

Making Strange

A Gothic Conversation with Terry Dowling, Australia's Premier Writer of the Imagination

Conducted by Danel Olson

A lifelong native of Sydney, Terry Dowling (b. 1947) is an *imagier* from the planet's largest island, where is found the largest monolith (Uluru), the biggest living thing (the Great Barrier Reef), and the oldest soil, rocks, and fossils yet to be discovered, along with the people who have longest occupied their traditional territory, the Aboriginal Australians. Small surprise it is that his fiction is acclaimed as surreal and dreamlike, a voyage into the deep outer space in front of us, and best suited for the adventurous. He is a critic and reviewer, an editor, a game designer with a doctorate in creative writing, as well as one of Australia's most awarded and highly regarded imaginative writers. Engrossed by the mystical movements of the jarring chance encounter, by the mind's negotiations with the impossible, and by characters' re-visioning of their worlds, Dowling consistently enchants. His prose evokes the disorientation and wonderment cast from fellow writers of the Commonwealth, living and dead: from England's John Fowles, Angela Carter, and Patrick McGrath; to Canada's Robertson Davies, Margaret Atwood, and Yann Martel; to New Zealand's Witi Ihimaera and Tasmania's Richard Flanagan. His strange stories from a sunburnt land regularly appeared in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, and his award-winning fiction 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*. Three new works—two tales and novel excerpt—were summoned for recent Ash-Tree Press anthologies: 'Jarkman at the Othergates' (*Exotic Gothic: Tales from Our Gothic World*, 2007), *Clowns at Midnight: A Tale of Appropriate Fear* (*Exotic Gothic 2: New Tales of Taboo*, 2008; released in its entirety by PS Publishing, 2010), and a haunting story of ghosts in Vietnam, 'Two Steps Along the Road' (*Exotic Gothic 3: Strange Visitations*, 2009). Ticonderoga Publications released in 2009 another edition of *Basic Black*, called 'One of the best recent collections of contemporary horror' by the American Library Association. Ticonderoga also presented *Make Believe: A Terry Dowling Reader*. For early 2010, Subterranean Press scheduled a fourth Jack Vance retrospective co-edited with his friend and colleague Jonathan Strahan, along with his collection *Amberjack: Tales of Fear and Wonder*. The latter includes the novella '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. Most recently, award-winning director Sergio Pinheiro has optioned Terry's 'One Thing About the Night' and 'The Maze Man' for film development, with at least one due for treatment as a feature.

In the following conversation, Terry Dowling discusses Australian sensibilities and sensitivities that emerge in its fantasy and science fiction; his own influences from comics and film to fiction and philosophy; and his enduring interest in understanding and depicting states of fear, panic, and madness.

DANEL OLSON: First, a question about newer influences. How much are you and other Australian authors now shaped more from the East? Do you sense there is a literary window toward Asia opening? One recent Australian Prime Minister committed ‘to making Australia the most Asia-literate society in the collective West.’ Thus, Australia will now have more schools concentrating on Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, and Indonesian languages and cultures. Do Asian currents move more strongly now within Australian genre fiction? For example, is there a conversation with the Japanese science fiction and dark fantasy writers as of late (voices including Koji Suzuki, Yusuke Kishi, Hideaki Sena, and Taichi Yamada)? Or perhaps with innovators in Japanese film, manga, computer games?

TERRY DOWLING: The Prime Minister’s words reflect the socio-economic positionings of a culture that already has its own firm identity and cultural alignments. So there hasn’t been so much a re-shaping or re-alignment in larger cultural terms as that general receptivity I mentioned, an open-minded appreciation of different forms and flavours, different ways of doing things, whatever they may be. By the first third of the 20th Century, our hidebound culture was becoming slowly but irreversibly cosmopolitan in very interesting ways. The US cultural influences of the 40s, 50s and 60s were laid over the existing British ones, and those brought in by the influx of Greek, Italian and other European migrants. Our gold rush in the nineteenth century, for instance, had very much the same effect as it did in the US, bringing in other peoples. We had cappuccino well before the 50s, and Melbourne still has the largest city Greek population outside of Greece, the largest Italian population outside of Italy. That says a lot.

