

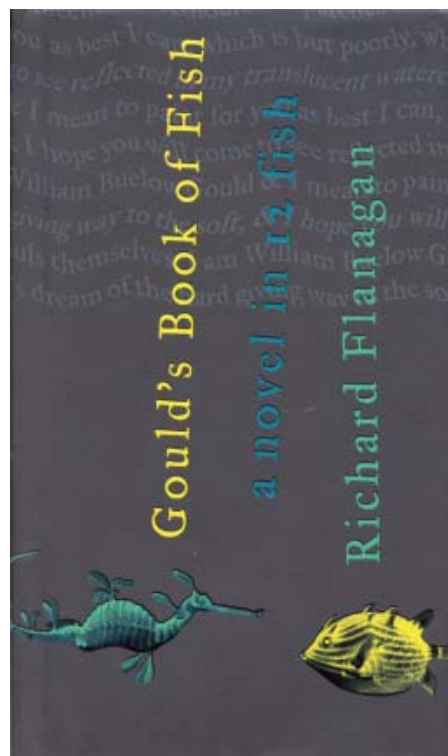
# PICADOR AUSTRALIA

NOTES FOR READING GROUPS

## Richard Flanagan

### GOULD'S BOOK OF FISH

A NOVEL IN 12 FISH



WINNER OF THE COMMONWEALTH WRITERS PRIZE 2002

Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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## THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

*'Once upon a time terrible things happened, but it was long ago in a far-off place that everyone knows is not here or now or us.'* (p. 4)

This 'fairy tale' plays with notions of storying and with the construction of historical record in order to explore matters of immense national importance. In 1828, William Buelow Gould, a convict and self-made artist, incarcerated on Sarah Island, is instructed by the mad surgeon Tobias Achilles Lemprière to paint a *Book of Fish*. A nameless man of nameless parents, Gould assumes names which may also have been borrowed by their owners from someone else. He uses the project to tell the 'real story' of the horrendous events which occurred in the penal colony of Tasmania, *'a colony of fish masquerading as men'* (p.250), inscribing in the margins his own version of the colony's recent history. He also discovers the 'real' Registry of convict records which are entirely false and seeks to escape with them, *'I was hauling a sled of lies called history through the wilderness.'* (p.322)

This is a chronicle of the past, but also a savage indictment of the present, and of a nation which continues to practise the same barbarities and to harbour the same self-delusive and wilful fantasies. The underlying message is that though Australia may no longer be a penal colony, it will never escape the manacles of the past whilst its citizens refuse to 'own' their history. In order to shape our future, we must cast off the attitudes which are still prevalent in our national makeup. *'If I cannot control the past now, . . . I will at least control it in the future.'* (p.246) In a nation which has failed to make reparation for the wrongs done to its Aboriginal Peoples; which continues to tolerate racism and incarcerates illegal immigrants in the name of border protection; which has sold off its national utilities for a handful of silver; which sanitises and manufactures its history by eulogising and rhetoricising events such as 'Anzac Day' and the 'Year of the Outback'; which underplays the role played by both Indigenous and culturally diverse groups in the making of its nationhood; which 'writes out' of history the massacres and bloody battles fought in the name of white settlement, Australians seem doomed to a future in which shallow gains are made at the expense of integrity and morality. *'They only asked in return to be lied to and deceived and told that single most important thing, that they were safe, that their sense of security - national, individual, spiritual - wasn't a bad joke played on them by a capricious destiny . . . that they didn't need to wear a black armband or have a bad conscience about their power and their wealth and everybody else's lack of it.'* (p.9)

History is one of the novel's major subjects. The *Book of Fish* disappears and re-appears a number of times, as a metaphor for the uncomfortable habit which historical facts have of being both unearthed or repeated by subsequent generations. Sid Hammet, the 21<sup>st</sup> century narrator, is a latter day Gould - a trader and restorer of dubious antiques (so he's an artist of sorts too), who comes across the *Book of Fish* and becomes entranced, like his alter ego, by the notion of reincarnation as a fish. The copy of an 'alternative' *Book of Fish* in the Allport Library (which Hammet also discovers) contains a wordless book of identical paintings to those in the first copy, which is symbolic of the alternative histories preserved for later generations. *'One book spoke with the authority of words and the other with the authority of silence, and it was impossible to tell which was the more mysterious.'* (p.23)

