Tim Bowling

On his Life and Writing

Interviewed by David Brundage, July 2014

A Writer's Tension: Reflections on Genre, Place, and Time

Q: Since your first book of poetry, *Low Water Slack* in 1995, you've published eleven more poetry collections, edited a poetry collection, published four novels and published two books of non-fiction. That's pretty well a book a year. It has all received high critical acclaim. And it all appears to rest on a poetic foundation. Is it fair to understand that you would consider yourself first and foremost a poet?

TB: Oh, well, that's a question that I kind of wrestle with, because there are practical reasons why it's best for me not to say that. But I think in fairness the genres over time have kind of blended and married together. So even as a poet if I were to say, yes, I think of myself as a poet, well, the foundation of my poetry has often been very narrative. I hold with Robert Frost that all poems are storytelling, so there's always been an element of storytelling in my poetry, no matter how lyric I try to make it.

So do I think of myself primarily as a poet? I think maybe if you publish more books of poetry than you do other books and you get noticed for those books of poetry before you get noticed for the other books, then the culture thinks of you more as a poet. But to be honest, it's something I have to fight against as a prose writer, because I think sometimes my prose is unfairly in competition with my poetry, which I don't want it to be. I see them as all part of one process if quite different activities. From my early twenties I wanted to be a short story writer and a novelist; that ambition was there as early as thinking about being a poet. But I'm happy to be considered a poet, for sure.

Q: At an AU presentation you answered a question on writing fiction by saying that you start it off with a poem or at least with the spirit of poetry. But I'm now wondering if it's

almost like different sides of the coin. Like you were saying, poetry is storytelling and in a sense there's perhaps a poetry to storytelling?

TB: Oh, I would say for sure. As someone who's looking at writing and the whole process of writing, one of the things I've had to do to be an effective fiction writer or a non-fiction writer-- and it's a constant struggle for me in the draft stage-- is to try to eliminate, for want of a better word, poeticisms. Well, that's even harsh. I'm always thinking Ezra Pound in my head saying that poetry and prose have to be as good as each other. So there's not this idea of what is poetic language. I like to think my poetry is pretty rigorous and not ephemeral and unspecific and all those things that poetic prose is often described as – it's purple, it goes on too long.

DB: Excessive description?

TB: In some ways, but it's also culturally relative. I've found that when it comes to fiction our culture currently has a hard time with description. I've always loved it, though, because I read so much Victorian fiction when I was younger-- physical description of character, of place. It's a little bit out of fashion, and I think in poetry you're encouraged to go… well… in a different direction as well. As you can tell, I am continually wrestling with these things. There's no finality to them.

Q: Block descriptions of characters and setting certainly do feature in the novel *The Paperboy's Winter*. I get the sense that there's such an affinity for them in your way of writing, that what's old-fashioned… what's the saying of Faulkner about the past?

TB: It isn't dead. The past isn't dead. It isn't even past.

Q: If you're doing it, it's not past.

TB: And the whole idea of time. All poetry, so it's said, is really about time fundamentally. You can hear time behind every line of poetry, that's sort of the way I

approach it. I guess I try to carry that over into the prose as much as possible. With my most recent novel, *The Tinsmith*, I thought I had really cut to the narrative line a lot more, stayed to the story as much as possible and eliminated a lot of extraneous physical description. Yet if I jump on Goodreads and have a look at different responses to the book, there are still people thinking the prose has too much description.

A certain amount of it is current taste. I've read studies that have suggested, for example, that the sentence is getting shorter and shorter, that people don't write in long sentences, because it's just not… Technology is affecting that to some extent. We all work in little quick bursts, and I think for someone who really loves Thomas Hardy, Herman Melville, or Henry James, as I do, these big long beautiful rambling sentences are very comfortable. But I think they're certainly not the fashion today.

Q: I recall a workshop saying the average sentence length has gone from sixty-four or sixty-five words in the late Middle Ages of Chaucer's period to around fourteen in the 1980s. Of course, it depends what kind of writing we're talking about, too. But I imagine the latest information might suggest today's average sentence length-- at least, outside of academe, perhaps-- to be shorter yet again.

TB: You mentioned Faulkner. I think some of his sentences-- and I don't know if some of them are even technically sentences-- just all run together, but for pages and pages. That kind of style is of the past, which isn't past.

Q: Clark Blaise once said that a long, long sentence in the right hands is like a rush-- he said this in the 1970s-- by Bobby Orr.

TB: (chuckles) Okay… That still holds up.

Q: I personally would say I find that quality in your sentences. They're still precise and accurate and specific, but there's a rhetorical drive when they get longer. I wanted to mention another author concerning description in fiction. I agree the general advice these days is to integrate it briskly and discreetly as the plot goes forward, drop in just a nugget

here and there. The author I'm thinking of, who is specifically noted for defying the minimal-description taste, is Saul Bellow. He has been praised specifically for his remarkable physical descriptions of characters. I wonder if you sense a connection in that respect. Of course, some people also consider him old-fashioned.

