

Reconfigurations of History and Embodying Books in *Gould's Book of Fish*

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It has to be understood that Billy Gould attributed to the records a power only those immersed in paper too long can appreciate, if even then not fully comprehend. I worried that unless I did something, the lies I now dragged behind me would one day be all that remained of the settlement, & posterity would seek to judge those who had gone before—to judge Capois Death, Mr Lempriere, the Commandant, even poor Castlereagh, to judge them, to judge me—to judge us all through the machine of the Commandant's monstrous fictions! As though they were the truth! As though history & the written word were friends, rather than adversaries! (312)
—Richard Flanagan, *Gould's Book of Fish*

The above quotation from Richard Flanagan's historical novel *Gould's Book of Fish* details William Buelow Gould's thought process after his escape from Sarah Island with the volumes of falsified history created by the prison clerk, Jorgen Jorgensen, and signifies much of the novel's battle with the written word. Certainly everyone in the novel, from Gould to the modern narrator, Sid Hammet, has been "immersed in paper too long," as all use text to reconstitute their subjectivities and all become reconfigured in each other's various histories of their lives in Tasmania. The quotation also represents the anxiety felt throughout the novel about the power of written historical texts to survive far beyond the death of their original authors and to continue a harmful and violent legacy that extends from the past to the present. Flanagan's novel explores how these written documents survive, thrive, and hurt in their rigid materiality while positioning them in relation to Gould's flexible and metaphysical text, which, while still perhaps an unreliable narrative, contains gaps and holes that allow the present to potentially understand and connect with the past.

If one is to believe the story in Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*, then just the fact that the reader is holding a material book is a miracle in and of itself. The text continually shows how putting the story of convict William Gould down on paper has been an incredibly difficult task, one that is repeatedly attempted in Flanagan's novel. Though the central character and his illustrations of sea life are rooted in reality, the content that makes up *Gould's Book of Fish* is as slippery as the creatures themselves. Everything that makes up this novel is unstable: identities, time, history, facts, fiction, and reality. Flanagan makes it extremely difficult for his readers to hold onto any aspect of this strange narrative to assert a definite truth. Instead, all of these characteristics that make up the

text ebb and flow to present a tale that almost resists its solid physicality in paper and ink in the material world. True history, or the complete events of the past, is not something that can be grasped easily, like a book; it eludes such a solid embodiment. Yet, it is through the book's materiality that Flanagan is able to explore certain contradictions of the novel and the complicated relationship of fact and fiction, especially in regard to history and identity. The fluid passage between past and present, as well as the subjectivities of the novel, work to convey the idea that the past is never completely divorced from the present and future, as it still resonates strongly today.

Criticism on *Gould's Book of Fish* highlights the various moments of elusiveness that run rampant throughout the novel. While Flanagan's employments of subjectivities that elude a solid definition and his use of nonlinear temporal relationships have been adequately explored by many, including Zach Weir and Jesse Shipway, these critics routinely have the same destination in mind: the construction of a postcolonial Tasmanian future with the awareness of the postcolonial Tasmanian present. While it is important and even essential to note the instability of both time and subjectivity in the text, attention should be given to the vehicle that carries these instabilities: namely, the written word and material book itself. The figure of books is just as elusive in *Gould's Book of Fish* as are time and identity, for it is through the written word and books that Flanagan directs the reader's attention to the creation of facts and history, the idea that such things must indeed be *created*, and the connection between one's subjectivity and the text. The characters in *Gould's Book of Fish* are constantly reimagining history through the written word and, in turn, reconstruct their own identities and experiences in relation to history. The material transcripts of history enter into a dialogue with one another that reconstructs the way the present thinks of the past and situates itself within such a history. This paper will assert that the material presence of books is instrumental in the construction of histories, both official and subversive, as well as in individuals' attempts to create their own subjectivities while establishing a relationship between their selves and history.

The novel's manipulation of time and use of unstable subjectivities has been noted in criticism primarily in regard to Tasmania's postcolonial present and future. In "Wishing for Modernity: Temporality and Desire in *Gould's Book of Fish*," Shipway explores the use of temporal relationships in the creation of a desired Tasmanian modernity in Flanagan's novel. Shipway argues that the slips in linear timeline work to create a "fictional past" that then can become "the alternative future for a non-fictional present" (44). Realizing the failures and defeats that are Tasmania's history, Shipway argues that Flanagan "returns to the time of Tasmania's first modernity in order to realize his hopes and ambitions for another modernity that is yet to come" (44). Shipway argues that Flanagan fictionalizes Tasmania's past to create hope for its future by recreating Tasmania's first entry into modernity under British imperial rule.

