

## Smoking Mirrors with a Hint of Scrimshaw

An Interview with Terry Dowling by Van Ikin and Steven Paulsen

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Terry Dowling is one of Australia's most awarded and internationally acclaimed writers of science fiction, fantasy and horror. A respected critic, freelance journalist, communications lecturer and a musician/songwriter with eight years of appearances on the Australian ABC network, he is author of *Rynosseros*, *Blue Tyson* and *Twilight Beach* (the Tom Rynosseros saga), *Wormwood*, *The Man Who Lost Red* and *An Intimate Knowledge of the Night*, and editor (with Van Ikin) of *Mortal Fire: Best Australian SF*, and senior editor of *The Essential Ellison*.

Dowling's stories have appeared in such magazines as *Omega Science Digest*, *Interzone*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Eidolon* and *Aurealis*, anthologies as diverse as *Dreaming Down Under*, *Destination Unknown*, *Australian Ghost Stories*, *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, *The Year's Best Horror* and *The Best Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy*. *Locus*, the award winning US genre newspaper, places him "among the masters of the field".

**VI: You describe yourself as a "fantasist" rather than as a writer of "science fiction" or "fantasy" or even "speculative fiction". What is your objection to a term like "speculative fiction" - or, to put this in a more positive way, why does "fantasist" strike you as the most apt designation?**

Labels inevitably get in the way and hide what is. By its nature, all storytelling is fantasy. In the original, richest sense of the word, all storytellers are fantasists. Others have said it, but it's marketing and the nature of consumerism that forces labels for ease of selling product, just as it's marketing product-mindedness that has fixed the term fantasy so narrowly, so simplistically onto mind-numbing formula, virtually to the point of caricature. Left to their own devices, natural and truly original storytellers tend to range across the false borders of category, having fun, discovering what else they can be. I love that elusiveness. Here are the marketing and publicity people trying to lock them in; here are the writers finding (or, alas, never trying to find) ways to range across such false boundaries. While it doesn't do to push *any* label past a certain point, the name fantasist is closest to first principles of what storytelling is and always has been.

Here's where I anchor this further for me by saying that I am keenly aware of the need for logical, rational frameworks for effective storytelling. Alain-Fournier said: "I like the marvellous only when it is strictly enveloped in reality; not when it upsets or exceeds it." You can play with 'upsets' and 'exceeds' quite a bit, but a story has to *feel* real for the marvellous to work.

**SP: Why do you feel drawn to the fantastic? What does it do for you - or for the world - that is so vital?**

In many ways, I find myself instinctively continuing something very close to what the Surrealists sought in the early decades of the century: an overhauling of perception, a challenging of assumptions and conventions, an attempt to undermine and then re-make the commonplace to release the numinous power existing in the moment. It's needed more now than ever, given the saturation of information, the overloading of our individual dataspheres, and a general desensitisation to reality. I see the best fantastic literature as being enriching, challenging and subversive in this way, using these things to re-energise our lives, to send the message: pay attention, notice what is, to reintroduce us to things as fundamental as cause and effect and what it means to belong. We're precisely specialised for reading this environment, with the added gift of being able to step outside it and model alternatives. What a remarkable gift! So often we forget to do so. If you play it right, judge it carefully, you can get moments of acute focus and personal liberation, a sense of being truly alive in moments of disquiet and delight, when the universe you thought you knew feels suddenly new again or even wrong in some way, and you as reader find yourself in the curious position of *re-choosing* orthodoxy, of rediscovering and re-defining your relationship with yourself as you fit into reality as a briefly re-choosing outsider.

With this is the delight that the marvellous brings, the exaltation and liberation of the spirit, the elan that comes with the unexpected encounter and being surrounded by the marvellous. Among so many other things, our neurotransmitters and hormones are designed to deliver rapture and delight. That's where this style of fiction works so well. Nothing is fixed, nothing is sacred. Anything is permitted. Whether it's found in the closing scenes of *Solaris*, a Greg Egan short story or John Crowley's *Aegypt*, there is a recognition and an exhilaration available. No wonder Einstein said: "The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious." Little wonder that early in the century Andre Breton, dealing with the vivid lived reality of 1924, said: "Let us not mince words: the marvellous is always beautiful, anything marvellous is beautiful, in fact only the marvellous is beautiful."

