

‘The Impossibility of Knowing’: Developing Magical Realism’s Irony in *Gould’s Book of Fish*

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The convict William Gould, the eponymous narrator in *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001), is only being sympathetic when he reflects on the Tasmanian Aboriginal people as ‘doomed savages regarded by us convicts as slaves below themselves.’ ‘By their own account,’ says Gould, ‘they were a free & noble people who had given up their nation for exile & who in return would be looked after by the government & did not have to work like we did’ (216). Of course, they were not looked after, as the Van Diemen’s Land colonial administration forced what was left of the Indigenous population on to tiny Flinders Island where many of them would die of disease and heartbreak.

Gould’s comment erupts from a fatalistic anger at the brutality and destructiveness of the colonial system, not only against Indigenous Tasmanians but also against British convicts like himself. Yet his sympathy for the ‘doomed’ locals is constrained by his lack of knowledge of who they really are, his empathy separated from his understanding by the chasm of a rigid, early nineteenth-century European world view. From a contemporary perspective, readers can imbue in Gould’s remark a lament for a fading pre-modern society destroyed by the imperialist, rationalist culture to which Gould belongs.

It is this gap between a twenty-first century reader’s lament for a lost world and the nineteenth-century narrator’s rage about the disappearance of that culture, one which he cannot fully comprehend, that instils *Gould’s Book of Fish* with a particular kind of irony. Given that irony is an underlying factor of magical realism, as Maria Takolander and others assert, then author Richard Flanagan’s book plays a critical role in the development of the narrative mode in contemporary Australian fiction. Flanagan exploits and plays with this irony by using a range of epistemological magical realist techniques and associated metafictional devices—such as dual texts and narratives, the fracturing of time, metamorphosis, the questioning of identity, and alternative histories—with the result that, as contemporary readers, we are restricted to merely glimpsing a sophisticated pre-modern society that is now largely lost. Moreover, the text creates a second type of irony by attacking the European Enlightenment and Western metaphysics, as being tools for imperialist domination and the subjugation of Indigenous societies, while at the same time upholding the Enlightenment’s humanitarian ideals.

By magical realism, I take Lois Zamora’s and Wendy Faris’s definition of literature in which the supernatural is presented as an everyday occurrence, where the supernatural is integrated into literary realism (Zamora and Faris 3). This basic definition underscores the irony of the narrative mode because the supernatural is the opposite of what a reader would expect to emanate out of realism. Two apparently binary world views are juxtaposed within the text. Critics generally agree that magical realism broadly falls into two categories. Ontological magical realism, the best known kind of the narrative mode, is based on cultural beliefs or practices from the text’s setting and is often associated with Latin American fiction.

Epistemological magical realism, however, derives from non-cultural sources or the observer's vision, and is often aligned with postmodern or metafictional writers like Salman Rushdie. Yet writers often use both kinds of magical realism in the same text (Bowers 91).

Definitions of magical realism, however, 'rarely' acknowledge the inherent role of irony, as Takolander highlights (Takolander, 'Magical Realism and Fakery' 167). The irony exists as an act of complicity between the author and the reader by which the latter must appreciate the former's contrived fusion of fantasy and fact, the magical and the quotidian. The 'representation of the unreal as real,' says Takolander, involves a 'paradigmatically ironic' narrative procedure. 'The presence of irony in magical realist fiction,' she adds, 'discourages a literal interpretation of its albeit literally related marvels' (Takolander, *Catching Butterflies* 205–06). Brenda Cooper argues that magical realist texts which portray a 'pre-scientific view of the world that some of their characters may hold' prevent the author from presenting this in 'an unmediated, undistanced way,' because of the gulf that exists between author and characters. This results in an 'ironic distance' between Western educated writers and 'the magical worldview' (Cooper 33–34). Yet Cooper qualifies her position by maintaining that at the same time magical realist writers must also have a genuine respect for, and faith in, the beliefs that are fictionally portrayed. Certainly this is what we see in Flanagan, who as a white settler author portrays Tasmanian Aboriginal spirituality at an ironic distance while simultaneously holding it in high esteem, not only in *Gould's Book of Fish* but also in his debut novel, *Death of a River Guide* (1994), and *Wanting* (2008). Yet it would be erroneous to imply that all magical realist writers are entirely distanced from their characters' 'magical' outlook. Nigerian author Ben Okri, for instance, presents a fictionalised version of abiku spirits as real in *The Famished Road* (1991). Similarly, Australian Aboriginal author Alexis Wright's depiction of ancestral spirits in *Carpentaria* (2006) is meant to be read as matter-of-fact. Nevertheless, as Christopher Warnes points out, authors such as Okri and Wright still exploit magical realism's irony 'to demonstrate the impossibility of knowing what is "really real"' (Warnes 140–41).

