Riding the Tiger

An Interview with Terry Dowling
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Terry Dowling is one of Australia's best-known and most acclaimed writers of science fiction. Winner of nine Ditmar Awards and the William Atheling Jr Award for criticism, science fiction reviewer and commentator for The Australian newspaper, and author of *Rynosseros*, *Blue Tyson* and *Wormwood*, Dowling has been as popular with critics as with his readership. Locus recently called him "*the only contemporary writer who comes close to that wondrous talespinner Cordwainer Smith*".

With the pending publication of Twilight Beach, his third collection of tales about Tom Tyson, captain of the charvolant Rynosseros, and with the US publication of the first, *Rynosseros*, in May, this seemed like an ideal time to catch up with the author again. Eidolon last spoke with Terry Dowling in Issue 4 ("*Postcards from the Flight Deck*").

Since we last talked, you've published another Tom Tyson book,* Blue Tyson*, which was well received here and overseas, as well as several short stories. That seems like a good place to start. With the book now a year behind you, what are your feelings about it?

I'm very pleased with it as a book and with how it's going. So is my publisher. Close to half the print-run is gone already, just when the Aphelion edition of *Rynosseros* is being listed as out of print. I found the editorial comment in *Eidolon* Issue 11 that "any further volumes in this series must resolve the many questions left unanswered by *Blue Tyson*, or seriously risk alienating the author's readership" very interesting, as I do when any critical pronouncement uses the word 'must'. I would have thought *I started out* alienating the readership, if anything, and have then steadily drawn them in, carried them along. The true crisis point has passed.

The comment you refer to is based on several conversations I have had about* Blue Tyson*, and on reading some reviews of the book. I think it addresses a reaction the Tom Rynosseros books are receiving, that the world described in the books is fascinating, but it can be difficult to understand clearly because information appears to be missing.

A legitimate view, but first we have to consider what special virtue or advantage there is in providing answers. Giving answers is easy, so ho-hum, just a few words here and there: like accounting for an even more advanced state of global desertification than we're already getting by mentioning changes to the pressure systems in the horse latitudes, or going into the use of microfilaments for satellite tethering, or showing how trends in present-day information technologies could culminate in something as

devastating as the Information Revolution and subsequent Reality Crisis so integral to events in Tom's world. All that's easy, and much of it can be deduced anyway.

What *is* hard to do is create an holistic emotional condition in which the participating reader is satisfied *not* to have answers, but rather accepts the incremental sense of there being answers available and even given, and is prepared to stay with you because of what else is being gained. What that something else is, is very important. My question to them is "Why do you stay?" Ballard said he did this with *Crash*: created a novel in which the reader had to examine their own reasons for completing the book. Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, with its provocative, difficult ending, was in no way served by Clarke's subsequent novelisation and its answers, nor by the sequels. It became all very prosaic, ironically very mundane, just as the Rama books have. There the sense of wonder is destroyed, debased by learning more, which may be an exemplary scientific attitude: that wonders are all well and good, but should be explained in scientific terms as soon as possible - the appropriate next step, a vital part of what being human and viable is - but hardly makes full use of that sense of wonder as a resensitizing agent for people required to assimilate so much so quickly as mundane fact. In an age where we risk reverting to sub-literacy, are dangerously dependent on levels of technology the average person cannot reproduce, are increasingly Pre-Copernican in our general knowledge of the universe etc., this is a crucially important attitude, but there are other human needs to be met as well. The ending of *2001*, for example, probably did more to convey the wonder of the universe in appropriate, meaningful and *felt* terms -- affecting the spirit of the age - than Sagan's *Cosmos* and all those important popularising programs ever did. The books and subsequent movie then went and grounded that: "Oh, is that all?"

