

## Postcards from the Flight Deck

An Eidolon Interview with Terry Dowling, *Eidolon 4*, March 1991

Originally appeared in *Eidolon 4*, March 1991

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same;  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves - goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,  
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*  
— Gerald Manley Hopkins

During late December 1990 Terry Dowling, Australian author and critic, generously agreed to "interview himself" for *Eidolon*. The process involved questions being drafted in Perth and Terry sitting down in Sydney, carefully preparing his considered responses. The resulting interview is, we believe, both interesting and more valuable because of the nature of its genesis. We would like to thank Terry for his generous involvement.

**Terry, you have won many awards, hold a prominent position as a reviewer for The Australian and recently had an extremely well received collection published by Aphelion Publications. Do you feel that the Australian scene offers sufficient challenge for you, or is international success becoming more important?**

International success is certainly a natural goal in the sense that I am writing for anyone, anywhere who enjoys my work. I believe what I am writing about concerns a larger audience than any particular country will provide; certainly my objectives as a writer go beyond nationalities. Judging by the feedback I've received, the appeal of my work is not limited by its Australianness.

It would be nice too to gain the kind of financial independence that will let me write full-time. Being published overseas is simple necessity in that regard.

But it's more than a desire for recognition, more than simple practicality and good business. The work of all the finest artists is universal in reference and relevance; it's the universality of any artform that matters - what it adds to the global song for the race.

We are still defining an Australian identity, so of course there is always going to be that challenge, of finding the voice and the direction. In artistic terms, just what *is* the Australian experience? We're still finding out. We may not know for a long time. But the best of what we produce will add an Australian perspective to the universals, just as Patrick White has done.

The chances for the right sort of recognition and the means to support the creative habit tend to be out there on the international scene, while the makings of the quest are, uniquely

and at least potentially, right here. It would be nice to blend all the things I am in this one enterprise.

**In a 1984 interview you stated that you prefer to be called a fantasist and imagier, rather than science fiction writer and author. Why? Is there any functional difference?**

I feel there is, though it all depends on whom I'm talking to. There's no point in carrying such arguments to those who resist, out of hand, the point behind making them.

The word 'fantasist' (and fortunately that term has not been locked in too irretrievably, marketing-wise) reminds us of an important process in creation, puts the emphasis on the right faculty. So too with 'imagier', a term traditionally associated with those Surrealist painters intent on pursuing surrealist illusionism.

Terms like "Science Fiction Writer" and "Fantasy Writer" are convenient but hardly accurate handles, especially now that they've been so thoroughly 'consumerised'. They're reductive and misleading, certainly trivializing. Yet being called such doesn't bother me. I'd just rather we continue to make the attempt to understand what this many-headed 'genre' is, and to call its participants by a label that captures the spirit of the phenomenon.

I don't expect these niceties of definition to be seen as anything more than 'quirks', but they are what I like to call myself next after the term 'writer'. They are reminders to myself, if you like.

**George Turner was recently reported declaiming the loss of direction in science fiction in general. In your own work, poetic image and setting could almost be said to outweigh theme. Is the "deep and meaningful examination of the issues confronting mankind" particularly important to you, or do you have other motivations when you write?**

The problem with terminology again, and definitions. George seems to have a very precise idea of what science fiction is and should be, hence it is possible to discern such things as 'direction' and 'loss' of same. I can certainly see the value of such a caring position.

The problem of genre and direction has always been one of reification: you end up getting what you look for. Set up categories and you're forever policing them, organising what is in terms of them, praising and dismissing according to them, even trimming off the pieces that don't fit so you can lay claim to a particular work. Useful, convenient, but not very accurate.

I admire George's work a great deal and the conscientious position he takes as an arbiter of quality and good sense. Yet I cannot help but think of his imagination as a very tidy, well-behaved dog on a very tight leash. It does just as it's told, heels, barks, and is scrupulously house-trained. Creditable things. I think I'd go crazy with a dog like that. I suspect George would regard my imagination as, lamentably, the opposite: a scruffy, unkempt dog, leaping fences, baying at the moon, bringing home all sorts of junk, fur matted with bits of this and that. We are different writers, operating in what are probably different 'genres'. I can only speak from one viewpoint. So, no loss of direction, because no direction can be imposed on such an open-ended, free-form phenomenon as this surely is.

As for the second part of your question: are the "deep and meaningful issues confronting mankind" important to me? Oh, yes indeed. Any intelligent, half-way sensitive artist cannot help but examine the only truth there is, which is being alive, cognate, here, in *this* world, undergoing *this* rather nifty experience. This body, this POV and Self you have, is your place to stand up in, your only strike-point with the universe, perhaps ever. Everything that happens to you is unique; everything that comes out of you, condensed, melanged, mixed-up, the same. Simple to say, profoundly important. You make with whatever you have or you use the same energies to contain and rationalize your conduct, routing it through envy and so on. (Here's where I say, by the way, that all these remarks come from the Flight Deck, okay? From the place where good old Ego thinks it's flying the plane. The truth is what's in the Black Box, in the in-flight recorder, and we don't get to see that till the flight is over. I know, labels again, but bear with me.)