In modern times we’re probably far more receptive, creatively, to Japanese, Chinese and Korean horror films, to anything special and different filtering down from Out There. US cinema often charms but rarely surprises; Asian and European cinema often does both. That, too, says a lot. The same with approaching the delivery of narrative. We are so used to US film-making and television cinematography conventions: the right to left camera pans to cue a shock, the currently fashionable telescoping slam-zoom shots we’re seeing overused, the sound FX and soundtrack stings to cue mood responses and plot situations, the concept of a laugh track. Consequently, other techniques, other approaches, become even more powerful, and aren’t just seized on but used to fuel the crucial mindset of allowing that other ways of doing familiar things *are there to be found*. That’s the great lesson of the Asian experience, learning to think outside the box. Different is possible, worth trying for, possibly better.

In short, the Asian influence is one more set of flavours getting a look-in, a fair turn, and, when it gets too much, too familiar, I suspect there will be a backlash – a swing back to

the core European influences that underpin this culture, get ourselves a cultural top-up, if you like.

Japanese genre and literary fiction, as well as their cuisine, have a notorious fascination with the deadly but tasty pufferfish *fugu*. Now how does the fact that Australia has more things that can kill you than seemingly anywhere else in the world affect your worldview and writing? I speak of your Continent's sharks, crocodiles, ten most venomous snakes on the planet, cruel funnelweb spiders, toxic caterpillars, wicked box jellyfish, twelve-spiked stonefish, and the infamous razor-clawed cassowary.

When you remember that Australia is the size of Europe or mainland USA (minus Alaska), with six large States and two Territories, a handful of comparatively small but truly cosmopolitan cities, and the population of New York State, then the chance of encountering any of these nasties is actually quite small, far less of a risk than, say, driving on any autobahn or US freeway, or even the dangers of walking down any US street, for that matter.

The thing that surprises a lot of visitors is the sheer size of the place. Stand on any US coast and look inland and you have so many cities, cultures, flavours, what are effectively different countries with often strikingly different mindsets. Do the same here and you have what is largely a vast waiting emptiness, still *tabula rasa* in so many ways. These days, ironically, that breeds a kinship, a connection, and, yes, a feeling of being incredibly lucky.

If the physical landscape determines anything, it's the sense of distance, of a healthy isolation. Once it was the opposite, of course. As culturally starved colonials and citizens of the early days of the Commonwealth, it was the enemy, *terra nullius*, a measure of how much we were cut off from home, but no longer. At its best, that isolation, that quality of being cut off, now tends to breed an ease, a laid-back tolerance, a healthy and useful detachment, a wry amusement at those societies hopelessly weighed down with tradition, conventions, cast and class structures, the sheer weight of the past. There's still so little of that here and it's always a relief to come back to such a place after travelling. Sure, there's a money 'class' system as in any healthy economy, and there is both a degree of social neglect and what's-in-it-for-me consumerism at the expense of a general caring for the common good, but it hardly shapes the underlying national consciousness, at least not yet. In an important sense, Australia is what the US was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: a place of the new chance, of incredible possibility. And it's a continent, for heaven's sake, with no shared borders – this setting, this way, all because an empire in the growing afternoon of its imperial might chose to send its criminals and social misfits here. The cast-offs did what no other visitors apart from the first Aboriginal arrivals did, *use it*, make it home.

Given that newness, that possibility of possibility, an attitude gets formed, one that goes deep despite being hidden by the over-stylised realities, by the thoughtlessness of consumerised, conventionalised day to day living. But it's there just the same,

characterised by an impatience with old forms, self-righteousness, political correctness. Those things get a look-in, of course, they're infectious memes in a global society, but they're largely loan-factors and as transitory as such things usually tend to be. Ours is very much a cultural hybrid, a borrowed culture relentlessly making itself into what it will become, cannot help but become, being in *this* place. As the Jaime Robbie Robertson song says: 'You take what you need and leave the rest'. I like to think that, at its best, without wanting to sound trite or jingoistic, that's still what's happening here. Certainly British fantasist Graham Joyce was so taken with Oz when he visited in 2007 that he said it is probably the closest thing to a utopia we presently have.