So I understand your "must", the viewpoint it represents, and I have letters saying the same thing. But I've also received letters saying change nothing, that this is why they began reading f&sf in the first place, what they hope to find again, that it's good to be treated as intelligent readers at last and drawn out. Just this week, I received a letter from New York saying: "I think that you are creating something marvellous, both in itself and in its differences from what most contemporary sf writers are doing". That's a wonderful return to get. The "must" view also has to be reconciled with *Locus* (June '92) referring to Tom's future as "a place of glimpses, nuances, secret battles and rare epiphanies. Exposed to the steady light of a traditional narrative novel, this world might lose its haunting air of possibility, its subtle twilit colourings", saying I'm wise to proceed as I am, and *Foundation 56* (Autumn '92) saying: "A strongly-plotted novel would reveal far more than he ever gives us. At times it is infuriating; we clamour for more, knowing that it won't ever be given, and yet this is also one of the collection's strengths. This reader at least will return again and again, in search of unknowable answers." Which is generous, and more than I'd ask. But I'm not being obscure for the sake of it. The answers *are* knowable, and more are certainly given in the new book, but never at the expense of that "infuriating" elusiveness, I hope, never in a way that will damage that "haunting air of possibility". That fragile equation, that wonderment, is beyond price, exactly what I'd hoped to achieve. When it is damaged, sullied, then we're just telling stories again, like in the Rama sequels, and somehow we feel the loss. Something vital is missing. Which is why interviews like this are not always in the

author's, reader's or the work's best interests either, however much I personally value them and get a chance to "meet" myself by doing them, however much it lets me publicly consider the nature of process, how whole-person, non-ego and profound the creative act is. The interview structure tends to imply that authors, artists etc. are automatically the best spokespersons, best advocates for their work, that they have better knowledge of their own phenomenon, have better judgment. Patrick White is an excellent example (as are Madonna and Michael Jackson for that matter). Such achievement is often so at odds with stated views and prevailing nature.

If you are deliberately seeking to draw out, to involve the reader, what is your intention in doing so, and is it difficult to reach that balance between too much and too little background information?

My intention? Participation, a refusal to (1) underestimate how smart people can be and (2) deny them their part in using imagination, association, their own lived experience to build the magic *their* way. As for getting the balance of too much and too little background: yes, it is difficult. Quite often it's an intuitive thing, a sense of knowing when enough is enough. Remember, please, the diversity of responses you get, that often the worst thing we can do is believe we know what other people will like, which is why I mentioned your editorial "must". One of my *best* reviews of *Blue Tyson* said: "Dowling's strength does not lie in plotting, nor in story-telling", while probably the *worst* notice I've ever had allowed that: "The plotting is tight". So go figure. What you do affects people in different ways. Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* novels often achieve the magic, the right balance I'm speaking of; *Nightside the Long Sun*, his first novel in *The Book of the Long Sun* so far does not, though I enjoyed it. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* has the balance etc., showing how emotional and iconological accessibility is as crucially important ultimately as rational. So, yes, it is difficult, and you're playing for very high stakes. Will the reader stay with you?

Do you feel* Blue Tyson *achieved what you wanted it to, both individually and as part of the Tom Rynosseros cycle?

Yes, I do, in both regards. The stories in *Rynosseros* were linked and sequential, very carefully so, but the idea was to give the effect both of Tom's own early bewilderment coming out of the Madhouse and the integral dreamlike quality I wanted to establish for the whole cycle. So any linking wasn't overdone. It was a toss-up whether or not to use some original connecting pieces there, and I'm glad we didn't. The stories in *Blue Tyson* are more clearly sequential, both in terms of Tom's growing self-discovery and our own discovery of his world. Stories like "Going to the Angels", "Stoneman", "Privateers' Moon" and "Totem" were carefully tailored to the emerging larger picture, but the trends they developed were already there in "Breaking Through to the Heroes" (the first Tom story written, 1984), "A Dragon Between His Fingers" (the eighth, 1985) and "Vanities" (the fourth, 1984). In the emerging picture, Tom is very much at a crossroads, as you say.