Weir returns to this subject of time and identity and the connection with postcolonial Tasmania in “Set Adrift: Identity and the Postcolonial Present in *Gould’s Book of Fish*.” Weir writes, “Flanagan develops a strikingly unified and urgent postcolonial critique amidst the fragmented narratives of Tasmania’s past and future; unreliable William Buelow Gould becomes the collective postcolonial present, constantly forged anew, but never silenced.” Weir argues that *Gould’s Book of Fish* “relies on reader participation, intimately involving the reader in the process of meaning formation through carefully constructed traps of misrecognition and misunderstanding.” The reader is charged with sorting out the unstable subjectivities, temporal relationships, and metafictional events that occur in the convoluted narrative. Weir pays specific attention to the process of naming in the novel, noting that Gould “eludes strict labeling” as he “continually searches for new labels in his attempt to situate himself within his own narrative account, as his proper name apparently fails to suffice.” The reader of the novel must navigate through Gould’s various instabilities as well as the slipping subjectivities and relationships between the characters.

In her essay, “To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines: Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan,” Celia Wallhead takes the destination of the postcolonial present one step further by looking at the representation of the Indigenous population in Flanagan’s novel. Specifically, Wallhead looks at the representation of Aboriginal people in Australian novels and films. Wallhead argues that many contemporary authors are interested in depicting the story of the Indigenous population to contrast the printed histories that choose to completely ignore the population, lessen their struggles, or romanticize European involvement with the colonies. However, unlike Shipway and Weir, Wallhead notes the importance of the text and act of writing in the representation of history, if only briefly. Wallhead writes that the narrative approach in Flanagan’s novel “attracts attention to the concept of writing, as opposed to orality or visual representation, as a strategy to gain power over others. Another point that foregrounds textuality is the fact that it was illegal, under pain of death, for a convict to keep a journal” (18). Certainly the power of writing is routinely used in Flanagan’s novel as a form of communication, and is a site where the struggles of power and control play out. Wallhead notes the authenticity that comes with Gould’s narrative, writing that a “marginalised convict suggests that this is a subversive view, but far truer than the official authorised version that appears in the history books” (20).

Jo Jones also explores the role of books, specifically in relation to history, in her article, “‘Dancing the Old Enlightenment’: *Gould’s Book of Fish*, the Historical Novel and the Postmodern Sublime.” Jones argues that the elusiveness of the text works to represent the history that it replicates, writing: “Like Gould’s book, the colonial past and history in general is something that shifts, often according to the motivations of the story-teller or reader, unable to be pinned down in any singular sense” (116). Arguing that the novel is a postmodern critique of the Enlightenment thinking that

is still used as a basis and justification of inequality in Australia, Jones focuses much of her argument on the presence of bodily experience in *Gould's Book of Fish*. Jones argues that the novel is filled with evidence of violence done by the British colonizers on the bodies of prisoners and the Aboriginal peoples, found in skulls, tattoos, and mutilations. Jones ends by insisting on the importance of the body: "*Gould's Book of Fish* is an effective instance of storytelling that is necessarily self-referential, fragmented, anti-realist, ironic but grounded in 'the real' through the body" (128). While Jones is interested in the importance of physicality in the novel, her focus is on the bodily experience and not the significance of the material book and writing in forging history and identity.

The role of the book figures much more extensively in Xavier Pons's "'This Sad Pastiche': Texts and Contexts in Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*." Pons examines the numerous texts that make up Flanagan's novel, their relation to one another, and their historical context. Pons is interested in establishing the historical reality of these books to look at the connection between past and present, and history and fiction. He notes the places and people in the novel that are real or are historical figures, but argues that the ambiguity present in the novel that comes from the juxtaposition of fact with fiction is a deliberate move on Flanagan's part to "subvert historical discourse itself" rather than simply present a history that is closer to reality (70). Pons dissects the novel to find instances of Flanagan using or subverting historical facts to create fiction, and while the use of books figures prominently the argument is largely interested in connecting the reality outside the novel to the fiction inside the novel.

These readings of Flanagan's novel all highlight astutely the postcolonial nature of *Gould's Book of Fish*. Showcasing the violence of the British colonizers on the landscape of Australia and the Aboriginal people, Flanagan's novel is invested in exploring the effects of colonial control as well as the role of stories in asserting that control. This colonial violence is not kept separate in the past, but rather, extends into the future as these histories continue to control and occupy Australia. The present day of Australia that Sid Hammet occupies is one built on the violence and lies of the past, lies that continue in the forgery of artifacts that he sells to American tourists. Hammet continues the role of history from the colonial times: he fabricates a story, puts it into a material item (furniture rather than books) and sells it as history. Thus, not much has changed from the colonial past of penal colonies to the postcolonial present of cruise ship docks. Flanagan's novel traces the construction and forgery of history while paying close attention to the importance of the physicality of writing and putting stories onto paper. Though these selective histories that write false pasts are encased in books, the vehicle of a book is not just a tool for oppression. As Bill Ashcroft notes, *Gould's Book of Fish's* depiction of "an alternative history of Australia's penal settlement" shows the narrative construction that creates history (35). Ashcroft views this move as typical of postcolonial texts, writing: "The novel in this way performs an act of historiography that is extremely common in post-colonial writing. Pushed