When it comes to writing, the same distance that creates this questioning awareness of imposed systems, hierarchies, memes and expectations, that lets us be free of much of the baggage and clutter of Western culture and have a healthy irreverence about it, also fosters a creative way of seeing. Less 'clutter' means noticing details, how ultimately *all* received cultural and notional structures are relative things, false absolutes that get in the way of seeing how it actually is; simple things, like how one person's ancient grave or sacred site is invariably another's archaeology. For example, take the northern focus for most of the dominant world religions, northern festivals, northern geo-centrism in determining *world* calendar events. Man first stepped on the Moon not on one but two dates: 20 and 21 July 1969. The world's day starts off our eastern coast out there in the Pacific, and we saw the Moon-walk on 21 July 1969. That is a simple, objective truth. Yet conventional history reportage tidies it up to a single date. The terrible events of 9/11 (which logically, in the least-greater-greatest sequencing used by Australia, the UK, the US military etc, should be 11/9 but is skewed by another northern meme) occurred on 11-12/9. When you add something like that to the much more mundane, hilarious, if personally dear, lifelong memories of receiving and sending Christmas cards depicting holly, winter snow and sleds with Santa by the fire in the midst of our blazing Australian summer, you start to see why Aussies have become so laconic, down-to-earth and amused when people take themselves too seriously. The absurdity of life is often more easily noticed, how custom and the 'it seemed like a good idea at the time' explanation so often determine the core memes we hold as desperate truths.

Despite this admirable Australian ease with incongruities, much of your work depicts and creates panic states. It is a meditation on madness. The reader seems bidden to slip into the disquiet, distress, and dread of both losing and seeing things, along with the protagonist. The inexplicable presents itself, old things are de-familiarized, a little thing becomes menacing (a cross stitch, a dress dummy, a coffee cup), characters question their own senses, and they sometimes tumble into a paralyzing psychological abyss. Has the unique weirdness of Australia's fiction seeped into yours, or is the source of the uneasy and torment in your writing from other springs? For me, some of your most potent portrayals of minds bewildered come from recent works, including the tales 'Basic Black' (in *Blackwater Days*, 2000), 'Stitch' (in *Eidolon*, 2002), 'The Bone Ship' (in *Gathering the Bones*, 2003), 'Clownette' (in *SCI FICTION*, 2004), 'Jarkman at the Othergates' (in *Exotic Gothic*, 2007), 'Two Steps Along the Road' (in *Exotic Gothic 3*, 2009),

and the novel *Clowns at Midnight: A Tale of Appropriate Fear* (PS Publishing, 2010) – which *The Guardian* hails as ‘an exceptional work that bears comparison to John Fowles’s *The Magus*.’

Nothing is more terrifying than the world as we know it going wrong. That simple element is at the heart of the best and most effective horror storytelling – the world goes wrong in some way. And the main character, traditionally the reader’s entry-point, isn’t sure whether it’s his or her personal reality going awry (what Philip K. Dick referred to as the *idios kosmos*) or the shared outer reality (the *koinos kosmos*) failing. Ken Levine, the talented lead designer of *Bioshock*, said: ‘All horror is based upon loss . . . and what you’re afraid of losing: family, property, and sanity’, but seen as part of a truly complete equation, there’s much more to it. Whether it’s hauntings, the living dead shuffling into town, or Lovecraft’s Old Ones pushing through, it’s things being lost, true, and reality breaking down, though with the positives such a situation also brings: of the world opening up, being larger, even for a moment, even with threat and crisis, having more to it. What a simple yet terrific gift; what a fine reward for the reader, having a larger, richer, fuller world – with the additional comfort of knowing that it’s only a story. You are personally safe no matter what happens.

That yearning for something more is at the core of our being, whether through religion, patriotism, championing causes and sporting teams, raising children, so many things. Horror, dark fantasy (like the best fantasy and science fiction writing with its possibility of other worlds, other ways, other roads to go down), delivers it in spades. No wonder it appeals. There can be a panic, a thrill, an unfathomed, instantaneous cleansing of the doors of perception. Equally important, it gives us the illusion of forever. It’s a false perception, naturally, but we each feel we have forever, and never more so than when we read about larger worlds and more to life. Darker imaginative storytelling gives that illusion then puts it at terrible risk, showing it up as falsehood but, again, within its workings in a larger world, a supernature, that gives the immediate and implicit solace that such a fuller world brings.