It would be virtually impossible not to examine 'deep' issues. Even a single word on an otherwise blank page will lead us to meaning, to implication and significance. Everything resembles and invites a causal proposition because we seem to be 'designed' to track such things that way.

Naturally the artist should strive to be in conscious control of what is being done, but that has never been and should never be a prerequisite for great art. Why should we - our conscious egos - be the experts on the people we are? Where did that idea come from? It's okay to say: 'I'm not sure what I'm doing; I may even be the last to know, but I'll keep you posted.'

We still seem to feel there is loss of artistic integrity if we speak like that; that it can't be genuine art if the artist doesn't know. What an absurd notion. It may not be hip to be Zen about such things these days, but if: 'It is what it is!' seems a bit twee, there is always the Delphic smile or that old standby: the knowing silence.

So you don't consciously choose themes necessarily, or even become immediately aware of the issues you are dealing with. You turn out stories and the stories take on a form. Later, when you consider what you've done, you become aware of the issues, and of what you appear to be to others.

Once you grant that discipline has a fundamental part to play in most artistic achievement, but put aside any *a priori* worth of a pro-rational bias in definitions and directions, you are free to turn out what is put together in the subconscious as well, and set it down. Then, before, during and after the event, you discover what it is giving you, telling you. Chances are it will often elude easy rational understanding, but it will reach across to other POVs, other Selves, and give them the genuine poetry of itself, the integrity, and - best of all - allow them to apprehend, recognize that numinous power. It's quite a gift.

**What is it that inspires you to write - that gives you the ideas that lead to *Rynosseros*, to *Wormwood*?**

I don't think I'll surprise you when I say anything and everything, just as it is for everyone. In a word: inspiration. The imagination is incredibly powerful. Its job is to do exactly what its name suggests - to provide images, to come up with possibilities and scenarios and display them, to make pictures for you to 'see' first-hand. Ego gets to be quality control, discriminator, chief co-ordinator.

So, I dream a word: 'charling' or 'dreamlock'. The imagination loves it, a pure trigger. The problem is getting down the associations quickly enough. Such resonances almost always feel original and invigorating. Other people may recognize these resonances, even identify them as borrowings, bits of what they too know, but it's purer than that. Take Ernst's collages, for instance, or Dali's homages to Vermeer. Never consciously copy, but don't be afraid to be what your inspirational sources have collectively made you. Your distillation of elements will always be unique - the hard thing will be masking and changing what you consciously identify, deciding what and what not to use (some Hollywood movie score composers are a worry in this regard).

The subconscious is a perpetual-motion machine, a self-firing mechanism, and it's definitely Black Box. No getting in there. No knowing it, except via dreams and inspiration. But you're feeding it all the time; and with practice you can tailor it to certain tasks, set up whole specialty areas.

I once spent four hours videotaping the tombs in a local cemetery, collecting the insect sounds, the way the wind gets in behind the heavy metal doors and moves them back and forth. Give the mind four disparate things and it will try to bond them together. It loves finding connections, so give it as much as possible.

Most important for the Tom Rynosseros stories was the song lyric given to me by Carey Handfield in 1982; a copy of "Loving Mad Tom", also known as "Tom O'Bedlam". (And you're talking to someone who grew up within a mile of a mental hospital located at Bedlam Point, whose rock band used to perform for the patients there, who lives within a mile of a cemetery called the Field of Mars . . . anyway, a deeply relevant landscape, you get my drift.)

I set that 14th Century lyric to music and sang it in the months leading up to Syncon '83. No doubt it got together in my subconscious with Blue Tyson, a character from one of my high school story fragments, and Tony Edwards' *Ralph the Rhino* (also given to me by Carey) because when I got back from Los Angeles and working on *The Essential Ellison* in January '84, having conversations with Harlan (a rich level of sustained input), I wrote my first Tom story, "Breaking Through to the Heroes".

Since we're talking process, let me give some inspirational clusters, the found objects if you like, which seem to have launched individual stories.

Take "Spinners". I celebrate the winter solstice each year with a group of diehard friends, and sometimes gifts are given. One year, Kerrie Hanlon provided some beautifully-decorated windmills. Then we began noticing spinners everywhere, the spinner-caps on the Mortlake Ferry, on a buoy floating off the bush reserve at Wangal, the ventilation spinners on factory rooftops, the seed-case 'spinners' from Christmas pine-cones. At the same time I bought a copy of Max Pam's very atmospheric photograph, "Luna Park, Sydney", showing the distinctive gateway towers against a brooding sky. In my general reading on the Aborigines I discovered the words "merinda" - a girl, and "bullen meddi" meaning dark. Which in turn reminded me of Mr Dark in Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, all this nicely focused by the merry-go-round in the Shell Ultra ad on TV at the time. You see how it goes. I wanted a carnival story - consciously wanted it. My subconscious went shopping to see what it could find. It began taking bits and sewing whole cloth. There was the Australian idiom, "Come in, Spinner!", there was talk with Nick Stathopoulos about min-min lights, there was

a pencil with a tiny windmill at the end and the word 'Spinners' lettered on it. Belltrees already existed in the *Rynosseros* universe. So it went.

