

A Darkling Smile

An Interview with Australia's Master of Horror and Dark Fantastic, Terry Dowling
Interview conducted by Danel Olson

Writing from a sunburnt country of compelling strangeness -- whose creatures and landscapes would boggle the imagination of Hieronymus Bosch -- Terry Dowling (b. 1947) is a lifelong native of Sydney. From this driest and hottest land, whose soil technically speaking is a fossil, his ever-changing art finds abundant nourishment. The work is praised as the 'more satisfying dark fantasy' by *Publisher's Weekly* and 'wondrously byzantine and baroque' by *Locus* magazine. He is a critic and reviewer, an editor, and a game designer (see the popular *Schizm: Mysterious Journey*, *Schizm II: Chameleon*, and *Sentinel: Descendants in Time*). Dowling took his doctorate in creative writing in 2006, and remains one of Australia's most awarded and highly regarded writers of the imagination. With literary sorcery reminiscent of the great Latin American fantasist Jorge Luis Borges, Dowling creates challenging stories within popular sub-genres. The detection narrative, the horror story, the psychological thriller, the ghost tale, as well as science fiction -- all are delivered with the 'air of menace peculiar to a land of endless sunlight' (as editor Philip Gore mused). There may be no zombies, werewolves, mummies, or vampires within them, but there are threatened and unstable people, the kind who are -- in some ways like us -- the plaything of their memories. In these accounts, Dowling casts the most compelling questions of time, structures and power, as well as psychological queries about identity and sanity, desire and denial. His short fiction regularly appears in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, and his prize-winning story collections include *Rynosseros*, *Blue Tyson*, *Twilight Beach*, *Rynemonn*, *Wormwood*, *An Intimate Knowledge of the Night*, *Blackwater Days*, *The Man Who Lost Red*, *Antique Futures: The Best of Terry Dowling*, and *Basic Black: Tales of Appropriate Fear*. Two new works—a tale and novel excerpt—appeared in recent Ash-Tree Press anthologies, 'Jarkman at the Othergates' (*Exotic Gothic: Tales from Our Gothic World*, 2007) and *Clowns at Midnight: A Tale of Appropriate Fear* (*Exotic Gothic 2: New Tales of Taboo*, 2008). A new novella of Fowles-like invention appears in 2009 -- 'The Library' -- concerning an entity named Chiras Namarkon who inhabits a living library and is concealed by the moves from a famous 20th Century chess game.

I once heard Stephen King say about his writing, 'I want to take people around the corner and scare the hell out of them'. Is that what you want to do?

The first part definitely. My work always seeks to take the reader 'around the corner' of the ordinary, the commonplace, to exploit and explore what Max Ernst called 'the mystique of the chance encounter', something prized by the Surrealists. But it's fear *and*

wonder, both, that matters. King doesn't take it far enough in that particular quote, doesn't say why he does it, what stands to be gained (though he is actually very accomplished at doing both). I would add: scare the hell out of them so they're entertained, thrilled, yes, but also so they re-engage with the unconsumerised, unprocessed, unconventionalised world with their selfness (and all *that* means), their connectivity (pried apart so disturbingly in a data-saturated, marketing-driven society), their recognition of something more in the act of being alive. In short, serve up awe and disquiet to allow a more complete re-engagement with that reality. There is no higher mission for the artist or the self, I suspect.

Out of all your characters, which one has the most of you in him? Whose skin could you step into with the most ease?

It would have to be three parts Tom Rynosseros from my Tom Rynosseros saga (*Rynosseros*, *Blue Tyson*, *Twilight Beach*, *Rynemonn*), three parts David Leeton from *Clowns at Midnight* [TD's PhD novel], and four parts Dan Truswell from my linked collection *Blackwater Days*. Obvious to say, but all writing, all creating, can be so intensely personal, though some 'makers' like to distance themselves from their work, from the creative act and its outcomes. I'm the other kind of creature.