Little wonder, too, that such storytelling, such ‘forever-peddling’, draws the lifestyle/joiner set, the ones who are probably too close to the crystal for their own good, and little wonder that it draws the imitators, the lesser talents who try to create something of the effect, Salieri imitating Mozart, sensing what it is. That’s unfortunate because, as with SF and Fantasy, by volume alone the lesser, safer work ends up being seen as typifying the form. The good stuff is often overshadowed in the modern market-place for the usual, almost inescapable reason: safe returns to shareholders. But, at its best, the result is to give us our own world in all its genuine wonder, the things we forget to see. The real, often unrealised and largely unacknowledged appeal of horror writing is to make the world seem as large as it *actually* is, because our perception of it, our lifelong love affair with reality, is so easily worn down. Shocking intrusions like sudden illness, death and the loss of loved ones notwithstanding, just the day to day business of living, of over-familiarisation with everything, robs us of our keenest, sharpest relationship with the act of being alive. And, of course, in subjective, lived terms, death is the ultimate failure of

reality, so death and its trappings are frequently, even crucially, the cornerstone of such stories.

As in any extreme crisis, extreme measures are required, overcompensations. Hence panic, dread, the terror of the world's reality failing in some way: these are the great tools for restoring kinship, renewing an invigorating engagement with the world, providing that revitalising *katharsis* sought by the ancient Greeks through theatre, specifically their 'goat songs' – the tragedies in honour of Dionysos. We are better for it.

I think the unease and torments in my own fiction come from having read writers like Dick, J.G. Ballard, Ray Bradbury and, significantly, Fritz Leiber's 'A Bit of the Dark World' at an early age in *this* context, *this* distant place. A tidy, conventional (as we generally understand the term) reality was so new here, so fragile, so affected by that emptiness I spoke of that it no doubt helped a set of attitudes to develop. But however it's achieved, it's the tension between the threat of the *koinos kosmos*, the shared normal, breaking down and the *idios kosmos* failing that provides so much panic and transformative power in the medium. No wonder so many tuned-in writers, artists, musicians, film-makers, observers of the human condition seek to explore that crisis point.

In *An Intimate Knowledge of the Night* back in 1995 I described the simple act of letting yourself into someone's house when they are not there and putting a chair on the kitchen table, just that, then doing it again four months later. Something small but, yes, very disturbing, all the more so because so trivial. Mentioning it in words like this, it seems no big deal. But imagine living it, something so simple. It would cause panic, a prying loose from the commonplace, deliver a hint that the world *can* fail, making us cleave to it, have to learn it again at some level of the self. The stories you mention all seek to do that in some way: 'reaccommodate the unaccommodated man', to borrow from Patrick White borrowing from Shakespeare.

The back cover blurb for that same 1995 collection leads off with the heading: *The Wonder and the Terror*. It was carefully chosen. For some time now I've been directing attention to the scene in Ridley Scott's fine 2000 film *Gladiator* when, with grudging admiration, Derek Jacobi as Gracchus remarks on Commodus's shrewd PR move of staging over a hundred days of gladiatorial games and says: 'Fear and wonder. A powerful combination.' That is the perfect description of the method I prize and always try to use, the same one Dick used, and Ballard, Harlan Ellison, Theodore Sturgeon, Charles Beaumont, so many others we could name. Use it well and it gives us back the world, nothing less!

And in doing this, I try not to overdo the role the supernatural, even while constantly hinting at it, flirting with it. While there's the chance that the crisis is in the character's mind, then the tantalising possibility of the supernatural at work – or worse, of reality failing – remains so potent. The moment the supernatural is confirmed as that – whether as ghost, vampire, living dead, haunted bridge, ancient demon or curse etc – then that supernatural *becomes*, by definition, the natural world, and tension invariably starts to be leached away. Many writers either forget this or don't have the savvy to maintain

suspense and unease in the face of it. I often refer to Tzvetan Todorov's belief that the fantastic at its most powerful and effective lies in that precious hesitation between the marvellous (the magical, the truly inexplicable) and the uncanny (the bizarre, outré but explicable). That powerful, subversive, transformative hesitation is the prize, the Holy Grail, that special intensity of seeing, feeling and, yes, understanding *before* the explanation is provided or copped out on in some 'Oh, is that all!' moment.

The eccentric and insane have an ensured place in your fiction. Did the fact that as a boy you came across a mental hospital—the madhouse at Bedlam Point' you describe in *The How & Why* on your homepage (www.terrydowling.com)—kindle a fascination for these troubled characters, their histories, their diagnoses, and their dark dreaming? Are there some other sources that helped shape your view of fractured minds? Does your fiction act, with a nod to André Breton, to eliminate the distinction between dream and reality, reason and madness?