The 'third' book, the official Registry kept by Jorgensen, paints a picture of progress, excluding the travails and tortures of the convicts, and depicting the Indigenous peoples as savages. His stories are for those who *'were only after something that walled them off from the past and people in general, not something that offered any connection that*

*might prove painful or human.*' (p.7) Such history is also co-opted by tourism - another form of myth making - which creates false images of the past, *'It was the story, really, that the tourists were buying, of the only type that they would ever buy - an American story, a happy stirring tale of Us Finding Them Alive and Bringing Them Back Home'*. (p.6) Hammet and his assistant Mr Hung 'distress' their 'antiques' to achieve the necessary patina with which to dupe tourist customers, *'buying what they mistakenly thought to be the flotsam of the romantic past, rather than what they were, evidence of a rotten present.'* (p.5)

There are further historical satires; the circular railway which goes nowhere, for which Gould is ordered to paint backdrops, anticipating *'a new trend in travel whereby people would never have to move in order to have their desire for exotic spectacles gratified'* (p.180). Museums, libraries, galleries, academics and even antique merchants are each held culpable in this matter of history making too. *'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.'* (p.68) Though such institutions are now presenting the 'alternative' histories which might constitute the nation's memory, it may be too little and too late, when their audiences are not attuned by either history or by circumstance to hear the messages they are conveying.

With all the weight of this dubious history, it's no wonder that the stories Gould/Hammet tell are confused. *'We - are histories, our souls - are, . . . in a process of constant decomposition and reinvention, and this book, . . . was the story of my compost heap of a heart.'* (p.20) Gould is the ultimate *'unreliable narrator'* or *'the lacuna of lacunae'* as is evinced by all his conflicting evidence. If he really sent his first book to Dr Allport in Hobart, and then watched Twopenny Sal burn the annotated one on Tracker Marks' funeral pyre, then what is the book discovered by Hammet, in present day Hobart? And what is the significance of the convict record which accords to Gould the several personalities he has written about in the book? Is he simply a madman? This idea is suggested from the beginning when the bibliophiles Hammet consults tell him it's a *'curious product of a particularly deranged mind of long ago.'* (p.16) It's supported by the insane lengths to which he goes in secretly creating his fishy records. eg: the revelation that *'a creeping slime rising up the walls'* (p.51) refers to the dead bloated body of Jorgensen disintegrating in Gould's watery cell. This assumption however is uncomfortably close to those made by sceptics unwilling to confront our history, who castigate the soothsayers by branding them either bleeding hearts or dangerously obsessive. In a colony of such barbarity a person might indeed go mad. Flanagan draws on actual records to detail commonplace horrors, and relies on his unreliable, possibly mad narrator to interpret them, for *'perhaps in madness lies the truth, or in truth madness.'* (p.33)

'False identity' has been a feature of white Australian culture since its inception. In a largely illiterate convict society identities were difficult to prove and easy to falsify. The 'true stories' of famous figures such as Ned Kelly are still mysterious, and Gould's ability to have assumed a number of identities is typical, and highly credible. His epitaph suggests that the characters he has created are his own aliases, and the identities of all his colleagues are dubious. The Commandant may have been a lag and lone survivor of a convict shipwreck who had assumed the identity of Lieutenant Horace, whilst marooned on Bass Strait island with only a copy of Huntington's *History of the Napoleonic Wars* for company, which inspired his insane ambitions. His fanciful letters to Horace's 'sister Anne' also represent the increasingly tenuous connections between Australia and the 'home' country, *'With the force of profound revelation he realised that his sister was inventing Europe, & his body shuddered in a single, violent clutch.'* (p.156) His elaborate monuments to her beauty crumble, just as the fiction of Anne's love for her brother does, when it is suggested that the Romantic poet Thomas de Quincey may be the 'sister' and that the Commandant has been writing fictional letters to a fictional subject! Twopenny Sal is the most suggestive of the name-changers - called the Mulatto by the Commandant; Cleopatra by those on the islands; even the infatuated Gould never discovers her real name. And finally, Matt Brady the bushranger is a complete mystery for few have ever seen him.