It sounds mannered and contrived to list it like this, but as lived it was rich and cumulative and totally unexpected - another postcard from the unconscious. When one comes, you scramble to get it down. Once it's there, it will possess a confidence, a sureness of touch that is very beguiling. And why shouldn't it? It comes from a part of the Self that is very certain, 100% committed to the experience of being itSelf. Yes, I'm labelling again.

I bought a wind-up Masudaya R-35 Antique Robot. *Omega* editor Philip Gore had just read 55,000 words of Tom material; he was urging me to give more of Tom's thoughts, the emotional reality of the man. I dearly wished that as well; I was doing the best I could, and this was crucial advice. Kohan Ikin sent Kerrie a Christmas drawing entitled: "The Robot Is Running Away from the Trees". From my boyhood memories of growing up in Gladesville, there was an old man who ran a gloomy old toyshop. It had a single naked bulb, dusty shelves, lead soldiers, clockwork trains. Even as a boy I called him The Man in the Shadow Shop. That postcard came out, received, locked in on 4th May '86. Oh my! What a find. I sat waiting for the next one to arrive.

Carey Handfield called up and we were talking approximate sizes for the Inland Sea in "Marmordesse". Carey said, 'What about Lake Eyre?', which just happened to coincide with Kate Cummings remarking on how she'd like to see more of how charvolants operated under fire. There was Comet Halley in perihelion, there was a Christmas decoration in the shape of a silver filigree shooting-star, there was the name Summondamas from my 1974 commonplace book, the consonance of 'Eyre' and 'air', and my desire to write "my comet story" while Comet Halley was here. Out it came. Postcard. Safely received 13th February '86.

Nick brought his unfinished painting of *Rynosseros* to our 1985 solstice. It had a travel platform. Of course: the high-tech travel platforms are simple necessity. It's the hulls that are the true ships, the beautiful, much-prized hulls. The tech is not prized at all.

Nick has a *Titanic* fetish. So instead of the White Star Line and the *Titanic*, what about the Golden Hand Line and the *Tyger*? He gave me a ship, I'd give him one. Appropriately, the captain's name was Nicholas - the surname was Pocock, after George Pocock, whose invention of a *char-volant* was patented in 1826.

At the same time, a friend was Locations Manager on *Mad Max III*; he had been telling me of the rocks and dust at Coober Pedy. I had on hand a story called "A Whisper from the Voice at the Vanishing Point" written for *Down Deep* (not accepted, those editors are tough!), so I merged that with the now swelling material.

That's how it works anyway; a 1967 drawing I did called "The Towers of Fosti", paintings by Bocklin, Ricardo Wolfson, Pauline Jones or Ken Tremaine, song-titles like "Beloved Lion", the word 'owl' in my own name, a photo of the hotel scene in a Tia Maria ad, newspaper articles on fire-sculptures on the Nullarbor or a meteor strike in South Australia that may have wiped out the dinosaurs, titles given to me by Van Ikin ("Mirage Diver") and Kerrie Hanlon ("Dreaming the Knife") that just hauled stories along after them, so rich they were, the image of Ned Kelly, the inherent poetry in patterns of words or clouds or stalls at a

bazaar, in pieces of stained glass in a window, or toy soldiers in a display, the shapes on a tortoise's back.

This is not to say that conscious rational story-planning doesn't take place. Of course it does. It's essential. I just wanted to give the correct order for these things and make sure that non-conscious inspiration was given its due place for once as what comes first most of the time. There are times when I get a whole plot idea by just working it out; oh boy, what a swell idea. Or I'll get an ending and write backwards from there. But usually this sort of conscious brainwork happens by association; there has to be something to trigger it.

For *Wormwood* it's been the same. Once you have the original notion, the bare skeleton of a plan, your subconscious works on it round the clock. I wanted an 'alien Earth' setting, and started a novel during the late '70s that would have been *After Wormwood*.

Anyway, my first professional sale was illustrated by Mark Salwowski. I bought the painting; together with the Bika Reed translation for Berlin Papyrus 3024 it triggered "For As Long As You Burn". A line from an old song gave me "A Deadly Edge Their Red Beaks Pass Along". The first page of "Nobody's Fool", the opening story in *Wormwood*, is word for word the fragment I've had for fourteen years. It inspired the story. That's how it goes.

Just now I know that I'm possibly gearing up for another set of stories, not Tom, not *Wormwood*, not my 'nature of reality' pieces like "The Bullet That Grows in the Gun", "The Gully" or "The Maze Man". I have a name for the series. The numinous flow is very strong. I just know I'm working on it. I'm writing this comment a day before Christmas. This morning I've been working on the fourth story for *Wormwood*, wrestling with the vicious blue-pencillings of my heartless editor. This afternoon I framed a Delvaux print called "Night Trains". I've just bought Christolph Ransmayr's novel *The Last World*. The hot westerlies are blowing. Who knows what's working away down there, but something's coming in.