There were a number of outstanding stories in the book. What, for example, can you tell us about "Privateers' Moon" and "Stoneman"?

They're both personal favourites. People's questions about the world set me off looking for answers myself. Kerrie Hanlon gave me the question which launched "Stoneman". Tom's own need to address the expanding political and commercial realities of his world led to "Privateers' Moon" - that and the idea of what privateering is in all its aspects, what it always has been in terms of political expediency and individual self-interest - these things plus the image of a vast singing house (which could have taken any number of storylines) and the "*Something* Moon" title. Image and title get there first almost every time. I just wait until the stories follow. Please understand: there is a flow, an intuitive and numinous clutch of sensibilities such as both *Locus* and *Foundation* noted. I am snatching stories out of that flow, forming plots which leave the flow intact.

Aphelion Publications are just about to publish* Twilight Beach, *your fourth book in as many years and your third collection of Tom Rynosseros stories. Do you feel you may be concentrating too much on the Tom Rynosseros cycle?

Not at all, and I'm curious whenever this sort of question is asked, while understanding why it is. It's like saying to Picasso, Van Gogh, Patrick White, Nick Stathopoulos, anyone who has ever taken their art seriously, "Do you think you've done enough of this or that?" You do it for yourself first, as part of your own developing relationship with yourself, part of a discovery of what matters. This is a personal journey for me as well as Tom. I have wonderful songs I would never have written had it not been for *Mr Squiggle* and Pact Theatre. So too I have stories - "Privateers' Moon" and "Stoneman" among them - I would never have written had it not been for the Tom cycle. And people's responses to it, to make that important comment. It was you, Jonathan, who led me to write "Roadsong", for instance, all because of comments you made, then your noting the mis-spelling of a word in that story which helped lead me to write "Swordplay". That's how it happens: senses on-line all the time, taking anything and everything.

Here's where I add that there are sound reasons why my fourth book should *not* have been a Tom Rynosseros collection. I have other projects which are equally important to me, equally representative of my interests and priorities as a writer and an individual, and I can't wait to resume them. But the response overseas, the letters and reviews I'm getting, the insistent nature of the Tom experience in personal terms, all make this the important next step.

Also, it's absolutely clear that the universe wants it this way! While at Jack Vance's over Christmas and New Year I was walking across the yard where the cars are parked and found a piece of paper on the ground, dirty, crumpled. On it was the first verse and the chorus of the same anonymous "Tom O'Bedlam/Loving Mad Tom" lyric given to me by Carey Handfield back in 1982, which, especially its seventh stanza, prompted the whole story cycle. It was startling, just looking down and seeing that fragment of song. How did it get there? I questioned the workmen renovating Norma's kitchen and found the verse had been dropped by this Falstaffian musician / handyman who happens to play

Mad Tom at medieval fairs across the country. Serendipity. Purest chance. We got to talking about it and a day or so later he brought in his photocopy of *Loving Mad Tom: Bedlamite Verses of the XVI and XVII Centuries* (The Fanfrolico Press, London), with text and notes by Jack Lindsay, illustrations by Norman Lindsay and a foreword by Robert Graves giving all the (mostly awful) variants on that original song - which, incidentally, seems to have first been recorded in *Giles Earle's Song-Book* in 1615, and was probably performed during act changes in *King Lear*. How could I possibly argue with that?

I was curious about the way in which an artist attempts or does not attempt to shape his career. Yeats was a great one for editing his career to fit what he thought it should be. Similarly Bradbury, who I understand strictly controls which of his works are reprinted. You are very much associated with Tom Rynosseros. To what extent was this a conscious choice?

