

GRETCHEN SHIRM

Richard Flanagan, *And what do you do Mr Gable?*

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It is appropriate that Richard Flanagan's collection of non-fiction *And what do you do Mr Gable?* begins and ends with bread. Bread is an apt metaphor for the collection, because behind it is the idea of sustenance. In his essay on bread, Flanagan observes that "Bread, thankfully, isn't politics. It's what people share while suffering politics and what people dream of when politics takes everything from them."

This book consists of essays and short pieces of non-fiction that seem to have been written by Flanagan as a digression from his fiction writing, perhaps incidental to his major work, but nonetheless enjoyable and nourishing. You can't help but think, as you read this book, that this writing, these shorter, simpler pieces were what sustained him over the marathon discipline involved in writing his novels.

In the first, electric essay of the book, "Out of a Wild Sea", Flanagan recounts a trip he took at aged twenty with a friend on a kayak across Bass Strait. The attempt, not surprisingly, ended in disaster and the two were rescued after being tossed from their vessel and separated. This is an exhilarating account of an event that might easily have claimed Flanagan's life and there is something about the way this incident is recounted that suggests it was something more than youthful misadventure; it seems to have been one of the defining moments in Flanagan's life.

From the safety of his adult life, Flanagan recalls the ill-fated expedition and his gift for storytelling is on display here, his sense of what to hold back, to not lurch forward too quickly, but to allow the full catastrophe of his situation to reveal itself slowly. He observes, casually, "At some point, I noticed jets roaring overhead" and only later does he reveal that these were an RAAF squadron of Orions deployed in search of them. Towards the end of the essay, Flanagan observes,

For though we are an age obsessed with telling all, it has to be admitted that most of us understand so little that any attempt at telling all is doomed from the outset.

It is an interesting disclaimer at the start of a book that is full of telling; for unlike fiction, all non-fiction can do is to tell. Perhaps what Flanagan is hinting at with this observation is a novelist's dual impulse to reveal themselves, but to hide behind the veil of their craft. It is the first insight, of many in this book, into Richard Flanagan the novelist.

This is a diverse collection of essays, ranging from personal essays on subjects such as the Port Arthur Massacre, to an essay on Tasmanian wilderness photographer Peter Dombrovskis, and the title essay, which recounts Flanagan's experience in directing the film of his own novel *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*. There are also essays on reading and writing and, notably, two essays on Jorge Luis Borges, who has clearly had a profound influence on Flanagan. Perhaps surprising are the number of essays in the

collection, clustered towards the back of the book, that might be described as “political” in subject. It is fair to say Flanagan wears his heart on his sleeve insofar as his political convictions are concerned, but you never get the sense that Flanagan is a man who fails to interrogate his own beliefs. While the piece on Bob Brown, “Metamorphoses”, could only be described as complimentary, there is an article on Mark Latham, “Poor Fellow, My Suburb”, written during the 2004 election campaign, in which Flanagan is plainly unsettled by the man parachuted into his position as the leader of the Federal Labour Party, describing him being “like an instrument never quite in tune”. In fact, Flanagan’s novelistic characterisations are on display in this piece, in which he also describes Laurie Oakes as a “sleek and assured Tongan King waiting to pass judgement”.

There is an ease with which Flanagan’s writes in these essays, as though he is freed of the shackles of writing fiction, of carefully choosing every word, labouring over sentences and the ongoing battle that comes with creating something out of nothing. There is a lightness to this writing that fiction often lacks. At one point, Flanagan quotes Walter Benjamin, noting the storyteller “is the man who would let the flame of his story consume the wick of his life” and perhaps it is the fact that these are not stories accounts for their readability.

Nonetheless, there are clear indicators in the writing that Flanagan is no journalist, that what he is interested in is not fact, but meaning. In his essay on Peter Dombrovskis, “It’s Peter Dom”, Flanagan writes:

The idea that great art is made out of love and can only be comprehended through love recurs through history in defiance of schools, traditions, aesthetics and ideologies.

This is plainly a preoccupation of a man whose life’s work is given over to imagination and art.

For a book composed of non-fiction pieces published in an array of publications as diverse as *The Monthly* to *The Age* to *Art & Australia*, this is a remarkably coherent collection. Much of this has to do with the way the pieces have been curated: thought has been given to the order in which the pieces have been placed next to each other. One subject flows effortlessly to the next: an article on the Anzac legacy in “Lest We Forget” transitions to a comment about the “new conformity at the heart of Australian life” in “The Lost Larrikin”, published in the final edition of *The Bulletin*.

There is also an overarching theme to this collection that helps pull the pieces together. One of Flanagan’s key preoccupations is the imagination; why must humans create? Why do we need love? It is a theme Flanagan returns to, even in pieces that are apparently remote from that idea, such as his article on his trip to the town ravaged by fire “The Road to Kinglake” where he seizes on the capacity of the devastated people he encounters to give to others in spite of their own losses.

Something that comes across clearly is that Flanagan is a man who does not take his own occupation for granted. In “Self-massaging Ugg Boots”, he writes “Art is, of course, a guarantee of nothing. Nor is love. But for similar reasons we have not yet discovered a way of living without it.” Many of these themes were also explored by Flanagan in his last novel, *Wanting*, which examines the uneasy relationship between reason and desire.

There is something in this preoccupation of Flanagan’s that reminds me of the essays of Jonathan Franzen. In Franzen’s essay in *How to be Alone* titled “Why

bother?” we’re struck by a man who is struggling with a deep-seated concern about what function fiction serves. Equally striking is the way they have both championed the cause of under-appreciated writers: for Franzen it was Christina Stead, for Flanagan it is American novelist Nelson Algren. Their disaffection with the political apathy in their respective countries is also a common theme. Ironic then, is Flanagan’s appraisal of Franzen’s widely lauded book *The Corrections*, in his essay on the state of fiction writing, “Sheep Management”:

Overall, it is reasonably written, passably edited, and has several things to say about the USA that have been said before. It is intolerable in being presented as a great book, which it is not.

It is striking that the non-fiction of these two accomplished novelists cover very similar terrain; also striking is how emphatic both are in their view of the world.

In the longest essay in the collection “Gunns: the tragedy of Tasmania”, Flanagan exposes some of the economic peculiarities in the business of chipping old growth rainforest in Tasmania. Flanagan’s disdain for corruption and the misuse of power is evident, his criticism of the industry’s cronyism seething:

There is in all this a constant thread: the Lennon government’s and Gunns’ real mates are not workers but millionaires ... great areas of Australia’s remnant wild lands are being reduced to a landscape of battlefields, in order to make a handful of very rich people even richer.

What drives Flanagan’s writing is passion; in the absence of a very strong reaction to what he sees, one senses, he wouldn’t write a word.

Behind *And What do you do Mr Gable* stands a man, perhaps rare for a novelist, who is deeply engaged with the world. This is a book of fine observations by a man, given to looking inwards, training his gaze outwards.