**In your role as critic you have discussed the works of Ballard, Cordwainer Smith and Vance. Faren Miller of Locus and other reviewers have suggested your fiction shows the influence of those writers. Who do you feel has been the most important influence on you, and how do you feel it shows in your work?**

I don't consciously follow the styles of those writers, though I am honoured that the comparisons are made, those ones especially. You probably should ask, what do these writers have in common that draws me to their work? Whatever that common factor is, it appeals to me, and is bound to surface in me since it has drawn me to them.

In 1962, when I was 15, I first read Ballard's *Vermilion Sands* story "The Singing Statues" in the July issue of *Fantastic*. That was a place I wanted to go back to. Vance's "The Dragon Masters" came out in the August issue of *Galaxy* that same year and just blew me away. That was a richness of alien experience I wanted again. Imagine the subconscious hauling this in, packing it all together, sewing whole cloth. I read Smith's *Space Lords* collection soon afterwards. But realize, I was reading dozens of other writers as well around this time. The first science fiction novel I read in high school was A. E. Van Vogt's *The Weapon Makers*. There was Heinlein and Kuttner and Bulmer and Dickson and Doc Smith. It was just that Ballard, Vance and Smith, and Bradbury, Ellison, Herbert, Dick, Zelazny, Delany, Sturgeon, and later Wolfe, Cherryh and Crowley, had the power of language placement and creating

'givens' that I happened to prize. So, as I say, it's a flattering comparison but it just isn't complete enough.

With the earlier fictions there was also a stunningly rich visual horizon, you see: the artwork of Emsch and Jack Gaughan and John Schoenherr, the works of de Chirico, Dali, Delvaux, Magritte, Ernst. (I'd discovered these Surrealist imagiers quite independently of the genre; you can imagine the impact when Ballard's work came to my notice, opening it out in his particularly vivid fashion.)

In the subconscious, these elements were all part of the same package: the Pyramid edition of *Galactic Patrol* with the John Schoenherr cover, the Emsch illustrations for "The Singing Statues" and "The Screen Game", the Leo Summers cover for Blish's "A Dusk of Idols" in the March 1961 *Amazing* (belltrees anyone?), the striking Josh Kirby covers for the 1965 Corgi Ray Bradbury editions, or the wonderful Bruce Pennington covers for those same titles four years later.

The most important influence, then, is that wonderful condensation of words, images and sensibilities, coming in a torrent. Notice that writers are never asked: Which five painters have influenced you the most? I'd count that a vital question. Or: which composers? Which movies? Which three poets? Which three landscapes? We persist in examining an area of activity only in terms of itself. Very strange; very incomplete. A curious chauvinism prevails yet again.

I am a strongly visual person. I always remember how both Ballard and Patrick White expressed the wish to be painters; I'm the same. Many of my stories are 'slow canvases'.

When Van Ikin established *Science Fiction* in 1977, for a time I turned out articles on the writers I admired, who had charmed me most; my way of honouring them, expressing gratitude, paying dues, since they had nurtured my own responses. I even did my MA thesis on Ballard and the Surrealists, and devoted a chapter to analysing the Vermilion Sands and other early stories, even some of the novels, in terms of definite, readily-identifiable works by Dali, Delvaux, Magritte, Tanguy etc. That was exciting; I got to play academically in the worlds of people whose work I admired. But most of all, I got to go back there. It was a fascinating crossroads point for me too - my first degree had me majoring in Archaeology as well as English Literature, feeding a love of culture and the wonderful mystery of plotting alien cultures. I'd already been trained as a teacher, so here I could blend my twin interests: landscapes and cultures of both the 'real' world and the imaginary, rendered in the intricacies of language.

The *Science Fiction* articles were fun, definitely cathartic, and I anticipated many more of them, but before getting to writers like P.K. Dick, I realized that this critical writing was essentially Creativity Gone Elsewhere - that I should be finding my own voice and, more importantly, distilling my own experiences, finding what my own postcards had to say.

So those writer-influences noted by my reviewers *should* be identified (most pertinently at the level of style alone, though given the writers I listed just now, it becomes a bit simplistic), but when resonances are sought, non-genre writers as diverse as John Fowles, Patrick White and Thomas Harris should be considered as well, not to mention dramatists like Shakespeare and art commentators like Alfred Schmeller, Patrick Waldberg and Robert Descharnes, then artists like Jeffrey Smart, Nigel Thompson and Bruce Pennington in his

finer pieces, composers (I played the theme from *Hawkmoor* all through the writing of "For As Long As You Burn"). Where does it truly end?

We all like handles on things - but what I'm trying to say is that listing influences is not accurate enough. It pre-supposes that you know, that you're able to monitor such a thing when it's the phenomenon of the blended elements, the *gestalt* that's created and what it means to you as an individual, that matters.