Tom Tyson, Blue Tyson, Tom Rynosseros is something of a swashbuckling 'new chance' man living in an exotic, far-future, Arabian Nights-style everyplace that just happens to be Australia this time, and let me create someone from my own better parts and the better parts of others, someone without memory of his past, his origins, and so his failings, his betrayals, his complications. We learn his amazing world along with him. The amnesia thing is an obvious storytelling device nowadays, so overworked in film, television and computer game narratives, but an entirely appropriate and valuable one just the same. How many of us wouldn't like a reset button? It allows for a chance at maximum redemption and ease of reader/viewer/gamer engagement. More to the point, Tom and I learnt his world together, and I learnt how to *be* him, and how to let him be himself. He became a much better creation than I ever dreamed, both Everyman and *tabula rasa*, sensitive, brave, responsible and forgiving. It's been very therapeutic, very cathartic, knowing Tom.

Then there's David Leeton in *Clowns at Midnight*: a musician, songwriter, storyteller as I am, and much of the book's décor and some key character factors come from my own experiences. He's not me, but enough of me, and is cursed and gifted with, afflicted and driven by, a special way of seeing: in his case a terror of clowns and masks that permits an intense re-connection with the world, and which I prize so much as the artist's main task and accept as the individual's main life-task. But whether it's his coulrophobia or Tom's needing to learn about everything, it is as in my horror and dark fantasy work generally, the intensity of seeing, the questioning of perceived forms, of perception itself. What is the world *in spite of* us, *because of* us? I try to remind myself that the truth is always somewhere else.

I'm very fond of David. His condition gives him a desperate and important 'adolescence' in terms of self-discovery, self-absorption and receptivity. Then again, new love, new intense recognition, always does. Most of us go to movies, watch television and DVDs,

play computer games, read books, compile music playlists, flirt with strangers, to get a taste of it: a new ecstasy.

As for Dan Truswell, both close to my own age and appropriately avuncular, he is a kind decent man vividly, committedly, actively engaged with his world, someone who grants that there is always that ‘something more’ in our mundane affairs, something extra behind the working of the world that we are not necessarily meant to grasp, just accept, allow. I like him tremendously. Then again, I tend to avoid having leading characters I do not like, cannot identify with, so I suspect that you’ll tend to get something of Terry every time.

Why are antagonists in your writing often rather appealing? Does it give a storytelling advantage? Does it mesh with your view of humanity? Is it more of a challenge to develop them that way? Or is there another reason for creating them? I am thinking of partially admirable people we meet in your pages—no spoiler alert necessary, as I won’t name them—who also happen to be poisoners, amateur lobotomists, or necrophiliacs. Why do you favour creating a character with an ocean of darkness within that is also functional, even polite, much of the time? Are there other authors that you commend for their elegant monsters, their wolves who wear their fur on the inside?

At a functional level, it’s not so much that it’s more of a challenge to create such appealing antagonists, rather that there is more of an intrinsic creative appeal, since there are few attractions in depicting brute thuggery, the mindless violence and unconsidered cruelty of the stupid and thoughtless of the world. Blind evil and brutality give little opportunity for the transformative, re-sensitising perceptions I prize, the life-changing, life-affirming insights I believe we need and deserve, except in the simplest, coarsest, reactive sense. Considered evil is something else. It permits a tension, a self-questioning, an intensity provided by choices, motivations, rationales, actual worldviews, and lets me (and so many other writers, film-makers, etc.) have it both ways, provides the means to measure and test the positives we ourselves hold dear. So, yes, it’s more in keeping with a personal view of the possibility of a higher life for *any* individual – good or evil, an extension and affirmation of the old Socratic axiom that the unexamined life is not worth living. And there is indeed a storytelling advantage: we often find behaviour motivation and any kind of considered, committed stance both intriguing and attractive. We live in a world where many people are fascinated by the minds of Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot; where women fall in love with serial killers; where we remember great villains. Look at the public’s recent love affair with Hannibal Lecter.

That aside, goodness and evil are vector qualities, extremes on a grid where individuals are at set points: Milton’s Satan, Shakespeare’s Macbeth, Ledger’s Joker. Again, it brings me back to exploring ways of seeing, subjectivity of experience, other individual realities. In a world where sociopathy and psychopathy exist, I allow that good and evil, ugliness and beauty not only sit side by side but overlap, as in George Sluizer’s harrowing, original 1988 version of *The Vanishing*. The 1993 remake obliterated that

crucial, absolutely terrifying distinction, how intricate but callously mundane it all was. Look at the enormity of such acts born out of such a simple relationship with the self: *idios kosmos* intruding, imposing itself so cruelly, so powerfully on the *koinos kosmos*. Authors I commend? I admire Thomas Harris tremendously for his 1981 creation of Francis Dolarhyde and Hannibal Lecter. As an author he teaches us a lot. Lesson 1: Beware of sequels. Lecter was terrific in *The Silence of the Lambs*, but even better when kept largely off stage in *Red Dragon*. By *Hannibal* and *Hannibal Rising*, he's too revealed, too grounded, too spent as a force, just one more guy with problems. And Lesson 2: Less can be more. Look at how leanly, how effectively, Harris spends the storytelling coinage: passages of clear suspenseful text, then a line like 'a chair made of antlers' and 'as sinister as flags'. There's a true talent for cadence there.

