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## "Dancing the Old Enlightenment": *Gould's Book of Fish*, the Historical Novel and the Postmodern Sublime

*Jo Jones*

### Abstract

The strategy that I wish to explore in this analysis of Gould's *Book of Fish* is the postmodern experimental narrativisation of the colonial past applied to a political critique of the national present. More specifically, through interpreting the novel through Lyotard's discussion of the postmodern sublime and a theory of bodily experience, it is possible to argue that Flanagan employs a postmodern aesthetic as a type of immanent critique in which the postmodern dialectic can be read as an extension of Enlightenment thinking. In the novel the past is shifting and, at least in a

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positivistic sense, ultimately irretrievable. This signals the notion of history as the postmodern sublime – a space of irretrievable loss and unfulfilled desire at the edges of the margins of history. While history and the colonial past shift and change in the novel, the representations of bodily experience anchor Flanagan’s novel in the recognition that real lives, often individual and collective suffering, often motivate postmodern critiques.

## Keywords

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Richard Flanagan; historical novel

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