Gould's Book of Fish, Flanagan's third novel, which won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 2002, inverts received assumptions about historical reality. On one level, the book is a picaresque romp through colonial Tasmania in the early 1800s based on the not very reliable reminiscences of Gould, a convicted forger, painter of fish and inveterate raconteur. On another level, the novel is a Gothic horror tale in its reimagining of a violent, brutal and oppressive penal colony whose militaristic regime subjugated both the imported and original inhabitants. The text is also a critique of the European Enlightenment, questioning the underlying rationalist philosophies of the colonisers and championing an indigenous—with a small 'i'—viewpoint associated more with spirituality, ecology and intuition.

Originally a Rhodes Scholar historian, Flanagan has mined the contentious history of Tasmania, where he was born and has lived most of his life, for much of his fiction. If magical realism is 'most visibly operative in cultures situated at the fringe of mainstream literary traditions,' as Stephen Slemon suggests (408), then Flanagan embodies this attribute of the narrative mode. He is geographically situated in a marginal island off a marginal continent in the opposite hemisphere to the imperial, metropolitan cultural centres of London, New York and Paris. But Flanagan turns this marginality, both of location and of mindset, into an advantage by attacking the foundations of European metaphysics, culture and imperialism.

Over the past decade or so, the critical reception to *Gould's Book of Fish* has largely related to the book's colonial characteristics. Although several critics have indentified the novel's magical realist aspects, for the most part they have not explored this topic in depth. Zach Weir, for example, says the novel's 'gritty realism' 'constantly flirts with the magical and fantastical,' yet he focuses on Flanagan's attempt to find a 'collective Tasmanian postcolonial identity' and his use of metafictional techniques. Xavier Pons correctly identifies Flanagan's intertextual play and the use of an unreliable narrator as being characteristic of 'magic realism,' but discusses the novel as a pastiche of history and a work of metafiction.

The exception, however, is Tanja Schwalm's excellent 2006 essay, in which she compares circensian spaces—or the blurring of the distinction between humans and animals—in magical realist novels that include *Gould's Book of Fish* and Peter Carey's *Illywhacker* (1985). Schwalm points out, perceptively, that in these two books 'natural history is intimately linked with Australia's past as a penal colony' through the Linnean system of classification, or taxonomy. Schwalm adds that 'conceptual delineation is reinforced by physical incarceration' in both novels 'as natural history is a manifestly carceral narrative' (Schwalm 91). Gould writes his own life story in ink, blood and anything else he can find while he is incarcerated in a jail cell subject to tidal flooding on Sarah Island, Tasmania's harshest penal outpost for its worst convicts on the remote and rugged west coast. In Carey's *Illywhacker*, which is arguably the most important magical realist novel in Australian literature prior to *Gould's Book of Fish*, a similarly unreliable narrator, Herbert Badgery, ends up living in a cage among human exhibits in his son's Best Pet Shop in the World. Yet despite her analysis, Schwalm does not explore more broadly how Flanagan utilises magical realism in *Gould's Book of Fish*.