Other names? Peter Straub for his eponymous killer in *Koko*, for Dick Dart in *The Hellfire Club*, and Coleman Collins in *Shadowland*, even John Fowles for his creation of Maurice Conchis in *The Magus*, because of the chilling implications in such a reasonably benign exploitation of Nicholas Urfe. To include film-makers: David Fincher for John Doe in *Se7en*, even the creators of Jigsaw in the original *Saw* (though that character, too, is squandered, shown to be just a means to an end, then thrown away in the lack-lustre sequels). In the wonderfully effective computer game *The Blackstone Chronicles*, set in an abandoned mental hospital (forget John Saul's name on it; it's crucially Bob Bates's wonderful work, a completely different order of writer), there is the fascinating, disturbing sociopath Malcolm Metcalf carrying out such awful (and historically accurate) procedures on helpless patients. And in Soap Bubble's excellent 1997 adventure game *Morpheus*, with its 1928 passenger liner trapped in the ice, Glenn Dean and his fellow writers created Jan Pharris, a desperate and cruel figure exploiting the terminal dream lives of the specially invited passengers. Monomaniacally self-righteous, driven characters.

In your view, what are the most original or impressive or influential neo-Gothic novels since the year 2000, those works that are stunning in their attention to excess, addiction, abandonment, violent love, transgression, and taboo?

I read constantly, but as science fiction, fantasy and horror reviewer of for our national newspaper *The Weekend Australian* for nineteen years, many of the titles I did look at were read for consideration for review. I enjoyed Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* for its staging, confidence and delicious creation of the Raven King, but many other titles simply didn't deliver. We're all looking for the next truly special thing. I guess I'm wary of the 'gothic-as-lifestyle' situation where what were once the classic, powerful forms have been 'gentrified', blanded down into clichés and joiner memes, robbed of their force and freshness. It's happened in so many areas of the supposed fantastic; it may be a millennial thing as well, where you stylise, neuter and conventionalise the things that bother you because it has been a troubled time. But the modern vampire novel, for instance, is mostly so banal now, so overworked and so often beaten into formula, that there is little that is fresh or dynamic, so little that possesses the power, the threat, the true tension inherent in the form.

Again, it's too often a market-driven, more-of-the-same-for-shareholder-returns, franchise situation, alas, where terms like 'popular', 'best-selling' and 'brilliant', even 'edgy', usually mean safe, lowest common denominator and processed. Few titles ever achieve dread or even the beginnings of unease.

In fact we're at the point where, in terms of originality, disquiet, dread, a wonderful, flawed 1984 novella like Fritz Leiber's *The Ghost Light* and the equally flawed, turgid, marvellous 1989 *Dr Who* episode 'Ghost Light' succeed far more as ambitious, eerie, disturbing failures than any of Stephanie Meyer's recent successes. Once you become acquainted with seminal works that have gone before, you see how minor or derivative much later work can be. So, the first order of business is learn the field; second, pay your dues whenever you can!

Having said that, I find fellow Aussie writer Margo Lanagan's work fresh, interesting and often powerful, and still find Ramsey Campbell's work of interest, not so much for the plots as the delivery, the way he uses language to disturb, build the dread while holding back the reveal, particularly in his shorter work. Hard to do dread well. Hard to really scare or shock. But, as with the Surrealist imagiers, those are the transformative Holy Grails in this enterprise, how we – to mix metaphors – shake the tree, stir the pot, put us back four-square into our lives with just something of that childhood sense of wonder and panic, newness of seeing, a fresh chance at ourselves and so the world. And let's not forget, too, that much of the best work has always been in film – look at the beguiling suspense dynamics of Peter Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract* or Frank Perry's *The Swimmer*, for instance, or, more recently, Juan Antonio Bayona's *The Orphanage*.