Confusion over identity is cemented by the idea that life is circular; the curiously repetitive sequence of events here is a story within a story within a story ad infinitum. *'I had lived the same life over and over, like some Hindu mystic forever trapped in the Great*

*Wheel? . . . my past and my future one and indivisible.*' (p.1) Gould dreams nightmares in which he 'imagines' things which have either happened already or will happen in the future: *'the terror I may actually be someone else, . . . that my life was only a dream dreamt by another, that everything around me was only a simulacrum of a world, & I was crying, lost, I really was somewhere else, somebody else seeing all this.'* (p.112) Circles appear again in the body cuts on Sal which represent the sun and the moon. They are also suggested by her belief that the 'numminers' (or white men) were her people's ghosts, returned from England culminating in Gould's discovering that the burning book contains details of things which haven't happened yet and that *'if this book of fish was a history of the settlement, it might also just be its prophecy.'* (p.337) Gould poses the ultimate conundrum when he asks, *'Why we order our lives as ladders while around us the earth circles.'* (p.358)

*'We will have traded our tyranny of isolation for the liberty of commerce.'* (p.166) This metaphor for the nation's foundation brutally castigates the lofty ambitions of the myth makers and architects of the future who were/are responsible for *'the remaking of Europe as a stunted island of misconceptions beneath the southern heavens'* (p.107). The Commandant's crazy vision of the grandiose Great May-Jong Hall to attract tourists from throughout Asia, might be juxtaposed against the creation of the Casino in Hobart. *'A chill wind blew through its reception halls, . . . & there was nobody to marvel with us at how so much could mean so little.'* (p.193) His railway might find its equivalent in any of the short-sighted transport policies implemented since Australia's earliest white settlement. *'Of a night he was unable to sleep for want of the sound of a nation. All he could hear echoing up and down the market aisles that were supposed to be full of the noise of bartering, of trade, of people, was that hollow sound of the waves ominously slapping the shore.'* (p.204) Political pragmatism and economic rationalism are pilloried when Musha takes control dubbing himself not a Commandant but the 'Chairman'. *'The Commandant's folly was to think you could turn a penal colony into a nation, whereas it was clear as day to Musha Pug that it would be far more successful as a company.'* (p.379) Sarah Island is described as our modern cities might be too - denuded of vegetation, full of monuments to great leaders and bordered by coastlines reconstructed by landfill, *'a nation summoned into existence simply by the night-time will of its leader'* (p.99).

Truth is stranger than fiction; this history reads frighteningly like graphic parody though it's anchored in fact. *'Van Diemen's Land - intended by the authorities to be a transplanted England - is mutating into a bastard world turned upside down.'* (p.197) The Commandant's penal reforms are preposterous but find their antecedents in official records - inventions such as his individual sleeping cages; torturous punishments such as the Treadmill and the Cockchafer, his trading the colony's assets in order to amass the wealth necessary to create the visions of his future. He succeeds in *'first turning the prison island into a city, & then, later, the city into a larger, more complete gaol.'* (p.195) Jorgensen's records of this mayhem describe it as *'some enlightened mass-migration scheme created by beneficent elders, in which horror was only very occasional, but always deserved, & in which men made good rather than bad.'* (p.288) But his record has become reality, *'For the world no longer existed to become a book. A book now existed with the obscene ambition of becoming the world.'* (p.291) The destruction of Indigenous peoples is also explored in the many impossibly barbaric but factual incidents. For example, the vile discovery of a staked out woman by Gould and Roaring Tom; the 'punishments' meted out by white men to black people; the casual work detail which brings back *'more dead niggers'* in hessian bags; the scheme to send barrels of *'black heads'* back to England to be 'classified'.