We do shape, we always do, but it was more an artistic than a tactical choice. Tactical would have said: go for variety, do other things. Artistic said otherwise. Let me explain it this way. You're riding a tiger; you dare not get off because - one way or another - you may lose your ability to ever ride it again. So, you ride the tiger till the tiger is no more, stay with it until - like those tigers in the story of Topsy - it melts away to nothing. It's possible that instead of riding a tiger, you could be beating a dead horse (which some felt Frank Herbert was doing with his Dune novels, or feel Tilley is doing with his Amtrak books - any writer working in series). That's the risk you take. In artistic, lived terms, it's often the only game in town. It becomes a matter of self-trust.

To put it another way: I'm just responding to the flow. It's the very basis of the creative act: you listen to what you're being told by whatever drives you. I'm learning Tom's world too, fascinated with what comes out of the flow. As I said in *Eidolon* Issue 4, the ego likes to take credit for all this, deludes itself into thinking it controls the tiger simply because it's up there. Thus Auden kept re-writing his poems and Bradbury "shapes" his career, throwing aside some pretty raw but exciting stuff in the process. This kind of revisionism is fine, but again it presupposes the artist is the best person for the job, knows best about what his or her own phenomenon is and should be, is the only one to read that flow or even do it the best way. I allow that other writers could produce first-class Tom Rynosseros stories, that the prerequisite is being in tune with the magic, not violating it in an attempt to make use of it. So, too, I allow that the time may come when I may lack the skill, vision or judgement to continue with them (something I wish Asimov had been able to discover with regard to his Foundation universe). I just hope I'm smart enough, intuitive enough and trusting of advice enough to know when the tiger has faded away (or shows signs of becoming too terminally equine!). There are other beasts to ride.

You have mentioned on a number of occasions that the Tom Rynosseros stories are part of a "rising action". Where do the stories in* Twilight Beach *fit into that rising action, and how does the volume fit into the cycle of stories?

The stories presented in the collections are chronologically sequential (with "Larrikin Wind" and "The Leopard" in the new volume as deliberate flashbacks), chosen from those 39 Tom stories I'm allowing into print thus far (30 of which will have appeared with *Twilight Beach*). Some are pivotal, some detours, others incidental or intended as linking stories (such as "The Final Voyage of Captain Gelise") or meant rather to gloss something Tom has done or will do (as with "Larrikin Wind"). By the time they appear as collections, it's all carefully patterned, which is why it's somewhat bemusing to hear commentators go on about which stories are strong or weak or don't show an author up to form. They were always intended to be in books together, always meant to serve a developing narrative, even from the very beginning. The late Roger Weddall wrote to say how much he liked "Gelise"; I know others who don't like it at all. But there is usually a double requirement for these stories: to stand alone, then to come into full form as part of a larger work and a fuller picture. "Gelise" operated at two levels and should have been trimmed for its appearance in *Aurealis*, but it highlights the point I'm making: they're meant to read differently when placed in sequence at last. They've always served the flow. Placed together, now the flow itself becomes more correctly the focus, far more important than any individual story, a heady mix of fashion magazine with *National Geographic*, *Scientific American* and *Psychology Today*, texts on mythology, exhibition catalogues from "Gold of the Pharaohs" or "Surrealism: Revolution By Night", and the intense image/emotion fix of a video clip or a Levi's advertisement, that order of rich conflation. In *Twilight Beach*, Tom discovers many of the memories underlining his adventures in *Rynosseros* and *Blue Tyson* can't be trusted. He's been alerted to some of this in "Privateers' Moon", and at the end of "Totem" when he's given a subconscious communication by the jacobi lifeform and sees one of his signs from the Madhouse. Was this a planted trigger or chance? It has already become increasingly clear to Tom after "Angels" and "Moon" that events are leading somewhere. He now realizes that if he doesn't act, events will proceed in spite of him. This realisation and what follows is central to *Twilight Beach*.

If there's usually a double requirement for these stories, to stand alone* and *work as part of a greater whole, how do you approach ensuring that a story will work on both levels? Do you, rather than any other critic or commentator, feel that this double requirement ever leads to a story working better in one context than the other?