He does so by employing a range of what may be called epistemological magical realist techniques. These enable Flanagan to keep his authorial ironic distance from the magical world view of pre-modern Tasmanian Indigenous people, by reimagining a sense of their pre-colonial society indirectly, rather than directly. As a result, Flanagan navigates around his position as a white settler author without inadvertently appropriating Aboriginal cultural property and thereby perpetuating an aspect of the colonisation process. This epistemological approach is symptomatic of white settler postcolonial writers when portraying Indigenous societies in a magical realist framework. Carey, for example, employs the same indirect approach in representing Aboriginal Australians in *Illywhacker*, and, to a lesser extent, *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988).

In *Gould's Book of Fish*, the most obvious epistemological magical realist technique is what gives the novel its distinctive structure: the dual texts that interweave and, towards the end, ultimately merge. The novel's first narrator, Sid Hammet, who lives in the fictional present, discovers the convict Gould's notebook, called *Book of Fish*, in a colonial sandstone warehouse in Hobart. Hammet realises it is 'no ordinary book' (11) for it 'never really started and never quite finished' (14), suggesting a non-linear concept of time. The notebook's cover glows with 'a mass of pulsating purple spots' (13), and Hammet believes the manuscript contains 'some magic that might somehow convey or explain something fundamental' (16). The two texts first intersect when Hammet loses Gould's notebook in the Republic Hotel (24), and Hammet proceeds 'to rewrite the *Book of Fish*' from 'memories, good and bad, reliable and unreliable' (28). Another hint at the inter-relatedness of the two texts occurs forty-one pages in, at the start of the novel's second chapter, which is also the beginning of Gould's narrative: a note states that the first forty pages of Gould's 'notebook are missing.'

Towards the end of the novel the dual texts merge when Gould tries in vain to recover his notebook from the funeral pyre stoked by his Aboriginal lover, Twopenny Sal. Gould has an epiphany, realising he is reading his own fate, which is presented as a *mise en abyme*:

Trying desperately to avoid the conclusion that if this book of fish was a history of the settlement, it might also just be its prophecy, I then realised that the book was not near ended, that it contained several more chapters, & with mounting terror I read on the succeeding page of how—‘I realised that the book was not near ended, that it contained several more chapters . . .’ (337)

The effect is akin to an intertextual loop, in which the novel’s text merges with Gould’s text. This narrative interplay, which implies a circular notion of time, is a prime example of how magical realism disrupts the Western conception of linear time (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 23). In *Gould’s Book of Fish*, the consistent overlapping between the novel’s framing story involving Sid Hammet and Gould’s narrative creates what Weir aptly describes as ‘the postcolonial present,’ given that there is no distinct separation between the fictional present and the historical past. By fusing time in a circular movement, the text serves to remind the reader that the postcolonial present is defined by its colonial past, that the human actions in Gould’s time created consequences that are still being felt in the reader’s time.

The novel’s central literary conceit, characters evolving into fish, is another epistemological magical realist element. Metamorphosis is common to magical realist literature (Faris, ‘Scheherazade’s Children’ 178), but in *Gould’s Book of Fish* it is used to emphasise the fluidity of identity and humanity’s deep connection with nature that is otherwise suppressed by rationalism. For Gould, metamorphosis reveals that ‘men’s lives are not progressions . . . they are a series of transformations’ (305). This is played out as Gould the convict forger and artist paints human portraits that take on piscatorial features. For instance, the Surgeon, who embodies the worst aspects of the Enlightenment and a scientific, rationalist world view, becomes a porcupine fish (138). The Sarah Island penal colony’s Commandant, who represents the insane extreme of imperialist delusions of grandeur, resembles a stargazer fish (173). The main Indigenous character, Twopenny Sal, morphs into a striped cowfish (273). Gould himself, in the historical past, eventually metamorphoses into a weedy seadragon that is the same weedy seadragon into which Hammet, in the fictional present two centuries later, metamorphosed at the start of the novel. Faris argues that the literal metamorphoses of characters in magical realist fiction occur in response to ‘cosmic forces beyond their control,’ which contrasts with the way characters in realistic novels rise or fall, or transform metaphorically, in response to social and psychological forces (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 138). The metamorphosing of humans into fish is a response to the regression of human behaviour, given that the savage barbarity of the Sarah Island penal colony is a perverse, and ironic, outcome of the imperialist, rationalist project. Gould’s metamorphosis into a weedy seadragon represents human evolution ‘going on in reverse,’ from land creatures to sea creatures rather than the other way around as Darwinism asserts. This evolutionary reversal implies, as Hammet says, that ‘we are already sad, dumb fish’ (3).