to the margins of imperial history, colonial stories repeatedly found expression in literature and in this way produced a narrative that subverted the official line” (35). The written word thus becomes an important vehicle by which to inscribe and represent the colonial and postcolonial experience. Gould can only create his story through paper and ink of some sort, and the existence of this physical book is what connects the past and present through Sid Hammet’s finding the book.

Flanagan is not alone in upsetting the role of history in representations of Australia in his literature. As *Gould’s Book of Fish* has ties to reality in that there really exists a *Book of Fish* illustrated by the convict William Buelow Gould, Australian author Peter Carey has also given a fictional life to historical figures and events. Carey’s novel *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) is based on the real-life Australian bushranger Ned Kelly, and his 2003 novel *My Life as a Fake* draws inspiration from the actual Ern Malley hoax of 1943. Juxtaposing events and people known to have existed with fiction creates an ambiguity of reality that these novels are invested in creating.

This interest in combining accepted reality and fiction is also an interest in the relationship between past and present. Certain reconstructions of history in the novel attempt to separate the actual lived events from the written portrayals, to insist on a solid division between the past and present, a division that causes the material text to act out violently. Flanagan’s text conveys this idea through its construction by situating Gould’s illustrations throughout the text, as well as placing a present-day narrator at the beginning of the narrative. Both of these moves are an attempt by Flanagan to present a history that is not separated from its present and future. Likewise, this idea is explored again with fish in the content of the narrative. Gould quickly recognizes a disconnect between his created images and the actual specimen when he begins to paint fish for the aspiring scientist, Mr. Lempriere, the Surgeon. Gould’s first attempts at painting fish are stifled and unsatisfactory because, he argues, the fish are out of their natural environment and subsequently dead. In order for him to create paintings that capture the reality of the fish, as well as its less definable essence, the fish has to be placed back in water to be painted as alive. In this text within a text, Gould’s story within Hammet’s, the stories are placed side by side with these seen fish. Gould’s actual material text places the history that he lived within the context of his own experiences and creates a historical narrative that breathes and appears more alive than the histories created and admired by those in the ruling classes.

Flanagan’s novel contains the narratives of two men separated by over 150 years who come together through the mystical *Book of Fish*. From the onset of Flanagan’s novel, the subject of the actual physical existence of the *Book of Fish* challenges the reader’s preconceptions of what a book is and what a book can do. The reader is presented with the power of the *Book of Fish* when Sid Hammet, the narrator who resides in the present Tasmania, asks after finding the book and noting its unusual

luminous cover: “What was it about that gentle radiance that would come to make me think I had lived the same life over and over, like some Hindu mystic forever trapped in the Great Wheel? that was to become my fate? that stole my character? that rendered my past and my future one and indivisible?” (1). Hammet’s questions represent both the uniqueness of the *Book of Fish* and the restrictions that books contain simply because of their form. Yet this passage of Hammet’s also highlights the limitations that the materiality of the book encompasses. Hammet’s question hits on the static characteristics and limitations that occur when stories are captured by the written word and placed between covers: the exact same story, the same characters, the same outcome, are “trapped” forever, to live that “same life over and over.” Unlike oral storytelling where the story may change and evolve as it is being told, the written text seemingly eliminates this unreliability and spontaneity and instead captures one version of the story that is immune to changes. Not only does that story not change, but it also does not evolve; the life that is captured in a book truly does repeat itself. If Hammet morphs into a fish and into Gould, if Gould’s story is truly Hammet’s story, if this book has been in existence with these written words, then the specific story that is told has certainly been repeated and relived over and over again.

Yet, despite this entrapment that books may contain, the first encounters between Hammet and the book explore its strange and metaphysical characteristics. The copy of the *Book of Fish* that Hammet finds in a meat safe among women’s magazines is bizarrely dazzling in its “bright purple glow” emitted by its grimy cover (12). These purple lights will be the stimulus of the change that Hammet will soon encounter: “As I held my luminous hands up in front of my face and then slowly turned them around in wonder—hands so familiar yet so alien—it was as if I had already begun a disturbing metamorphosis” (13). It is the book, the actual material binding, that is the gateway to Hammet’s metamorphosis. It is *through* this text of history that past and present come together, not because of it. The material book acts as the gateway or vehicle to the past and to Hammet’s eventual metamorphosis to Gould as a weedy seadragon; in other words, the book itself acts as the agent that blurs the lines of temporal relationships, identities, and calls into question the legitimacy of factual history. Its physical being connects the two bodies of Hammet and Gould, bridging the gap between subjects through time and location.