TB: Well, the term old-fashioned… I mean, Saul Bellow, the kind of writer Saul Bellow is-- today he seems somehow out of place. And he probably did fifty years ago, too in a way, not only for physical description but also the absolute unapologetic intelligence of his work, saying to us, "I'm going to deal with this particular area of life unapologetically and really go into it."

But "old fashioned." It took me many years to realize: "fashioned from the old." They turned the word around. Old-fashioned / fashioned from the old-- well, who isn't? Where should we be fashioned from?

Q: In other words, isn't it a good thing, to be …?

TB: Well, I would think. But obviously when people use that term what they mean is that you're not current with whatever the development is. But then again, Margaret Atwood amongst many others has said there's no progress in art; it's not like technology, where there's always the new, better thing, the improvement. So when it comes to art, when it comes to fiction writing, I hate to think of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, to use an old cliché. You can only go with what you as a reader will take. I will hate three pages of description if it's bad, but I'll hate three pages of dialogue if they're bad. So if it's three pages of wonderful description, that doesn't bother me in the least.

Q: That was my feeling with *Paperboy's Winter*, and clearly it's other readers' feelings. But this reference to where we are fashioned from leads me to another of your works I'd like you to discuss-- *The Lost Coast*, published in 2007. I believe it was about the twelfth of your nineteen published books. So it's kind of further along. But I thought it might be

an interesting departure for exploring your life and writing in that it's so much based in where you're from. To start off, could you describe that book.

TB: Well, *The Lost Coast* was a very simple-- it came out of a rather simple frustration on my part, to be honest. Again this relates to the blurring of the genres, and what I recognize can be done in one can't be done in others as successfully. I basically realized that the culture I grew up in, the salmon fishing culture on the Fraser River, had disappeared. All of the commentary around it apart from finger pointing had to do with the disappearance of the actual species. Of course, destruction of the salmon was a terribly sad thing. But what no one was talking much about was the destruction of the culture that went with it. In Newfoundland, for example, with the cod fishery, those two things were always married. You had the resource and then you had the effect of the lost resource on Newfoundland. But in British Columbia the discussion was almost purely salmon as an economic resource and how does it affect the economy – that's all you were hearing. You were hearing fishermen were to blame for over-fishing, the Department of Fisheries was to blame for this, that and the other.

I realized I had lost something personally. It was a sense of place and a sense of working in a place. The physical experience of working in a landscape, a powerful landscape, is something that's irreplaceable. You can go as a tourist and get in a kayak and paddle around the Fraser River, but it's not the same experience as living in it and working in it. You don't feel it the same way, I don't think. Not that it's a bad experience, it's a different experience. So when you have an entire culture all up and down the coast of people whose lives are in those rhythms of the salmon's return, you've lost something much greater than just an economic resource. You've lost a whole way of life.

So I realized I wanted to reach more people, for one thing. You'd have to be a pretty deluded poet to think your poetry is going to reach a lot of readers if you want to make a statement about something. It just doesn't happen in this culture-- or many cultures anymore. Non-fiction remains the most popular form. If you want to reach readers and you're not going to make a movie, prose non-fiction is probably the number one choice.

I wanted to explore the history of British Columbia salmon fishing industry and my personal place in it, and I also wanted to make a few, for want of a better word, political and moral statements about my truth. I'm not saying it's the only truth, but as a writer you have to make your stand. I said, well this is the way I feel about it. Then I put it out there simply because I didn't think anybody else was doing that.

Q: I guess a term for those elements or threads in the book is manifesto, and it's a powerful manifesto. That can easily come across as putting people off, as I'm sure you would agree.

TB: And it did. It did put some people off.

Q: The strong critical statement.

TB: I think I was sensitive to that, though. I wanted to make clear in the book my own complicity in an industry that was destroying the resource. I didn't want to make it seem entirely as if there were all sorts of outside evil forces that had caused this downfall.

Q: It struck me you weave back to that point frequently in different ways.

TB: Well, the nineteenth century wasn't a golden age; it was a destructive and brutal age, and we're not necessarily any worse than they were, maybe in some ways better. I guess at the end, how do I feel about it now? The first talk I gave for the AU writer-in-residency this 2013-14 term was all about our relationship to the natural world and what we're doing. This is the burning topic of the day. It's the *big* topic. I'd like to believe *The Lost Coast* will remain. Apparently it shows up on courses and people use it who are teaching ecological writing. I hope it will hold up that way, because really it's basically mourning the loss, it's mourning the way we treat and interact with the natural world. But how are we going resolve that? I don't think I'm arrogant enough to posit any answers.