Mostly it's a conscious planning decision, while no doubt an intuitive one as well. "Shatterwrack at Breaklight" was designed to stand by itself, so was "Sailors Along the Soul" etc., (written at a time when it wasn't yet clear just how this future age would open up), others not at all, while some, "Ship's Eye" surprisingly, do better than I would have thought. But I've learned that people will accept a self-referential piece, just as they'll sit down halfway through a movie, because it is very much itself, carrying its own air of conflict, emotional force. In other words, a purity, a selfness, which is felt and responded to. The obvious compromise is to hold back some bits of continuity "business" - a line or two in "Sailors", for instance, or "Larrikin Wind" - then restore them when their book is being assembled. Conversely, you may have stories with no intentional connection, and suddenly they line up almost by themselves, suggest their

own connections, their own way of advancing the overall story of Tom Rynosseros and his world. Earlier Tom stories had less of a world to refer to, admittedly, and so could be patched in as easily as Cordwainer Smith did with his chronologically disparate Instrumentality stories, or Ballard with his Vermilion Sands pieces, or Bradbury and his Martian tales. When you have the same central character and a more restricted time-frame as I do, you have to work harder to reveal *and* withhold. Then again, it makes for some wonderful surprises, discoveries and consolidations where you least expect them. I wish I could convey how much fun I'm having with this, something which Bill Congreve rightly commented on in his review of my work in *The Mentor* #76 when he said: "Through the whole of Tom's world runs a suspicion of autobiography", which is not far off the mark *if* you include the rich imaginative life which makes up a person's subjective reality. I think this more than anything explains why *Twilight Beach* is appearing now and not the "nature of reality"/horror collection Aphelion and I had originally agreed to do next.

A number of writers have tackled the topic of the unreliability of memory. What we remember defines us. Gene Wolfe, for example, did this at length in* Soldier in the Mist *and* Soldier of Arete. *Is the suggestion that Tom's memory may be unreliable an attempt to address the issue of the nature of memory, or perhaps to subtly renegotiate or reinterpret the background of the Tom stories, as the readers currently understand it?

I'd always intended that Tom would discover he could not trust his memories. Before the 1985 Worldcon in Melbourne, with seven Tom stories already written, I'd intended to do that because of the madman idea, even intending using the stanzas of the 16th century lyric as chapter or story lead-ins. Then Silverberg did that with his novel *Tom O'Bedlam*, so I pulled back on labouring the connection, found I gained immeasurably by doing so. If and when I do use the lyric, it will be the appropriate time. The same with using linking material. The earliest manuscript of *Rynosseros* had a preface for each story, referring to a memory which Tom had brought with him out of the Madhouse. It would have been a neat structuring device, rather like in Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man*, I suppose. But the stories found their own ways of relating. Not only was such "forced" structuring not needed, it somehow damaged the tone, the cumulative effect, gave the reader answers, yes, but they *felt* contrived, flat, and grounded some of the magic rather than adding to it. Now, with *Twilight Beach*, that idea has reached its time. I've used a linking narrator, Lone Star Stone, whose position is integral to Tom's own story, and I've restored the original plan to use Tom's few remaining memories, a notion planted in *Rynosseros*, developed at the start of *Blue Tyson*, and now given full form. But instead of a host of clear memories, each one cueing a story, most are vague: machines chattering in darkness, half-remembered conversations, that sort of thing, but with three images becoming ever more insistent: the Ship, the Star, the Woman's Face. These are emerging, becoming ever stronger and dynamic, as with Tom's important recognition of Star in "Totem", the final story in *Blue Tyson*.

So, yes, we are defined by memory, and Tom is, and equally important, we are defined by other people's memories of what we remember and believe to be true. Reality and

truth are always somewhere else. Tom thought he knew his past. His memory of Phar in "The Robot is Running Away from the Trees" went back ten years, he thought. What are the implications of that being untrue? How does it extend Phar's involvement in additional schemes and conspiracies, and so on? The world is opening up, is far richer than ever I dreamed.