**In a 1984 MJ interview you said that, when you write, you don't want to reveal too much to the reader, that you prefer to "provoke him to crisis". Isn't there a danger of telling the reader too little or of alienating the less perceptive reader?**

There surely is and it's a gamble, a matter of judgement. But given what I've just said, I think you can see just how much respect I have for what we are all capable of becoming. I don't believe in talking down to people, and I do not believe we communicate by simplification. Simplicity must have its place, and directness, but the intellect and the imagination have to be exercised or Ego starts talking to itself and finding answers for the Self.

The title of my postgraduate thesis was *Beguiled into Crisis* - and by that I meant seducing the readers, making them work with you in the creative act (their imaginations and interest engaged and working), drawing them in, finally working the *inquietude* or the provocation (since fiction is probably the most volitional of artforms). By the same token, I am aware that people like to think they're smart, and that they are uncomfortable, even resentful, sometimes dangerous, when you force them to examine ideas and what they hold as truths. Ego under attack is a shrewd enemy.

Above my desk is a quote from Jung that may preface the next Tom book. I've had it for years.

"This is the task of man always . . . not to illuminate the ancient truths, the ancient intimations of the unconscious, the ancient intimations of the soul, but . . . to make them immediate and contemporary, to give them a meaning in the here and now."

That's the mission. That answers your earlier question about purpose. Being rational and logical is important; being entertaining definitely so. But the task is to restore numinosity to the human experience, to beguile the readers into a confrontation with their own humanity. I can't think of a more important task right now.

***In the past you have mentioned certain aspects of your methods of writing. Specifically, you have said that you compose long-hand in coffee shops. Why is it important that you write long-hand? Is there any functional or philosophical difference?***

I do write in coffee-shops, often staring out the door. It's something to do with immediacy, I think. While it's in long-hand, it's fluid, mutable for me. Once typed, I find it locked in. The word processor is very handy, but I find it can be a subtle trap if you're not careful. You can move very quickly but it's far too easy to change things. When it has to be right the first time, you seem to refine the skill of placement within yourself.



The coffee-shop long-hand thing works nicely. It's a neutralized setting, all the fixtures known, the coffee-getting protocols, the people-flow through the door, the ambient noises, the way light falls during the day. That door becomes a blank screen. You're on automatic. Ego is reined in; the plane is on autopilot. I go close to alpha-state, that very creative level of brainwave activity we all experience.

Even if a placebo thing, it works. The material just comes tumbling out to the sound of cappuccino (which has to be one of the great inventions of human civilization!). It's like the old dancing line: 'Okay, feet, do your stuff!'

**One of the challenges facing any artist is objectivity towards his own work. It had also been said that a work of art is never finished, just abandoned. How do you know when a piece is finished, when to leave it alone?**

The extremely tactful answer is to say I work at being a storyteller and write with an audience in mind. That's a habit you quickly develop. You've got to have product to sell, therefore you learn to regard things as 'finished' while knowing full well they may not be. Readers are not always generous in this regard; in fact they are often quite hard, which I find very telling. Authors are actually viewed badly for going back and re-working earlier pieces, when their only crime was going with what they had (a) for practical reasons like earning a living, or (b) so they could see what they had - letting it roam around a while, workshoping it in public, as it were, and making it pay its own way for a while.

Sometimes you have it both ways. There is a very pure sense - part of the holistic package I've been describing - when you just know when a work is done. If you're lucky, you refine that sense the more you produce; and hopefully that is confirmed by the opinions of people you trust.

I started out as a poet and a songwriter. I am blessed with a sense of euphony, of placement (and you may find that a common link with writers I'm compared to). I tend to overwrite, but there are cadences, rhythms that one responds to, patterns one knows are right. "Larrikin Wind" is a case in point. Simple story, set into a linguistic flow that just took it along. "Shatterwreck at Breaklight" is the best example, musically very pure for me. It becomes your blind spot; you really do depend on your handful of trusted readers for counselling, otherwise you find yourself in terminal Bradburism. Hence the value (and scarcity) of truly gifted editors.

There is no special virtue in refusing to go back and re-work something later. It's when holding back becomes an excuse for not putting yourself on the line, not giving your work its chance, that it's a problem. You need to be a better friend to yourself than that. Your work may define you, but it is not you. It exists as something separate as well; it deserves its chance. Sure, you might get better poems, better stories, if you hold off, but if you wait around for only Grade A's and classics, you may also end up competing with yourself or resisting what your spirit has to say, operating out of habit and self-justification. You may also miss out on passion.

I write Tom stories to get back there - to look round in a world that is dear to me. And any kind of story can be a trigger for others - it's all part of the rich storehouse, an investment in possibility and your own process. You've got to keep the flow going. "Larrikin Wind" being

finished kept the door open long enough to snatch out the makings of three others. It's a pretty good trade. So, in short, find what works, stick with it, confirm it every now and then.

