

The Weird Talesman: An Interview with Terry Dowling

Interviewed by Benjamin Szumskyj, *Studies in Australian Weird Fiction 1*, Equilibrium Books, March 2008

Terry Dowling is a writer, journalist, reviewer, critic, game designer, and editor. His doctorate in creative writing was obtained in 2006, from the University of Western Australia. He has had one novel, *Clowns at Midnight*, published in 2006 [sic], and eleven separate collections of stories published. He has edited three collections of materials by other authors; one, *The Essential Ellison*, was reprinted in an expanded edition in 2000. Dowling has one eleven Ditmar Awards for fiction, three Aurealis Awards, two Readercon Awards, and a Prix Wolkenstein.

You have often been quoted as feeling a kinship with the Surrealists of the mid-1920s. Does surrealism have a place in dark fantasy and if so, how does it manifest itself?

It can't help but have a place. We accept the role of the unconscious and the subconscious so readily now when it comes to creativity and defining self that there is no longer the vital revolutionary edge which powered the Surrealist Movement in the early decades of last century. Most of us no longer even have an adequate grasp of the workings of the Surrealist phenomenon as the sociological, philosophical, political, aesthetic reality that it was, certainly not as it was revealed to those alive at the time.

What were then such surprises, such potent dislocations and transpositionings are commonplace now, the whole mode overworked, plundered and parodied by cinema, television and advertising, in fashion promotions, video clips and videogames, which is as it should be. One age's most earnest passions are so often another's comedy. But, powered as it was then by the discoveries of Freud and shifting concepts of the self, it truly was a liberating modal shift that influenced the whole 20th Century and remains with us today as part of the intricate data landscape of being human. Surrealism's influence is everywhere, from the mostly trivial to the sometimes profound. Its familiarity among those working in the popular culture shows how durable and important its time was. It manifests in my work in the same kind of intense seeing and close focus, the awareness of the hesitation between the marvellous and the uncanny, the abiding delight in providing new things, strange encounters, wondrous alignments.

You recently wrote a dissertation entitled "The Interactive Landscape: New Modes of Narrative in Science Fiction". I am interested to know whether

you see the computer horror game as an important new area of storytelling as well.

The medium of computer games as a narrative vehicle is a wonderful and vital medium indeed. We're still in the silent movie era of what computer games can do, though now, as then, people experiencing the form tend not to realize that. The future will be astonishing and I suspect that, ironically, the adventure game will become the pre-eminent form.

It will be an ideal medium for work of the fantastic generally and, given the question, horror specifically. I think of promising and effective contemporary horror titles like: *Amber: Journeys Beyond* and *The Blackstone Chronicles*, both of which I admire tremendously, not to mention *Silent Hill* and its sequels and *Dark Fall* and *Scratches*, even odd and eerie games like *Temujin*, *The Dark Eye* and *Pathologic*. It truly is a potent area for storytelling.

Has there been a story which you have written that has haunted you since writing it, whether it was the mere conception or its unintended final version?

Most of my tales of unease, dark fantasy, terror, whatever we call them, have a potent effect on me. It's a key part of why they were written, what led them to be written; they exert the motivating dread or sense of *inquiétude*. In other words, they're very personal – in conception and execution. "One Thing About the Night" haunts me vividly, "Scaring the Train" does (partly because, as a College student, I walked the foggy tracks at Katoomba one wintry night with a group of friends under circumstances very close to those in the story), "The Suits at Auderlene", "The Bullet That Grows in the Gun". All very intimate works. I cannot re-read them without becoming strongly affected by the thought processes and contributing elements that brought them about.

Do you believe that there is a line which an author of dark fantasy should not cross whether it be a particular theme, issue or expression of personal philosophy?

This is where it becomes a matter of individual conscience, especially since (given human nature and our more fascist, prurient inclinations), censorship and what it ultimately and inevitably entails tends to be the first sign of population control and should be opposed in any way possible. If as Ballard says we are now in an age where the 'death of affect' is in play and the average person is increasingly desensitised to the workings of the world, then you could argue that we need the strongest, most outlandish and surprising story material to jolt us back to a valid sense of reality, to get through the most insidious and unsuspected desensitisation barriers. You could also argue that it is in response to the violence and shock and trauma of modern living that we have become so desensitised, so numb and affect-less, so that subtlety and

understatement go by the wayside. I think I tend to use one to achieve the other. My writing is governed by personal, ethical but carefully non-moral and non-religious values that are important to me, but I also believe that we rarely need to shock and upset in gross ways to achieve the most powerful effects. I believe in beguiling the reader into crisis, that the use of disquiet and unsettling ideas and staging will do the job far more effectively than the excessive, broader strokes. Since I know how effective less can be in delivering more, I tend to proceed that way, with only a few exceptions. The 'off-stage' events reported in "Toother", for instance, are far more chilling than our seeing them first-hand. The most terrifying line for me is when one interviewee says: "What is that?" Understatement and the reader's mind deliver far more than blatant display ever can. In other words, include nothing for its own sake; everything in service to the commonweal in the original and wonderful meaning of that word.

Do you believe post-modernism has enhanced the reading experience of contemporary readers or has diminished it, in that the once secure fundamentals of literature are no longer seen as relevant or even familiar?