The reader already knows that Tom is not what he seems. In *Twilight Beach* there is an anti-climax delivered in "The Green Captain's Tale" about a part of that secret nature, and far far more in "The Leopard". Interestingly, nothing revealed (if it *is* recognized as revelation) will come as much of a surprise. The clues have been building cumulatively since the beginning. I'm only glad I held back. Having delayed like this, renegotiated, I'm pleased with each volume as it stands; they do precisely what I would have wanted them to.

What can you tell us about the origins of the stories in* Twilight Beach*? I understand it features "Shatterwrack at Breaklight" and "Ship's Eye". Also, in each of your books to date you have incorporated a significant amount of previously unpublished work. How important do you feel it is to do this, and how much of the work in* Twilight Beach *has not appeared before?

When you have a plan for what each of the books must do, stories tend to suggest ways of fitting and shaping that plan, become nuggets of inspiration. Hence "Shatterwrack" (my second Tom story, 1984) is the perfect opening for this part of his progress, "Ship's Eye" (the thirtieth, 1991) the perfect resolution. You place stories into the mosaic, knowing what they must do, what the final picture must be, and they make a whole work of it. When you have a story, a tone piece like "Larrikin Wind", for instance, you set it in place, then produce the tales which fulfil your purpose, add to the gestalt, lead to and from it. In other words, you interpret your own material.

The charge you can be open to when you include unpublished work is that you are padding - as with music albums where they often throw in a few hits then pad it out with bottom drawer stuff. I won't do that. That is why there is Tom material no-one will ever see, whole stories not included in that (so far) 39 total: a totally different version of "A Whisper from the Voice at the Vanishing Point", for instance; a prototype for "The Aftertime", and so on. Others. "Going to the Angels" almost didn't make it for a number of reasons. Should Tom go into space, open his world up this much, this way etc.? If a story is there, effective, successful or otherwise, it's for what I've regarded as an important reason. It has never been a case of "Oh good, I have enough stories for another book!"

Six of the eleven stories in *Twilight Beach* will be appearing for the first time. "Shatterwrack" first appeared in 1985, but "Larrikin Wind", "Roadsong", "Gelise" and "Eye" were released for useful strategic reasons but mainly because it's exciting and self-nurturing to see them in print, to have them calling back at you from the printed page, testing the very plan they are supposed to serve. Doing that, responding to that, helped me produce other stories you'll see in *Twilight Beach*.

Origins? "Shatterwrack" is the perfect tone-piece to begin the collection. It gives us the town, shows us Tom responding to one of his images, the Woman's Face, or rather responding to the act of recognition. "The Babel Ships" could not be a free-standing story. It was written specifically for this book (using a title from a poem I wrote in the army in 1969) to give us the other two images, Star and Ship, to introduce us to another of the Coloured Captains, Green Glaive, whose experiences in a later story will be such a catalyst for Tom, and to give us Tom's motivation for setting out from Twilight Beach. It also re-introduces the important idea from the earlier books of there being factions and forces, a purpose behind Tom's Madhouse past. After these experiences in Twilight Beach covered by the first two stories, Tom gets out on the land, trying an obvious line of enquiry in "Sailors Along the Soul", hoping to learn something in the tribal territories. "Roadsong", in retrospect, does more to shape Tom's choices than we might first realize; again, that rising action/ advancing narrative I've referred to. "Larrikin Wind", importantly for the flow and tone of the book, takes us back to Twilight Beach and to an event in Tom's remembered past which he *can* trust, which gains new relevance when Tom, still searching for answers, goes to Totem Rule, a famous hotel in the desert, and enters the desperate and mysterious nadir of his search. In "Gelise" he has received an important lead, and by participating in another man's quest is reunited with the belltree, Lone Star Stone, and so hears the story of his own first days following his release from Cape Bedlam - the events preceding those described in "Colouring the Captains", the opening story in *Rynosseros*. Stone's account of Tom coming out of the Madhouse, "The Leopard" (my personal favourite in the book) isn't quite free-standing (though some readers find it so), and does exactly what I wanted it to. "A Whisper from the Voice at the Vanishing Point" (July '92) is the newest entry. My first Inland Sea story, "Marmordesse", appeared in the final issue of *Omega Science Digest* in January '87, and I had Tom go there briefly in "Captains" at the start of *Rynosseros*. It became important to have Tom go there again, especially since it had been mentioned in "Sailors" and "Gelise", but more importantly because it lets me add another powerful *locus mirabilis* to this book, opens up this future time still more, and anchors Tom in a most appropriate context. "The Green Captain's Tale" brings us back to Green Glaive and, like "Angels" and "Totem" etc., shows us more about the plight of the Nationals. What occurs in "Tale", what Tom learns and so suspects from the events there, is then brought to an appropriate climax in "Ship's Eye". It was very satisfying to bring all this together.