**Much is made by critics and reviewers about which themes and ideas are important to an author. Having read stories like "Spinners" and "The Robot Is Running Away from the Trees", it seems that the major theme you deal with in your work is the value of life, in whatever form. What do you see as being the dominant themes which concern you when you write?**

Consciously speaking, to make that important distinction, you're close to it with 'value of life'. The world is at such a population density and locked into such a corporate-consumer nightmare, such a condition of reality desensitization, that it is hard to value life. The basic requisites for civilized conduct are difficult to maintain, worse, difficult even to see merit in. All the finest things humanity is capable of are being severely tested.

Both Jung and Joseph Campbell pointed out the need to re-mythologize the human experience, to give it valid symbols and reference points which can heal and replenish, to restore the numinous link. A measure of the crisis is that there are people who will read what I've just said and either not understand the point being made or not care.

Conscious themes then: to re-mythologize the human experience, to advance symbols, to celebrate the triumph of the human spirit, the worth of civilization, personal honour, the value of life, the fineness of ministering, of hospitality, of moderation and decency; to achieve an understanding of the drives powering the race, good and bad, because the reconciliation of opposites in each of us is tremendously important.

**To date your entire body of published work has been comprised of short stories and novelettes. What is it that appeals to you about writing short fiction and do you have any plans for longer pieces?**

Others have said it and I think it's true. You do your learning in the shorter forms: how to tell a story, how to use language for tasks like setting, characterization, dialogue.

There is something very satisfying for me about the short story form. It's also a matter of aesthetics. The short story has been called the purest literary form, I think for good reason. For me it certainly seems more elegant than other forms; it requires a greater balance, achieves purer poetry more often.

The novel requires much more accountability. You need more background, more fully-rounded characters, run the risk of becoming too familiar. I found - in my one completed novel, *Malgré* - that I had to be careful. Poetry and mythic force can dissipate if you're not careful. It's a trade-off again.

Shorter fiction is closer to the poet's task, the songwriter's task, the single quick, rich image of the painter. It is more immediate, more elegant, more powerful. It's also a matter of personal taste, obviously.

**As a writer you have had dealings with a variety of editors. How do you react to being "edited" by someone whose goals may not be your own?**

So far I have only benefited from my dealings with editors. I know that as the writer, notwithstanding those 'gut-feeling' and inspiration things I mentioned earlier, I do not always know what is best for my story. I may have locked it in too soon, missed potentials of plot and direction, generally settled for less. It's easy to do.

Fiction editing is a creative task, and, given the right person, a major creative one. Usually it works in your favour; you actually have another person closely involved in the success of your work. What a strange and unique thing. Sometimes when you trip editors' creativity switches, they see a different direction, a different flavour entirely, ultimately a different story. This can be a great blessing or a great tragedy. Or they're so intent on tracking down some elusive quality they want to fine-tune that they prune out the magic that drew them to the thing in the first place. We often never know when we're trying to paint with someone else's brush.

Being edited often hurts (it usually takes good reviews to soothe the wound). Producing a story is such an intimate and intense experience. You acquire discipline, perspective, objectivity, then learn that you're as vulnerable as ever. You just learn to trust that you may be wrong, nearsighted; that you're inclined to listen to your own propaganda. It's a good thing to be rejected; it's good to have to ponder why.

The best arrangement is that workmanlike, truly professional relationship where an editor can tell you: "This is rubbish!" and "This is ridiculous!" and you don't reach for your guns.

**Conversely, as an editor you have worked with a variety of writers. How do you relate to writers as an editor and how do you balance their vision with your requirements or opinions?**

Your own tastes are a problem, but when you've read as many stories as, say, I've had to for *Down Deep*, you quickly learn not only what a *good* story is, but what a *story* is and should be. You learn to work outside your own preferred tastes and serve a range of tastes.

When you're a reader, you know a good story usually because you enjoy it and remember it in a positive and/or meaningful way. As an editor, you ask yourself why this is so; after a while you identify a fundamental set of constants and/or you refine some pretty reliable intuitions.

I quickly discovered that many writers, some of them with solid critical regard, do not know how to tell a story, to do that most basic of things: entertain. I greatly admire the work of Sterne, Joyce, Borges, William Burroughs, Australia's own David Brooks, but for every writer who can make a variation of form work for the reader (it's easy to make it work for yourself), there are others who do not, who are probably re-inventing the wheel, who seem to forget that we've had the Surrealists' experimentation, *The Atrocity Exhibition* and the whole *New Worlds* experience. Very little is truly new, truly original. Mostly it comes across as variation for variation's sake.

*Down Deep* again. Many writers sent in mood pieces, finely-tuned, admirable, sometimes exquisite fragments that were never more than that. Put two or three such pieces side by side and they appear as what they are. It became quickly apparent that there are more writers who know how to dress up a 'story' and play with form than find a story to tell. It was good to learn that truth first-hand.

