

REVIEWS

***Gould's Book of Fish:
a novel in 12 fish***
Richard Flanagan
Picador, 2001

Linnaeus Downunder

For me the standout novels of 2001 were Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* and Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish: a novel in 12 fish*. Chalk and cheese in every respect. Where Winton seduces and cajoles, takes one through pain into idylls and seeks a benign resolution, Flanagan presents obstacles to reading, retails monstrosity, and offers a process/resolution as black and challenging as the grimmest novels in existence: I would compare it with Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and Patrick Susskind's *Perfume*. It's a work that invites such big comparisons, because it overreaches in a variety of ways.

The novel is challengingly postmodern along many axes: it constitutes a trenchant re-writing of the history of the penal system and of colonialism from the point of view of its underbelly, the convict class; it engages in a wide range of parodies of Victorian styles, and as well begins in a contemporary style which takes none-too-subtle, reflexive pot-shots at literary skirmishes closer to our own times (the manuscript, published "as a novel [...] could win literary prizes" [21]); it overlaps several different narratives, and genres; and it is dazzlingly intertextual. It's the rare Australian novel that warrants annotation, and intrigues with its learning. Not to mention its metafictional and deconstructive feints: in short, it is "not at all the sort of open-and-shut thing a good book should be" (14). It is, though, a wonderful story, a book that sets out to prove that stories tell more truths than facts. It ends up suggesting something rather different: that language, finally, cannot serve. Flanagan tells mesmeric stories, ones that "itch" (58) to be told and heard, as, for example, the compressed tale of Gould's conception and birth (55–56), which reads like a bent hero-tale.

The novel opens with two phenomena that are almost as old as fiction: the unreliable (institutionalised) narrator (whether psychiatric or penal is not quite clear) and a found (or invented) manuscript (sighted first by its cotton threads, “like Great Aunt Maisie’s stubble” [11]). The finder, con-man Hammett, resembles the narrator of the second interior frame in being one whose life was “an ongoing act of disillusionment,” but a sense of wonder and a raucous, irreverent sense of the black comedy of human life empower both of their enterprises. We are warned in Chapter 1 that we will begin with a fairytale and end as a nursery rhyme, “riding a cock-horse to Banbury Cross” (4). The cock-horse, by a process of impeccable fictional logic, becomes a weedy sea dragon and yet another narrator.

Flanagan’s 1830s Tasmania may be a “far-off place,” but we are meant to read Hammett’s claim “that everyone knows it is not here or now or us” (4) resistantly. He is, after all, a specialist in faking antiquities, metamorphosing government discards into Shaker chairs in the Van Diemonian Antiquarian Association workshop, and flogging them to American tourists as whalers’ imports. The next stage in that downward trajectory is signaled in satiric mode as eco-tourism. There are many gestures in this novel towards magic realism, not the least of these being the watery transformations that occur and recur at beginning and end of the novel. These motivate a reworking of the texts of the past. The novel teasingly removes the narrative standing-ground, fragile as it is, by the dream stratagem in the first of its two apocalyptic resolutions, by having Gould destroy the very manuscript we are reading (335). Subsequently, Flanagan suggests that the artist and memoirist might be his jailor Pobjoy, or even Conga and Mr. Hung, inheritors of a legacy of colonial faking.

Once the reader has negotiated the teasing outer-frame narrator, the inner-frame journal of Gould becomes the spine of the work. Flanagan creates a sharply satiric analysis of the penal system of Sarah Island, circa 1828, suggesting that its inner story is a microcosm of Australia in the present. It is a crazy place, based on a cruel abuse of hierarchical power. Its Commander envisions Sarah Island as a New Venice, in which Europe is to be replicated, but some weird parodies of civilisation are enacted. Flanagan demonstrates that civilisation downunder is inverted and criminalised. The Commandant’s tiny island, which aspires to nation status, is a place that is founded in illusion and buttressed by simulacra: journeys by steam train around the known world are virtual. Trading economies ride phantom booms and busts and traffic in whale oil in return for worthless luxury commodities (barrels of oil are traded for a single overripe guava, and Huon pines are exchanged for Moluccan feathers [152]). Then there is the trade in Siamese girls with their manfern fronds. Finally, in a manoeuvre so Tasmanian, the Commandant attempts a Mahjong-led economic revival. The Commandant’s “success” is pithily expressed:

His reputation grew, his name began to be spoken far & wide, &
boats began appearing with all manner of traders, merchants,

beggars & charlatans. The Commandant welcomed them all, & what started off as furtive trading along the southern stockade wall, administered but not controlled by the felons of a Saturday afternoon, grew into a market & the market into a bazaar & the bazaar into the idea of a nation. (153)

Ultimately, the man who succeeds to the helm, Musha Pug, will decide that a company is preferable to a nation, and discarding “The Supreme” and “His Bunefience” [sic] as honorifics, he settles on “The Chairman” (379).

Intellectually, Sarah Island is bankrupt too. Flanagan mounts a heavy-duty satirical critique of Linnaean assumptions about the world and its methodologies. For Flanagan the delusion that all is knowable/improvable/explicable/solvable/remediable is to engage in a “gargantuan act of vandalism” (126). Becoming “Botticelli” to the Surgeon’s “Medici,” Gould sabotages these delusions by capturing the mystery of life in his ichthyologic paintings. His written exposé of the settlement sees men in the fish and they become fundamental to his self-knowledge and his understanding of the key players in the drama of Sarah Island. The ironic discrepancy between Lempriere’s version of the fish-paintings and Flanagan’s and Gould’s understandings that the narratives are in fact humanising ones is delicious. This is a text that keeps one continually pivoting. Gould’s scheme backfires as the narrator progressively is turned into a fish who/which seeks the loving ambience of water and finds freedom from speech and language the ultimate consolation. The highlight of Flanagan’s anti-scientific critique is to have the Surgeon, Lempriere, the chief Linnaean naturalist of Sarah Island, not only lose his manhood in a Shandyesque accident, but, more humiliatingly, consumed by his pet pig, Castlereagh, in revenge for his tedious conversation. Most humiliating of all for one of his racist beliefs, his pickled cranium is deemed by London phrenologist, Sir Cosmo Wheeler, to suffer from excessive amativeness, to be the ultimate in depravity, mental inferiority and racial degeneration, and its origins to be outside the Garden of Eden (302–03).

Flanagan’s “bonfire of words” (91) continually draws attention to its fictiveness. It begins by assuming that many “civilizing” projects are transformative (buildings, streetscapes, railways, Linnaean categorization, fiction writing, theories of penology, and certainly paintings) and designed to “[offer] us a purpose,” — “[s]ome alternate idea of ourselves” (103). They offer us “a world more fantastick & yet bizarrely more familiar than the one we lived in” (85). However, the easy assumption of benign transformation is progressively deconstructed, at first through the trope of “forgery”:

I fancied faces as rough as theirs [Hobart Town society] with pasts as dirty as theirs deserved someone with as little talent as me to paint

them. This wasn't work for the Academy or the Prado or the Louvre, but for the bastard & idiot issue of the Old World who through theft & terror thought they had a right to rule the New.

Which, I ought add, they did. (134)

And "colonial art is the comic knack of rendering the new as the old, the unknown as the known, the antipodean as the European, the contemptible as the respectable" (68).

Gould, the archetypal little-man/misfortunate, having been accused unjustly of forgery, finds it expedient in the New World to become a forger. He begins his career inventing coats of arms for the "bastard gentry" of Launceston's coaches, and Latin mottoes to go with them with the help of a cleric doing time for bestiality (*Quae fuerent vitia, mores sunt*—"what were once vices are now manners" [97–98]). That Gould is not alone in the enterprise of becoming a forger/artist is many times made clear. Indeed, the colony depends on forgery and scams for its very existence. Flanagan, a precise historian, offers a roll call of colonial forgers. Wainwright the murderer and Bock the abortionist were both valued portraitists of the gentry, while Lycett painted Tasmania without ever needing to visit it (187). On the literary side, Savery the forger "wrote mannered trash about the colony that flattered its audience with so many imitations of their own stupidity" (73).