Speaking of other media, you once mentioned in an interview that interactive computer games, while in their babyhood now, will probably become the dominant entertainment form. Perhaps novels will become quaint as daguerreotypes, but it was also once thought that film would replace novels, and we find that not to be completely true. Novels at their best still provide imaginative avenues other arts do not: the same great same novel seems to change each time it is approached, though it is we who have changed. Moreover, a novel's dearth of visuals—unlike that of a strikingly detailed adventure game—only acts to involve readers all the more. What do readers currently not comprehend about the future of computer storytelling?

Most people tend not to see that computer narrative is currently piggybacking on gaming structures and that this will change, just as the first silent films tended to imitate the proscenium arch, stage and staging conventions of traditional theatre. The current lack of the necessary technological sophistication and the prevailing publishing, marketing, sales and distribution models will make this a useful, inevitable and lucrative way to proceed for quite some time. But properly immersive, computerised storytelling is no more about gaming – or as little about gaming, if you prefer – as life itself is. We problem-solve as people, we role-play, we advance, we change. Gaming structures (with gaming outcomes, level design etc.), presently provide a great vehicle

for 'safe-playing' the life experience, just as gaming has always done in human affairs, just as fiction has always done. Once we have readily available, totally immersive story structures, then the gaming aspect will take on the appropriate proportional relationship it presently has to our everyday lives generally and the current storytelling/gameplaying arrangement, while still present in a lesser capacity, will change significantly. Sure, there will still be fighting games, action sims, RPGs and the like, but as part of a more total *faux* life experience within a total sensory system of being in another life or another place and time. In short, we will have other lives, other vital, defining, transcendent lives. The word 'game' will be totally inadequate for describing this.

The paperbased, printform novel remains *the* optimum form in this regard: surprisingly durable and very effective at what it does: giving other lives, other worlds. The computer narrative is far from being at that level of achievement as a carrier form yet, but, war and a major technological disaster notwithstanding, it may very well happen, especially once we have self-repairing, self-configuring and self-sustaining systems with benign, intuitive AIs in place.

While on this subject I would urge interested parties to check out Frank and Susan Wimmer's wonderfully creepy adventure game *Amber: Journeys Beyond* (Hue Forest, 1996) for its governing premise, mood and one very unsettling haunted house, *The Dark Eye* (InScape/Time Warner Interactive, 1995) Russell Lee's disquieting take on a number of classic Poe stories (with narration by William S. Burroughs), and *The Blackstone Chronicles* (Legend Entertainment, 1998) for its classic setting in a mental hospital and mounting sense of dread. It's certainly worth adding Ken Levine's remarkable, unforgettable *Bioshock* (Take-Two Interactive, 2007) to that line-up, and *Silent Hill 2* (Konami, 2001) for its very disturbing and atmospheric setting, horrific encounters and intriguing delivery of story.

The American writer Steve Rasnic Tem recently pondered spirits for non-believers in the online All Hallows Reading Group,

I'm not at all sure the ghost story needs reinventing, but I am interested in the idea that perhaps, for those of us who don't believe in ghosts, there is an equivalent experience which might be explored in fiction. I've always thought that someone who really believes in ghosts reads a ghost story differently than I do--I read it as metaphor, and I read it for the emotional content. I do think there is this area in which questions of a spiritual/mystical dimension intersect the lives of even the most sceptical among us, myself included, questions about things we can't explain or quite comprehend.

I've read your startled reaction to a 'true' ghost story in *Dancing with the Dark* which was confessed to you in California. How do you read a 'literary' ghost story, Terry? What story of yours or another's might provide 'an equivalent experience' for those who don't believe?

