

An Intimate Knowledge of the Night

A Review by Cheryl McNeil

TD: It means a great deal to any author, artist or maker to have his or her work appreciated in a way that comes close to matching the original intention. In February 2010, Sydney writer Cheryl McNeil produced this astute and most insightful review of my award-winning 1995 linked collection and metafiction *An Intimate Knowledge of the Night*. The following piece takes the form of a letter to the author and both comments on the text and poses questions in turn. It is used with permission.

Dear Terry,

I thoroughly enjoyed *An Intimate Knowledge of the Night*, and I thank you for writing it. I fear that for such highly-structured source material this review will jump all over the place, but I shall at least try to start at the beginning.

“There is a braid that gathers up the hours...”

It’s such a lovely image: threads of time, timeless threads. Surely, we braided before we ever even conjured fire. The first four paragraphs of the Introduction are a delight. Someone in possession of a soul is trying to shave off a slice and give it to me in that passage.

Before going much further, I must beg your indulgence to allow me to divide you into ‘Terry’ the character in the Terry/Ray dialogues and Terry Dowling, author of the words on the page. The ‘Terry’ in the dialogues could have been any gifted, intelligent writer with a story to be told about him and his personal dragons just as much as about mental patients and frighteners and mazes and trains. Maybe this is exactly what you wanted from your reader, or maybe not, but that’s how I received the text, and I relished the duality. It took the novel to a whole new level for me, and I do see it as a novel. I saw the short stories as both stand-alone pieces and as a set, but, at first, during the reading, I felt like the ‘novel’ comprised only the Terry/Ray dialogues. That changed on p233 when Ray hangs up without asking which story is next. The story in question is *The Rediscovery of Tutankhamen’s Tomb*. It quickly becomes one of my favourites, yet I am happy to get to the end. Where is Ray? And what does it all mean?

I immediately went into sleuth mode wondering what it was about Neb’s story that had special meaning in relation to Terry and Ray. Wrongly or rightly, I came up with the idea that both ‘Terry’ and ‘Ray’ were re-imaginings of the Terry Dowling template. I wasn’t sure what that meant. It was perfectly feasible that ‘Ray’ was based on a real person even if the inclusion of him in the dialogues was a fiction. Ray appeared to be an aspiring writer, and from our own past discussions I know you hold grave concerns about protection of authors’ intellectual property rights. Ray’s attempted theft of ‘Inserrio’ certainly triggered firm chastisement. Does Ray represent a Terry Dowling

manqué? Would he turn into an evil clone as we get further in the book or be exposed as a poor wannabe?

Okay, let's say I *might* be onto something with Ray, but you might wonder why I would consider 'Terry' a manqué. For me, the division between the two Terrys (should that be Terries?; it looks wrong both ways) was trumpeted on p244 when Terry Dowling speaks calmly of a love of Egyptology, apparently oblivious to what the 'Terry' character is experiencing at that point, which is 'Panic. Alarm. Disconnection.' (p232). Exactly the sorts of things that Neb and the others had felt. And I do feel that the Terry in the dialogues appears more flawed and vulnerable than the original. His fears are bigger, his responses less composed. (Or maybe it's just that it's a tempting irony given the original's professed love of Egypt, even a 'false Egypt'.)

I hope it makes sense now for me to say that it was only at this point that the shorts became important to me in the context of the novel. (Yes, I came a bit late to that party!) Until then I enjoyed but almost—almost—resented the regular interruptions to what was going on with Terry and Ray, which was wonderfully intriguing. Following *The Rediscovery of Tutankhamen's Tomb*, 'Terry' became increasingly vulnerable, exposed. Conversely, Ray never seemed more in control.

As I read on, the story that keeps popping back into my head during pp245-248 was *The Quiet Redemption of Andy the House*. Or more like one line; I keep reciting 'Andy Bates see', 'Andabates see', in my mind—ABC. Am I off with the pixies with thoughts of manqués? Should I be limiting my reading of Ray to him being a former psych patient capable of messing with Terry's' mind? I've been thinking hard on it, but there doesn't appear to be a redemption going on with Ray. Yes, he eventually admits his error with Inserrio, but it seemed a glib concession considering his earlier position.

At this point I'm giving more thought to what the shorts might be telling me about Ray and Terry. By long habit, I avoid lists of story or chapter titles for fear of seeing something like 'Chapter 17, Ray's Funeral', so I didn't know the title of the next story until Ray guesses it (p247), and then the rest of that tense interstitial talks of readers and writers being travellers together.

Scaring the Train. Fantastic title! Even before reading it, just the idea of anthropomorphising the train combined with pre-story talk of Ray and Terry being travellers planted a new thought in my head. Authors are like trains. They provide the vehicle, the structure, that transports me in a direction of their choosing. With some authors, the journey is clumsy but the destination exciting; with others, the destination is irrelevant but the 'view from the carriage' is breathtaking.

With all that's been going on with Terry and Ray, it occurs to me that this book of short stories could be titled 'Scaring the Author'. At this point, I toy with the idea that the author as depicted (in this case the 'Terry' character) is the train, and I wonder just what Ray is going to do to him.