Though the *Book of Fish* is a written text, it is a unique text that is still vulnerable to the changes, omissions, and additions that oral storytelling allows. The story has changed through the written word as it has constantly been re-imagined, recreated, and rewritten again and again. The text of the *Book of Fish* disappears or is destroyed only to be recreated again. By allowing the written word to remain as elusive as an oral tale, Flanagan highlights a certain fluidity to the written text that refuses the rigidity normally associated with something so permanent as a book. He also highlights the book’s involvement with history, as history is constantly expanding and changing, suggesting that the paradox of history

exists in the open: history is thought to be fact, but is actually continuously being reconfigured in the public space, insinuating that there is no real “truth,” or, if there is, it takes many texts to even begin to paint a relatively faithful picture of the past. In her essay, “Faking it: History and Creative Writing,” Camilla Nelson notes that the conservative view of history is expected to “illuminate past actualities” that will present a completely factual depiction of the past. However, Nelson argues that “[t]his places history at odds with the whole thrust of contemporary theory, which rejects not the past as such, but any idea that it can be recaptured directly—that history can function to uncover the truth.” Flanagan does not position the story of Gould as one that is completely true, or the form of the book as one that is infallible. He allows for holes to develop in texts and narratives, but in doing so criticizes those works of text that claim not to have such fallacies and that prove harmful to current and future populations.

Yet, it is not just the *Book of Fish* that is questionable, but *Gould’s Book of Fish* as well. What is this text that the reader is reading? There are two written stories being told here: the “present” tale of Hammet and the “past” tale of Gould. The material book of the *Book of Fish* no longer exists at the time of Hammet’s retelling, but the story is still told from his memory. Though the following tale is long and detailed, one must assume that it is also imperfect as it is being filtered through another’s mind. However, it is also important to note that this Victorian-era tale is being mediated through the present mind of Hammet, a man with a strong connection to his fellow counterfeiter Gould. It is a tale that is needed for Hammet to make sense of his current situation, as the past is needed for modern Tasmania to conceptualize its present. Hammet represents the present making sense of the past or, as Wallhead argues, “the present-day narrator (also representative of us, the reader, trying to recuperate the past), undertakes to reconstruct it from his memories of having read it” (18). However, it is important to note that Hammet fuses this relationship with his past Victorian doppelgänger through the written text, an act which implies the importance of such objects in our understanding and creation of our current understandings of self and identity. Hammet does not become entranced by a “legitimate” source of history, an authorized or “official” depiction of the penal colonies. Rather it is this subversive text that has slipped through time, hidden away and kept out of reach of those in control which forges a connection with Hammet.

The physical construction of *Gould’s Book of Fish* comes into play as the timeline of Flanagan’s novel jumps from Hammet’s postcolonial present to Gould’s colonial past. The two narratives easily flow into one another despite the fact that Hammet does not formally introduce Gould’s narrative. Depending on the edition that the modern reader is using, a distinction is made by the different colour print, a technique that will continue throughout the rest of the text and shows Flanagan’s awareness of the materiality of his own novel. Yet here is where modern publishing does not always align with the experience of storytelling that an author

wants to provide. Not all editions of Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* contain this rainbow print. For those readers with editions that contain the standard print colour throughout the entire text, a sense of belief in Gould's story has to be suspended; the reader is told that Gould used a variety of objects to make ink and that the ink varied in colour, but there is no proof of that on the written page. Elizabeth Webby notes that "[r]eaders of this version have to imagine, if they wish, the different colours—arguably more in keeping with the novel's status as a magic realist text—and, after all, all versions present us with print instead of manuscript" (98). While the coloured ink foregrounds the physical writing of Gould's own construction of history, the modern reader is *not* reading Gould's text (as Webby points out, the text is print, not handwritten), but Hammet's memory and reconfiguration of that text; is coloured text really necessary for a memory? However, those readers with the coloured text are a step closer in experiencing the book as Gould wrote it and as Hammet reads it. It also continues the illusion that Hammet's subjectivity, story, and experiences are not entirely separated from those of Gould. The contemporary reader can, like Hammet, melt into Gould's story, recognizing the coloured text as a product of Gould's creation but not question how such a text still survives. The reader is positioned in Hammet's mind and can now see the colour of the text as Hammet saw it in the *Book of Fish*. This modern publishing decision shows that books can present various experiences based on their materiality and characteristics. The vehicle of telling the story can change the experience of that story.