I don't for a moment think that a belief in ghosts is necessary for a ghost story to work well or that it ultimately makes much of a difference. This has probably always been the

case. A good story is a good story. People steep themselves in the richness of religious ritual without believing in a deity, go through the trappings of Christmas (spoiler alert!) knowing Santa doesn't exist. It's make believe, exactly what children do, what we each do when we sit down to watch 'untrue' stories like *The Lord of the Rings* or *Star Wars*. It doesn't matter if we believe in Frodo or Luke Skywalker, just that we accept. It's a key ability we have to suspend disbelief for the simple reason that it gives us the larger world and the illusion of forever. Most of us live as if we have forever, even while knowing we don't. In the first *Star Wars* film, Obi-wan Kenobi tells Luke that he's taken his first step into a far larger world, and that's exactly what's on offer. Horror stories, ghost stories, stories of drama and loss, stories of other lives, stories of any kind, let us feel reassured, comforted, diverted, hopefully extended, can give us a yardstick that, again, lets us feel safe and tapped into having something more, something larger. For however long we can manage it, however briefly, we have the false forever and the perspective other viewpoints bring when facing the finite realities of our own lives. If we're fortunate, we achieve grace and a numinous re-connection. If we're not, we can become desperate and bitter. But in story there can be this sense of something more, a reprieve, if you like. Where the extremes and risks of dark fiction are concerned, we have it even more dramatically. We're safe. We're back in our own lives.

Nor do I believe that it's really ever about allegory or metaphor. That's just reductivism, so much after-the-fact rationalisation, as I see it. We each make the world that defines us; we each lose it. On the journey between those two events, we give ourselves as much of the illusion of forever as we can, because in that we find connection, extension, ideally the numinous link, hopefully courage and wisdom. Stories that deal with that profound crisis – and give the promise of something greater, something transformative, even cast in negative terms like hauntings, demon possession, etc. – are a finger in the eye to that loss of everything, even while facing the terrors on offer, a healthy, exhilarating blast of forever right through our lives. No wonder we enjoy such confronting material. Mortality is faced, forever is threatened, but then we have the solace of rushing back into our everyday world afterwards, into connection, new chances, foreverness.

For me a fine ghost story is first and foremost a fine story, powered by character, situation, mood and setting as much as by subject matter or originality. As such, it doesn't need reinventing, but that shouldn't stop us from trying to push the boundaries whenever, however, we can. If there's one thing that concerns me about dark fantasy/horror writing at present it's that it's largely trading in older set forms not far removed from ideas and approaches set by Henry James, Bram Stoker, Poe, etc. That said, I can easily suspend disbelief if the staging, the setting-up, of a ghost story *feels* real enough, has that beguiling Voice of Truth I prize so much. Believing or not believing in ghosts doesn't really come into it. We simply do not know enough about life is, what death is, what self is. It remains wonderfully open, even while framed with sound scientific parameters.

But I never read a ghost story as metaphor or merely for anything quite as necessary but pedestrian as mere emotional content. The emotional aspect is essential for reader engagement, certainly, as a valid part of access, and to an extent characterisation

memes are so interchangeable that while it remains something you need get in place, it can be a comparatively minor thing for the modern storyteller. Modern writers can often afford to go easy with what were once essentials of good storytelling. Readers can bring so much to the reading experience now: find emotional conventions where there are hardly any ('Clay' comes to mind again), provide meme-faces for under-described characters, meme-backstory, meme-lifestyles and attitudes with little need for the burden of description and setting up of thirty, forty years ago. We've seen so many movies, so much television, we're stocked full with faces and behaviours to draw on, lifestyles as modes, choices, distinctive options.

I was utterly chilled by, say, 'Wood,' that compelling, disturbing Robert Aickman story, and I hardly engaged with any character or any character's emotions, rather my own. The mood and staging were such that the strangeness of those within the tale made me use my *own* humanity as a yardstick, and their separateness from it is what helped the story become so powerful. They only had to *seem* like they occupied the real world – or a real-enough world, to make that distinction.

I read for the thrill of the new, the thrill of fear, eeriness, the beauty and power in *inquiétude*, the possibility of transformative glimpses into larger, richer worlds that, at most, allow the beauty of recognition from that higher seeing, higher 'minding', I believe we all have, a glimpse into some part of the human mind and human life experience we don't yet understand, and that, at the least, allows the doors of perception to be cleansed for a time. It's a measure of how dangerous our 'unaccommodation' from the real world has become, that people cannot feast on the wonder and fear served up as reminders of how the world really is. The grim and reprehensible reality of 9/11 should have surprised no-one given how the world has always been. The fact that it did says a lot about that the consequences of that alarming 'conventionalising' and 'lifestyling' of reality, that pending 'death of affect' Ballard warned us about so vividly back in the 60s.