The petty ambitions of man are also satirised in relation to art (which Gould parodies), and science. eg: The ironic mistake made by Mr Cosmo Wheeler at Royal Society who labels the skull of Lempriere Item MH-36 the *'Craniae Tasmaniae'*. And not only are the power brokers, artists and scientists castigated but so too are the ordinary people who wallow in greedy mundanity, and *'spend the rest of their termination payouts and disability pensions and unemployment cheques, filling their polystyrene Coke cups in front of the screens mesmerised at how their hard fates could be to precisely rendered in the perfect images of those spinning wheels.'* (p.35) Flanagan takes no prisoners in describing Gould as *'the stinking cockroach. . . the filthy lice that didn't stop itching. I was Australia.'* (p.261)

Fish are metaphors for these despicable human beings and have a literal connection too, to the tortured Gould being kept in a cell which fills daily with water. They represent freedom, so that he dreams of *'diving into the sea & swimming as one with the fish until one was a fish.'* (p.82) Each chapter, headed by the name and illustration of a fish, is written in a different coloured ink, *'Did the wonder of colour . . . redeem the horror of his world?'* (p.15) Each fish represents a person: *The Pot-bellied Seahorse's 'capacity to transform'* (p.36) is *'like Gould's lost words'* (p.36); *The Kelpy* is guilty like Gould who has witnessed all the tragic things he sees in the *'accusing, horrified eye'* (p.89) of the dying fish, who also represents the dying man killed in the Cockchafer; *The Porcupine Fish* is the horrific, bloated Surgeon Lempriere; *The Stargazer*, with *'the strangeness of its eyes that sat on top of its head rather than on the side as if it were always looking upwards at the heavens'* (p.161) is the Commandant; *The Leatherjacket* is Matt Brady the bushranger, 'Liberator' and proposed leader of the new Republic; *The Serpent Eel* is Guster Robinson; *The Sawtooth Shark* is Jorgensen, the Danish clerk whose disappointment with the mismatch between books and reality is expressed in his Registry in which he can tell all the lies he wants; *The Striped Cowfish* is the alluring and mysterious Twopenny Sal; *The Crested Weedfish* is Tracker Marks, the native 'dandy' employed by Robinson to bring in his own people; *The Freshwater Crayfish's* ability to shed its shell and become a new thing is assumed by Gould who yearns to be somewhere else; *The Silver Dory* is Pobjoy, Gould's guard and nemesis; *The Weedy Seadragon* is the fish Gould becomes; *'a primitive throwback whose species is on the verge of extinction'* (p.399).

The *Book of Fish* attempts to achieve a numinous or spiritual insight into life. The Greek word for fish is the name for Jesus Christ ich-th-ys. (p.239) Gould, knowing that good and evil are equally inescapable, is on a mission to remind people that they are more than *'hungry dust'* (p.28). He laments man's capacity for cruelty, but finds solace, or escape, in stories. Flanagan also offers a stern caution to those who deny the power of history, for it's a story with no end. This is a Shakespearian tragedy told by a man who cries, *'I will try to show you everything, mad & cracked & bad as it was'* (p.91) and asks, *'how can power & ignorance sleep together?'* (p.221) Finding no answer he's forced to admit simply that, *'Neither we nor our children nor their infinite progeny were ever to forget the shame, long after the memory of why had been lost.'* (p.338) The Commandant, too, receives blinding visions of truth, regarding his futile search for power, which he realises *'in his last remaining moments of clarity, was the saddest expression of all, of an absence of love, worse yet, of the capacity to love.'* (p.378) Gould finds that even words cannot 'hold' the necessary truths, and is reduced to reciting the alphabet as a prayer for the dead. As a fish he makes a last impassioned plea for Australia to change. Both he and the Commandant finally realise that though *'to love is not safe'* (p.402), it's the only thing we have worth saving.