As a child and an impressionable adolescent, I romanticised such realities as the madhouse, the cemetery, the dump, the playing fields and waterways, the spreads of bushland all around, but that's never a bad thing: yoking a youthful, Wordsworthian, Whitmanesque intensity and generosity of spirit to humdrum, even sordid, realities, bringing a touch of Byronic passion and exuberance to the mundane. We lose these powerful ways of seeing far too quickly, though they often inform the rest of our lives in profound ways, and even cause a grieving, which isn't simply for lost youth, a lost chance at self, but for a way of seeing. For me, ways of seeing are intensely fascinating. Given that we each proceed through subjectivity and inherent solipsism to consensus patterns when building our notions of reality, with private experiences, circumstances, tastes, different individuals being influential on how we think and feel, then such notions should be scrutinised and challenged at every turn so we don't deceive ourselves as to what is or what could be going on.

Other sources? Again, the work of the best of the Surrealist *imagiers* comes to mind, bringing that focus on antic seeing, strange connections, dangerous and contrary, even rapturous, viewpoints, shaking up the conventional to show that things like social conventions, customs, mores, whatever else they are, are also population control devices: situational, variable, inevitably parochial ways of not only forcing consensus reality but of reification: getting what you look for, often in the worst possible way. In other words, something is normal because our social mores say it is normal, that sort of thing. The Surrealists at their best played fast and loose with such hidebound, self-limiting thinking. By all means follow the prevailing customs, follow order, but understand that they are by their nature relative and local things, very much comforting, often *ad hoc* social protocols. Don't get to believing any absolutist ideological, sociological propaganda or that this is *the* norm for anything more than this moment in this culture at this point in time. I can readily understand why Socrates was forced to take his own life and why many Athenians truly wanted to see him die. It is very much in keeping with Don Marquis' wonderful saying: 'If you make people think they're thinking, they'll love

you; if you make them really think, they'll hate you.' You see the pros and cons of creative compromise right there. Some of us try for more.

Troubled characters, fractured minds, clowns and sacred fools give us the wild card factor, the Court Jester irreverence factor, let us get by the 'Kill Socrates!' phase and hopefully see the entrenched forms as transitory, often exploitative, just as madmen and madwomen in folklore have often done. They can mock us, satirise us, hold our sacred cows up to ridicule as false absolutes in a constantly changing, relativistic world, something to hang on to in the face of the terrible dark, the great and terrifying chaos of nonexistence. They become reminders of that cultural relativity, that mutability and temporary nature, even if only of the possibility that we may be deceiving ourselves, not only failing to see that the emperor has no clothes on, but that he only came to be emperor by manipulating, exploiting, suborning the social circumstances of the day. All of us have to try to see more of what actually is in spite of the protections we devise to keep us from doing precisely that.

Why does so much Australian art invite serious questions about perceptions and sanity—from iconic films like, say, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Walkabout*, *The Last Wave*, and many more; to peculiar short stories like 'Clay' from Nobel Prize winner Patrick White (who died in your city in 1990); to memoirs where the horrible is also banal as in Robert Drewe's wounding *The Shark Net*?

Again, I suspect that it's part of what comes of that intense isolation while having such intense, rich yet ultimately borrowed cultural input from 'over there'. Remember, Perth, the capital of our largest state, Western Australia, is still the most isolated city on the planet. Once we allow that we build culture as part of, say, Maslow's hierarchy of human development, we can also allow the psychological process that translates in both subjective and consensus terms as 'staving off the dark', whether it be actual physical darkness at a level of technological development, or metaphorical, symbolic darkness, our response to annihilation, death, non-being. As on any frontier, we were constantly reminded of that here, perched on the fringes with forests that resembled nothing in Europe, facing deserts and a true strangeness within. Imagine having that at the centre. But that vast emptiness, we came to realize, wasn't anything of the kind, of course, once you really adjusted your ways of seeing, and that became the key lesson. Pay attention. See what you already have, what really is in spite of what you think you want and wish you could have. That took some doing initially, because of a frantic knee-jerk response to the void, and to the personal and social annihilation it represented, and it has left a legacy, even if quite unconsidered by the average Australian nowadays. British cultural forms were and are among the most resilient, most durable, often most infuriatingly intractable, which meant that, for the longest time, our way of seeing the interior, the Outback (what we traditionally, wonderfully, still call the Never-Never) was actually a form of desperate self-preservation and orientalism: projections of our dreads and anxieties from within a set of fixed, transplanted, lock-step cultural views.

