

Dancing the Dark Fantastic: An Interview with Terry Dowling

Published in *Ténèbres* 3, July /September 1998.

Interviewed by Stephen Dedman

SD: You've had six books published, the latest being *An Intimate Knowledge of the Night*, from which 'Scaring the Train' was taken. You have degrees in Archaeology and Literature. You've won more Australian SF Achievement Awards for fiction than anyone else, two Readercon Awards in the US, and two Aurealis Awards for your horror fiction. You co-edited *The Essential Ellison* and *Mortal Fire*, and you're an editorial adviser to *Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature*. As a writer, you've created one of Australia's most famous futures with your Tom Rynosseros tales. You recently turned fifty, teach communications in Sydney, and performed your own songs on the Australian TV series *Mr Squiggle*, and you do a mean rendition of 'Runaway'. In there anything else you'd like *Ténèbres'* readers to know about you?

TD: Perhaps that I've always felt a connection with the Surrealists and how they both 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 Surrealistic Novel*, focused on Surrealism as an evolving form and its connection with today's literature of the fantastic, particularly those forms labelled science fiction, horror and what gets called magic realism, particularly in connection with the work of Ballard. I suggested – with the arrogance of youth, I'm sure – that Surrealism was a response to what I called the First Reality Crisis in human affairs, then claimed that a Second Reality Crisis (almost the opposite of the first) was presently occurring, with writers like Ballard and Philip K. Dick tracing its form and progress.

SD: Apart from Ballard and Dick, whose work would you say has inspired and influenced you the most?

TD: This becomes difficult, because, as with anyone's influences, it's always so circumstantial and eclectic. We always overlook things that *were* important for the things we think were. I've always loved ancient civilizations, the fantastic and the bizarre. At the same time I was discovering Jack Vance, Cordwainer Smith, Ray Bradbury, Ballard and Dick in the sixties, I was also reading Charles Higham's horror anthologies, reading the armchair archaeology texts of Leonard Cottrell and admiring the Surrealist painters. Finding the work of Roger Zelazny, Samuel R. Delany, Frank Herbert, Theodore Sturgeon and Harlan Ellison was paralleled by reading Poe and Robert Bloch, and relishing films like Robert Wise's *The Haunting*, William Castle's *The Tingler*, Richard Heermance's *The Maze*. It's more that an horizon of theme and imagery was built up cumulatively, so that by the time I read Borges, John Crowley's

Little, Big and *Ægypt*, Robert Lipscombe's *The Salamander Tree*, Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes* they fitted into what was already there like retroactive pieces. Three favourite works are John Fowles' *The Magus*, Fritz Leiber's *Our Lady of Darkness* and Ballard's *Vermilion Sands*, so you can see that mystery, disquiet and a richness of setting tinged with darkness have always been natural. The joys of my life include becoming close friends with Jack Vance and Harlan Ellison, corresponding with Ballard during the writing of my MA thesis, and visiting Fritz Leiber in San Francisco in 1988.

SD: How would you define your approach to the fantastic?

TD: As in many ways instinctively continuing something very close to what the Surrealists sought to achieve 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 general desensitization to reality. I see the best dark fantastic literature as being challenging and subversive in this way, using these things to re-energize our lives, to send the message: pay attention, notice what is, to reintroduce us to things as fundamental as cause and effect. If you play it right, judge it carefully, you can get moments of acute focus, of personal crisis and liberation, a sense of being truly alive in moments of disquiet, when the universe you thought you knew feels suddenly wrong and you as reader find yourself in the curious position of re-choosing orthodoxy, of rediscovering and re-defining your relationship with yourself.

SD: What is the genesis of 'Scaring the Train'?

TD: It's the result of several converging strands. First there was the title – three words tapping into my great affection for the 'railway' paintings of Paul Delvaux. I keep lists of titles and use them in all sorts of different storytelling settings just to let them gather their own weight and resonance. Again, as with Breton and the Surrealists, I prize inspiration and what the subconscious can do creatively when given half a chance. So I set up word triggers and wait to see what comes. Soon I had the different opening lines mentioned in the story. Also, I'd always been fascinated by the notion that the average human's blood contains enough iron for a two-inch nail. What would happen if it suddenly vanished from the bloodstream? What could it be used for? You can see how the progression went. The iron road. The idea of trains and bogies. A train as death. I love the train winds you feel on underground stations, how you sometimes feel a train coming by its breath even before you hear it. These things led back to when I was 18 and some college friends and I visited the Blue Mountains' stations outside of Sydney and completed a walk along foggy midnight tracks very much like the one described in the story.

Finally, as well as the richly haunting Delvaux imagery, I was also powerfully affected by William Stoneman's disturbing cover for the May 1982 issue of *The Twilight Zone* magazine, by Joseph Mugnaini's illustrations for the early Ray Bradbury collections, and by Ted Rand's illustrations for Bill Martin Jr and John Archambault's *The Ghost-Eye Tree*. So, you see, a very rich genesis.

SD: You've been able to work closely with your illustrators, notably Nick Stathopoulos and Shaun Tan. How much of a difference has this made to your work?