The book’s ironic theme of biological regression is reinforced by a questionable narrative, albeit one that purports to tell the ‘truth.’ Like Herbert Badgery in *Illywhacker*, Gould as an unreliable narrator personifies the unreliability of orthodox history, pointing to the artifice of historiography and blurring the boundaries between fiction and history. As Rushdie writes: ‘History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings’ (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 25). Also like Badgery, Gould is a self-confessed

liar. Not only is he a convicted forger, but Gould also admits to being ‘the most untrustworthy guide you will ever trust’ (53). His cautioning echoes Saleem Sinai in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), who, in another unreliable narrative in a magical realist text, asks the reader to ‘swallow’ his stories as a ‘commingling of the improbable and the mundane’ (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 9).

By highlighting the ambiguity of history and by presenting fictional alternative histories, postcolonial magical realism seeks to reimagine the history of the colonised. In this aspect of ‘historiographic metafiction,’ to use Linda Hutcheon’s term, that explains much of the attraction of magical realist fiction. Hutcheon describes this kind of metafiction as a self-reflexive critical reworking of history, with a ‘theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs’ (Hutcheon 5). Flanagan exploits this self-reflexive critical reworking of history in *Gould’s Book of Fish*. The author acknowledges this when he writes about a Tasmanian literary tradition that is ‘indigenous’ and ‘subversive,’ and challenges the established order (Flanagan, ‘Another Country’ 92). Here, he means indigenous with a lower-case ‘i’, evoking not only Tasmania’s original inhabitants but also the convicts, many of whom were political prisoners, for example from Ireland. Gould’s baroque nightmare of the hellish conditions for convicts in Sarah Island, as well as the decimation of the Aboriginal people, challenge the accepted history of a peaceful British ‘settlement.’ Indeed, Gould proclaims that his intention in writing his notebook was ‘to create a record of this place, a history of its people & its stories . . . all those faceless people who have no portraits’ (384). The reimagining of a colonised people’s history is evident in many canonical magical realist texts. For example, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* the machine-gun massacre of banana plantation workers by the army that is covered up by the authorities (García Márquez 247–52) mirrors the actual massacre of striking workers of the United Fruit Company in Colombia in 1928 (Martin 108).

Gould’s Book of Fish, therefore, employs magical realism to create a fantastical fictional version of the historical Tasmanian penal colony. Yet in doing so, the novel pushes into the background of the text the early Aboriginal Tasmanians and their society. In other words, the epistemological magical realist techniques at once qualify and distance the text’s depiction of pre-modern Aboriginal culture. This is the novel’s central irony. Gould, as the first person narrator, confined as he is to a convict’s barracks and life of hard labour, can only ever have a limited knowledge of the Indigenous society, its mores and spirituality. Gould admits as much when he watches Twopenny Sal dance around Tracker Marks’s funeral pyre, saying he feels ‘as if we shared something that transcended our bodies & our histories,’ but also realises ‘I only sensed that I knew none of it’ (333). Other references in the text to Aboriginal spirituality, as interpreted by Gould, are simplistic and lack detail. For instance, Gould recounts how ‘Numminer’ is ‘their word for ghosts and the white man,’ and adds that Aboriginal people ‘believed England was where their spirits went after death to be reborn as English men & women, that the white men were their ancestors returned’ (271). It is as though the text suggests that, from a white person’s perspective, Indigenous spirituality may be ultimately unknowable. This facet of *Gould’s Book of Fish* is an example of what Cooper calls the ‘corrosive irony’ of magical realism. On occasions, she says, the narrative mode’s irony ‘allows a destructive ambiguity to enter and to wreak havoc with the novel’s sense of purpose’ (Cooper 30). On the one hand, I do not mean to suggest that the irony in Flanagan’s book is destructive. But on the other hand, by maintaining a qualified distance from the Indigenous pre-modern society, it seems at times as if the novel’s cleverness almost overwhelms its sincerity.