Q: Jane Jacobs was taken to task by some reviewers for her last book *Dark Age Ahead.*[1]. It was called gloomy. It basically analyzes different reasons she thought things were not in good shape. But she said she wanted to push the discussion; it was up to everyone to work on the answer.

TB: What is a writer's responsibility or what is a writer's purpose? I think it's different for different writers. I was too much a fan of Camus and Orwell and others who really believed that you had to be a bit of a disturbance at times. I think I do, probably do that in all the forms I work in.

I worked really hard to get a lot of history into *The Lost Coast*. But I do that what-they-call creative non-fiction thing where I kind of blend the fictional techniques with the history. As a result, some have unfairly tagged the book a memoir. But it isn't specifically. When I was trying to sell the book, one particular agent said to me, "Well you know, no offense, but who are *you* to write a memoir?" But it's not specifically a memoir in the sense of Gordon Lightfoot writing his memoir or Bobby Orr writing his. I'm not saying, "This is my story in the salmon fishing industry." People who write memoir about themselves better have some kind of fame. My purpose was more to put myself simply as an entrée to a memoir of the culture

Some of the reviews of the book really pleased me. One in particular recognized my purpose, which is all any writer can ask for. I forget the specific writer, but the review said that in the debate which is obviously ongoing with the talk of pipelines going out to the coast and running through First Nations territory-- and that's all going to affect the ecology of the coast, these things are not going away – that my personal background gave me a position on the discussion that not everyone has. Thinking about that review, I realized the gift I had in having grown up where I did and having been involved in what I was involved in, and then being a writer, that gave me an opportunity to write a manifesto that might carry some weight. Books speak to some and not to others, but I think that one certainly has been one of my more popular books.

[1] On the decay of five essential pillars of North American society, published in 2004

Q: Is there a degree to which the acknowledged persona viewpoint is essential for accountability? You're positioning who you are and sort of putting the cards on the table. It's clearly honest from that perspective.

TB: I guess the danger in that, though-- going back to hockey-- it can be like the argument that you can't criticize fighting in hockey if you're not a hockey player, if you've never played it, because how do you know, you don't understand the code. I wouldn't want to trump everybody else's position by saying, well, I grew up in a salmon fishing family, how can you possibly …

I'm not saying that's what you're saying, but that was the balance I had to find. Yes, I do have a specific position that tells me certain things. I certainly would have, from being a child on the river, a certain appreciation for that culture that someone who's coming to it from books wouldn't have. That was an advantage. On the other hand, you can be somewhat blinded, too, to certain obvious things by being within a culture.

Q: Your insider position informs people who don't have that background, in an important way. But also you're alerting us to the politics, to the bias, to other things in the culture. To me, though, the personal memoir strand of *Lost Coast* is most vividly and vibrantly a description of family. That's so important, I thought-- the loving relationships.

TB: I'm glad you described it that way because I think I'm overstating the manifesto part.

Q: It's only there sometimes?

TB: It only comes in a few points where I really let it out.

Q: Ten percent or something?

TB: Yeah. I think that's probably the only way it could work. Fifty percent manifesto and fifty percent family lyricism…. probably your better balance would be lower end manifesto. How many words does it take to get a message across if what you're saying is

we're doing things wrong? You don't need to spend pages and pages blaming governments and blaming corporations. Everybody knows.

Q: I find the overtly critical part is quite brisk and controlled as well as poetically cadenced. It's more an honest description of conditions than finger-pointing. As well as these critical elements, there's this quality and level of almost a textbook on fish, telling us all kinds of interesting stuff. That part reminds me of Melville, except again it's not going on for pages, it's interwoven. It's very educational, and the process descriptions of the industry of a fishing village – the cannery, the boats, the whole process.

TB: The thing about the species, I'm glad you mentioned that, too, because that's where Alberta comes into play frankly, my shift from living on the coast to living in Edmonton. When I first came to Edmonton, people would ask me about myself and I'd talk about salmon fishing in the background and talk about salmon. I was amazed at how many people don't know the most basic things about what I just took for granted as being this amazing natural spectacle, not knowing how many different species of salmon there were, not knowing that the salmon spawn and die, the whole process. The whole cycle, which was like mother's milk to me, wasn't common knowledge to people even just one province over. Then I reflected that Vancouver is filled with people who have no relationship to this incredible history and resource. That also factored into the book, my frustration with the west coast literary culture itself. I'm still fighting that battle, I'm afraid. Or I'm not afraid, but it's one that I've set myself out to do, and that's where my recent *The Tinsmith* comes in. I've always had this desire to sort of, again it sounds aggressive, but just to say to people, look at this place where you're living and look at its history.

Q: *The Tinsmith, which* is about the cannery history.

