

The Ikin Interviews:

Terry Dowling

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1. You're walking tall just now, aren't you? You're still Australia's most awarded writer of science fiction, fantasy and horror, and you've recently had the tremendous honour of being the only writer to have two stories in the Datlow/Windling *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* collection for 2001. One of those stories, 'The Saltimbanques', also appeared in the inaugural *Year's Best Fantasy*, edited by Hartwell and Cramer, as well as winning a Ditmar for Best Short Story and receiving a nomination for the World Fantasy Award. Your collection *Blackwater Days* won a Ditmar for Best Collection as well as a World Fantasy Award nomination, and your sf story "The Lagan Fishers", was not only published at the prestigious (not to mention high-paying!) *SciFiction* site, but was selected by David Hartwell for this year's *Best SF 7*. And on top of that, your computer game - *Schizm: Mysterious Journey* - won the Grand Prix at Utopiales 2001 at Nantes in France, beating Ubisoft's *Myst III: Exile* among others.

But you're still best known for your Tom Rynosseros stories, so let's start there. Tell us of the origin of Tom Rynosseros. How did this character first come to you, how did the tale of his names evolve in your mind? In short, take us back to the beginning...

There was a stanza of poetry in an issue of the *School Magazine* way back in the 50s that ended: 'By a knight of ghosts and shadows I summoned am to tourney / Ten leagues beyond the wide world's end / Methinks it is no journey.' It fascinated me as a kid; it was so full of romance, mystery and a sense of high adventure. Nearly thirty years later I learned that it was from an anonymous lyric called 'Loving Mad Tom' or 'Tom O'Bedlam's Song' that was possibly sung during scene changes in the earliest performances of *King Lear*. I grew up very close to a mental hospital in Gladesville that was set on Bedlam Point. I've always loved the Small Faces' 1965 song 'Mad John' and in the early 70s I wrote a song of my own called 'Tom O'Bedlam', which began:

*"See Tom with his half-baked mind
Walking like a glory in the summertime
Drifting like a mist upon the sudden shine of blue.
Easy in the afternoon
Out there singing softly to the rising moon
Simple songs that someone taught him, oh so tunefully."*

So there was this interest in madman songs, and in 1982 my friend Carey Handfield gave me a copy of the complete 15th/16th century lyric so I could set it to music. The second last verse contains the line: 'Those that cross Tom Rynosseros / Do what the Panther dare not.' There it was. From my days in high school, Teachers' College and the Army, I already had story fragments about a character fresh out of a madhouse, variously named Tom Tyson and Blue Tyson, so I just blended them. Soon after that I wrote my first Tom Rynosseros tale, 'Breaking Through to the Heroes', and it grew from there. I wanted to do a series of stories concerning an Everyman character in an exotic, timeless setting, a fabulous Somewhere like you get in the Arabian Nights tales that could take whatever it needed.

Robert Silverberg used a variant of that 15th/16th century lyric as chapter headings for his 1985 novel *Tom O'Bedlam* - spelling it Tom Rhinoceros in the relevant stanza - so, while I had Tom stories already out there and focused around the song, I deliberately steered clear of using it in my Tom collections. I'll come back to it in my own time. I *know* I'm meant to come back to it. In 1992, staying with Jack Vance and his family in Oakland, I stepped on a scrap of paper in the driveway, picked it up and found it was the first verse and chorus from the same 'Loving Mad Tom' lyric. Can't tell you what it was like finding it there! Here I was putting my third Tom collection together at my desk up in the house and suddenly there's this message - this reminder from the universe lying in the dirt! The handyman who had dropped it (he performed the lyric at medieval fairs across the country) later showed me the book of lyric variations edited by Jack Lindsay and illustrated by Norman Lindsay. So from the very beginning the lyric was a crucial catalyst to a fascination I already had with the noble madman, the gifted fool, the unnumbered first card of the Tarot.

- 2) In his Introduction to the MirrorDanse edition of *Rynosseros*, Peter McNamara notes that you have put more of yourself into Tom Tyson than you'd ever care to admit. Amazingly, my research for this interview shows that Damien Broderick made the same point in *The Melbourne Age* back in June 1990:

Through the whole of Tom Tyson's world runs a suspicion of autobiography. Dowling has invented a world and created a hero by writing a perception of himself into that world.