## WRITING STYLE AND TECHNIQUES

1. This is written in a 'Metafictional' style, interrogating the concept of narrative by telling 'stories within stories' - Flanagan's story of Hammet's story of Gould's story of many people's stories, are then questioned as are the identities of the narrators. This tradition of the 'unreliable narrator' has been deployed by classic Australian writers such as Tom Collins (Joseph Furphy) and Steele Rudd (Arthur Hoey Davis). Such narrative playfulness with the divide between the fictional and the 'real' narrator has also resulted in literary frauds, '*That one area of national letters, . . . in which Australia can rightly lay some claim to global imminence.*' (p.21) such as those by Miles Franklin (Brent of Bin Bin), and of Vogel Winners Paul Radley and Helen Darville (Demidenko). This is also a pastiche of literary references - Mr Hung's fascination with Victor Hugo and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*; nursery rhymes and chapbooks; the poets Ovid, Pope, Keats and Shelley; *Tristram Shandy*; Pliny's *Natural History*. '*a book at its beginning may be a new way of understanding life - an original universe - but it is soon enough no more than a mere footnote in the history of writing, overpraised by the sycophantic, despised by the contemporary, and read by neither. . .*' (p.30)  
What effect does the narrator's unreliability have on your reading? Is Flanagan as sceptical about literature's veracity as he is about history? Discuss.
2. It might also be described as 'Magical Realism' - both Gould and Hammet believe that man's true nature may be found in fish, '*that sixth sense that allows us to see miracles and have visions and understand that we are something other, larger than what we have been told.*' (p.3) Why is this a popular mode with 'post-colonial' novelists such as Marquez or Allende?
3. It's a work of 'Faction' which explores the '*very crowded bedroom of history*' (p.243) drawing on and extrapolating from many sources to create an historical fiction. Read Robert Hughes *The Fatal Shore* (Collins Harvill, 1986) which contains many of the 'facts' which are the basis for this novel. For example, Gould was a real convict artist (1803-1853) after whom was named a giant freshwater crayfish (*Astacopsis gouldii*) because he '*was the first to draw and describe one*' (Hughes: p.375). His life and work are discussed in Garry Darby's *William Buelow Gould* (Copperfield publishing Co., 1980) and in other books on Colonial art including G. Stilwell's *Convict Artists of Van Diemen's Land* (Allport Library, Tasmania, 1975). The *Sketchbook of 35 Fish* by Gould, from which the illustrations used in this novel were drawn, is held in the Allport Library, Hobart, CR 55. Matthew Brady (1799-1826) was a convict/bushranger who challenged lieutenant-governor Colonel George Arthur and was subsequently hung. (Hughes: p.234) George Augustus Robinson (1788-1866) was known as the "Conciliator" and from 1830 onwards herded all the Aborigines into a '*benign concentration camp*' (Hughes: p.423) until only Trucanini was left, surviving until 1876. She might be seen as the model for Twopenny Sal. Is this a book about literature or history? Fact or fiction?
4. Humour and Irony alleviate the tale's grim nature. '*The book was the Hobart football ground waiting for a few drops of Lourdes water and memories of absent love.*' (p.28) Is it possible to make light of such atrocities?
5. Symbolic words and names are used in a seemingly casual and yet deliberate way. eg: When Hammet loses the *Book of Fish* it's in the bar of the *Republic*, once the old *Empire* (p.24). Similes and metaphors relating to the sea also refer to metamorphosis. eg: When Hammet discovers the book, it's, '*As if it were a prize fish hopelessly entangled in my net*' (p.11). Later he strokes '*its soft underbelly*' (p.13) and then feels '*monstrous wave after wave of fear crashing on the ocean floor of my soul.*' (p.25) What other symbolism did you notice?
6. This employs the literary convention of an 'everyman' figure on a journey, quest or 'Pilgrim's Progress' towards enlightenment. Gould is *Tristram Shandy* - a man who knows that '*the truth is never far away but up close in the dirt*' (p.93). His 'characters' play 'iconic' roles in biblical parables exploring human frailties. For example, Capois Death, '*is Adventure and I was Envy, he was Trouble & I was Excitement*' (pp.164-5) Description is often Rabelasian or Chaucerian in its bawdiness, too. eg: The tale of Gould's conception after a chance meeting between his French Jewish weaver father and his mother at an Irish fair, whereupon his father was '*struck down with apoplexy at the height of his rude passion in that barn, thinking he was going to ride a cock-horse all day long.*' (p.55) Or the reduction of Lemprière to a giant pig's turd (p.235). Does Gould find salvation in his immersion as a fish?