In contrast to *Gould's Book of Fish*, Flanagan achieves a more detailed description of pre-modern Indigenous Tasmanians in *Death of a River Guide*, which also has elements of magical realism, although not to the same extent as the later book. The magical realist visionary dream sequences by *River Guide* narrator Aljaz Cosini of his Aboriginal ancestors at the inception of, and after, the European occupation of Tasmania is integral to Cosini's own story of discovering he is of mixed Aboriginal and European heritage. If *Death of a River Guide* is a literary manifestation of the desire for reconciliation between black and white, as Marc Delrez argues, Gould's tale highlights the ironic gaps between the two cultures, with Indigenous characters playing a secondary role to Gould's main convict story.

A different kind of irony, however, underlies *Gould's Book of Fish's* attack on the Enlightenment and Western metaphysics' rationalist, scientific view of the world, while at the same time seeking to uphold the humanitarian ideals that the movement betrayed in nineteenth-century Australia. Michiko Kakutani, reviewing the book in the *New York Times*, notes that the novel is a 'surreal examination' of 'the ambivalent legacy of the French Enlightenment.' Its legacy is ambivalent because the imperialist execution of the Enlightenment, which firmly took hold in Britain, betrayed its humanitarian ideals of emancipation and equality. Although the Enlightenment's philosophical underpinning was a scientific approach to understanding the world, which held that the rational intellect could explain anything, in a cultural sense this was mixed with a free-market commercial imperative to continually seek out new markets for profit, and a political imperative to expand sovereign frontiers to new territories. In Australia, the Enlightenment rationale resulted in a penal colony that was essentially a totalitarian, militaristic state, at least at the outset. In Gould's time, in the early nineteenth century, at the commencement of the colonisation process, the Enlightenment resulted in a hellish gulag for its prisoners and the attempted genocide of the Indigenous population. Freedom and liberty were sacrificed for commercial and political expediency.

Gould describes himself as 'the Murderer of the Enlightenment' (265), and indeed he is, in that the novel's protagonist challenges and attacks the Enlightenment's central precepts of rational epistemology and the notion of historical 'progress.' But the text also tries to uphold the movement's humanitarian ideals. According to Jo Jones:

While Flanagan rejects what he sees as the oppressive effects of the Enlightenment, or more specifically the Enlightenment Project, he retains an Enlightenment sense of liberal engagement as a key principle in combating present injustices and inequalities. (115)

By the Enlightenment Project, Jones means the effect of universalising ideals, reason, positivism, materialism and the will to power. Flanagan uses a range of epistemological magical realist techniques to achieve Gould's 'murder' of the Enlightenment. At each point he attacks various underlying philosophical positions of Western epistemology while attempting to supplant them with a small-'i' indigenous philosophy based on spiritualism coupled with an ecological, intuitive world view. For instance, Gould proclaims, in answer to why he paints, that 'you must find beauty in the most adverse of worlds' (266). And he eventually realises that freedom is found in the natural world, when the Aboriginal Tracker Marks says that the elusive bushranger Matthew Brady, whom the authorities keep failing to apprehend, exists in the rocks, tarns and fish (327).

