

## **Time for Tom Rynosseros: An Interview with Terry Dowling**

Interviewed by Edwina Harvey / *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* 35, June 2008

*It has been a good year for Terry Dowling, with the release of his novel, Rynemonn: Leopard Dreaming, his most recent successes in winning the Australian Shadows award for his horror stories, and receiving the Peter McNamara award at the Aurealis Awards in January. Edwina Harvey recently interviewed the prolific author about the future of Tom Rynosseros, a character who has endeared himself to many of Terry Dowling's readers.*

**I believe your Rynosseros series recently came to a close with the publication of Rynemonn, the fourth (and final?) book in the Tom Rynosseros series. Are you sad to see it go, or do you feel that the time was right?**

Some writers have careful strategies for what they do, but as projects have a way of taking on lives of their own, I try not to play things in a too structured fashion. I could have easily kept writing Tom stories (and may yet do so, either fitting them into existing timeline events or producing stories exploring the adventures of the other Coloured Captains) but it certainly is a time to stand back and look at the whole thing. The main determining factor for it going this way was, of course, my dear friend and publisher Peter McNamara's serious illness in late 2002 that led to his tragic and untimely death in June 2004. Peter was so full of life and energy and, in those final twenty or so months, wanted it to be business as close to usual as possible. He edited *Wonder Years* for Bill Congreve at MirrorDanse Books, and put together *Forever Shores*, a major anthology of new stories, with his long-time friend and colleague Margaret Winch. He asked me to submit something to the project and I was delighted to do so. In a way it forced my hand, which is often the best way for things to be creatively.

I'd already written the last few pages of what was to be the 'final' Tom story, "Sewing Whole Cloth" back in 1993-94 soon after *Twilight Beach* appeared. I knew how the fourth collection would end, especially after the desperate events described at the close of "Ship's Eye", the final story in that third volume of Tom stories. I already had a working title for the fourth Tom collection (*Leopard Dreaming*) before meeting Jesse Polhemus at Jack Vance's home in Oakland in late 1999. Jesse introduced me to the Anglo-Saxon word *rynemonn*, meaning "one skilled in mysteries" and was only too happy to let me use it in my Tom Rynosseros work. It was perfect. Most of the stories in the final collection had been published in one venue or another, but they were all tailored to that ending written back in the early 90s. I already knew what the linking

pieces – finally called “Doing the Line” – had to add to the whole. Had there been more time, those linking segments may well have become fully-fledged stories delivering the same narrative payloads, but they stand as effectively – perhaps even more effectively – just as they are.

**You have a loyal readership (both in Australia and overseas), but from my point of view this series had a particularly strong group of readers. Was it your fans that kept urging you to write in this universe? And if so did you ever feel trapped by it the way Douglas Adams possibly felt trapped by Hitch-hikers Guide to the Galaxy?**

Not for a moment have I ever felt trapped in any way. In a curious but very important sense, I’m one of those writers who write the stories I myself want to read. This was a narrative and spiritual journey I had gone on for personal reasons, and, as with many of us with the books we read, the movies and television shows we enjoy, the music we listen to, this became a vital part of this individual’s journey. I’m honoured and gratified that it struck a common chord, found such a place in the life journeys of others.

**It doesn’t seem a particularly easy task to write SF based in Australia, but you seem to have done it with aplomb. (The only other examples I can think of are Damien Broderick’s *The Dreaming Dragons*, and Traci Harding’s novels.) Have overseas readers of your work said they particularly enjoy the Australian background to your stories?**

First, thank you for your kind words. Overseas readers often do enjoy the exotic and epic background to the Tom stories, but it’s more that they’ve sensed an adventurous, romantic, universal aspect in the work that remains valid – to use that word – and representative of where humanity is at in these last few decades. Just as *Dune* told a traditional story of conflict and transcendence in a far-off exotic setting, so does this series of tales, and, as with so much SF, the more you read, the larger this setting of Tom’s gets. It is actually a truly universal setting as we finally learn, one with specific reasons for its existence. That was something I never needed to resolve, of course, and originally did not intend to, but found that the stories themselves led me towards that sort of resolution. They really did, do and should take on a life of their own. I think the whole series has gained immeasurably by this sort of open, organic approach. As I’ve said before, I discovered Tom’s journey at the same time he did. But then I’ve always allowed that the self is so much smarter than the ego speaking for it. Sometimes you control things strictly, according to set goals and narrative tasks; other times you proceed and just see what happens.