**VI: You have always felt close to the Surrealists, haven't you? It's a connection that goes back at least as far as your Master's thesis on J.G. Ballard, which in itself was ground-breaking because it was the first dissertation on sf ever approved by Australia's oldest university.**

I have always felt a connection with the Surrealists and how they explored the nature of reality and prized disquiet and the marvellous as a means of letting the observer see things with 'new eyes'. My master's thesis, *Beguiled into Crisis: J.G. Ballard and the Surrealist Novel*, focused on Surrealism as an ongoing and *evolving* form and on its connection with today's literature of the fantastic, particularly those forms labelled science fiction, fantasy, horror and what gets called magic realism, particularly in connection with the work of Ballard. I had dues to pay and believe, to paraphrase an old Procul Harum song, that we're taking turns in trying to pass it on. I suggested - with the arrogance of youth, I'm sure, but also with a conviction I still feel - that Surrealism was

a response to what I called the First Reality Crisis in human affairs, then claimed that a Second Reality Crisis (in many ways the opposite of the first) was presently occurring, with writers like Ballard and Philip K. Dick tracing its form and progress.

## **VI: What were these two Reality Crises? And what phase are we in now?**

TD: There was a major realisation at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that European civilisation was too rigorously rational, too out of touch with the importance of the individual self as an unconscious as well as a conscious being, that humanity was isolated from its inner dynamic forces. Some thinkers and observers found there was a crisis in the basic perception of what human was, in the very processing of what we were, and saw that our senses alone were not enough to provide a full idea of self as we related to the universe. With Freud and psychoanalysis, the Surrealists and the likes of Carl Jung, amidst all the social and political ferment of the age, this changed. Proportion was restored in a dynamic and most exciting backlash.

The second crisis is marked by the alienation of the individual from phenomenal reality. Now it is no longer a question of removing barriers between inner and outer reality so they can interact as they truly should (and do), but of using all available sensory and mental resources to discover which elements of that interaction are which.

Our present phase? We're deep in the second crisis - casualties of having too many facts, too many manufactured, consumerised realities, of - in marketing notably, politics definitely - truth being the first casualty of self-interest, and that being seen as an appropriate ethical stance as we shift from civic to corporate values, of living in an age (perhaps the first in history ever to do so) where we finally accept that we *cannot* hope to predict the future, can only allow that there will be exponential change, can only shuffle the paradigms to keep us open-minded, bright-eyed and alert to possibility. We're in an era which is increasingly, ironically, alarmingly Pre-Copernican, where many people cannot explain why planes fly or prove the Earth is round, where few people bother to track Rene Magritte's impact on the iconography of the century or know what's wrong with an episode of *Xena* having a pharaoh named Ishtar, where the courage and grace of Giordano Bruno and Hypatia, Marcus Aurelius and William Tyndale are lost to us, where the destruction of the Library at Alexandria is forgotten, where things as basic as the implications of the British winning at Waterloo or Bill Gates speaking English are rarely considered. As a celebrity recently said in a TV interview: "Well, television has been around for hundreds of years now and not much has changed." When I recall television programs like Jacob Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man* or Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*, I try to remember to remember the importance of what needs to be done. We need our paradigm shufflers, our eloquent generalists, explainers and diligent storytellers - our possibility-modelling fantasists - more than ever.

**SP: Can you relate this concept of Reality Crisis directly to your stories and explain how the link works? How does a Dowling fiction specifically tackle this issue?**

I'd like to think by giving vivid and focusing alternatives, by creating moments of intense seeing, intense disquiet - the French *inquietude* - that pry us loose from our complacency and hopefully re-sensitise us to the commonplace. It's an intuitive thing rather than a planned formal task. I'm aware of it more in my stories of unease than anything else I write, but since it's something I prize, I suppose it's inevitable that it emerges in *how* I do what I do. Entertaining and pleasing have to be both the mask and the substance. I'm aware of other intuitive factors: like avoiding moralising, excessive satire and didacticism at all costs. But while storytelling may just be smoke and mirrors much of the time, the author should try to make the smoke as perfumed, euphoric and addictive as possible, with just enough piranhas hiding in the shadows, and the mirrors should be honest enough, sharp enough, tricky enough to keep faith yet betray and provoke. In fact, in classic Surrealist fashion, if we are earnest about beguiling the reader into crisis with such rewards, we should try to use the safe, accepted, comfortable, mimetic forms to deliver profoundly affecting moments where forms and expectations are both reaffirmed yet violated - both, that was one of Surrealism's most powerful insights, the reconciliation of opposites - where expectations are both fulfilled yet given new unexpected edges and aspects: smoking mirrors, for instance, or perfumed razors. New eyes. It's not always easy to achieve. Too often it smacks of being contrived. Balance is everything.