The addition of coloured ink was a very definite and intentional choice of Flanagan's to best replicate Gould's narrative. Flanagan explains his choice for having the book published in different coloured ink, writing, "Billy Gould thinks in colours and consequently the book is printed in six different coloured inks. These colours reflect the difficulty of his making his book, an activity for which the direst punishment is reserved...the colour propels the story on, as colour does in a good movie" (Flanagan qtd in Matthews and Moody 66). Various paperback editions of the book only present the illustrations in black and white, again denying the reader the experience of fully immersing themselves in Gould's historical narrative. What is even more unfortunate than the loss of the coloured ink in some publications is the displacement of the fish illustrations. The Australian paperback edition of the novel has an appendix in the back of the book containing the illustrations rather than keeping their intentional placement at the beginning of each chapter (Matthews and Moody 66). Unfortunately, this eliminates the stress on the cyclical motion of reading Flanagan's novel, a motion that physically would occur when the reader flips through the pages to look at the illustration after reading about the fish in the text. It is a physical motion that would occur when reading that replicates the timeline of the story that begins and ends with Gould as a fish and reinforces the idea that history is forever moving backward and forward, always revising itself.

Before Hammet encounters the strange anomaly of the disappearing *Book of Fish* and his subsequent metamorphosis, he experiences the harsh critique of esteemed professionals who all dismiss the text as fraudulent and of little importance. The physical properties of the book account for the authenticity of its age, but all of the professionals discount the entire text based on the story alone. The *Book of Fish* does not read like the conventional history texts that are recognized as such and admired. This realization is communicated to Hammet by an eminent colonial-history professor who denounces the book as a fake. Like the other professionals, the professor recognizes that the logistics of Gould's story are true, including the existence and location of the penal colony, but the details that actually make up the flesh of the story are completely discarded. The professor lectures to Hammet that history "is what you cannot see. History has power. But a fake has none" (18). In contrast, the *Book of Fish*, as well as *Gould's Book of Fish*, is notable in its visual characteristics; both texts in their construction are begging literally to be seen. The *Book of Fish* was made to be looked at with its bright watercolour illustrations, coloured ink, hodgepodge text, and luminous cover. It is a text that visibly represents the history as Gould lived it. Likewise, Flanagan's modern text as he desires it to be created seeks to represent the experiences of reading Gould's text as faithfully as possible through the usage of Gould's illustrations at the beginning of the chapters and the coloured ink. However, the expert in colonial history does not recognize this contribution to history that Gould's book makes and continues to lecture Hammet on the fraudulent nature of the book, while Hammet understands that this history professor "looked for truth in facts and not in stories, that history for him was no more than the pretext for a rueful fatalism" (20). Such a man would not find anything worthwhile in a text that is entirely made up of stories.

Just as the material book is a contradictory artifact in Hammet's experience, the act of authoring continues to be a questionable, as well as prevalent, activity in Gould's narrative. While reading the narrative, modern readers are aware that the story presented to them is filtered through Hammet's memory of the *Book of Fish* and may therefore be modified from the original. However, the *Book of Fish* that Hammet first encounters is not the original either. Instead, Gould admits that this actual story and the material book are both continually being recreated. In the confinement of his dank cell, Gould creates the book on fragments of paper and ink made from whatever materials he can find. Gould writes, "In Pobjoy's dull dog-like eyes I can see he knows it's the second time around for me on the fish; he can see that I paint from my memory of my first book of fish that was so cruelly taken from me" (52). Like Hammet's telling, Gould continually recreates this book from memory. He is paradoxically telling the story through history while living the events, and at the same time he is always removed from what he writes, filtering the tale through his mind. Yet, it is a tale that Gould feels the need to write again and again. He writes so much that the text overlaps on pages,

doubling back to present quite a long volume for someone who had to fight and suffer for every scrap of paper and drop of ink. Gould refuses to let his lived experience disintegrate and disappear forever. In a Lacanian move, the creation of this physical object that represents Gould's life and history reflects back to Gould his own subjectivity and even assurance of his existence. In a reality where subjectivities are so entirely fluid and unstable, a text may be the thing to attempt to solidify a subjectivity long enough to live it and explore its relationship with external factors. Though the historian may not recognize the authenticity of Gould's tale, it is a story that he must write in order to escape from the histories that would have him forever trapped in a false world. He is able to write himself into history and create a voice that the official history of the present would have silenced. It is only through writing that Gould is able to forge a connection to his present and make sure his past will resonate with the future.