Is that how you see it? What aspects of Tom do you see as being Terry?

I'm not sure I'm the one to answer this, but I'll try. Tom and I discovered his world together as we went along. We were both in the same position: he was a character with a past that was unknown to both of us, living in an unknown world at an as yet unknown future time - everything *tabula rasa*. I knew more than he did in quite a few key areas, had ideas about how things might go for him, possible background details for when they were needed. But coming up with ideas, giving answers and providing explanations is easy, often too easy. What's hard is keeping the power of mystery, the essential wonder of something while holding explanations back. There's an exquisite tension in much of the best storytelling; a novel like China Miéville's *The Scar* comes to mind as a recent

example. Why would I deny Tom or the reader (or myself) that delight, that narrative tension? So from the outset, one of the rewards was to discover it together.

Since I wanted Tom to be someone I could like and admire, it was inevitable that I give him qualities and attributes I find admirable and prize in others: loyalty, courage, a sense of honour and fair-play, of humour and irony, a dedication to learning and self-discovery, a truly cosmopolitan and ethical pragmatism, etc, with the important proviso that these qualities had to emerge as parts of someone learning his life by going through it, just as it is for any of us.

It's easy to have a character stand for the things you'd love to live by yourself, to externalise your own values and beliefs, even your foibles (which you find ways to forgive, of course). It simply never occurred to me to make him at odds with the things I valued. I wanted to like him and, yes, I'm sure, be like him. So I allow there has to be a salutary amount of psychotherapy and personal catharsis involved, even self-redemption. If I look carefully, there's sure to be a set of rules - wholly subjective - for his co-creator live by. I say co-creator because there's the real sense of Tom having invented himself, of course, and me just going along for the ride. The wonderful (for me) ending to 'Privateers' Moon', for instance, surprised Tom and me both. Neither of us knew that was going to happen. That's how it's been from the start.

3) Peter McNamara also comments on "how much of Tom has flowed back into Terry". How do you feel about *that*?

Seeing how Tom and I have kept each other's company for more than twenty years now, he has to have 'created' me as well. You can't give this much time and care to someone through forty-plus stories and not be changed. So, too, given the piecemeal 'mosaic' nature of his adventures across such a period, he can't help but be a mouthpiece for this writer's philosophies and a sounding board for the things I hold dear. I've often asked myself (overtly for narrative purposes but it goes deeper): now how would Tom go about this, how would he react to such and such?

So it's been possible to externalise, re-define and re-choose dearly held beliefs: things like how wisdom must be protected by enigma lest it be trivialised and squandered, how the important things can only be learned and earned when the individual is ready, and how the storyteller's job is often, optimally, to accelerate reaching that state of readiness. I've said this before but I do *not* believe we write with our egos. It's a whole-brain act, completely self-driven but at the same time essentially selfless. Ego comes along and tries to take the credit. Who can blame it? None of this existed before. It's a miracle.

4) Is it true that you see Kevin Costner as the ideal actor to play Tom, if he ever hits the big screen?

A younger Costner would have been fine; so too a tougher, younger Robert Plant, especially as seen on the cover of his 1988 *Now and Zen* album wrapped in that robe,

with that desert skyline and those wonderful symbols. I could name many others - from Iva Davies to Bono, just to name pop singers. For a while I clipped images of possible Toms from magazines. Having seen the wonderful casting of relative unknowns for key roles in *The Lord of the Rings* films, I'm happy to be blindsided with someone else's choice. Authors, like parents, should know when to let go.

5) We should also talk about the role that our mutual friend Nick Stathopoulos has played in helping to shape Tom and his world. But first let's get nostalgic and give *Aurealis* readers some little-known insider information: When Nick Stathopoulos was a high school student, one of his teachers was Richard Faulder. Richard Faulder was a long-time sf fan who was active in a number of Sydney sf organisations, including the Sydney Science Fiction Foundation and the Sydney University Science Fiction Association (SUSFA). In this latter role he edited some issues of the SUSFA fanzine, *Enigma*, and published some stories by a First Year student named Van Ikin. Van then became the editor of *Enigma* (and a friend of Richard Faulder) and retained the editorship from 1972 to 1980 (when he moved to Perth).

