

Peter McNamara: An Appreciation

by Terry Dowling

In 1985, not so very long after becoming a professional writer, I received a gracious and charming letter from an editor named Peter McNamara who lived in Adelaide, the capital of South Australia. He said he was about to launch a new science fiction magazine called *Aphelion Science Fiction* and asked if I'd do a story for his first issue.

Brand new to the game, with only six professional sales under my belt, I was delighted and flattered, and sent him "The Only Bird in Her Name". He took a story for each of the issues that followed, which doesn't begin to cover the level of rich and precious interaction that accompanied each of these transactions between fledgling editor and fledgling writer. We chewed the fat, shot the breeze, built the sorts of bridges that editors and writers everywhere no doubt recall building and may well smile at to hear mentioned now, knowing how it is, how it can be and should be.

I learned that Peter was a freelance surveyor who, with wife Mariann (she worked at a high level in something to do with federal government), had lost their home and most precious worldly possessions in the infamous Ash Wednesday fires. I learned that Peter loved science fiction with a passion and had 'given' himself this publishing venture the way another man might buy himself a share in a yacht or a red sports car. It was always more than a hobby. It was a reward; a way too of paying something back for the wonders he felt he'd so richly received from years of enjoying the field.

Peter and Mariann worked hard at creating a venue for quality science fiction, fantasy and dark fantasy storytelling Down Under at a time when there was only *Omega Science Digest* and an occasional small-press anthology providing venues for short fiction writers. When *Aphelion* magazine closed after five issues, Peter and Mariann transformed Aphelion Publications into a book-publishing enterprise and produced 13 titles bearing the Aphelion imprint. Five were mine, I'm proud to say. Yet again each project involved the sort of encouraging, always challenging, invariably fascinating exchange of letters, suggestions and recommendations that made the creation of a finished book such a joy. Though our face-to-face meetings were far less frequent, separated by half a continent as we were, they were always special. We were both busy, both doing stuff. It was enough that we were in the world together.

It's easy to love someone who likes your work. But, like any truly first-class editor, Peter worked with his writers to help make them better. He helped me hone my craft beyond the easy telling of it here. The irony is that — if Peter had right of reply — he would probably say that we had our confrontations and that he finally learned to back off. That's typical Mac modesty. He only did that after teaching me some vital lessons about

character motivation, logic testing, plot sequencing and what the reader needed in any given story. Gracious man, natural editor, good friend.

Aphelion closed its doors as a publishing venture in the mid-'90s, but Peter continued to champion Australian SF and fantasy through his work with the Aurealis Awards and other genre-related activities. In 1995 Peter (and his long-time friend and editorial colleague Margaret Winch) had edited the landmark *Alien Shores* anthology from Aphelion. In 2002-2003, even while incapacitated by the illness that finally claimed his life, Peter began assembling *Forever Shores* with Margaret. That book was launched on 4 December 2003 at the South Australian Writers' Centre.

Peter approached his pending demise with courage, cheerfulness, appropriate outrage, and yet both a delightful sense of irony and an inspiring sense of purpose. He was determined that the show wouldn't be over until it was over.

On a wholly personal note. Since we never quite knew how much time Peter had, and swapping emails as we did, it became clear that I needed Peter to see the end of the Tom Rynosseros saga he had been so instrumental in bringing to the world. One often holds off from creating endings of any kind, but the clock was running. First I sent him "Coyote Struck by Lightning", what I hoped would be a suitable standalone piece for *Forever Shores*. Margaret and he took it for the book. I was incredibly relieved. Their opinions mattered and I'd made the cut. Feeling easier about the whole thing then, I sent them "Coming Down" and "Sewing Whole Cloth", the stories that followed "Coyote" and completed the fourth ([then] unpublished) Tom collection, *Rynemonn*. Peter and Margaret took those for the book too, cobbled together into one large tale. None of us had intended it happen this way. It just seemed right.

In the best way possible, we use our friends. They become ways of helping us read the world, be in the world, read and define ourselves. You will surely have names you can check as I'm doing now. Just know then that Peter McNamara left the Australian science fiction scene and his part of the world significantly better than he found it.

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http://www.locusmag.com/2004/News/06_DowlingRemembersMcNamara.html

From The West Australian newspaper:

"The eerie beauty of Australia's desert landscapes led engineering surveyor Peter McNamara to become a major figure in Australian science fiction publishing. Assignments amid the red dust and wide skies allowed Mac, as he was known to all, to experience "what seeps into everyone's senses when they spend time in Australia's heartland". Discovering the significance of this "outscape" reflected in Terry Dowling's Tom Rynosseros story-cycle, for example, Mac published five books of Dowling's fiction, delivering them to an international audience. The

meticulous editing evoked such loyalty from Dowling that the final book about Tom Rynosseros was written ahead of schedule so that Mr McNamara could read it before his death this month.”

The West Australian, Thursday, June 17, 2004.

Final words to TD from Mac re Rynemonn:

“Meanwhile, let me congratulate you again on these final pieces. For me, the whole thing comes together so breathtakingly as *Rynosseros* surges towards the front of the Captains’ little fleet and the Gold Captain concedes position, signalling “Take point”. Brought a tear to my eye (both eyes, actually) – but then I’m a wee bit sentimental about all this.”

Peter McNamara / September 2003.