While it's always a little difficult discussing unpublished work, I would like to discuss your novel* Malgré *briefly, especially in view of those criticisms mentioned earlier: that too many questions are left unanswered. How many of the answers to those questions have* been *provided, but are in* Malgré*?

The novelette and novella are the perfect word-lengths for me, but I wanted to try a novel to see if I could do it. It was the natural place to reveal more about Tom's world and I did so, but were that book ever to appear, I would actually play down that background. Which is more in keeping with the spirit of the stories themselves - a fixed yet timeless landscape, just what a narrative extension of this Dreamtime should be. It

might please "rationally" but at the expense of mood etc. The reader must help build this world as a commonplace, build their own acclimatisation to it as well.

I mentioned wanting to use the Inland Sea before. Ironically, *Malgré* is partly set there, and, along with an unpublished story, "The Bull of September", gives background about how the National arcologies in the interior were cleared and left abandoned, the Nationals driven back to the coasts. Like the Inland Sea, that's an important setting and mood component as I see it, hinted at in other stories but never given quite as strongly. This background element is needed for each Tom collection and helped lead to "The Green Captain's Tale".

I had a chance to revise *Rynosseros* for its US edition, make it more accessible etc., but decided against it. I don't think the audience I want will complain too much. Like I said before, people are smart; they realize I am working with them, ultimately, and giving them the compliment of honouring their imaginations and their participation in the creative act. I long ago learned the crucial wisdom of the evocative evasion, an approach informed as much by Robert Smithson's "Establish enigmas, not explanations," as LeGuin's "It is good to have an end to journey towards; but it is the journey that matters, in the end." Taking this further, there's Rene Magritte: "People who look for symbolic meanings fail to grasp the inherent poetry and mystery of the image. No doubt they sense this mystery, but they wish to get rid of it", or JG Ballard in 1971: "Someone who has got to know the 'ultimate' meaning all the time can be as destructive as a boy with a slingshot knocking birds out of the sky". Robert Hughes' words in *Time*, March 1974, could as easily apply: "It is intolerable: no metaphor provides an exit, no rational explanation will do, while the very technique . . . keeps denying the presence of fantasy." Which, not always mindfully on my part, not always successfully, is what the Tom Rynosseros cycle keeps wanting to do. I realize I'm setting myself up here, being a sitting target, though as Dan Simmons told me recently: "We're sitting targets anyway." If I fail at such a task, it's my shortcomings as a writer, not the shortcomings of such a vision and approach. The vital quality needed for Tom's world is the *inquiétude* sought by the Surrealists, the cathartic unease, the corner-of-the-eye apprehension of something more, the non-rational exaltation of the spirit. The recognition of unknown things as known or at least knowable, the hesitation between those fugitive states. There is true poetry in that. When the reader is able to participate, recognizes their own humanity coming back at them made strange and briefly new, finds - even for a moment - they are viewing their own world, assumptions, perceptions in a different way, then I feel I'm beginning to achieve my task as storyteller.