TB: Yeah, it's set in the nineteenth century. It's really about how the American Civil War affected the development of British Columbia in the 1860s and 1870s. It deals with slavery and it deals with one of the early salmon canners on the Fraser River, who was

mixed blood, white and black. This is historical but very little is known about him. So that had always haunted me from a very young age. Sarah Orne Jewett, an American writer, has said what haunts the imagination for years and years and finally gets put down on paper has the possibility of being literature. That's something I think is true.

So anyway, as a kid I'd be taken to the local museum, which was very close to my home, and there'd be these references to this character, John Sullivan Deas, but very little was known about him, a very shadowy figure, very mysterious, like much of western history. You have these fascinating individuals but very little record of them or very little known about them. So that was the basis of that book. It wasn't actually in the historical record about this particular person, who came and went very quickly in BC history. He was there for a decade and then gone back to the States.

Q: But he left a legacy.

TB: A definite legacy, which is his name. His name is on Deas Island, the Deas Island Tunnel, the tunnel that links Vancouver to my part of the coast. His place name is still there but very little known about him, so in that novel I wanted to take that history and flesh it out.

Western Canadian history has so much richness to it. This is probably the greatest tension in my creative life: my fascination and interest in the local and the sense that I have that our cultures are moving away from it. I don't just mean literary culture, I mean economic culture; that tension exists everywhere. Whether you're buying your groceries, you're buying your lettuce that's been sent to you from China, or whether you're going to the farmer's market and trying to buy it local, everybody's making these choices. I think those choices are also happening in literature. Writers make choices about whether they're going to write about the place they're from, if it matters to them. Maybe it doesn't matter to everyone. Or you're going to write a different kind of book. Obviously not everybody's going to be the same kind of writer.

Q: You've suggested that reader responses to books like *The Tinsmith* or *The Lost Coast* give an impression that people don't know-- or don't know enough-- about the history of

the local. Without your book, how many of us would have heard about what you call "British Columbia's most dramatic environmental crime… when the Canadian Northern, racing against a deadline to build an unnecessary third rail route to the coast, illegally blasted tons of rock into the Fraser River at Hell's Gate." Several dozen workers fell to their deaths.

TB: Hell's Gate. That was 1912, just before the First World War.

Q: You report that 1913 was "the big-year of the four-year salmon cycle" (122). Everyone "got together to figure out ways to keep the price of fish low, to keep fishermen divided on racial lines, and to block any possible labour organizing…. Meanwhile, at Hell's Gate, an already narrow passage upriver through the canyon had been narrowed to just a few yards by the blasted rock." What happened to the salmon-- and not just the salmon-- was devastating. You say, "The situation that awaited the salmon and the interior aboriginal groups whose lives depended on them was as tragic as the situation that awaited western civilization. And the blithe unconcern in the face of it was equally monumental" (123).

TB: But there were other slaughters, there were terrible slaughters all along.

Q: As a working writer, how do you negotiate between really important topics you know personally and believe should come forward and the conditions of what we might call the industry, the market-place?

TB: It's hard to know. What you write and how does come down partly to practical things. There's what readers-- that mass of people out there-- might be reading or potentially interested in reading. Then there's what the publishing industry *thinks* readers are interested in. You have to negotiate that path.

I've often said to people that if you want to publish with Random House or Doubleday or Knopf or these big multinational publishers, you're probably going to

really, really minimize your chances if you're going to write the great novel about William Lyon Mackenzie King.

Q: Nightwood Editions, publisher of *The Lost Coast*, is a BC publisher descended from the early 1960s Vancouver blewointment press founded by the remarkably creative concrete and sound poet bill bissett. It grew and reached into creative non-fiction and seeks new writers across Canada. But it's not claiming to be a Random House.

TB: Yeah. That's just the way it is. It's like you're not going to sell certain subjects to big multinationals. This gets to nationalism, to independence, this gets to all these things again which are not just about literature, they're about the way we live today, and larger issues. Sometimes I think, wow, I'd love to write or wouldn't that be fascinating to read a really good novel about a Canadian political figure. It's not that there aren't presses or publishers out there who would do that, but if you're trying to make a living, all these things come into play for writers, how you go about things.

I think to some extent with some of the books I've written, I've been trying to act like a George Orwell in an age that doesn't necessarily listen to writers the same way. I've had it said to me many times-- and we hear this all the time as writers--if you're trying to make an impact, if you want to make your voice heard, then writing books is not the way to do it now. But if you're a writer, then you just have to continually believe that's not true: it's not only other forms of expression, of art, that reach people.

DB: And getting back to poetry?

TB: I've always felt that poetry doesn't have that problem. Maybe that's a reason I go on writing it among all other genres. For so many people writing poetry is kind of liberating and freeing because they understand very early on that poetry is not a commercial activity. Therefore any choices you make about projects you're going to do have a different kind of consideration. I don't think I've ever written a book-- and I don't know too many writers who do, actually, when it comes right down to it, sit down and write a

book-- thinking that it's going to be publishable or saleable. There has to be some sort of interior drive. It's too hard to write books.