TD: Many authors, Ballard and Australian Nobel Prize winner Patrick White 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, doing sketches, photographing streets, sunsets, vistas, found objects. Artists often provide triggers for stories. 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*, 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 publication by an Australian artist. From when I first started my Tom Rynosseros tales in the 80s, I've had the honour of having Nick Stathopoulos visualise that world for me, giving it the right air of mystery and possibility. It's a rich cross-pollination.

SD: When did it occur to you that the stories that make up *An Intimate Knowledge of the Night* could be assembled into a novel?

TD: My publisher and I had talked about collecting my separate tales in 1992 but, because of wanting to keep momentum with the Tom Rynosseros material, elected to do *Twilight Beach* first. Once that appeared in 1993, we went ahead with the other book. I'm one of those readers who actually likes reading his own work. I don't believe that creation is ultimately an act of ego, rather an act of self. The ego tries to take credit, but I am often in awe of what my non-ego creative self has managed to achieve. So often I read my stories as a marvelling stranger wondering how on earth I managed to do this. Thus it was easy for the stories destined for the collection to re-inspire me, to work their own cumulative magic. I've always admired Bradbury's linked collections: *The Martian Chronicles*, *The Illustrated Man*, *Dandelion Wine*. I wanted to do something similar, began doing notes, then suddenly found I had a rather eerie and disturbing story growing. To my delight, the book assumed a life of its own. I dreamt the title – actually had a list of titles and was aware in the dream that this was the title I wanted. I was so worried I'd forget it, as we so often do with dream material. But I kept it with me on waking and quickly wrote it down, then promptly forgot all the other titles.

SD: You're well known for stating that Australian sf and fantasy have unique qualities, a unique style. Can you comment further on this?

TD: I do feel that the best fantastic literature produced in Australia often catches the essence of something quite unique. 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 light, locality and experience, a

sense of being *here* and not somewhere else. So, without presuming to identify any such unique qualities, 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 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* (but not always) be special.

SD: You've managed to sell seven books of short fiction, and edit two more, in a time when most publishers seem to believe that short fiction does not sell. What do you think are the strengths of short fiction? And how would you rate its importance to the genre?

TD: For me, short fiction and poetry are the perfect forms and vital to the healthy storytelling traditions of any society. With the oral tradition reduced mostly to tall stories and jokes, to lullaby, nursery rhyme and fairy tale fragments, and with most novels giving people what marketing departments believe they want, it's in the small presses and the independent film houses, in pop songs and video vignettes, in society's blind spots that the important storytelling can be found.

A story should only be as long as it needs to be, not as long as it *can* be. So many novels are stories inflated beyond their ideal lengths and are damaged by it. Enough is as good as a feast. Such things should be intuitive, never forced. The ideal story length for me is between nine and twelve thousand words, so the novella and novelette are clearly my optimum forms. I always think of writers like Poe or Borges. Just enough. Language needn't be wasted. Placement can become everything. You actually become a better storyteller, can build more potent and exquisite works. The word 'novel' has been debased in its present use – most novels are derivative, mass-market pap, far from being novel in any sense, all part of the dumbing-down of our global society I still feel marks a Second Reality Crisis. Short stories, so generally (and wonderfully) non-commercial, are where the novel work can most often be found. It's good to have a sense of irony about these things.

SD: You once mentioned to me that you prefer writing in a cafe. Do you still do this, and what is it about the relatively public performance of what has always struck me as an intensely private act that attracted you?

TD: I don't see it as a public performance in any sense or even something consciously chosen. For me, it's just process. I like to write longhand then key it in later, print off, resume longhand, and so on. I spend two hours in a coffee shop every morning. I'm its first client of the day. I find everything is fluid in script. For me cappuccino is one of civilizations's great inventions, proof of a future for the race and a golden tomorrow.

SD: Is this your first experience of having your work translated? How do you feel about it?

TD: My story 'The Ichneumon and the Dormeuse' was translated into Czech for *Ikarie* last year. But being translated into French means a great deal indeed. Given my earlier and instinctive involvement with Surrealism and French traditions of thought, I feel something has been completed somehow. It matters a lot. I'm delighted.

SD: What are you working on now, and what can we expect to see from you in the near future?

TD: I'm working on several new stories of disquiet, a novel set in the bizarre future Earth of my Wormwood series [see *Wormwood*, Aphelion 1991], and a fourth Tom Rynosseros collection, plus some standalone sf stories. I'm doing a collaboration with Harlan Ellison to see if it works for us. In other words, I have the titles pinned up and fragments humming away. My next book is *Blackwater Days*, due from Eidolon Publications later this year. It's seven linked yet freestanding stories initially inspired by Shaun Tan's powerful painting *Blackwater*, and uses events and interests in my life to resolve that painting in a suitably disturbing way. The book is set in a mental hospital in the Hunter Valley outside of Sydney, and concerns Dr Dan Truswell and some rather terrifying experiences which start to happen. Two parts have already been published and done well for me. 'Beckoning Nightframe' was reprinted in the US Datlow/Windling *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror* in 1997, and now 'Jenny Come to Play' has won me the Aurealis Award for Best Horror Short Story, has been reprinted in *The Year's Best Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy* and has just been picked up for next year's Datlow/Windling *Year's Best*. My stories of disquiet are doing very well for me. It seems that I'm destined to dance the 'dark fantastic'.

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