Perspective and sanity were challenged in every sense then, breeding a hardy, resilient, laconic people, but this far along the historical timeline it remains as a set of more or less unconscious reminders, cultural defaults, if you like. Julian Mitchell put it well on the liner notes for the 1969 Kinks' album *Arthur* when he said how Ray Davies and he agreed that the average English person walks around with a map of the British Empire 'decaying in their minds', an image of it *as a fallen power*. It says a lot about the present-day English collective psyche and its need to contain, dismiss and put down the upstart 'colonials'. As an equivalent 'map', Australians have long had this sense of an emptiness at the centre, of being on the edge of a great nullity in more ways than one, but now, like I say, that has translated into opportunity, possibility, a quite exhilarating positive. Again, that's why anyone knocking the Australian situation always seems to have missed the point somehow, possibly revealing more about themselves than they realise. We've used sophisticated, transplanted and borrowed cultural forms to bootstrap ourselves into an early adulthood as a distinctive First World culture in the only country that is also a continent. In Davies' terms, think of the psychic brief that brings with it for the occupants. And that opening up, that challenging of set forms in every area, is just as vigorous in the arts. We've learned to adjust our ways of seeing, just as Ballard had his characters do: Kerans in *The Drowned World*, Sanders in *The Crystal World*, Maitland in *Concrete Island*. I suspect that, in creative terms, in healthy, reactive, pragmatic terms, we couldn't help but do so. It could be argued that *Picnic* could *only* have worked so well being set (and made) in *this* context: not the Americas, not Africa or Europe, not Asia. Those other places are probably too laden, too well used, have been too often commandeered and stereotyped as settings.

I called White's famous story peculiar a moment ago. Was I wrong? Do you find this story exceptionally bizarre, or would many Australians not? Perhaps Australians have unique taste and a wider sense of humour? For instance, they gift their towns with names that might not occur to the rest of the world: like, for example, Wee Waa, Borrumbuttock, Jiggalong, Boomahnoomoonah, and Tittybong. Perhaps they also experience their fiction differently, looking as dissolution with a tougher and droller response? The southern U.S. writer Flannery O'Connor once said that when she was funny, people said she was Gothic; and when she was Gothic, people found her funny. Is what strikes outsiders as Gothic in Australian fiction, dark lines from the only nation that began as a prison, perhaps not seen the same way within the culture?

Most Australians, in my experience, aren't particularly aware of the peculiarities, valuable lessons and charms to be found in White's work, or even those factors of the Australian experience I've just now described. The things I'm speaking of are rarely formalised or consciously acknowledged, no more likely than the British going to the pub and discussing how the impact of losing a great world empire affects them psychologically on a day to day basis.

It partly explains why our Nobel Prize-winning author isn't read too much these days. He showed us our humanity measured against that emptiness I spoke of, that specific yet at

the same time universal physical, cultural and psychological emptiness, and how we are transformed by it, by the beauty of the fly on its bed of offal; in other words, by humanity adjusting its ways of seeing. For many Australians it was too intense, too elusive, too naked, just as 'Clay' is. We'd rather shop at K-Mart and take the kids to soccer practice, grab the illusion of structure however, wherever, whenever we can, not navel gaze into the abyss we *all* know is there.

But White saw what the mission was, one very much at the heart of the best horror, SF and fantasy writing that's ever been (and present – I like to think – in my own better work). *The Vivisector* remains a favourite novel because of what it says about the relentlessness, the totality of how individuals engage with the world, their defining landscapes, their experience of living the only life, the sublimeness of the act of making and how understanding these things can be so valuable.

It was White who captured, probably better than any other Australian writer, the intrinsic universality of the Australian experience, who, powerfully for me as a lifelong fan of Philip K. Dick's writing, wrote that 'We tend to confuse surfaces with reality.' In *The Eye of the Storm*, White made the obvious but powerful comment that you cannot convey the utmost in experience, even while resolutely writing about what was needed to reaccommodate the unaccommodated man in a modern world. Put that with E.M. Forster's 'Only connect' and the all-important truism that wisdom must be protected by enigma, and you have some key motivating factors and guidelines for me as a writer. Never use mysterymongering for its own sake, but with an appropriate respect for the tremendous power of mystery for rendering, transforming and – as I like to say – for delivering both a way of seeing *and* a recognition.