**A significant part of your career as an editor has involved links with Harlan Ellison. You have worked as an editor on compiling *The Essential Ellison*, and as you've mentioned are currently co-editing *Down Deep*, a collection of Australian-oriented fiction, with him. What was the experience of preparing *The Essential Ellison* like for you, and what do you hope to achieve with *Down Deep*?**

It is a wonderful and quite unexpected thing to have become friends with writers whose work I've admired. Working on *Down Deep* with Harlan was and is a marvellous experience, especially since we both have similar views about the special qualities of *this* land.

One of the greatest pleasures is how we've been agreeing in our decisions. That is exciting. There was only one exception, and that was a story I was taken with because of its theme. It's what I was saying just now about having your own creative tastes engaged; I was liking it because of what it meant for me, not for itself.

*The Essential Ellison* was a huge job. Richard Delap had done a lot of work on the project; I took it over in late '83 and finished it with Gil Lamont's assistance. Gil then made final alterations, working with Harlan.

Looking back, preparing the *Essential* was a heady, crazy experience. Harlan left me alone with it. I'd take the manuscript and go off in his Pinto down to a local Mexican bar and sit there with corn-chips and margaritas, going over text, making changes, selecting stories, driving back up the fire-trail at the end of the day like some mad thing. Harlan would be working; I'd ask him some questions, make notes, rush off to the Blue Room and type up copy. Occasionally I'd read stuff to Harlan and Gil to see what they thought. Sometimes I just sit holding the book, looking over photos of those times, and wonder how it all happened. It was a much-loved project, and I'll never forget sitting with Kerrie and Ken Keller at the '88 Hugo Award ceremony in New Orleans when it was nominated.

*Down Deep* has been a long time coming. Harlan and I are both keenly aware of that, but it's definitely going to happen. It's ironical really. What I hope *Down Deep* will achieve, I've in a sense already started working towards in my Tom Rynosseros work - celebrating a sense of possibility for this wonderfully charged locus, of highlighting the invigorating, enlivening, enabling sense of the role that myth has in human affairs. Harlan and I want to assemble a body of fiction which reflects the unquantifiable power of the land, the effects it has, both inside and outside the psyches of those who inhabit it, whose identities are defined by it. This mythic, spiritual reality belongs to anyone who feels it here - who finds they are a psychic national of this place in some vital way.

**This is a ticklish question which you don't have to answer. Fans are a variegated group of people and the "Fan" experience is different in every case. How important do you feel conventions are to Australian writers, and how important is fandom?**

Fandom is a remarkable phenomenon and I can be positive about it because, with one or two sad exceptions, it has not harmed me in any way.

We all start alone, discovering the genre, the writers, the films, the famous worlds and characters, etc. It is *our* private discovery; those books, authors and worlds are *ours*. Then we discover they're not. Meeting other fans is like going from the top year in primary school to the bottom year in high school. The magic, the self-exalting power of the magic, keys that have triggered your imagination, are no longer exclusively your own. There's pleasure in that, the sharing, the potential for society with a common focus, then there's the elitism, the self-importance, the very community sullied by the power-play of any humans when they come together. That's inevitable.

Fandom has given me friends I will have for the rest of my life. It has definitely helped make me a writer. It has led me to become friends with many of my favourite writers and artists. I was and am a participating fan. Fandom is community and community, any kind of genuine, nurturing kinship, is beyond price.

But here is the fundamental truth about the fan experience, and I'm speaking optimally because I believe this is how it mostly is. A fan is anyone who likes what someone does, who makes a private discovery of it, who has a unique relationship with it.

I write for any individual who can make use of what I produce. That person brings alive my characters, my words, my narratives and makes them theirs, providing images all their own. It is a simple one-on-one. Optimally again, a fan will care for my part in this, for my unique role. Fans coming together is a bonus, but the equation is always one-to-one, the Self and the universe happening to it. I try to remember that when I go to conventions. Not a crowd-scene, but individuals.

**In a recent interview for ABC radio's *The Science Show*, you admitted you'd begun retrospectively demystifying your Tom Rynosseros tales - adding science where 'magic' had previously been enough. Is this a conscious reaction to the current mass-marketing of fantasy, or are there other reasons?**

Nothing to do with mass-marketing, just simple story dynamics. When you have five stories, you can give glimpses, hints, flavours. When you have ten, fifteen, twenty, you have a different dynamic operating. If you set ten stories in the same world, you should be clarifying - you should want to.

The point I was trying to make on *The Science Show* was that it's only natural that reason operates rationally about what has come from the subconscious via the imagination, that it seeks to find logical answers. What were incidentals now connect up, refer across the stories to one another. It's very exciting when it happens so effortlessly. As each new postcard comes in, I'm alert for a different horizon of detail. Consequently the mind gears up for that requirement; those things become part of the brief as well.

Part of the pleasure is that you learn your own world as you go along. Your own *rational* curiosity about what you've made leads you to go back and consider what inspiration and imagination have already provided as touchpoints, as poetry.