Q: I wonder if a common interior drive is notable across some of your genres, in dominant details and interests, suggesting perhaps some common source material and inspiration. It's noteworthy to me, having recently read the *Paperboy's Winter* and *The Lost Coast*, that there are connections between certain characters and settings. I wouldn't assume that the places and characters in the non-fiction are one hundred percent the model for the novel. They have their differences and yet they share this kind of nexus of material that you worked with. What might you feel you're going for with the novel that's different from creative non-fiction?

TB: I think there's parts of *The Lost Coast* that come pretty close to fiction in terms of how the narrative unfolds. But also big differences, and you've already touched on a couple of the big differences, and that's the amount of information about species. In a novel you're not going to suddenly stop, well unless you're Herman Melville, and Herman Melville was really writing a novel that no one else has ever written.

Q: No one liked it at the time, either.

TB: A lot of people hate it now. Actually to be honest, I use Herman Melville and to a lesser extent Scott Fitzgerald, because writing books is hard. I remind myself a human being wrote *Moby Dick*, one person wrote that book. That should've put him on easy street, in my mind, for the rest of his life. He should've just been, whether you like it or you don't like it, just give the guy a soft job in whatever department of the government or something. So if I'm having a bad day as a writer I think, oh God, look at what Herman Melville did and what happened to him. Or Scott Fitzgerald. Basically *The Great Gatsby* at the time it was published was considered a failure.

But anyway, yes, I think the information about species and about the history and then the manifesto part-- those are harder to get across in fiction successfully, though it depends on the kind of fiction. There obviously have not been many novels written that

have had real strong manifesto elements to them where you can have a character stand up and make a speech. My first novel does, actually, *Downriver Drift*, published in 2000, again, similar setting, similar dealing with the fishing industry. One character is a labor organizer; some of his dialogue is meant to be manifesto-like. But I do think with *The Lost Coast*-- and we haven't mentioned *In the Suicide's Library* yet-- there's a certain kind of license and freedom to blending non-fiction and fiction.

Q: Speaking of *In the Suicide's Library*-- and here's another question on the nature of creative non-fiction-- is every event and moment in that book exactly what happened?

TB: No, but it's definitely non-fiction. It's non-fiction in the sense that all the important things are true. The core of the book, what the book is about-- again almost always at the center of my prose there is some sort of moral conundrum-- the core of that book is really about whether I should steal a book or not. And that's true. Exactly as it's described is true. It was in the University of Alberta Rutherford Library, it was that book, that signature was in it – everything is true. What happens after that… and all the things about my life that are in that book are-- I don't know, I haven't looked at it for a while, but I think-- are almost entirely true. But some things have been altered…

Q: For dramatic impact?

TB: Yeah, made bigger. Was I necessarily as tortured as I sound in the narrative? Probably not. I got through it.

Q: Being familiar with the Rutherford, I couldn't imagine it being the setting for a gripping story: that apologetic Canadian dismissal of the local, perhaps.

TB: Well, in Edmonton these days there's this sense of literary happening-- because the city's getting bigger and bigger all the time, and when you get bigger and bigger there are more and more writers and more and thre's more sense of a place with energy. People here have been talking a lot lately about how many books get set in Edmonton. My wife

Theresa, her novel *The Unfinished Child* (Brindle & Glass, 2013) is entirely set in Edmonton. There are more and more of them, and a lot of genre writers, though I think they hate that term. In any case, a lot of detective-story writers are starting to set novels here. The funny thing about a place like Edmonton, and this is also true of Vancouver-- I know I'm getting a little off topic, jumping ahead but also coming back to the idea of the local and who's interesting what readers and what readers are interested in-- is "exotic appeal." When I won that Guggenheim fellowship in the States, one of the reasons I'm sure is that for people in New York and, say, the east coast United States, Alberta and British Columbia are interesting because they're still rather exotic. What are these places and what do we know about them, they think? Very little. So they're sort of curious. Whereas from the point of view of people in the West – Edmonton, Vancouver, Calgary – there's always been this sense (I think it's disappearing but there's long been a sense) that we're not taken seriously because who cares about what happens here. That's not without foundation, there certainly is some truth to that. But again if the population of Edmonton is going to double in the next twenty years, as they say it is, then sometimes sheer volume just changes the way writers feel about their place.

Q: As you report, your home community, Ladner (fictionalized in *The Paper Boy's Winter* as Chilukthan) was founded by British and Americans. You mention the strong influence of reading and enjoying Victorian literature. But it also seems clear that you are very close to American literature as well. Could you comment on this?

TB: I think it's just a matter of the sheer power and quality of American literature. I really think it's that. I grew up in a strong Canadian nationalist home, very much the idea of Canada at the time I was a kid in the seventies.

