villain. In *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, Alec Leamas says, "What the hell do you think spies are? Moral philosophers measuring everything they do against the word of God or Karl Marx? They are not! They're just a bunch of seedy, squalid bastards like me." Jake Treweek rises above that. In the end he sacrifices his own life for his principles and for the sake of his Timorese friends, the same people who had saved his father's life during the Japanese war.

Surely that is the standard of service that we expect of true Australians.