Tracker Marks eventually meets a gruesome end when redcoat soldiers cut off his ears and nose after he refuses to lead them to Brady (326). It is but one example of the horrifying cruelty endemic throughout the novel, reflecting Jean-Pierre Durix's comment that writers of magical realism 'willingly use the grotesque and the picaresque.' Writers of magical realism, adds Durix, interweave realistic and fantastic modes to pose 'an implicit questioning of the polarity on which such terms are based' (Durix 146). Flanagan deftly constructs Gould's rambling narrative of a convict's misadventures in colonial Van Diemen's Land, to depict such an extreme picture of the penal colony's barbarity that it often seems as if historical realism has transgressed into the fantastic. However, the actual conditions for convicts were so brutal that Gould's fictionalised world plausibly passes as fact, the grotesque becoming an everyday reality. The real Sarah Island 'reeked of fear and woe' and 'all convicts feared it,' given that the jail was designed to inflict the most severe punishment in Van Diemen's Land (Hughes 398).

Flanagan piles detail upon detail of the perils of convict life in order to portray a regime of cruelty that owes more to the Marquis de Sade than the benevolent utilitarian ideals of Jeremy Bentham. Violence is institutionalised and people survive by victimising the layer of society one rung below them. Hence soldiers brutalise convicts, and convicts brutalise Indigenous people. The sadism ingrained in convict life is encapsulated in the myriad mechanical devices which soldiers use to inflict punishment on the convicts, such as the 'Tube Gag' (106), the 'Spread Eagle' (106–07), the 'Cradle' (107), and the 'Cockchafer' (79).

Yet the institutionalised violence is juxtaposed with numerous references to the high ideals of the Enlightenment, including scientific discovery and individual liberty. The text is permeated with allusions to leading intellectual figures of the era: Isaac Newton (49), René Descartes (117) and Charles Darwin's grandfather Erasmus (121), for instance. The deranged Commandant keeps 'a small glass bust of Voltaire' in his quarters (178), but the megalomaniac soldier thinks of himself as 'Caesar of the south seas' (142) and wears a gold mask to give the appearance of an ancient Roman demigod (101). His mission—in his own mind—is to create a nation city-state on Sarah Island (100) in the vein of a Renaissance Florence or Venice (102). That this totalitarian dictator who is constantly high on mercury and laudanum (100) keeps a bust of the famous French civil libertarian reflects the perversion of the Enlightenment's ideals. Liberty, the text suggests, comes at a violent price. Indeed, in echoes of the French Revolutionary Robespierre, whose portrait Gould earlier paints (65), the Commandant, who poisons his predecessor to take command of the penal island (148), is ultimately deposed in a violent coup d'état by his own soldiers (375).

This mixture of barbarism and failed idealism is most apparent, however, in the theme of phrenology, which is embodied—or literally disembodied towards the end of the novel—in the character of the Surgeon. Tobias Lempriere is a satirical characterisation of the Enlightenment's scientific approach to epistemology: that to see is to believe. 'MY DESIRE TO SERVE SCIENCE,' he tells Gould, in his buffoonish declamatory dialogue of capitals (110). But his bald head and white face, the result of cosmetic lead powder (108), create the impression of a clown. His middle name, Achilles, indicates a weak heel for scientific causes, or, more aptly, fashions. The Surgeon is obsessed about becoming a member of the group at the pinnacle of imperialist science, the Royal Society, and has fallen under the influence of natural historian and Royal Society member Sir Cosmo Wheeler in the hope of achieving his goal. Initially, Sir Cosmo convinces the Surgeon to collect and catalogue specimens of native fish, but this later descends into the collection of human skulls belonging to Indigenous people.