Q: My childhood was before that, a time when we still saluted the Union Jack. We didn't have a Canadian flag at all. I just want to offer that sense, for younger readers in particular, of how rapidly this changed, with a plunge-- some would say awkward-- into nationalism. You seem to capture that new outlook very well in the figure of the school principal in *The Paper Boy's Winter*.

TB: He was actually modeled very loosely on a principal I had who was all into the United Nations and Lester B. Pearson, that whole notion … and boy how old fashioned that looks now, this sense of Canada as a tolerant force, a peacemaker. But also this idea of nation building, Canada on the rise, Canada as an entity, which is almost…

Early in my writing career I tried writing poems about Canada; I very quickly realized that I couldn't have picked something that was more doomed to obsolescence, which is really sad. It's a sad acknowledgement for a poet to understand. Manijeh[2] and I were recently talking about poetry and how different it is for an Iranian and other cultures, with relationship to an actual nation. But partly that's because Canada has… what is a Canadian? If you don't have one sort of ethnic bloodline, it's harder to have a sense of speaking for all people. I can't stand up and speak for the whole. I mean, I can try, but it doesn't carry the same validity.

Take the World Cup of soccer: my kids were asking me who we'd be pulling for. They keep showing people all across Canada pulling for basically their ethnic bond, like if they're Greek Canadians, they're pulling for Greece, if they're German they're pulling for Germany. My heritage is English and Irish but back so long-- like mid-nineteenth century-- that I don't have any particular affinity for that. Canada didn't have a team so I said, well, pick whatever you want. I think probably there are real pros and cons to that from the point of view of writers who are fascinated and interested in their own place.

I had an interesting conversation on email with a Newfoundland writer named Paul Bowdring. He's a novelist. He just published a novel *The Stranger's Gallery* last year that won the big Newfoundland award for 2013, the Winterset Prize. I've always really liked his work. He publishes about one novel a decade, so it had been a long time between books. Anyway, this novel is entirely about Newfoundland and Newfoundland's history and the way things have changed over time. The main character is an archivist. I said to Paul, it must be so nice to write in a definite culture – because Newfoundland is different from the rest of Canada that way – that if you're a Newfoundland writer and you write about Newfoundland, you might actually have a strong local audience. He said, well, that's kind of-- we're losing that, he said. I was saying to him I didn't think I ever

[2] Dr. Manijeh Mannani, Chair, Centre for the Humanities, AU

had that. Growing up on the Fraser River when I was living in B.C., I never felt there was any kind of appetite for-- strong appetite-- for writing about B.C. Having said that, one of my main publishers, Harbor Publishing, has almost by themselves managed to give local writing about place a presence there.

Q: So failing a single nation to write about, it seems your response , as wonderfully summed up in *The Suicide's Library* with the little formula for writers-- "reality plus imagination"-- is to work with the reality you know best in the local. In other words, home. But you also show, in works like *The Lost Coast*, the old local reality slipping away. Does that get us into, if you're not using the local, then what…?

TB: Yeah, it becomes more and more complicated. But I'm sure outside of Canada it's just as complicated. In the Western world, we're becoming more and more urbanized. People are-- I know you're out there with critters…

Q: I'm the other direction, but I know what you're saying.

TB: The statistics are there, anyway. The countryside is emptying out and people are moving to the cities.

Q: For the first time the Native population is over fifty percent urban now.

TB: I think that's reflecting the general trend everywhere, not just in Canada. So when you don't have the bond with the actual land, and this is what I come back to with *The Lost Coast*-- I mean, why do I have such a strong sense of place and maybe some other writers don't have it? Well, it's not a mystery. I have it because I was given it. It was given to me because I was fortunate my parents worked in a land-based industry that put me right there at the center. This is the foundation for all of my poetry. It put me at the center of mystery and awe in a way that I wouldn't have been otherwise.

As a parent I struggle with this. All parents who had any kind of a natural relationship to nature growing up look at the way kids live today and think, God, get

outside, climb a tree, do something where you're actively involved in the physical reality of where you live. Well, with the times we live in, you realize you're really fighting the current there.

Q: You're swimming upstream more than the salmon.

TB: You certainly are. And how is that going to change writing, how is it going to change literature? A person who sees the glass as half full would say, well that's storytelling, and the power of storytelling can come from other sources and other places.

Q: Sure. Some say, can't a writer always tell a meaningful story? Regardless of change, urbanization, globalization and so on, there's always something lyrical and dramatic, the telling detail that captures the moment. But, if one's not that kind of writer, what do you do?

TB: This is so hard for me to address, because I've spent most of the past twenty years of my life as a city dweller. I'm not on the Fraser River pulling salmon. So where do my experiences come from, where do the poems come from now? Well, for certain kinds of writers, and I'm one of them, a lot of times it's memory, it's other things. The past. This is why the past isn't dead-- because it's so rich, there's so much in it. Your failure to access that is the question. You go and talk to somebody you grew up with and they'll tell you all sorts of things you've forgotten and can't access anymore. Then once you're told, you think.