Also, you are getting advice from people who are skilled in different scientific fields - input on how geo-tethered satellites function, how charvolants would operate, where the ideal place for an Inland Sea would be, that sort of thing. It becomes easy and a pleasure to do, taking what the mind has served up and rationalising it.

**Tom Tyson often appears to border on becoming a mythic hero. He goes on quests with the right purpose, and yet seems to fail to gain the knowledge necessary to truly become a hero. What is your perception of Tom, and what do you feel he represents in your work?**

I'm glad you said "appears" and "seems". I am fascinated by the reactions of different people to Tom - in fact I've learned a lot about certain individuals because of how they view this character. If I put that another way, I have learned more about Tom too by the reactions of others, by what they see him as or need him to be.

For instance, you've said that he "seems to fail to gain the knowledge necessary to truly become a hero". I'm intrigued by that perception, just as I'm fascinated by those who attempt to identify what a hero is philosophically, academically, ideally, etc. The market is glutted with books featuring copybook heroes, and how they came to be such - there are ample models everywhere. It would be easy to work to formula and make Tom 'heroic'. But that would be a cop-out.

Again, it's a matter of labels and concepts. If Tom's going to be a mythic hero, he has to become one all by himself. I've done my bit, set him up, given him a ship and stories to play around in. Let him do the rest.

My brief was simple. I wanted an Everyman figure, a viewpoint character that would honour the spirit of the medieval lyric and whose functional job it would be to carry the reader into an exotic world and provide a series of adventures there. I knew he couldn't stay that. From the first few stories I saw he had a mind of his own, things he wanted to do and say. But I like him, let me say that. He represents possibility, a chance. I consider him to be a hero.

So let's see what happens. There are quite a few of his adventures to be published. Aphelion has other Tom collections planned, all developing the Tom story. And the Tom saga does have a shape to it; there is a 'rising action', as it were, a reason why Tom was in the Madhouse; the stories do advance according to a plan. It's just that I would be foolish to miss out on what the material itself delivers while in a hurry to get any imposed, pre-considered plan resolved.

**Are you concerned that you may overdo it, that you may end up over-rationalising the Tom Tyson character?**

There is the danger of that, isn't there? I trust not, especially with good editorial advice and readers I can trust. Any Tom books - *Blue Tyson*, for instance - will be carefully tailored to what I do know Tom to be. Some of the stories will not be used, may never be published. They may end up cannibalized for other, stronger tales - that has to be the way of it. I'm learning that if in doubt, put it aside. Just wait awhile and see what happens. What makes it hard is that different people have different favourite stories. Two Tom stories Peter McNamara doesn't much care for have each been published twice now.

*E: Sean McMullen recently made a comparison between the world of Rynosseros and Frank Herbert's Dune. The world seems to be a complex, complicated world set after some kind of disaster or great change. What has happened to change Australia?*

Set any kind of quest adventure/rite of passage saga in a desert setting and *Dune* will come to mind. Of course *Dune* is part of it; it has to be, but not as any conscious model. I'd more readily consider Korda's *The Thief of Baghdad*; those opening scenes on the docks are wonderful blueprints for the Sand Quay at Twilight Beach.

As for your question about what has happened to change Australia; the future has happened. I'm not just being cute here. When you've got good scientific advisers, it's easy to come up with plausible explanations for what has occurred: land degradation, advanced desertification, population decline, reasons for enforced medievalism and so on. You need only consider a book like *Giving Up the Gun* or the restrictions once placed on scientific research by the Roman Catholic Church to find precedents for such regulation of society.

To seek an explanation, as to give it, is to miss the point of these stories. The fact I started with was that this world existed; I went into it as the reader does, discovering it as I went. Why would I want less than that for the reader?

I have a song called "Mr Fate and Mr Danger". I used to sing it in concert all the time; done properly it's very haunting, very powerful. People would come up to me afterwards, tell me how much they loved it, and ask me to explain what it was about. I soon realized that no explanation I gave could equal *their* experience of the song, or their expectations, that I became the enemy of the work the moment I began to try. They were actually happier when I said I'd rather not comment. It's probably what they secretly wanted.

The same with these stories. They're Tom's. Let him explain. I've got a feeling he might, because, as I've said, there is an opening out of his world. I'm just the messenger first up, then the caretaker, trying to serve them the best way I can.

### **The Leopard**

The leopard walks,  
Its sides are kissed with night,  
The leopard walks,  
His eyes are tiger,  
Tiger, tiger bright.  
As one cat sits  
In another's contemplation,  
As one man's words  
Sit in this other's mind  
And works the hands,  
The exaltation he can find,  
So cats can sit enshrined  
In one another,  
And burning bright  
Suits one as any other.  
The passing on, the passing in  
Is what  
Most matters then,  
Keeps all cats burning hot,  
Keeps this man poised to pounce  
So when  
I leopard at the night,  
Go tigering,  
It all comes back again.

– T. Dowling

Copyright © 1991 Terry Dowling and Jonathan Strahan. All rights reserved.