## THE AUTHOR

Richard Flanagan lives in Tasmania. His first book *Death of a River Guide* was published to considerable acclaim. His second *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* was hailed as a classic, and he wrote and directed an award-winning film from the story. *Gould's Book of Fish* won the Commonwealth Writers Prize 2002 and the Australian Literary Society's Gold Medal 2002.

[For further information about the author and this novel you might like to read Luke Slattery's article, 'The Tasmaniac', The Weekend Australian Magazine, June 8-9, 2002, pp 14-21.]

## AWARDS - Gould's Book of Fish

Winner	2002 Commonwealth Writers Prize
Winner	2002 Australian Literature Society's Gold Medal
Winner	2002 A.P.A. Design Awards - Joyce Thorpe Nicholson Best Designed Book of the Year
Winner	2002 A.P.A. Publishing Project of the Year
Winner	2002 A.P.A. Design Awards - The Hodder Headline Best Designed Literary Fiction Book
Shortlisted	Braille Book of the Year
Shortlisted	2002 Miles Franklin Literary Award
Shortlisted	2001 Book Data/ABA Book of the Year Award

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *'All books are grand follies, destined forever to be misunderstood.'* (p.30) Is the writer's task to make himself understood? Or is it enough that s/he has written?
2. *'The easiest path with authority is inevitably acquiescence'* (pp.103-4) Is cowardice or laziness the reason why so few people challenge governments?
3. *'Are we safe? . . . No, but a barricade of useless goods may help block the view.'* (p.9) Is consumerism the human response to fear of the unknown?
4. *'In Van Diemen's Land they seem to like nothing more than the Artist From Elsewhere.'* (p.62). Is the Australian cultural cringe still as bad as it was?
5. In Sydney *'such dreaming fraudulence would have been handsomely rewarded. But this, after all, was Hobart, where dreams remained a strictly private matter.'* (p.10) What contrasts/comparisons does Flanagan make between Tasmania and the rest of Australia?
6. Questions of historical accuracy permeate national media debates, (such as those in *Quadrant* Magazine between Henry Reynolds and Keith Windschuttle over the so-called 'black armband' view of history.) How do you inform yourself when history-keeping is so subjective and so tenuous?
7. *'Is there nothing that doesn't mean sex to them? . . . People.'* (p.19) Discuss this modern tendency towards banality and pseudo-emotions, in relation to phenomena such as reality TV, for example.
8. *'History . . . was no more than the pretext for a rueful fatalism about the present . . . a shallow nostalgia'* (p.20) Does this apply to the current Australian government's approach to history?
9. *'The Archives Office of Tasmania, whose neat, unremarkable urban shopfront belies the complete record of a totalitarian state that it houses'* (p.21) Is this too extreme a view of colonial history?
10. This is a history etched in blood - a poem or dirge to suffering, which has a connection with the 'Song Lines' of the abused Aboriginal Peoples whom Flanagan laments. Discuss.
11. *'I can tell you that there are no pictures of convicts ever made at this settlement, and that the very making of such pictures is forbidden'* (p.45). Such 'censorship' has recurred in Australian legislative history with, for example, the restriction of media access to those detained as illegal immigrants today. Discuss.
12. *'Books dealt in cause & effect, yet life was inexplicable disorder. Nothing was as it was in a book, something about which he forever after harbored a dull resentment that finally found expression as vengeance.'* (p.251) Does violence stem from the incompatibility between fantasy and reality?

## GOULD'S BOOK OF FISH

Richard Flanagan

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*Death of a River Guide* - Richard Flanagan

\* *Gould's Book of Fish* - Richard Flanagan

*The Sound of One Hand Clapping* - Richard Flanagan

*The Idea of Perfection* - Kate Grenville

*Seducing Mr Maclean* - Loubna Haikal

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