It just happens that while working on my current book in progress, I met a girl that I grew up with in my home town. She lived next door to me, actually. She was reminiscing about the old days. She said, "Remember when I kept pigeons?" I said, "No, I don't." But when she said it, then I remembered. So now I've incorporated that detail into the story I'm working on, because there's something haunting about it, because who keeps pigeons? But I guess people do, and bees and all those things. But I would not have recalled that if I hadn't spoken to her. I guess the question is-- it's more what struck me

when my family and I moved back to the west coast. This was back to “the lost coast” and specifically why the book of that title happened.

Q: The point of view from Gibsons, with which you open *The Lost Coast*, right?

TB: From Gibsons, yeah. We moved to the Sunshine Coast and when we were there it looked a lot like my hometown in the seventies. But there was no fishing industry going on, so the boats were idle in the harbor. That was more or less over and I felt that, so the book came partly out of that experience but also the recognition we moved there specifically for the ocean and the mountains and to get our kids living right in that environment to see what it would be like. My wife thought it might be permanent, but I figured we'd come back to Edmonton, because I like Edmonton so much. But anyway, while we were there we noticed that most people-- and this would be 2004 or 2005-- by then most people living there were living just the same as people in the city. Kids had no greater access, kids weren't roaming around any more than they do anywhere else. Everybody's life was very scheduled. Everybody was busy, overwhelmed, the pace was fast even though everyone said it was slow. The only people who were going slow were those who were retired. Everybody else trying to live there was living just as if they were in downtown Edmonton.

This is probably everywhere. It’s the *zeitgeist.*

Q: So how does that affect your writing?

TB: Well, I guess at a certain point it's no different than if you're not a writer. Some people are always embracing the new and moving rapidly towards it while others feel we're losing something valuable behind us, too.

I think that tension is the tension that creates my art. I don't want to live in the past because it wasn't perfect, but there are also things about it that I think I would like my children still to be able to experience.

Q: Yet I think it's fair to say that not everything you write now comes out of memory, settings from the past?

TB: Many of the poems that I write now in fact come out of urban experience, a lot of them, because of where I am. This city isn't like others and not all cities are like each other yet.

Q: Returning as we have to this city and Alberta, Tim, we seem to have reached a natural point to conclude this first part of our discussion. I just want to say that we were very grateful to have you as the writer in residence this past year with Athabasca University. Thank you for these wide-ranging reflections on your life and art, and on writing in general. I look forward to resuming the thread in Part 2.

Note: Part 2 of the interview with Tim Bowling, which includes discussion of his latest novel *The Tinsmith*, is archived at the Athabasca University Writer in Residence website at http://writer-in-residence.athabascau.ca/

A Writer's Tension: Reflections on Genre, Place, and Time (Part 2)

Q: In Part 1 of our discussion, you touched on genre, writing local, remembering the past, and reflecting on loss. You also touched on a strong element in your work of social criticism and even protest. To resume these themes, I wondered if you could say something more about social activism in your personal life.

TB: Just as an example of how a writer's life sometimes reflects the work, some of our kids have been home schooled. Recalling my own school years, I have such vivid memories of-- frankly-- boredom. When I look at it now, it was boredom. Relief was just go out and do something, wander around with a stick, look at things and just have nothing else to do.

Q: You have a memorable passage in *The Lost Coast*:

> "How can I put this plainly? School cost me my heritage. Kept out of it, I'd have experienced so much more of the rich world into which I'd been born. Put into it, I learned how to raise my hand and how to sit still…."

What follows is most striking: "learning the cruelty and injustice of authority, losing the streets, field and river and hours of daydreams and solitude" (224). It's one of many remarkable passages. It put me in mind of William Blake saying something to the effect of thank God I was never sent to school and made to play the part of a fool.

TB: Yeah, well, but I went to school from the age of six, so…

Q: You say that you were farmed and before that you were wild.

TB: There's always places where writers, I think, make choices. That might be, and it is, an exaggeration.

Q: A persona?

TB: It's a persona, yes, a created thing for the sake of that narrative.

Q: It makes a point, though.

TB: Well, and it's not entirely untrue, because I think if I had not gone to school, I certainly-- these experiences I write about-- I would've had more of them. I would've been with my dad fishing more of the time. But school obviously gave me things, too, that my own family would not have given me. Sometimes when you're remembering the past, you like to remember things a certain way-- you're not exactly an honest chronicler always, that's for sure.

Q: You're translating, in a sense?

TB: Yeah, you are. And you're probably translating poorly at times. But what's any writer's obligation? This comes down to the forms somewhat, but I think it's the same, and I tell apprentice writers this all the time. I say, you only really have one obligation, and that's to be entertaining. There are different ways to be entertaining, but that's your primary one. Even if you're going to write a manifesto, it has to be entertaining.