Much of this is what I referred to in my Master's thesis as the Second Reality Crisis. The First Reality Crisis was in the early years of the 20th Century when you had the nature of society shaken up by Freud, Jung, Einstein, other great thinkers coming along, the vivid achievements of the Surrealists, the clash of ideologies and the resulting political turmoil, the terrible legacy of the Great War. The present Crisis is far more sinister because it's happening in the midst of First World plenty and more personal freedom for more people than ever before in the history of the world, so much freedom and ease that people expect too much: too much comfort, too many choices, too much perfection. They question too little, do not notice the population control devices – governments, corporations, vested-interest organisations – in their midst. But there's the *illusion* of choice, the *illusion* of freedom, the expectation of safety, order and, that word again, perfection. Little wonder, when our modern meme-factories – television and cinema, music videos, fashion houses, marketing agencies – are so effective, so constantly working at it, so that every action, every encounter, stands to become stylised, processed, balletic. Everything from the ways the bros in the hood hold their hand-guns to how Tom Cruise falls and shoots from between his legs in *Collateral*. We're even cued as to how we should feel by music, sound effects, close-ups, and we're told what is

happening in entertainments far too much. Little is being left to *our* minds, *our* understanding, our selves, *our* unique way of being in the world. Consensus has become less about community than about compliance with imposed systems.

Those facing the First Reality Crisis were as often lied to, brainwashed and under-informed, as superstitious and nearsighted as we are, but they were closer to healthy errors and imperfections: the glitches and gaffes, the snafus and, yes, the more totally threatening and obvious fascist models, closer to the grimmer, have-not, live-or-die consequences of their everyday humanity. We have spin doctors shutting us off from the sharpest edges of those things. Yes, we do have often sophisticated, hip, street-smart people, but often with little knowledge of their world and how it got to be this way, little ability to discriminate or reproduce even a fraction of the level of technological and consensual civilisation that makes possible their way of life. People are smarter and more adaptable, more giving, potentially more imaginative, more creative, more individual than they ever get a chance to be.

Another part of this is the loss of connection with the inner self and a prizing of what that relationship brings, a loss even of a meaningful context in which such a thing should be sought. Since the Surrealists and the days of Freud and Jung, there's been a growing reductivism regarding the role, say, of dreams and the unconscious, a pendulum swing away from Jungian theory and that larger, arguably valid life of the self. Now the pendulum is heading back the other way to greater potentialities again, though with a distinct and regrettable muddying of the pool. Now there's a superficial, consumerised, rather millennial meme-package of horoscopes and dream interpretations as a daily newspaper, lifestyle thing, of processed 'fantasy' writing, processed film stories, lowest common denominator stuff. The dumbing down of popular culture that we all dreaded has occurred and is both worse and better than we feared. There is such sophistication and ingenuity in communication savvy, yet the general sense of what Sven Birkerts and others call deep time and of realistic outcomes is in an appalling state. Many people simply do not know or care about what their world has already been and what it remains behind the masks.

I don't believe in 'reinventing' anything per se, especially when it's mostly just re-arranging the deck chairs, sticking on false labels like New Weird or Slipstream. Scary stories, stories of unease and provocation, have always been with us, always gone through periods of form and fashion according to tastes, current events, prevailing taboos, using whatever carrier forms are available, targeting whatever taboos or concerns a society has. It's the Court Jester syndrome again – dare to be dangerous, dead or in the dungeon. Marketing departments are forever coming up with angles as part of their efforts to make money from whatever humans do, any aspect of human experience, constantly striving to create saleable realities, exploit meme patterns, peddle goods, any kind of goods, fine, mediocre or downright terrible. That dooms most of us to lives with saturated dataspheres, too much stress and blurred mediocrity meters, and equips us poorly indeed for facing the larger, harsher world.

So, too, the majority of horror, gothic, ghost story writing has become – lazy isn't quite the word, storytelling has survived that for centuries – but limited by locked-in

conceptual memes (tautology intended): standard elements like the vampire, the mummy, the werewolf, the zombie, the serial killer – fiends by which the form is known when you ask someone what horror is. Only occasionally does something special come along, important exceptions like, fleetingly, at their best, Clive Barker's Cenobites.

