

Gould's Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish

by Richard Flanagan

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\$14.00, paperback

Reviewed By Paul Devlin

This profoundly awful book, by Tasmanian writer Richard Flanagan, which was first published in Australia in 2001, and has since been hailed as a masterpiece by credible publications all over the English-speaking world, had a lot of potential as an idea. (Flanagan is the author of two other well-received novels: *Death of a River Guide* and *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*.)

It seems as if I picked the wrong novel of 19th century Australia to read. Peter Carey's 2001 Booker-Prize winning *True History of the Kelly Gang* looks much better, and I plan to check it out if I can purge Flanagan's book from my memory. If what was published here were really a first draft, it might be guided into an actual masterpiece in the hands of a brilliant editor, as the *concept* is not necessarily a bad one.

In the early 19th century, an Irish-French/Jewish convict in a British prison in Tasmania has a talent for painting, especially for painting fish. He paints two books of fish. One is just fish paintings, and one has fish paintings with the text of a story around them. The copy with the story was lost for nearly two-hundred years until found accidentally in "the present" and lost again, then recounted from memory by the man who found it. Each chapter begins with a painting of a fish and is named after a fish. (The titles of the chapters are, as far as I can tell, completely arbitrary.) These paintings exist in real life, in the State Library of Tasmania, and their painter's real historical name, William Buelow Gould, is that of the protagonist. Everything else in the novel fictional, except for large-scale background historical events.

It is not inconceivable that this might make a good novel. So, approaching the book with high hopes, spurred on by the good reviews, and trying hard to like it, I plodded through the unreadable first chapter with the unbelievable present-day narrator. The present-day narrator is an ex-con "furniture-faker" who sells fake antique furniture to American tourists. He has no education to speak of, yet he seems to know an awful lot about literature, politics, and art – everything that Richard Flanagan probably knows. The reader grudgingly accepts this, because maybe the character just likes to read. But then, when he says he does not know *anything* about literature, politics, or art, his trendy critiques of everything become unacceptable. There is another dull character, the present-day narrator's love interest and parole officer, "The Conga". "The Conga" is a shortening of her last name, "Congariva" or something. I traded this book in at The Strand so long ago I don't remember or care what her full name is. There is also a master-antique faker, a Vietnamese man with a *shrine to Victor Hugo* in his living room. A real shrine!

This is the point where the reader squints at the page wondering how this nonsense got published. But the reader keeps going until Gould's story actually starts in chapter two, only to learn that he is just another run-of-the-mill, naïve, 19th century protagonist who does all sorts of stupid things to get himself into trouble. And his perspective on things seems to be, curiously but not surprisingly, almost that of an educated westerner (Richard Flanagan?) at the turn of the 21st century.

In general, basic things like character and motivation are ignored, and there is an overkill of unnecessary and unnecessarily gruesome descriptions, surely thrown in to try to cover up many fatal flaws in the pointless plot, which awkwardly stumbles along. It is also hard to distinguish one character from another, they are all pretty much cardboard, and it is nearly impossible to feel sympathy for or identify with any of them. William Buelow Gould is tremendously offensive and might be one of the least likable protagonists in all of literature. This is not to say that protagonists must be likable, but the reader has to care *somewhat* about what happens to them, and with Gould it is difficult.

This novel (over and over again) piously mouths the party line on a variety of trendy topics, such as 1. current notions of heterosexuality are a modern bourgeois construction (not only are they not, but saying that they are is so ubiquitous that we don't need to hear it on every other page in this novel) 2. colonialism is bad, bad, bad...really really really bad! (wow, that's a new one, let's shower this book with prizes for saying so), and perhaps worst of all, (which we also hear again and again and again) 3. the Lake Poets and Voltaire were problematic. (And there's a pig named "Castlereagh". Get it? The real Castlereagh was a pig!) The tone is overwhelmingly and stiflingly preachy. It almost reads as if designed to accompany a contemporary literary theory textbook (e.g., a lot of Australian Aborigines die, so we can do a post-colonial reading, Gould is bisexual, so we can do a Foucauldian reading, etc.). Although there are one or two interesting observations made here and there, and some mildly amusing moments, but this is a terrible novel, so overrated that the many positive reviews really make me wonder what was on the minds of the reviewers and publications. This fish story is floating on its back.