

New Voices:

Mr Dowling and the Wow Factor

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Interviewed by James Murray

Terry Dowling: *how to avoid doing what stops you doing what you should.*

For a writer of high ambition, Terry Dowling has an engagingly antithetical way of describing himself as if he were low man on the totem pole.

"I'm five foot six inches with a moustache," he said when arranging our meeting, "and I'll be carrying a guitar to make myself more recognisable."

Not only does this kind of line take the curse of Dowling's ambition, it makes him sound like a character from one of his own fictions. Dowling displays another mark of the writer; he has arranged his life so that what he does for a crust enables him to write what he wants when he wants.

Dowling's First Law is to avoid doing what stops you doing what you should be doing. In his case, it's a lectureship in English at a business college. This pays him about the equivalent of a Literature Board grant – \$20,000 a year.

Dowling being Dowling, a thought-provoking writer, this situation inspires the notion that instead of straight grants, the Literature Board might well be organising suitable jobs for writers.

Anyhow, sitting in the canteen of the business college sipping tea after an agreement that beer and the pub were not in order, Terry Dowling launched into the credo which inspires the fiction exemplified by *The Maze Man*, featured in this issue.

"I want people to notice their surroundings again. People have become densensitised. They no longer see the corridor they walk along, the handle of the door they grasp or the room they walk into.

"The kind of fiction I write is a way of making people see their surroundings in a new way; it's also a way of talking to them about our isolation as individuals. Just as surrealist paintings are a way of showing ordinary things in an extraordinary way so is the kind of fiction I write."

Dowling's tone is distinctive, his intensity persuasive. So much so that the going down of the sun transforms the humdrum boxes of the city into menacing glass cliffs. The robot dispensers of canteen chips, chocolate bars and nuts hum a prophecy of dehumanised society.

Dowling presses on. "We are living at a time when a lot of our images are being made for us. We are getting so many fictions in print, from radio, in films and on TV that we are not using imaginations anymore.

"This is especially dangerous when the provision of these fictions is in the hands of so few and becomes in effect a control mechanism."

But isn't Terry Dowling aspiring to add to the number of fictions?

Indeed he is. Nevertheless he distinguishes between the completed, the predigested fictions of mass media and the kind of fictions where readers must involve themselves to arrive at their own solutions.

"I refuse to offer readers the comfort of a solution to the mystery," he says. "What I aim to do is beguile the reader into crisis."

In fact, *Beguiled into Crisis* was the title of the thesis with which Dowling took his Master of Arts degree with first class honours at the University of Sydney. The thesis, the first involving science fiction work, was five years in the researching and writing after Dowling had taken his Bachelor of Arts in Eng. Lit. and Archaeology.

Having achieved this measure of academic respectability for the genre of science fiction, Dowling made it clear that he himself preferred not to be labelled as a science fiction writer – though he acknowledged the value of the label in the market place.

"I prefer the term fantasist or even surrealist just as I prefer the French term *imagier* to the term author.

"The gift of images is the greatest gift the story writer can give to the reader, images which re-vitalise, images which exalt, images which have a Wow! in them.

"Jungian psychology demonstrates that better symbols mean better relationships with our world. It was Jung who said that we were courting disaster because we were out of touch with our natural beginnings."

Does Jung's dictum apply with greater or less force to Australia than to the rest of the world?

Dowling is honest enough to say he doesn't know. Yet. The answer may be in *Down Deep*, an anthology of short stories he is co-editing with the American science fiction writer Harlan Ellison; the stories in the anthology will reflect what Dowling called "the mythical quality of the Outback".

Independently, Dowling is working on a series of short stories under the title: *The New Adventures of Tom Rynosseros*. These will concentrate on an Australia of the future, an Australia where sand-ships are towed by giant kites and the Ab'Os (Dowling's spelling) own all the centre of Australia.

This is a leap of the imagination beyond that of the futurologists who see Australia as a bigger, if not better, combination of Texas gigantism and Californian hi-tech hedonism. Dowling has been to California and been tempted by it. But at 37, born and bred here, he realises that Australia must be the base from which he writes.

Or more exactly the coffee shops. His method as a writer involves rising at six, coming into the city, finding a coffee shop and writing there in long hand till about nine am when he begins lecturing.

"You must use Australia as a springboard not a prison, a springboard of the imagination," he says. "People tend to forget that imagination is a survival faculty like be able to swim, climb a hill or fight. That's why we need fantasists to restore the balance between imagination and reason.

"For me fantasy is about ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, circumstances which make us realise that our ordinary lives are truly extraordinary."

Again Terry Dowling is like a character from one of his own fictions: ordinary/extraordinary.

He sees no distinction between writing for children and for adults.

"I would say that it's a false distinction. When you write for children you are writing for them as they are. When you write for adults you are writing for the child that remains in them.

"Fiction is the most volitional of the art forms. Painting gets you immediately or it doesn't. Music beguiles you. With fiction you have to win the reader word for word. "The attraction is that it permits me to be universal and restore our relationship with symbols. It's a genre which gets us away from the Australian sense of limitation."