We need to push the form. That isn't re-inventing, that's remembering, continuance, getting back to natural process and healthy growth, resumption, if you like, particularly given the sheer scale of the market-driven self-imitation that's been going on. Hence: a vampire by its nature is a zombie. Discuss. If so, why? If not, why not? What rules and conventions say so? Keep pushing. Entertaining first, pushing second. The only way is forward.

As for stories of mine that I'd recommend to non-believers, I'd be bold enough to say most of them. As long as the core humanity is in place, the right common touch to allow recognition and ease of entry (what I call 'Voice of Truth' in writing classes), it can trigger the same suspension of disbelief as enables them to engage with, say, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Pan's Labyrinth* or *Iron Man*. It doesn't become an issue.

The publishers Barbara and Christopher Roden once wrote in the introduction to their anthology *Acquainted with the Night*, 'The 'spooky' tale remains a work in progress—it continues to develop in the same way the world [evolves]'. What is the future of the ghost story? I sense that in the 19th century, the ghost tale was often a displaced reflection on a forbidden issue, but what does it do now? Are there some new mutations in the ghost story that give you hope?

The Rodens are right, especially in that storytelling can always trade off a certain currency, tap the cultural horizon of the day: the prevailing anxieties, mundane realities, ethical dilemmas and so on. Consider Stephen King's recent take on our inherent vulnerability in *Cell*, for instance, both obvious and appropriate. But it's a fascinating and quite paradoxical time. You need only look at how the whole millennial period has been characterised by a downturn in sales of SF compared to the safe, stylised timelessness of heroic fantasy; it's of the order of fantasy outselling SF by 3:1.

Again, as with the dual effect of horror, it's about having the larger world and the false forever. All the violence and loss are safe, distanced, elsewhere, and, better yet, formularised, neutered. Many of the problems on offer are those of far lands, other times, other social organisations, other power systems. It's the opposite of what King does in *Cell*; it's not us, the problems aren't ours. Our mortal dreads can be at arms' length and we can dip into the horrors and crises as much as we each can stand.

In the ghost story and horror writing generally, the mortal dreads are always there, of course, but, again, both approaches work: wearing the trappings of this particular time or those of an earlier period, possibly even using those traditional forms to surprise modern readers by triggering a specifically modern reaction just when they thought they were safe in the old familiar patterns.

So what does the modern ghost story do now? At a time when organised religions are under threat and have become ever more ferocious and mendacious in their decline, where we routinely question governments, corporations, and authority figures, the modern ghost story can return to its first and best role again: violation of reality as a way to experience authentic wonderment, startling us into a new relationship with what's unknown. As for hope for the form, absolutely. You need only look at how the Japanese take on the ghost story has helped deliver a wholesale revitalisation of ways of approaching the old standards. Look at the Japanese original of *Pulse (Kairo)*. Just that one reminder that it *can* be done differently pries us away from the formula – that hardening of the imaginative and creative arteries that's inevitable in a safe shareholder culture. You only need one potent example, as provided in 1979, say, by Ridley Scott's *Alien*.

As for its future, it only need do what it's always done, whether using modern or traditional (dare we call it 'retro?') staging: enrich and enliven the life experience by re-sensitising us to what we already have, shaking us out of our complacency, confronting our great fear of death, oblivion, that ultimate loss of self and so reality, but sugarcoating this reminder of our final *known* destination with the illusion of forever. Having it both ways there, but that's how it works. Too much of either and the key effect is lost.

In this regard, I tend to 'shoot from the hip' when writing. No over-rationalising, no sitting down to come up with a nifty, over-intellectualised idea. It's far more intuitive, more organic and natural, far more in keeping with the spirit of those imagiers I prize. Once you master the basic delivery and mood skills, restore those check-the-boxes elements to being intuitive again, that's how it is. They're second nature. You don't notice the contrivance as anything like that.

The idea for 'The Fooly', for example, came from having that title on a list of titles I keep to provoke myself and hope to 'resolve' someday. I'd only ever heard the term used in that classic *Star Trek* episode, 'Miri', and then, wonderfully, vividly, in Bill Martin Jr, John Archambault and Ted Rand's deliciously spooky 1985 picture-book, *The Ghost-Eye Tree*, which I make sure I read every autumn. But a story for the title sprang to life fully-formed, and the struggle was to keep it as short as it is. At 1950 words, enough was enough, and, as with 'The Daemon Street Ghost-Trap' and 'The Bullet That Grows in the Gun', I like to think that it shows a distinct evolutionary twitch, possibly a hint of a new angle in an old geometry. I kept my fingers crossed that the idea hadn't been done before. Certainly I hadn't encountered it.