The text then that Gould creates is very different from the modern book that Flanagan's readers enjoy. As an imprisoned convict, Gould uses whatever items he can to create the ink that he writes with. He is forced to use created inks from fish, stones and, in one case, his own blood: "I have knocked a few scabs off my elbow & am dipping my quill carved from a shark's rib into the blood that oozes slowly forth to write what you are now reading" (48). Gould's ink and his shark rib quill are physical objects from the island; he is, in fact, writing history with historical artifacts. Though he asserts that he would much rather be writing with a real quill and ink, this infusing of Van Diemen's Land and Gould's life render his narrative a very realistic and true depiction of his story and history that he wishes to represent. What is more, he notes these details in his text as he wants to emphasize the materiality of his writing to himself and any readers who might come across his words. His history is certainly more embodied than the overly verbose histories that Jorgen Jorgensen will create. Gould's text remains more fluid and elusive than the other constructed "factual" texts found in *Gould's Book of Fish* in its content that contains such a convoluted plot, as well as in its physicality that allows the book to be destroyed, dissolve, and disappear. In contrast to the dangerously solid texts of Jorgensen, Gould's text much more reflects the flexibility of the oral tradition, providing gaps in the narrative that allow for contemporary and future readers to assert their own identity in their retelling.

In particular, Gould's narrative as history is placed in contrast with the constructed history of Jorgen Jorgensen, the Danish clerk of the penal colony. Jorgensen worked to fill volumes upon volumes of books with a false history of Sarah Island, a history "that would accord with expectation & not reality" (284). Jorgensen creates a history that is not meant to be faithful to actual events, but instead to be faithful to both the present and future expectations of what a respectable history of such a place should look like. Like the histories that Wallhead criticizes for their convenient overlooking of unpleasant material, Jorgensen completely rewrites the

system of Sarah Island, eliminating any aspects that may reflect negatively on the penal colony. Wallhead writes that Flanagan's novel uses these false histories to argue that there is no essential truth, as they "(mis)represent the Other in the terms that the coloniser wants to see or hear" (8). Jorgensen's history is not one of the convict, but one of the colonizer, a history specially tailored to satisfy the egos of those already in charge.

Later describing Jorgensen's history, Gould writes, "For the world no longer existed to become a book. A book now existed with the obscene ambition of becoming the world" (291). Jorgensen's history shows signs of the violent tendency that such histories have by reconstructing a false world that can soon trick readers into believing that it is a reality. Though Hammet accuses the historian he meets of despising stories in the pursuit of facts, Gould's discovery of Jorgensen's counterfeit shows that history may indeed be a creation as much as any fictional story. Jorgensen manufactures every item that would be necessary for a respectable and conventionally believable piece of history, including statistics, charts, and graphs. Jorgensen's texts have the familiar characteristics that make up the conventional histories respected by those like the professor whom Hammet visits with the *Book of Fish*. It also contains actual stories, backdrops for the created characters that populate Sarah Island, like the Commandant. Though the Commandant as represented in Gould's text is as much a constructed character as any, Jorgensen re-imagines him to give him a respectable background story that would lend him credibility as a leader of a penal colony.

However, despite its materiality, Jorgensen's history lacks the bodily physicality that legitimizes Gould's text, as Jorgensen's history is written with proper ink on proper pages. Gould reacts strongly against Jorgensen's history because of its falsity as well as its actual violence to the subjectivities that it attempts to capture and represent. Perhaps its greatest use of violence is Jorgensen's use of time as a rigid, impermeable barrier. Gould explains that "Time [...] was in these accounts something separate from us—so many equally weighted bricks that together made the wall of the present that denied us any connection with the past, & thus any knowledge of our self" (285-286). Unlike Gould's representation of time that ebbs and flows, connecting the past, present, and future, Jorgensen's time is rigid and violent, separating past and present, as well as splitting subjectivities. He separates the body of lived experience from his presented history so it is no wonder that Gould becomes physically ill and vomits after reading Jorgensen's history. Wallhead writes,

Here he finds that the truth about convict and colonial life has been completely erased and rewritten by the Danish chronicler Jorgen Jorgensen. The horrors of the daily life of the marginalised and victimised, the tortured and mortally sick prisoners and natives have been eliminated, making it appear that life in the colonies was, if not a bed of roses, at least fair play and civilised. Gould feels this is an insult to his personal suffering and that of his fellow prisoners, past, present and future. (22)

It is as if Gould's body has already felt the violence being done unto it, the forced separation of body from life. The destruction of life that Jorgensen's text attempts is too much for Gould's already drunken body to handle.