**SP: Aspects of your work are intensely and intricately visual. Your emphasis may be upon concepts and significances, but you always take pains to ensure that your reader can see whatever exotic creations you are offering. This visual quality clearly arises from your own approach and vision, but at the same time it links with certain traditions in Australian literature. (For example, Australian Nobel Prize winner Patrick White always claimed he wished to be a painter but could only paint in words.) What is your association with the visual arts?**

I've always been strongly visual, always kept sketchbooks, even won a school art prize as a kid. Around age fifteen I developed a great fondness for the work of the Surrealists, notably Paul Delvaux, Salvador Dali, Max Ernst, Rene Magritte and Giorgio di Chirico. Coincidentally, I was discovering the work of Ballard, Jack Vance, Ray Bradbury, Cordwainer Smith around the same time, and so had a vivid exposure to both images and words achieving similar powerful effects. If you add some horror collections edited by Charles Higham and allow for a solid enjoyment of adventure films, you start to see an author and process profile emerging.

Now it's 1999 and I believe, as Ursula LeGuin says in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, that: "It is good to have an end to journey towards; but it is the journey that matters, in the end." The staging of any journey is very important: the sights, the smells, the being there. Intense focus, intense seeing, a keen sense of place and self-in-place. These things were gifts from the authors I've mentioned and so many others. And when they *weren't* there, I found that I was providing the vividness of the visuals myself. I'm sure others have found this on re-reading books they loved. *We* often ennoble less than truly wonderful works with our own visual imaginations. We make up the shortfall in what *we* need them to be.

As for Australia, it's still very much a blank canvas in so many ways. You cannot have a continental land-mass with a mere 18 million people, most living on the coast, three quarters of the population in thirteen cities, and not feel a sense of emptiness, of possibility. You cannot help but project onto that emptiness. It's not often talked about, not often formalised that much - "Oh, look at all that emptiness! I wonder what effect it's having on my psyche?" - but it makes for a constant, deep-down exercise in the act of becoming. One of the oldest, most stable land-masses, yet barely two hundred years old in anything like a European sense of history. An ancient place, newly in the present, made for futures. And now I've formalised it too much.

As you say, some authors, White and Ballard among them, have said they wanted to be artists. I too would love to be a painter. I respond so well to visual stimuli and collect images all the time, do sketches, photograph streets, sunsets, vistas, found objects. Artists often provide triggers for stories. It's no coincidence that Surrealism - originally a philosophical, literary and socio-political movement - should be remembered for its striking imagery. One of the first stories I ever wrote involved a journey into Dali's *The Burning Giraffe*, a way of resolving the painting. Just as Ballard's "The Screen Game" appears to be set within Dali's *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* and *Cry Hope, Cry Fury!* within "Sleep", I like to resolve images that have moved me. A prime example of this is my story "No Hearts to Be Broken", inspired by Shaun Tan's wonderfully mysterious painting "Sea Butterflies". I obtained his permission, completed the tale, and had the thrill of seeing both story and painting appear in the March 1997 *Interzone* apparently the first-ever cover for a professional overseas sf magazine by an Australian artist. Another Tan painting inspired my forthcoming book *Blackwater Days*.

**VI: You have also had a long-standing association with artist Nick Stathopoulos, from his earliest appearances in the journal *Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature* through to the present moment, when he stands nominated for a Hugo. The Stathopoulos connection has clearly played a role in shaping the vision behind your Tom Rynosseros cycle of stories.**

Yes indeed. From when I first started my Tom Rynosseros tales in the 80s, I've had the honour of having Nick visualise that world for me, giving it the right air of mystery and possibility. It's a rich cross-pollination. We also shared the heartbreak of having *Omega Science Digest* fold one issue before it ran a twelve-page feature on the Tom Rynosseros future fully illustrated by Nick.