Interestingly, all of your books to date have appeared from the Adelaide specialty press, Aphelion Publications. How important has Aphelion been to you as a writer?

Very important. Others have said it, but the small presses still seem to be the ones shaping the genre, extending and re-defining it, taking the risks. Unless we do formula, we all have to create the audience that will applaud us. That's harder with the larger imprints, who impose the market structures and trail the trends.

How would you describe your relationship with Aphelion editor Peter McNamara, and how important a part of your decision to stay with Aphelion has it been?

It's a very good relationship. From the first, back in the *Aphelion Science Fiction Magazine* days, Peter was very helpful, always professionally courteous, had exactly the right bookside manner. A lot of editors don't have that. I very much admire his and Mariann's commitment to what they are doing. They were helping all of us, after all, at a crucial time; I made sure I was ready to do my best in turn. At a personal level, Peter has given me excellent (often infuriatingly correct) advice, sound criticism, insufferable scorn, the usual run of editorial abuse. One of my regrets is that we no longer have the editorial debates we used to have through the mails. I like to think I've developed rather than that he's given up. I value and respect his judgment very much; he has built my confidence and taught me much of what I thought I already knew.

Do you plan to continue with Aphelion, or are you, perhaps, ready to look further afield?

It's the Bloomsbury thing - they were able to poach writers they wanted by promising cover control. Some things are more important than money. Aphelion allows me almost full authorial freedom, input on control of text, blurb, cover choice, lets me have as much a hand as possible in shaping the final product, as well as the best writer to editor/publisher relationship I think you can get. Sure, I might do better elsewhere financially, but it's the phenomenon of the book as artefact, lived experience, total input package that matters most of all. The Book Club edition of *Rynosseros* takes me further afield in that regard, and hopefully other deals will follow.

Yes, congratulations on* Rynosseros *being picked up by the Science Fiction Book Club in the US. This is only your second hardcover edition and your first book published outside of Australia. How important is this sort of thing for you and your career?

Very important. People have been speaking well of my work but without American editions to support their case. All my books have made the *Locus* Recommended Reading Lists; *Wormwood* won the 1992 Readercon Award for Best Collection and even came 13th out of 74 collections listed in the *Locus* 1992 Readers' Poll (without a US edition; that really surprised me. They're very ethnocentric there). Now I'll "officially" exist. My agent, Richard Curtis, said: "Congratulations, you're now a published American author." This sale made it possible for Harlan Ellison to interview me on *Sci-Fi Buzz*, the national Science Fiction Channel cable program.

Finally, what else can you tell us about your plans for the near future? What can we expect to see in print, and what will you be working on?

More Wormwood and Tom Rynosseros material, and finishing the "nature of reality"/horror etc. collection I mentioned, which is very important to me because it represents my first area of interest. Also, because much of my work has been in series

and so self-referential, I haven't been sending stories overseas. There have been some test exceptions - "Stoneman" to *Pulphouse* in 1991, more recently "Down Flowers" to *F&SF* in January etc. - to test the market response, but they pretty much await the books that will take them. The US edition of *Rynosseros* may change that too. So, with *Twilight Beach* out, provided I am not led astray by stories wanting a place in *Leopard Dreaming*, I will get back - at last! - to the stories that work on their own; I have about seven or eight waiting. I've just finished "The Rediscovery of Tutankhamen's Tomb", a genuine short story at 3400 words, which I've sent overseas and am waiting to hear back on. In July, "The Daemon Street Ghost-Trap" will appear in Leigh Blackmore's horror anthology *Terror Australis*, due from Coronet. Also coming up is "Fear-Me-Now" in Stuart Coupe and Robert Hood's anthology *Cross-Town Traffic*, a story started just after the momentous Swancon 15 in 1990. Also Van Ikin and I have a project out on offer. It's a busy life.

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