'Clay' is a bizarre story in anyone's terms, precisely because it keeps the reader wrong-footed, off-balance, then delivers an elusive, powerful, understood but at the same time barely grasped resolution that affects how we grasp reality itself. Other writers achieve this: Robert Aickman in 'Wood', Ramsey Campbell in 'Loveman's Comeback'. I try for it myself.

It's hard to talk about this. As with 'Clay' and other White stories, words always fall short, but there is an ongoing recognition of aspects of our engagement with the world, the lived reality, at levels of our consciousness that ego, self, conscious thought can never get near, that cannot (and arguably even should not) be talked about. Nothing as simple, dismissive or reductive as a term like 'atavistic', too glib, insufficient, too casually clinical, but actually a key defining element of our humanity. There is also a vital aesthetic in play, an often self-mocking, self-violating aesthetic, something which a lot of critics don't begin to track properly, possibly because most writers don't (at least consciously), and certainly cannot talk about without sounding like being spaced out on drugs or an apologist for one thing or another. But an aesthetic is at work, fueling a super-rational recognition, some key underpinning to the way our minds evolved and are meant to operate. And not just as residual factors, some holdover from a healthy terror of the dark, but as an important higher insight, the higher mind's response to such a potential

being there. How does the modern mind react to the primordial hardwiring; *what does it do with it?* All good questions. We almost know what it is. It is just around the corner of what we know, and it begets the very best writing in the field – and the best storytelling and creation generally.

Certainly this entering into mystic awareness explains why people like to read darker tales, not just as a healthy and safe response to our mortal dreads: whistling past the graveyard, laughing at the boogyman, but because there is a set of strange and powerful dialectics at work: a profound life-centring awareness of life in death, hope in loss, *viriditas* – the green surge – in entropy that brings a tension that has to be recognised, articulated, acknowledged. How can we exist in the world and not be predisposed to contending with such things, especially in spite of the fact that we'd prefer to avoid thinking about them? Even fictional 'rehearsals' for what we call reality failing let us re-acquaint with the shared reality we need to maintain at all costs. They provide both a great socialising tool and a great self-centring tool, helping to keep us on course.

White's story 'Clay' has something of this startling, shocking shaking up of expectations, as a reminder of our fixed life journey, our mortality, or perhaps, more importantly, as a reminder to truly, actively live, a way of remembering all that you have, all that you are in spite of the darkness, the mundane, the inescapably (yet always escapable) sordid, *because* of those things. White's work captured this sense of something more. Yes, his stories often track as rather grim and pragmatic, often Jungian free-forming, much of this sort of rapture-in-perception writing frequently does, but it reminds us that we do not yet know too much about the mind and *all* that it is, all that it needs and demands in the act of building its world.

And, ultimate irony, even if these higher things do get reduced by the more clinical, the more pragmatic thinkers among us to subjectivity, just the result of enzymes and neurotransmitters at work, rapturous spin-offs of day to day mental housekeeping, that is still *the reality of the world* and of the self that, in consensus with others, *makes* the human world. That's the great paradox: the world is real without us, yet *cannot* be real without us. For the human perception-consciousness, that is what reality genuinely is: the constant glory, crisis, tragedy of those factors colliding. Those able to access the sublime, that way of the mind firing, have access to a something more that is as objectively genuine as love, hope and desire, views through doorways, rain on the glass, the smell of oranges.

Beyond exploring what the English writer Patrick McGrath calls the neo-Gothic's 'geography of madness and the depths of spiritual derangement,' your fiction peels away at scarring memories. Many of your works deal with youth, and its never forgotten initiations, rejections, and discoveries. ('The Saltimbanques', as a case, is one of the most moving stories of youth's longing and adulthood's mystery I know, using a dark memory in a new way.) Why do you enjoy concentrating on coming-of-age stories? What about your own coming-of-age

never leaves you? Do you believe as the Jesuits say, ‘Give me the child until he is seven, and I will show you the man’?