**SP: Where do you stand with the Tom Rynosseros series at present? Your most recent work has tended to be mainly horror fiction; does that mean we won't be seeing so much of Tom in future?**

a fourth Tom book is complete, awaiting a publisher. Because they're linked story collections, I've had the usual resistance from the marketing people at the larger imprints (the Book Club edition of *Rynosseros* in the US notwithstanding). They want novels, preferably formula, the thicker the better. But the book is done and Tom's

adventure will continue as long as the journey feels right. He is one of my ways of re-discovering and re-choosing my life.

My recent published work only seems to be horror (it's more terror and disquiet than horror, but oops, that's labels again) because that has drawn the most public attention recently. I could argue that if you look at storylines, many of my Tom and Wormwood stories involve fear, disquiet and 'horror' as well. The boundaries of category in storytelling are inevitably false ones, fixed prices on variable goods.

**VI: It's currently trendy in Australia to stress the "internationalism" of sf and decry any kind of nationalist flavour, but you have always believed that the Australian context offers unique perspectives which most writers would be rash to refute or ignore. You've stuck to your principles by continuing to advocate this view, and the immense popularity of the Tom Rynosseros stories confirms your wisdom in this. Your more recent stories tend to be more urban in setting, but here again you are pursuing the grail of that ineffable Aussie gestalt, aren't you?**

Yes, I am. I do feel that the best fantastic literature produced in Australia often catches the essence of something quite unique, though this isn't meant in any nationalistic sense whatsoever. I feel I am a 'psychic national' of Arizona, for instance, and I'm sure there are Arizonans who feel the attraction of this place. Given the liberties of Surrealism, science fiction and fantastic literature in general, and the exhilarating ride we're all taking through the late twentieth century, you quickly realise there is only ever space, time and identity. Who, Where, When, What. We use these things to work at Why and How. We're governed by paradigms, elaborate mindsets made by reason and imagination, by light, locality and experience, a sense of being *here* and not somewhere else. So, without presuming to identify any such unique qualities too rigorously (labels again), I feel a sense of being *away* from the rich mix of cultural horizons which did, yet at the same time did not, foster our modern Australian experience, of being on the edge of an ancient emptiness, of observing at a remove all that other places have been and are becoming. There isn't the weight of history or class or expectation. You feel you still can matter, that most of it is ahead of us. Few places allow that now in any dynamic sense. So while it's lonely and incomplete, even never quite enough, it's also very liberating. There are vital and fundamental contrasts and dual perspectives: new/ancient, sophisticated/primordial, liberated/isolated and so on. We are culturally so far from what made us, but without the anguish that marks, say, a South American culture like Argentina. The perspective is quite unique. In storytelling terms, the resulting dynamic and style *can* (if not always) be special.

**SP: Later this year the first critical monograph on your work is to appear. The title - *The Eternal Yes: The Affirmations of Terry Dowling* - strongly stresses the affirmative side of your work. Are you happy with this as an initial critical response to your writing?**

I'm delighted and honoured. I don't believe we create with our egos, but ego, poor misguided creature, tries to take credit whenever it can. I've never sat down and

planned my stories as affirmations. That's the gift of the self to the self. Again, Patrick White comes to mind. Such a crusty, curmudgeonly man, but, oh, the constant return to the transformation, the transcendence, the becoming more you find in his work, themes pursued almost in spite of himself.