During that time he published the earliest works of writers like Rick Kennett and Terry Dowling. Unfortunately, Van often illustrated these works himself, in a style that could only be described as a Marvel Comics rip-off, and it was clear that the magazine needed more artists. As it happened, the schoolboy Stathopoulos showed some of his art to Faulder, who showed it to *Enigma*, and within no time at all the magazine was parading beautiful multi-colour Stathopoulos artwork on covers and interiors.

As far as I know, you met Nick Stathopoulos through the *Enigma* connection, and in time the three of us became involved with my (then) new journal, *Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature*, which we launched in 1977. (Yes, folks: for more than three years your interviewer edited two publications, both of which were supposed to publish quarterly. The madness of youth! Not surprisingly, the quarterly schedules fell into disarray...)

Can you pick up the story from there?

The truth is out! Van is responsible! But yes, I met Nick after first seeing his *Enigma* artwork in your office at Sydney Uni and soon after at local science fiction conventions, which truly were something in those days. We quickly became pals and Nick delivered key images at a crucial time, first displayed in the glossy mass-market magazine, *Omega Science Digest*, with its 30,000 print-run. It was a definite high-water mark for Aussie science fiction publishing and it gave the collaborative side of the friendship a definite focus. Again, I owe Carey Handfield for my debut there. Then *Aphelion Science Fiction Magazine* appeared as well, which continued into the Aphelion paperback line: both splendid outlets. For a time, Nick was illustrating my Tom work in both magazines and then on the Aphelion book covers. The only regret is that *Omega's* US parent company shut it down one issue before it ran a twelve-page interview about the Tom Rynosseros future illustrated in full colour by Nick. So there exist paintings of the

Inland Sea, the Breathing Gate from 'Sailors Along the Soul', early belltree designs, most importantly a splendid and very influential design for the charvolant *Rynosseros* complete with sandstorm kites, and then shown in a cross-section cutaway, things like that.

- 6) When Peter McNamara worked as a surveyor, he was often out in the red deserts, experiencing "what seeps into everyone's senses when they spend time in Australia's heartland". He pays deep tribute to the way the Tom Rynosseros stories bring out the meaning and poetry of Australia's "red desert country"; he says the stories express "what seeps into everyone's senses when they spend time in Australia's heartland". What can you say about this deep connection with the land?

That it's an instinctive and intuitive response; that we're meant to react to it this way. Hardly surprising in that we've evolved to respond intimately to landscape, to levels and degrees of light, to shape and contour, to an awareness of being in the world, on the world, wherever we happen to stand long enough. Think of it, the human eye, the human brain, specifically designed for such responses. We're specialist decoders, every one of us. There's a hard-wiring toward this recognition, an atavistic knowing that links straight to the temporal lobe and delivers rapture and a sense of deep connection. Nowadays, ego and living in a data-saturated world obscure 99% per cent of the message that being-in-the-world brings, but we're meant to have it, even if only as a biological reward system. But what if it's more? Any scientific response must include that possibility as well or we're just touting a fashionable reductivism again.

There's the wonderful German expression *Erwartung* which photographer Bill Henson explains well: "The air seems charged with something between expectation and anxiety...You feel a sharpened awareness of yourself in nature, and in the landscape. Your imagination reels, surging from rapture to foreboding and tender sadness, and you experience one of those moments of epiphany." Sure, it's easy to dismiss this response as hyperaesthesia, some airy-fairy New Age nonsense, ultimately non-viable as a survival tool, but once you allow that what Patrick White said holds true, that "You cannot convey the utmost in experience" and that rational discourse can only ever go so far, then it becomes relevant. You cannot live on the edge of such a great 'emptiness' and not have it code the psyche, deliver an expansiveness of feeling even in the midst of incredible hardship and suffering, pack you full of appropriate signature responses. Only connect, as E.M.Forster said.