I do hold with the Jesuit saying. The first making of the world occurs in each of us and shapes the response mechanisms, the perception-consciousness we then trade off for the rest of our days. The whole journey into self and into the waiting, framing reality the self encounters fascinates me, so coming of age tales always strike a powerful chord when done properly. Part of it is recognition again – I know *this* place, *this* time, *this* way of feeling! thinking! being! At their best, they remind us how it was, and how it was for others, all building a consensus reality. Such stories let you have more than one life at that crucial, exhilarating, often awful making. They give you other versions of what you already had. Fears, too, are more personal in that they haven’t been completely generalised out into a larger context yet: allowing that others fear dark rooms, strange neighbours, Mr Teddy from that angle in the moonlight. They’re vividly part of you, part of what *you* can allow. It’s all about the breakdown of self, of fundamental truths that are yours. Terror, love, hope, yearning, betrayal, loss, disappointment, all more vivid, new and sharp. The Jesuit truism holds. We never recover from childhood. Little wonder that John Douglas in *Mindhunter* focuses on the formative experiences of psychopaths and sociopaths when it comes to forensic profiling. Little wonder that Thomas Harris struck such a chord with *Red Dragon* back in 1981, giving us something of Francis Dolarhyde’s formative years. Small marvel, too, that those Surrealists I admire prized the ways of seeing in children and the insane, sought that kind of newness and power of seeing, an over-sight into both the unconscious and the compelling possibility of a supernature.

My childhood was vivid and special, as I remember it; ordinary enough to those observing and listing facts and circumstances no doubt, but endlessly transformed by a rich imagination, probably too much sensitivity and sentimentality and a true sense of wonder. I had a strong inner life, was amazed, deceived, frightened, delighted by so many things. The local dump was where you found treasures then: flags, books, war medals and Egyptian perfume bottles discarded by the widows of World War 1 Lighthorsemen killed in action, that sort of thing. Gates in overgrown backyard fences led to secret domains. Magic was everywhere: mostly at the inside of the eyes, of course, but I didn’t know that. The inner and the outer worlds blurred. I trafficked in ‘better seeing’ on a daily basis, had no difficulty suspending disbelief, no trouble making friends either. I was private without being solitary, without (I trust) becoming morbid or disengaged. I enjoyed the company of others too much.

What are the more compelling conclusions any of your characters have drawn regarding the meaning or sense operating within evil and human wickedness?

To continue from my previous answer, that opposites are not necessarily extremes to each other, rather different ways of investing energy, ways of defining and extending the self and dealing with the nihilism inherent in that individual final failure of reality. Love and hate are strong emotions, empowerment emotions. In a sense they are both using positive energy. The opposite of love is probably indifference and apathy, affectlessness,

what Ballard called the ‘death of affect’: a failure to engage with the world actively, healthily, passionately. My character Dan Truswell accepts that good and evil are vector qualities in this regard and always engages with the world. Considered evil comes with a view of reality that allows it to be part of such a positive process of self-extension, though for questionable ends.

Many of my own creations – good and bad – become mouthpiece characters as well, given to reflection and attempts to grasp the ‘process’ of the situations they find themselves in, even to help justify those situations to themselves. The most sustained examination of it are probably in my characters ‘Terry’ and Raymond Collis in *An Intimate Knowledge of the Night*. That whole book is a sustained reflection on the dual nature of reality (*idios* versus *koinos*), perception and madness, on states of seeing, ways of being, the responsibility, rewards and risks of re-engaging.

Thank you for taking us into the Sorcerer’s workshop!

Thank you for the opportunity to share something of the journey.

Danel Olson has taught horror, ghost, and Gothic fiction at Lone Star College in Houston since 2000, and taken sabbaticals and international exploration grants to meet some of the international writers he teaches. A fiction series he conceived and named *Exotic Gothic* is a literary venue for new Gothic fiction set outside of its traditional homelands. Its authors have made it a Shirley Jackson Award finalist twice and also a World Fantasy Award finalist. The first three *Exotic Gothic* anthologies Danel compiled appear from Cananda’s Ash Tree Press, and the latest from PS Publishing (2012). In 2011, Scarecrow Press published a 710 page guide of all-new essays Danel gathered and edited on fifty-three premier Gothic series, novels, and novellas from around the world, *21st Century Gothic: Great Gothic Novels Since 2000*. Joyce Carol Oates calls the new reference guide, ‘impressive: professional, thoughtful, historically illuminating, and engaging.’ In the same year, Danel edited Centipede Press’s *The Exorcist: Studies in the Horror Film*, which screenwriter and novelist Stephen Volk describes as ‘a must-have...Some books are so gorgeous they turn heads – but this one turns them the full 360 degrees!’