**SP: But you must have some reservations about the notion of "affirmation"? Surely "exploration" is a constant feature of your work, and the kind of inability to affirm that arises from the open-minded approach of the explorer. When so much of your work resists closure, how much can it affirm?**

I'm probably the wrong person to ask about this. We don't need to be told again and again what we do wrong, how we fail, how we mean nothing before oblivion and an oblivious cosmos but those fleeting things we leave with others with a desperate 'Remember Me' attached. It's always there, so insistent. We need to know that, sure, there's entropy, there's the Big Bang and the sun burning itself away, but, hey, look, we're getting by, man, we're doin' fine. We're made for here and, despite the wrongheadedness, the ecological abuse and opportunism, the cynicism and desensitisation, there's still the green surge and renewal and kinship and possibility. The way we're designed shows me that. Sure, you can reduce compassion to the brain firing a certain way, reduce rapture to hormones and genetic predispositioning, but look at what we do in spite of those practical explanations. Some writers are, by nature, bleaker, more reductive, more pragmatic, less generous, more existentialist, many of them more instructive and effective as futurists. I'm about a different task, or rather the same task in a different way. I guess I'm more like Stubb in *Moby Dick* when he says: "I know not all that may be coming, but be it what it will, I'll go to it laughing." Maybe that's why I have an affinity for the Fool card in the Tarot and all that it represents, and why two of my major characters, Tom Rynosseros and Hollis Green, have lost their memories and are charmed fools rediscovering their worlds. To paraphrase a famous T.S. Eliot quote about the proper end of all our exploring: you *must* go home again.

**VI: A story like "Stoneman" is a good example of the way you generally resist closure in your stories. The storyline is self-contained, with the central predicament resolved, but throughout the story there has been a strand of imagery which likens the Stoneman to a kind of Christ-figure, and the reverberations of this echo far beyond closure. This is obviously a difficult question, but for you as author what do you think (or hope) such "echoing reverberations" achieve?**

Again, it makes our lives larger if only by reminding us of what our humanity has been and what it can be again. In the smallest acts we echo the greatest. Once we grasp why the Arthur mythos endures, the Robin Hood mythos, those of Sophia and Christ, Mary Magdalen and Gandhi, we begin to find resonances, pleasing echoes, in our own smallest acts. We're told the unexamined life is not worth living, yet, often because of ego, we get in the way of knowing ourselves, meeting ourselves, tuning ourselves. We have to go home, we have to reconsider, we have to re-make for closure to work. It happens at the self, not necessarily in the story. The story can stay open, resonating,

eternal. The reader no. Arthur, too, could only sit in one chair at a time. Everything I've just now said is both nonsense and simplest truth, both I must emphasise, depending on where each of us is in the journey.

**SP: Where do you stand now in relation to your career as a literary critic? You have moved on from co-editorship of *Science Fiction* to editorial adviser, you've been the regular reviewer of science fiction, fantasy and horror for *The Australian* newspaper for the past ten years. You are presenting writing workshops and accepting commissions for critical work. Do you wish you had time for more work in this area? Is the critical passion still there?**

It certainly is and I still enjoy doing it, but I do see being a critic and reviewer as creativity gone elsewhere, because, along with songwriting, that's where I placed my creative energies for so long. Not putting myself on the line with stories, afraid to fail, afraid to be what I truly was, I placed it into literary criticism. It pleases different parts of the mind, the well-turned line, the well-crafted argument. It's more ego-driven and too often becomes an application of that fascinating John Fowles' notion of Nemo: if I contain, limit and fail you, I win and extend myself. I transcend. A critic must be better than that: a teacher, an explainer, a fair witness. Being a critic uses the ego; being a storyteller uses the self. They both use words to do it. Oh, but the responsibility!

**SP: What are you working on at present?**

As well as *Antique Futures: The Best of Terry Dowling* appearing in time for this year's Worldcon, I'm well into a Wormwood novel and really enjoying the journey. I finished *Blackwater Days* in 1996, a stand-alone 'novel' in the true sense of the word - seven linked stories designed as parts of a single work, concerning the inmates and staff of a mental hospital in the Hunter Valley northwest of Sydney. That should appear early next year. Three of the seven pieces have been released for publication so far: two made it into the Datlow/Windling *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*; one has appeared online at *Event Horizon*. I also have a Tom Rynosseros novel waiting to receive a final draft.

**VI: And are you still following your habit of doing your writing longhand, in a cafe, over a cappuccino or two?**

Yes, indeed. I like to write longhand, key in, print off, then resume longhand. I spend an hour or two in a coffee shop every day, scribbling away on the café terrace. I find everything is fluid in script. As for cappuccino, like the microchip, the carousel and editors who think like Lorenzo di Medici, it is one of civilisation's great accomplishments, proof of a future for the race and a golden tomorrow.

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