Post-modernist ways of thought have made us notice the workings of process as an intrusive, structural thing. By its analytical (and inescapably reductive) nature, this cannot help but destroy the single greatest requirement of narrative delivery (all artistic delivery for that matter): invisibility. I personally do not need to be reminded and pre-disposed to know that most print storytelling is in the third person and the past tense or even that the author exists as a guiding, controlling force. I don't want to be aware of editing in a film while enjoying it or what the director's subtext might be. In fact I actually want and need the opposite: the preservation of the illusion of total reality in that given delivery form; I want the beautiful lie. Was it [Pushkin] who said: "Better the lie that exalts us than ten thousand truths"? Post-modernist sensibilities change nothing except for the (probably) over-informed minority. Those who consider, explore and embrace such elements deserve exactly what they get. There are far more important things to do.

In your own words, what role does psychology play in your works of dark fantasy?

I find I focus on the role, place and nature of human psychology a great deal, both as a useful and sound tool for understanding human consciousness and as a tool that is still very much a work in progress. There is so much we do not yet understand about the human mind, so its workings remain an unending source of fascinating narrative possibilities. Ultimately there is only the framing perception of the individual self, yours, mine, those of others, and I am fascinated with states of seeing, with how we each render reality for ourselves then, by achieving a rough consensus, proceed as if we *know* what reality is. I find I keep coming back to the nature of mind again and again and, in so doing, tend to proceed by allowing a number of key operating tenets. I grant that we cannot know the system while we're inside the system, that we know more than

we understand and understand more than we know, and that the truth is always going to be somewhere else. These things keep this writer appropriately humble and open-minded, and remind you (as that person) to be dependent on informed, sensitive and caring others as yardsticks for your place in the world.

You once mentioned in an interview that your perception of modern horror was one of dismay in comparison to the works of past authors in the genre. In an Australian context, do you see this problem improving and how do you believe this poor performance came about in the industry?

Dismay is a strong word. It's more in line with what I was saying before. Gross out and using the supernatural is easy. Crafting a growing dread, a creepiness, a sense of *inquiétude* is usually far more difficult to achieve and far more effective. We are all natural storytellers, but we don't always do it as well as those who are naturally gifted at it. People don't like to hear it said but, like skiing or cooking well, storytelling is a meritocracy: it truly is based on how well you can do it. Some storytellers have great ideas but lousy delivery. Some have relatively mediocre ideas but know how to stage and execute the writing part really well. Some have great ideas, great sense of staging but cannot pattern words to save their lives. It's like that with horror – any writing form you wish to name. It takes writing skill, execution and patterning, to achieve mood. The staging, the setting, can and should help, but we've all rolled our eyes at books and stories where the writing just doesn't cut it. Most people want to write stories. You can steal the ideas (as T.S. Eliot said you should), borrow the staging (a Sherlock Holmes London, for instance), but it's the actual quality of the prose that becomes the great decider. Because of this, many horror writers – to bring it back to the question – take the easy way out. Those who really want to get a reputation going will work harder at their craft.

The Australian scene is improving in one sense, but any refinement of delivery by particular writers is balanced by the growing volume of work being produced locally and the comparative ease with which it is being published. Some writers need to consider that being published may be the worst thing for their career. Allowing second-rate, mediocre work to be seen will get a writer classified and sidelined very quickly. The main thing is to send out only the good stuff. Know when to hold back. There probably will always be a lack of that sort of restraint.

How do you perceive Aboriginality in dark fantasy as a whole?

Simple, there should be no issue with using anything that is available. Anything used should be treated with respect and sensitivity unless there is a sound reason for violating those things for appropriate narrative purposes. Nothing is intrinsically sacred unless we can each convince the other that it is so: not land, not life, not people, not ideas or ideologies. In order to feel meaningful to ourselves, we build up absolutes. It's perfectly understandable. Remember, we violate the tombs of our various global

ancestors and call it archaeology. Descartes' skull is on show in the Musée d'Homme in Paris. Aboriginality cannot be an issue for the storyteller. Time will tell who will be remembered for what.

What would you consider an Australian classic in the genre of horror and why?

Crossing media here, but Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. It does everything right: idea, staging and execution: mounting dread, location, atmosphere, strong human dimension, the suggestion of larger things, darker things. Wonderful. The novel isn't anywhere near as good. My story "Jarkman at the Othergates" is a conscious homage to that film and to John Fowles's novel *The Magus*. And speaking of seminal influences: I always like to mention Fritz Leiber's *Our Lady of Darkness* and "A Bit of the Dark World." Useful templates all. Pay your dues, Terry.

What do you believe is that best way to develop the emotion of horror in a tale of fantasy or science fiction? What is considered horrifying to one who reads works in these genres?

Developing the emotion of horror? The same as for mood, atmosphere, emotion in any story. Try for what Faulkner suggests: show the human heart in conflict with itself. The character's point of view is crucial for achieving suspension of disbelief, in sf and fantastic writing even more so, since much will be asked of the reader in terms of what will happen and will be passed off as real. In a sense, characterisation becomes *more* important than in conventional mimetic fiction, though, again, many writers fail to achieve this engagement satisfactorily. If I sign on with your character, then their uncertainty, unease, alarm, terror, redemption etc become mine. While the character remains at arms' length, then I can stand back from anything served up.

It seems obvious to say but once you have a character the reader can engage with, then that character's sense of dread, disquiet, unease becomes the reader's so much more easily. The next strategy for me – other writers may proceed differently – is to provide that character with a reason for intense seeing; that is, beholding relatively familiar things in an intense new way. It is in the details of such seeing that the fear comes creeping in and, all things being equal, it can be achieved in the simplest way. Then you, as writer, both give and hold back. You make it clear but first and foremost you make it potent. Ramsey Campbell reaffirmed that for me; he gives but withholds, teases. In short, it needs to be like a bow-string. There is a state of tension, possibly resolved with sudden violence when the string snaps, possibly left intact as that abiding tension and working by implication alone. Once again, less can be so much more.