Gould's fictional manifesto is learnt from Capois Death, a black convict from San Domingo: his is a narrative of colonial brutality, garnered close to the earth ("truth is never far away but up close in the dirt," [93]). It is told in the style of "firing, loading, & refiring [a] musket," told "without pause & without emphasis, & the horror & the glory & the wonder of it all were in the accumulation of endless detail" (87). It is a narrative method that Flanagan himself employs, and it is self-consciously transgressive: "life is better observed than lived" (94). His text revels in the representation of the abject:

Death was in that heightened smell of raddled bodies & chancre-encrusted souls. Death arose in a miasma from gangrenous limbs & bloody rags of consumptive lungs [. . .]. Death was rising in the overripe smell of mud fermenting, enmities petrifying, waiting in wet brick walls leaning, in the steam of flesh sloughing with the cat falling, so many fetid exhalations of unheard screams, murders, mixed with the brine of a certain wordless horror; collectively those scents of fearful sweat that sour clothes & impregnate whole places & which are said to be impervious to the passage of time, a perfume of spilling blood which no amount of washing or admission was ever to rid me. (104)

There is a passionate intensity that spares no gothic detail in its anatomy of the cultural pathologies of Tasmania. He adroitly ties together a raft of pointed political issues: the horrors of the penal system, the despoliation of irreplaceable Tasmanian landscapes (and the Huon Pine), and genocidal massacres of Aborigines. There is a grim-faced refusal to glorify any aspect of the colonial system, and certainly no impulse to glorify the Tasmanian Ned, Matt Brady. (And why is it so hard to resist the idea that his treatment of Brady is in some sense a swipe at Peter Carey who is far less critical of history and national icons?) However, to bring all these elements together does make for a very discursive ending in which all the ideas that animate the text are spelt out, sometimes more explicitly than they need to be.

The two apocalyptic movements of Flanagan's resolution—the disillusioning search for Matt Brady and the conflagration of the Sarah Island gaol, both of which precede Gould's election to become a fish—serve to demonstrate that there is little to sustain Gould's original faith in the liberatory power of fiction. This text systematically undoes its own pretensions and fantasy about the uses of books and the need to rewrite history. Whereas Gould reveled as a young man in the ways in which a world can be created by a mere 26 letters, his ultimate insight is that “a world could never be contained in an alphabet” (358). “Unburdened by speech” (397), and living the life of a weedy sea dragon, the narrator sees ever more clearly the fictional impulse in history, in settlement and nation-building, and the interconnectedness of class and race enemies:

[. . .] it wasn't the English who did this to us but ourselves, that convicts flogged convicts & pissed on blackfellas & spied on each other, that blackfellas sold black women for dogs & speared escaping convicts, that white sealers killed & raped black women, & black women killed the children that resulted. (401)

Astonishingly, the production values of this book also overreach. It is a magnificently luscious physical object, printed on heavy ivory paper, in a variety of ink colours (to mimic the narrator's use of improvised inks—blood, powdered stone, laudanum, excrement and porcupine-fish-quills). The twelve fish of the title are reproduced from William Buelow Gould's book of the same name, and used for a variety of narrative-driving and character-defining purposes. Picador is to be praised in this age of economic rationalism for providing so pleasing a material and aesthetic artifact. While the book mimics the condition of a nineteenth-century natural history, we can be glad that verisimilitude has its limits: that we are spared the microbes and the transverse copperplate.

Flanagan may at times read like a nihilist, but his anger is powered by a sense that to live intensely in the real world is inevitably to love it in ways that are beyond expression. It is a risky place for the novelist to be. Let us hope that this is

a position that the logic of his characterisation of Gould and magic realism dictates, and that there are many more Tasmanian novels in Flanagan.

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