I long ago accepted that we know more than we understand and understand more than we know. Rationalists (so many fine ones in the science fiction field) come down hard on this sort of view, and probably just as well (better to overreact that way than the other) but it highlights a key part of what being human is. It isn't just rational mind but whole-mind, whole-person recognition.

So, again Peter has it. It's this deep recognition and deep knowing that I prize, often things that drive us to silence. The Australian heartland delivers this. It shapes us no less profoundly, no less correctly than it has the Aboriginal peoples. How could it not?

Hey, like you, like all of us, I'm just one of those specialist reading devices evolution has served up, perfected for reading context, decoding what's there and turning it into meaning. What does your father do, son? Why he just reads the universe like you do, sir. And we probably needed a swelling musical score behind that last lot.

- 7) You provided the story, script and title for the adventure computer game, *Schizm: Mysterious Journey*, which won the Grand Prix at Utopiales 2001 in France. How did *Schizm* come about?

Purest chance. I regard a lot of computer adventure games as pieces of fine art, as neglected, underrated and often misperceived works yet to receive appropriate recognition. Favourites include *Myst* and its sequels, *Riven* and *Exile*, as well as *Morpheus*, *Amerzone*, *Temujin*, *Amber*, *Gadget*, *Grim Fandango*, *Lighthouse*, *The Blackstone Chronicles*, the list goes on, usually strong or interesting storylines with intriguing gameworld design and a compelling atmosphere. Ironically, the supporting technology for these games changes so quickly that many such works may very well fall through the cracks and – as with so much great art – only later be properly reconsidered and appreciated.

Having little time to play these things, I use walkthroughs – the step by step story guides readily found online – so I can have the game experience, go on the journey. When I was stuck on a timed puzzle in *Reah*, Detalion's first game for L.K. Avalon, I emailed its developer Maciej Miasik in Poland, introduced myself and asked for his assistance. Maciej checked out my homesite, and replied with both the puzzle solution and an invitation to devise a story and name for their new game, which soon grew to the full scenario outline, then the screenplay and shooting script for twelve or so characters.

Schizm is very much a traditional First Contact adventure like a lot of those from the 40s and 50s. In 2083, Earth has located Argilus, a world in a distant star system, but has found all the inhabitants missing. It's rather like finding the brigantine *Mary Celeste* on a planetary scale: there are signs of recent habitation: meals unfinished, machinery running, but no people. The planet is quarantined, science teams are sent in, and one by one they start disappearing too, leaving behind mission logs giving clues and theories, but no firm answers.

The story opens with the two-person crew of a supply ship trying to make contact with these science bases without success. When the vessel is suddenly disabled, the crew eject in escape pods, intending to rendezvous on the surface below. Sam Mainey lands in a vast balloon field above the largest continent, Hannah Grant on a rather amazing floating city adrift on the ocean. In order to meet up at Base One, they have to learn how to understand and operate the alien technology. Occasionally they find mission logs left behind by the missing scientists, and start catching brief glimpses of some of these scientists. These 'ghosts' seem to be trying to help them figure it all out. The story develops from there.

The dual protagonist idea was already in place and, since the characters couldn't feasibly be visible to each other, I came up with the 'schism' idea and the story to carry

it. But a large part of the gameworld already existed. I had to fit a story around existing material, which was a real pleasure. It's the DVD version that won us the Grand Prix at Utopiales 2001 in France. The only downside is that, for compression reasons, the CD-ROM version loses 40% of the story, so most of the mission logs are blank and the animation features severely limited. We're presently working on a follow-up project, where I get to do the whole story up-front.

- 8) Earlier on, when you were speaking of the creation of Tom Rynosseros, you mentioned your own song-writing. Fans who attend conventions will know that you strum a mean chord, but I think very few people know of the depth of your background in music and song. Those who do know of it can see how it features in some of your fiction.

At the time we first met you were part of a group called Gestalt, and you personally had written a large number of song-lyrics (many of which were sf/fantasy pieces, which I published as poems in *Enigma* - often graced with your own illustrations!). Am I getting this right?