Scaring the Train is a formidable story in its own right, but I'm still thinking about trains and authors. By the time I reach the direct-to-camera break on p269, the acknowledgement of the reader by author-character-Paul, the admission of story construction, the voice so similar to the linking text, there is considerable blurring of authorial fact and fiction. With the author-train idea still in my head, this blurring was

perfectly placed to show author-Paul struggling for control, struggling to 'be the train', to not be derailed. On finishing the story, the train-wind still fresh in my mind, I'm eager to find out what is happening with Terry and with Ray, his Frightener, the would-be derailer, the sometime Trickster, perfectly constructed to scare the author-Terry-train.

Ostensibly, we have Ray's dragon story revealed (p280), but that notion is fleeting. For me, now, Ray is but a manqué. Spreading the real dragon dark is you alone, Terry Dowling, the novel's Night Train, unable to be derailed or diverted. Then 'Terry' awakes, and appears to have had the willies knocked out of him by your dragon breathing hell into urban life—the author's life—asleep or awake. You leave the Terry manqué vulnerable, terrified. 'Raymond', has the power now (or does he?). It's a delicious climax.

I don't know if my reading of your text is even close to what it should be, but I guess that is exactly what really scares writers every day. Once committed to print, you are at the mercy of your reader, critics, fashion. The quote from Inzerio on p94 comes to mind. It's a delightful piece. How true that we never walk the same street, just as my reading of your novel can never be as you intended—not fully (not nearly, more like). You weave in so many layers. Most, I'm sure, have flown right over my head.

My mind keeps returning to naming the fundamental fear that oppresses 'Terry', and it's not the imagery of 'the blood, the breath!' that grabs me, but rather it is 'using the energies of our lives to extend itself'. I had wondered earlier whether Ray was turning into some kind evil clone. I could also ask, would I or any others from your writing classes do so? I wonder if perhaps that is the real fear for you, that by giving of yourself through writing and teaching (but especially teaching) that some protégé would try to steal your ideas, to render you irrelevant by eclipsing you through theft and deceit. Is such a beast your dragon?

Okay, enough of my waffling and second-guessing of subtext. There were so many great moments throughout the book to comment upon. Some stood alone, others tied things together. I loved the Green Man reference in the dragon passage, for the literal image of the Walk icon, for the allusion to some kind of gatekeeper, for a throwback to historical Celtic imagery, but mostly for providing a bookend to the Green Man in the opening story—our first Frightener.

In the closing lines of the dragon passage (p282), you speak of lines rising up and 'How you name a thing defines a thing.' My mind is already running away equating rail lines with story lines. It leaves me wondering what it means to be named an author. If named such will 'Form Follow Function'?

But getting back to the bullet. The gun itself is so potent a threat. I certainly couldn't have put it to my temple, but that choice is more rooted in suspicion of human trickery and malice than any genuine fear of quantum uncertainties combining random particles to form iron and gunpowder. The idea of the Green Man growing in the armchair is somehow more real, and more sinister, for the gun won't fire itself (one supposes). Good scary stuff!

I absolutely adored *The Maze Man*. I found it delightful that you made the conundrum so public (in the context of the story). So often with fantasy 'incredible

things' happen in convenient seclusion, with the writer only bothering to deal with half a dozen people in an isolated town. Here we have the natural consequences of the James Quinlan's predicament as he tries to go on with his life and can only coincidentally co-exist. And the last lines were great, painting over every line, rendering his non-existence non-existent.

The climax to *The Deamon Street Ghost-Trap* was both surprising and satisfying. I was a child in the seventies when cancer always wore a capital C and was always a death sentence. How apt, then, for the hero to be someone who gathered the carcinogens to himself to protect others. Oddly, *The Terrarium*, bears a warped similarity in the self-appointment of heroism, this time saving, protecting the moon's culture. We take a different turn with *They Found the Angry Moon*, with two crooks headed for two different hells. I really liked the dialogue-smithing in this piece.

I have to say I do feel lucky to be a Sydneysider reading your work. The local references resonate that much more powerfully, I think. I've lived off Victoria Road, shaken my head in wonder at the perfectly named Blandville flats, buried family at Rookwood, caught trains at Town Hall, done ten minute 'bush-walks' in weirding gullies between neatly mown cul-de-sacs. *The Gully* was mesmerising and so real.

Your landscapes are perfectly familiar to me, and that very ordinariness is what makes it a perfect nightmare dreamscape. It certainly makes the dragon climax that much more compelling for me. I can so easily see cardigan-wearing pensioners stirring their cups of tea, preparing for another day made hellish by decrepitude and irrelevance.

This review is getting awfully long, but I must spare a word for my absolute favourite story, *The Last Elephant*. I was already loving every bit of it, and then it went to a whole new level. And even more resonant now with public consciousness rising about environmental issues. Amazing stuff! I've always had a soft spot for elephants (though I'm happy to keep a respectful distance!). They paint and bury their dead and remember and get completely stressed out. It deeply saddens me to think of what we do to them. How they must wish us gone.

In all a fantastic read! Thanks so much, Terry!

Best wishes,

Cheryl