The pseudoscience of phrenology—the measuring of human skulls to determine people’s character and mental capacity—is arguably the most grotesque facet of the novel. The Surgeon, at Sir Cosmo’s urging, embraces the ‘up-and-coming’ field of phrenology in the belief that this will ensure his acceptance into the Royal Society. The Surgeon enthusiastically tells Gould of phrenology’s capacity to help science ‘MAKE GREAT ADVANCES IN ITS UNDERSTANDING OF HUMANITY IN ITS SUPERIOR & INFERIOR FORMS,’ and ‘PARTICULARLY IN REGARD TO VANQUISHED & INFERIOR RACES’ (227). What phrenology is really about, however, is an attempted rationalisation of racism. Phrenology represents the extreme consequences of European imperialism and the attempted genocide of the cultural Other. Gould, however, eventually reveals this barbarous offshoot of science to be fraudulent. After the Surgeon’s gigantic pig Castlereagh, named after the British politician (123), eats his owner (235), Gould cheekily puts the Surgeon’s skull in a barrel along with Aboriginal skulls, marking it the thirty-sixth skull of the ‘Macquarie Harbour collection,’ and sends it to Sir Cosmo in London (246). Subsequently, the Royal Society member mistakenly believes Lempriere’s head to be a ‘Negroid skull,’ and claims that ‘the generally regressive shape of skull MH-36’ ‘proves beyond doubt’ the ‘mental inferiority’ and ‘racial degeneration’ of Tasmanian Aboriginal people (302-303). Flanagan employs the grotesqueness of phrenology in each of his other Tasmanian historical novels, *Death of a River Guide* and *Wanting*, to also undermine the European imperialist notion that white-skinned people belong to a superior race.

Flanagan’s fiction follows *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (1991), another magical realist novel set in colonial Tasmania. This book by Colin Johnson, who publishes under the name of Mudrooroo, also criticises the Enlightenment Project with an ironic perspective and portrays the Indigenous population’s precarious struggle for survival. An aspiring scientist is the central character, who is called Fada but is modelled on George Augustus Robinson. Despite Fada starting life as an uneducated bricklayer, as head of the government mission for a dwindling number of Aboriginal people on an unnamed island (most likely Flinders Island) he writes ‘scientific’ papers for the Royal Anthropological Society in the hope of becoming a member (18). Fada ties up his religious belief in a logician’s knot by thinking that science will eventually prove Christianity ‘beyond all doubt’ (92). Yet shortly after Fada’s return to London, the island’s Aboriginal ‘shaman,’ Jangamuttuk, secures the escape of his dying people by hijacking the supply boat and summoning the wind to change course so they can flee (143). Fada’s ‘science,’ like that of the Surgeon’s, is baseless, although it is deployed as a controlling tool of colonialism against the Indigenous Tasmanians. Where *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* differs from *Gould’s Book of Fish*, however, is its direct portrayal of Aboriginal spirituality. Given questions about Johnson’s claim to Aboriginal heritage, this aspect of the work is problematic.

Underlying the Enlightenment’s epistemology was natural history’s taxonomic system of classification, which was gaining ascendance as a sub-branch of science in an age of global exploration and imperial conquest. As Schwalm points out, the ‘Linnaean system of taxonomy in particular became . . . the universal blueprint for the way Europeans order the world around them’ (Schwalm 85). Yet the subtext of *Gould’s Book of Fish* is that, despite the best efforts of European scientists, things that are distinctly Australian defy categorisation, and that they have an intrinsic value irrespective of European definition or assessment. Magical realist fiction, as Zamora and Faris argue, is a narrative mode suited to exploring and transgressing boundaries. ‘Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction,’ they write (5–6). Flanagan’s novel does this by illustrating that a strictly rationalist, Cartesian view

of reality does not work in this unique, antipodean island of rugged wilderness, strange animals and Indigenous spirituality.