Jorgensen's fabricated tales in their physicality are tomes of violence that ultimately lead to his own death. During Jorgensen's scuffle with Gould, the bookcase holding the numerous heavy texts falls, burying Jorgensen in the heavy books containing his fabricated history. The books become those "weighted bricks," destroying Jorgensen in their creation of a constructed past. Gould explains that he last sees Jorgensen "uselessly trying to parry with his sword those huge tomes that now were falling upon him heavy as boulders, ubiquitous as rain, dreadful as an avalanche" (295). These volumes are dangerous in their heaviness made by the false words Jorgensen has recorded. This history takes over the lives of those living under it: Jorgensen is buried underneath the fraudulent history he created, and this history is also literally situated above Gould as he lives in his underwater cell below the office. The texts begin to take over his life and direct his future for the rest of the narrative as he steals the books that will ultimately lead to the destruction of Sarah Island.

Words continue to have this destructive force throughout Gould's text as they punish another character who attempts to recreate history through textual representation. It was under Mr. Lempriere, the Surgeon, that Gould was first assigned to paint the native fish of Van Diemen's Land for a naturalist science text. The Surgeon is desperate for recognition from the European scientific community, particularly Sir Cosmo Wheeler, his scientific contact in England. When the fish are discarded by Sir Wheeler, the Surgeon takes up studying craniums to prove the superiority of Caucasians over other races, especially the Aboriginal people of the island. However, like the dehumanization that Jorgensen's words cause, the Surgeon is also stripped of his humanity and subsequently trapped forever in text. Exploring the text that participated in Jorgensen's death, Gould finds it to be a "large and elegant folio" entitled *Crania Tasmania* by Sir Cosmo Wheeler, a text that the Surgeon contributed to feverishly with his cranium studies. Though the Surgeon meticulously collected and prepared the craniums for Wheeler's study, he does not find immortality as a scientist, but rather as a specimen. It is the Surgeon's head that, unbeknownst to all but Gould, makes up skull MH-36 in a "scientific" text that positions itself to prove Caucasian superiority. A review of the book prizes the Surgeon's skull as the definite proof of degeneracy in the "Negro" race, as well as the skull that conveys "hideous depravity" (302). The review continues: "The marks of mental inferiority and racial degeneration are everywhere evident in the corrupted cranial features so splendidly illustrated in the book, and generally lends weight to the growing body of scientific knowledge that such a wretched, if fascinating, species must have been created separately from European man" (303). Wheeler's reconstruction of this particular history is praised by his contemporaries because it follows the tradition of conventional

historical and scientific texts, including containing illustrations that *show* these facial features that apparently “prove” inferiority. Again, illustrations are important in representing history both visually and through the words of the text. Gould’s text includes his own illustrations of the fish, which Flanagan includes in the novel, playing with the idea of what an authenticated history book looks like. Regardless, the Surgeon is punished for contributing to such a dangerous text with his violent death and eternal entrapment as a “Negro” skull. Nelson warns that “narrative does not reflect so much as it actually *produces* reality, moving beyond the realm of the purely imaginary to become part of material culture, with material effects (which can be large or small, progressive or regressive, good or bad).” While the progression of the Surgeon from doctor to pig waste to the model of inferiority is darkly humorous, Flanagan showcases the true dangers of false facts that can go on to destroy lives all in the name of science.

After fleeing jail with Jorgensen’s books, Gould encounters another configuration of the history of Van Diemen’s Land when he discovers the journal of Matt Brady, a runaway convict turned legendary would-be hero. The only interaction Gould has with Brady is through the written text of Brady’s journal, his own creation of history. When Gould finds the diary, he explains that he experiences only “disappointment & disillusionment,” for reading had become a depressing prospect, an event that “seemed to turn my entire life upside down, disturb & distress me beyond compare, & make me think everything I had hitherto taken for granted about this world was all cack-handed & wrong” (347). Before even reading Brady’s text, Gould is feeling the harmful effects of the physical recreations of his present; it is no surprise that he is hesitant to enter into another one. Brady’s journal, like Gould’s *Book of Fish*, shows signs of its historical presentness in its physicality as it is made from wallaby hide, sinew, and ochre. Despite its physical similarities to Gould’s text, the written narrative inside confirms Gould’s suspicions of disillusionment. Its contents do not support the imagined image of Brady as a convict hero and new leader, but rather, reconstitutes him as a love-struck man interested in recording trite and formulaic ramblings. Though this diary is true to Brady, it is still harmful to Gould as it reconfigures the imagined Brady from this important savior to the actuality of a simple runaway man. After digesting Brady’s embarrassingly cliché-ridden journal, Gould tries to literally ingest the text by eating the book in an attempt to forge some sort of physical relationship with the text, to make it feel like part of his history and present condition, something that he could relate to.