As much as these things are every truly considered, I'm very much drawn to exploring and pushing the forms. This is why I do find the majority of monster stories so ordinary, so lacklustre. It's like the Goth-as-lifestyle thing, the whole horoscope, psychic shtick. These old favourites are definitely another way of thumbing our noses at death and the unknown, all the things we fear, but they also represent the wearing down of the hard edges, sanctify and lock in the tired old tropes as décor rather than any kind of living, thriving dynamic, as if they're automatically what horror should be known by rather than the prospect of reality failing or being larger and stranger.

This is where we come back to the value of ways of seeing – both in terms of motivation and a different approach and in terms of actual content. Once you’ve done the taboos: necrophilia, incest, paedophilia etc, then, taking the lesson of the Surrealists, and the best of the horror writers at work today, it may be useful to go back to the ordinary, the mundane, and make those powerful again. The term ‘surreal’ is so easily tossed off these days, used a ‘dangerous’ décor and method but mostly without achieving the discipline and transformational rigour that makes it so effective. But it’s there to be used – gloriously, dangerously, provocatively – as in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*. The thing is, it’s often easier to take the gross-out, violence and taboo approach, far far harder, far more of an imaginative stretch and a matter of sheer writing ability, to do the other. The good news is that you can keep it small, keep it traditional, and still astonish.

D.H. Lawrence said of Edgar Allen Poe’s writing: ‘It is lurid and melodramatic, but it is true’. If Poe were writing today, where in the bookshop would he be placed? Can you think of many writers of darkness who are also literary and ‘true’, yet are unfairly ghettoed onto a small shelf? How do they break through to the big shelf?

We’re each of us of our time. How would Jesus – a specialist in messiah roles – do? End up in a madhouse, sleeping on a park bench or running the Hillsong Church? Would Shakespeare – a writer of popular entertainment with a definite something extra, the Joss Whedon or J.J. Abrams of his day – be writing series television? Writers like Poe and Fritz Leiber have been plundered, risk being blanded out in an age of mass-market sampling (to be hip), homage (to be kind), appropriation (to be diplomatic). Second-string writers, really very ordinary but often enthusiastic writers, have worked the tropes *ad nauseam*, embellished, even blurred the historical record. Publicists and marketing teams certainly don’t care unless the legal department says go easy, using terms like ‘breathtaking’, ‘edgy’ and ‘brilliant’ for work that’s formula, pedestrian, derivative, what, in terms of ideas, often characters and settings, is ‘franchise’ storytelling. So be it. That’s the way of the world. It becomes a matter of remembering what are ‘other men’s flowers’ (to use the title of a book of war poems I read when I was a soldier), granting in true measure who did what and setting the record straight. Ironically, I suspect that the best way to break through to the big shelf these days is to take what others have done, play the standards, tell a familiar story from a new angle, give a focus and pacing variant that will make people think they’re thinking. Just do it well. Find someone’s old idea and give it a better, more modern engine so that it catches the spirit of the times, which is precisely what J.K. Rowling did with the Harry Potter books. Old idea: magic school. Modern dynamic.

If Poe were alive, he’d be shelved under genre, one of those false handles marketing people devise to over-signpost their culture for a largely non-discerning consumership. We can only shake our heads at any such attempt to put a fixed price on variable goods and go with it as best we can.

Also concepts of merit and literary worth change. We’re back to Van Gogh only selling *The Red Vineyard* in his lifetime and *Moby-Dick* virtually ruining Melville’s career but

being one of the great novels in the language. So, no, it doesn't bother me too much. I see what the task is, addressing the reality crisis presently occurring and do what I can, entertaining, celebrating the possibility of that larger world, giving back. And I'm proud of my body of work. The International Horror Guild Award for my US collection, *Basic Black: Tales of Appropriate Fear*, with its starred review in *Publishers' Weekly*, and the World Fantasy Award nomination for *Blackwater Days* confirm that I'm on the trail of something worth pursuing. Nothing may come of it in terms of longevity, but at least I'm drawn to pursuing the Great Work and accept the challenge as best I can.

Thank you for inviting readers into your imagination today.

It's been my great pleasure.