The Surgeon's obsession with taxonomy and Gould's resistance to it serve to play out Slemon's influential theory of magical realism as postcolonial discourse. Magical realist fiction's characteristic manoeuvre, says Slemon, is to have 'two separate narrative modes [that] never manage to arrange themselves into any kind of hierarchy.' This creates, says Slemon, 'a battle between two oppositional systems' that are 'locked in a continuous dialectic with the "other," a situation which creates disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences, and silences' (Slemon 409–10). Slemon's oppositional systems are usually taken to mean those of the colonised and the coloniser. In *Gould's Book of Fish*, the convict represents intuition and a small-'i' indigenous reality, while the crazed Lempriere stands for rigid rationalism and European imperialist domination. At Sir Cosmo's insistence, the Surgeon has become a disciple of natural history—he owns editions of the famous works of Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, French botanist Lamarck and the Roman naturalist Pliny—and boasts to Gould about 'the revolution in the affairs of man that the Linnaean system of classification of plants & animals [is] beginning' (120). Lempriere co-opts Gould—with the promise of protection from his jailers—to paint native fish around Sarah Island so that he can send them to Sir Cosmo in London. The project, however, is doomed to fail as Gould's fish paintings metamorphose into portraits of people. Furthermore, whenever Gould tries to paint a native animal, his own cultural bias prevents him from depicting the local fauna in a realistic manner, and instead restricts him to painting it as a bastardised version of a European animal. For instance, Gould's attempt to paint a native orange-bellied parrot looks more like a bald eagle, and his painted kangaroo ends up with a 'suspicious rodent-like face' (84).

The novel offers a satirical take on taxonomy's attempt to neatly categorise the antipodean natural world from a biased, European cultural perspective. Although the Surgeon demands objective, scientific observation and convenient classification of the native natural world, Gould can only produce hybridised versions of what actually exists and what his cultural prejudice compels him to think might exist. Or, in Slemon's terms, the oppositional systems of the European Enlightenment preconception of reality and Australia's actual native world are locked in a continuous dialectic, with neither forming a hierarchy over the other. Therefore, the Linnaean system of taxonomy breaks down, subverted by the unclassifiable nature of the New World. As Schwalm says: 'Australian animals subvert and mock Linnaean taxonomies' (91).

Gould himself is sceptical from the outset about taxonomy and its convenient categorisations. He worries that people 'will try to define me like the Surgeon does his sorry species, those cursed Linnaeans of the soul, trying to trap me in some new tribe of their own invention & definition' (93). But in the end Gould cannot escape being stuck in a permanent cage, becoming the object of everlasting observation as a weedy seadragon incarcerated in an aquarium at the Hobart home of Sid Hammet's Vietnamese friend, Lai Phu Hung (35). The implication is that Gould, aka Hammet, is forever doomed to be imprisoned and watched in the proverbial fishbowl. As Gould himself says: 'I, who was the Artist, have instead become the subject; I, whose role was to assist with classification, have now become the classified' (399). Gould's fate at the end of the novel suggests that, no matter how much he tries, ultimately he cannot escape his European cultural background. Gould's predicament echoes that of the white settler author.

It is Flanagan's shared predicament with Gould, in that sense, which makes *Gould's Book of Fish* a critical text in the development of magical realism in contemporary Australian fiction. Because Flanagan cannot escape being a white settler author, he navigates around his position by employing a range of epistemological magical realist techniques to indirectly portray pre-colonial Tasmanian Aboriginal society. In turn this creates an ironic distancing between the author's point of view and that of the pre-modern Indigenous world, underscoring the inherent irony in magical realism. Flanagan's application of these techniques follows Carey's similar use of the narrative mode in *Illywhacker* for the same purpose, to navigate around his position as a white settler writer, more than a decade before the publication of *Gould's Book of Fish*. Yet Flanagan exploits magical realism through more pronounced metafictional techniques than Carey. In particular, *Gould's Book of Fish* creates its own kind of irony as a result of the gap between a twenty-first century reader's lament for this lost pre-modern society and Gould the narrator's fatalistic, nineteenth-century anger about the disappearance of that culture, one he cannot fully comprehend. Moreover, the novel also uses magical realist techniques to attack the brutality of the Enlightenment while upholding the movement's humanitarian ideals, highlighting the irony of British imperialism's inability to live up to its philosophical standards during colonial times. This range of ironic strategies, therefore, makes *Gould's Book of Fish* a core text in magical realist literature in Australia, illustrating how the narrative mode has been adapted in a peculiarly antipodean setting.

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