The strange and powerful figure of the Commandant is not impervious to the seduction of the written word and the alternate world it can create. His texts are not the heavy, falsified volumes of Jorgensen, the immoral pseudo-scientific texts that capture the Surgeon, or even the mystical and illuminating *Book of Fish*. Instead, the Commandant translates his historical desires physically onto the land by translating the letters of his fake sister into buildings and railroads. The letters from Miss

Anne, filled with descriptions of a new European modernity, inspired in the Commandant “a passion demanding demonstration” (155). It is her words that take on a strange power to call these things of modernity into being, as if the words themselves actually invented the modern age of Europe for the Commandant. Because of the power of her words, the Commandant sets to recreate her Europe on Sarah Island by turning her text into a physical reality. Miss Anne’s texts become violent in their reconstruction by the Commandant, as Gould describes, “the hundreds who died in its construction, the thousands who were maimed & crippled in the forging of the iron, the cutting & carrying of the timber, the quarrying of the stone, the masonry, the carpentry” (185). Again, others of unprotected classes like the convicts and Aboriginal people, fall victim to the power of the written word. However, the apparent fraudulent nature of her words eventually overcomes the Commandant and the physical representations themselves. Though her text becomes larger than life when lines from her letters are replicated on the walls of a Mah-Jong Hall, they slowly deteriorate with the building. Like Gould’s fish out of water, Miss Anne’s words of a European modernity do not belong on Van Diemen’s Land and, after ruining both the natural resources and the people of the land, fall to ruin. Like the buildings and his hopes for a new Europe, the Commandant’s connection to Miss Anne’s letters dissolves as the island erupts in flame. As the words and buildings burn and fall to the ground, the Commandant feels the dissolving of the “unbearable weight of inanimate objects that had become a massive anchor chaining him for so long” to his identity as the Commandant, his location on Sarah Island, and his own life—all things he no longer wished to partake in (370). The history of words, that he himself was an active participant in, shackled him tightly to a history that was never truly meant to be his.

Gould’s Book of Fish is filled with people who both construct a view of their present condition through text as well as engage in relationships with others solely through text. In looking through all of these various reconstructed histories, obvious similarities abound among their authors. All of these men, Gould, Hammet, Jorgensen, the Surgeon, Brady, and the Commandant, are forgers and creators of their own identity. Nelson suggests that the “bogus” or counterfeit might present us with a way of intervening in the discourses of reality—of questioning the discourses (like history) through which reality constructs itself.” Certainly Flanagan’s use of such unstable figures works to present various readings of history: while they highlight the subjective creation of history, they call into question past history as well as this specific history. Flanagan encourages his readers to think of the construction of history, whom specific histories benefit, and what relationships are being exploited.

Perhaps the most climatic relationship is between Jorgensen’s text and the rest of the Island. Twopenny Sal uses the pages from Jorgensen’s text to light a fire to cremate Tracker Marks. When Gould attempts to stop her, he finds pages of text that he himself had written, text that he had not yet written, descriptions of his person, and text that described his

experiences at that very moment. The physical form of the book again rears its ugly head, threatening complete control, as Gould writes, “Billy Gould could not escape the growing suspicion that he had become entrapped in a book, a character whose future as much as his past was already written, determined, foretold, as unalterable as it was intolerable” (336). This fear is incredibly similar to the one felt by Hammet at the beginning of *Gould’s Book of Fish*, an anxiety that one is forever reliving the same life over and over again. If Jorgensen’s text had survived, this certainly would have been true for Gould. He would have been forever painted as Jorgensen thought fit for the books, unable to escape his defined position in the history of Sarah Island. Instead, he lets it all burn: “Onto that pyre those descriptions of so many individual pasts, their implicit idea of a single future, & how those hungry flames shrieked with delight! As Pobjoy so long ago told me, definitions belong to the definer, not the defined, & I no longer wished to have my life & death foretold by others” (337). Feeding on these false histories, the bonfire of words rages and burns the whole island. These words of history, false or true, ignite and destroy, in an attempt to erase all the material evidence that the words were ever connected to.

However, Gould is neither entirely free from his past nor able to completely discard it. He refuses to flee from the penal colony with Twopenny Sal, writing: “But I whose obsession had been the past & its chronicles, found myself without either the desire of [sic] the energy to follow Twopenny Sal into the future” (340). Gould is perhaps too tied to the past, the pages of history, the written word. He is unable to continue on with Twopenny Sal and instead morphs into a fish, a creature that always appears to be in suspended animation as it floats through water. Even as a fish, he longs for language, again betraying his shackles to the written text. Yet he is not completely stuck in the past, and he is not continuing on in the future. He seems to simply exist, a timeless creature who ultimately leaves Flanagan’s reader unsure of what to make of his text: what was real, what was fake, what was the past, and what was the present. All of these contradictions are ultimately embodied in Gould, in a history that the readers are given as an alternative to other histories that have only destroyed lives. *Gould’s Book of Fish* sets out to convey the folly in believing that authentic, responsible history is a solid thing that can be grasped, like a book, but as Flanagan shows, history is as easy to hold as water.

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