**I discovered that Kate Cummings\* and I had a shared perception about your writing where you present something to the reader that we think we understand, but then we’re not quite sure. (Your belltrees are an example**

**of this. I felt I instantly knew what you were talking about, and then I didn't! Kate said she enjoys that about your writing.)**

Never deny your readers the chance to use their own imaginations. Always allow that their imaginings might be better, more effective, more intense, more appropriately intimate in terms of reader engagement with an author's work than anything you yourself can deliver and lock in with mere words. We're designed for these powerful imaginings as creatures, but more and more it's leached out of us by overconventionalisation of experience, by consumerism, franchise thinking, lowest common denominator expectations, the general everyday stylisation of human conduct we see all around us. All the savvy writer has to do is provide the right triggers. The traditional storytelling corollary is: "Show, Don't Tell", but as with Jack Vance, Cordwainer Smith, many others we could name (yes, including TD), the ideal refinement is "Don't Just Show, Suggest!" The words we use to describe something can also damage that description – something the great majority of writing workshops never begin to address. Less can be so much more.

**Are you still writing computer games? I'm not sure if it's the storyline you write, then give to computer game developers, or the other way around?**

I'm set up to move quickly if a new game project eventuates. With the first title, Schizm: Mysterious Journey, I worked closely with Maciek Miasik in Rzeszow, Poland, and provided the entire gamestory and game-title, the characters, dialogue etc to go with an existing game-setting they had already been working on. I fleshed out their setting with what we all felt was an appropriate planetary geography and an intriguing narrative and they adapted what they had to the existing gaming format with its gaming rewards etc. With the sequel, Schizm II: Chameleon, I did the same creative design tasks but this time with my story providing the up-front planetary setting as well. Maciek and the Detalion team in Poland then brought that to life in consultation with me, while adapting that material to a gameplay/level-design approach. For our third collaboration, I did the same tasks, but this time with the game-story based entirely on my short story "The Ichneumon and the Dormeuse", which meant I had the added pleasure of seeing an existing story of mine I like a lot being given 'cinematic' treatment.

**Is there likely to be a Tom Rynosseros computer game in the offing? (Marianne De Pierres had one of her books developed into a computer game by a group in Tasmania, I think.)**

Film or television mini-series treatment, graphic novel, yes, but the way gaming is currently set up, I think not. Existing computer game formats and platforms are not yet an optimum form. They're certainly heading that way, but this is the 'silent movie' era of game design and the whole interactive fiction industry is presently piggybacking on a gaming approach. It can be interesting, even very promising, sometimes exciting, but it's still very much a short-term solution for what interactive experience will become.

**Damien Broderick was once described (By Russell Blackmore?) as “the enfant terrible” of Australia SF. If that’s the case, what does that make you?**

That’s for others to say, of course. I’m not sure I qualify as an ‘eminence gris’ yet. I have applauded a good deal of what Damien has done but, personally, never really saw him as all that much of an enfant terrible. Some of his more rarefied, experimental work remained just that, elusive and distancing, and I personally have always preferred it when he just cuts loose and tells a terrific story in an outright fashion. But this is all relative, of course. Given how lean and low-key the Aussie scene was in the 60s and 70s, it was possibly necessary, relatively worthwhile and comparatively easy to cut a swathe as a maverick or rebel. The scene became very different in the 80s. I truly believe Aussie SF came into full bloom in that decade and Damien certainly helped shape that crucial blossoming.

**You’re also the only Aus SF writer I know of who’s had a mailing list set up to discuss your works. I know you’ve always been very open and communicative with your fans, but how does this make you feel? Are you on the list at all, and likely to contribute in the same way Larry Niven occasionally posts to his list?**

I visit the yahoo group (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/terrydowlinggroup/>) several times a week and, as you see, have posted lots of game photos and such that give interested parties some idea of the details of certain projects. There’s even a video of Cottesloe Beach in WA that gives just enough of a feel of Twilight Beach. If someone directs a specific question my way, I make sure I’m there to answer it.

**Did your time on Mr Squiggle have any connection to your interest in Science Fiction?**

It was all part of the same creative package. Before Squiggle, I did some presenting on ABC science programs, so I became a singing-dancing robot called Mister E at one point, an astronaut to Mars (with a song called “Come on in, the Ammonia’s Fine”), a pirate etc. Squiggle became the culmination of that, all part of a very special watershed time creatively.

\* Terry Dowling launched the second edition of Katherine Cummings’s book, Katherine’s Diary, at Gleebooks in December 2007. They have been good friends for many years.