Yes, indeed. I always figured my career would be in music. There were years of playing in rock bands, then in Gestalt, an acoustic line-up in wine bars, at the same time working with Pact Theatre in Sydney. Hey, Gough Whitlam even bought me a guitar! During the 70s there were television appearances that led to presenting science shows on the ABC (dressed as a pirate yet!), then to eight years on *Mr Squiggle & Friends*, the longest-running children's television show in the world. I even got to appear as a cartoon character in an ABC Squiggle book, *Mr Squiggle and the Great Moon Robbery*.

But I have many genre-related songs, even a concept musical about a stranded time traveller. I performed a lot of them at concerts put on by Pact Theatre in Sydney in the 70s (which also featured my gifted writer/songwriter colleague, Richard Harland – I have the recordings!). I still write songs, still love performing, but since 1983 my energies have been directed elsewhere.

- 9) American editor James Frenkel has said that "you are writing some of the best, most powerful dark fiction around", what generally gets called horror. Tell us about your approach to that.

As well as being entertainment and fun, storytelling has always been a powerful philosophical and socialising tool, an instrument for not only helping us face reality, but for building reality as both a private and shared phenomenon.

We've always produced scary stories as a healthy and appropriate response to facing the unknown and dealing with our fears. Now, arguably more than ever, horror (or dark fantasy, a far more useful term) allows people to re-connect with the world in a meaningful way via sudden, alarming, often violent events which, by their nature as story, are ultimately 'safe'. At its best, it's a form of reality testing, reality 'protecting', with profound cathartic powers for making this vital re-accommodation of self possible. Like any form of intensified seeing, it can also deliver a surprising beauty.

Sadly, a lot of horror – to call it that – never begins to come close to realising the potential inherent in the form. As with ninety per cent of all fiction, all artistic expression, you get predictable, derivative, lowest common denominator fare re-working the old tropes and clichés. Rarely does much ‘modern’ horror deliver anything close to a genuine frisson, let alone cathartic fear. It is actually very safe and conventional, and reduces the once powerful tropes to burlesque and caricature. Rarely do writers push the form into what else it can be. Doing such a thing may not be easy, but *trying* to do so is as important here as in any artform. Without growth there’s decay. The cutting edge in science fiction is as sharp as ever, perhaps sharper than it’s ever been; in most commercial heroic fantasy and horror it barely exists. Still, I have no doubt that good, formative writers will continue to emerge. It has to happen. The form is too potent, too useful, too *natural*.

I’m fascinated by psychology, perception and how we track the nature of reality, how we each privately create the worlds we inhabit. My stories tend to explore that situation. We live in an age where fiction and falsehood have become more eloquent than available truth. There’s simply too much data, too much pre-rendering and conventionalising of reality. The average person is able to verify less and less of the world they inhabit in a meaningful way. As J.G. Ballard predicted back in the 60s, a typical response to this is a flattening of what psychologists call an individual’s affect: the situation where someone no longer responds to a given stimulus in an appropriate and healthy way. As much as I can, and not always successfully, I try to craft my own storytelling to re-work the forms, deliver beauty and catharsis both, make the reader see the world in a new way, even if just for a fleeting moment. It’s a way of shaking the tribal tree, not simply to dislodge the bogeymen hiding there, but to make us notice the tree, and the forest it belongs to, the reason for forest, the very notions of tree and forest. Entertainment, yes, always, but always trying for more too.

10) And of course, the final question: what next? What are you working on now, and is there any truth in the rumour that during a recent long stay in Perth you were researching ideas and locations for the much-awaited fourth Tom Rynosseros book?

As well as the new computer game, I have more dark fantasy stories in progress, two of them slated for the Ramsey Campbell/Jack Dann/Dennis Etchison horror anthology *Gathering the Bones* and Ellen Datlow’s *The Dark* (research for which included making a table-top model of a six-sided mirror room). There are five science fiction stories and three, count ‘em, three novels in the works (I’m smiling) and I’ve just commenced a doctorate in creative writing at the University of Western Australia. And it’s true, I did spend a lot of time in early 2002 over in Perth working on the fourth Tom collection, and what a great joy that was. What a great environment to work in. Here’s where I say thanks to you, Van, for driving me around so we could both become world experts on Perth’s suburban drainage pits and how to colour-analyse every crow and raven we saw. Ah, the things we do for art!