Q: Is it perhaps a matter of if you have the truth and a great deal to say and compassion and wonderful intentions but you don't know how to make it entertaining, then the rest doesn't matter? Is that partly what it is? Because you certainly have those other things in there, too. I wouldn't say that the ultimate value for me is the entertainment, but it's what kept me going and turning the page.

TB: Entertainment is a hard, dangerous word to use in our culture because it sounds frivolous. But I don't mean it like "entertainment." I think *Moby Dick* is vastly entertaining, but it's entertaining on levels that we don't necessarily all agree are.

Q: Magic charm?

TB: Well, it's the power of the language, it's the power of the sentence, it's the power of an image. It's the sheer idea. When I teach John Cheevers' short story "The Swimmer," I always begin with, what an idea, to write a story about a guy who's going to swim his way home across backyard swimming pools. He must've just been giggling and delighted and couldn't wait to write it. Apparently he was going to write a novel based on it. I'm not surprised, because it's such a good idea. But he wrote one hundred and fifty pages of notes and then condensed it down to that short story.

Q: You say in *The Lost Coast*, "… poets live over dark rushing water and build our flumes of words to carry something on beyond ourselves…. And the fuel for that motion is a continual sensitivity to association, otherwise known as a metaphor-making spirit" (232). That idea of Cheevers' was a happy day for a metaphor, I would think.

TB: A hugely happy day. I was thinking about that and then the whole idea of *Moby Dick,* too. Things get watered down so much over time. I know *Moby Dick* is such a cultural icon now: you see it used for restaurants and T-shirts and all sorts of things. But the idea of coming up with this guy in mad pursuit of a white whale is just hugely powerful. How do people get through all those pages and pages and pages of whaling description? Most people aren't that interested in the details of whaling. But what's going to happen with this guy and this whale? It's just a basic narrative hook. Melville does so much else, but this, I think, is what holds us…

Having a good hook comes right down to everything I write; it comes right down to an individual poem. The poem is like a pop song in that sense. Right from the start, if there isn't some metaphor-making or some kind of memorable language, memorable image, something to reward the reader for making the effort, then I don't think it's going to succeed.

Q: Well, to me in your work there's always a question, or something, that leaps out and is very interesting, whether it's is this guy going to steal this book…

TB: That's why Melville is a genius and I'm maybe a good writer but I'm not a genius. Partly, Dave, in fairness this is also a difference in time period. I had this conversation with my son the other day. I was explaining Shakespeare because he asked me out of the blue, "So was Shakespeare the greatest writer ever?" It's like, well, okay let's see now…"

Q: You didn't point out to him who you are?

TB: He didn't ask, "Dad, are you greater than Shakespeare?" But the funny thing about that to me was that I'm so aware always of mythologies and conventions. I think certain kinds of writers, and I'm one of them, I'm always questioning accepted wisdom. I think, well, okay, why would my eleven-year-old who's not in school even, like why would he think Shakespeare is the greatest writer ever? He's come across this idea somewhere – television. I haven't said to him that Shakespeare is the greatest writer.

Q: I think I had that idea by about the age of four. Where does it come from?

TB: Where does it come from? Well, it's certainly the notion. I wanted to answer it honestly. I had energy that day. I wasn't just going to say yes, move on. My knowledge of Shakespeare is such that, okay obviously powerful, yes, no doubt about it, and probably maybe if you have to rank, up there if not number one. But what were the circumstances outside of that writer's control that collided with the language and everything else to allow that to happen? So I used the comparison between Shakespeare and Melville. I said, well whoever William Shakespeare was, is he a greater writer than Herman Melville given what they each had to work with and given the times and places they lived in? I would say, you know what, I think maybe Melville was greater, but I don't know. It's not just a question of the work you left, although some people would like to think you just look at the work, but greater in terms of what you've had to overcome.

Q: You're handed a certain path by destiny in a sense, aren't you?

TB: In a sense, I think – where you are, what you experience… With Shakespeare, the coming together of all those forces that made English so rich at that time. But then again, where were all the other Shakespeares at that time? That's a very difficult thing to answer.

Q: But coming back to narrative hook?

TB: Coming back to narrative hook, it might be a condition of the way our lives have changed. Melville's story in *Moby Dick is* so based on the elements, the hook is such an elemental force, closer to what Shakespeare had, it seems, than what we have today. So my narrative hook involves an urban guy having to decide whether he should steal a book or not. Partly that's all created out of this tension that I feel as a writer in an industry where books are changing so much, where the way things have always been done in publishing is rapidly changing and being digitized. Again, is it bold new territory that we should all be rushing and racing into? I think there are probably great opportunities and advantages for writers in the way things are now. But also, who doesn't love books if you're a writer?

Q: For me *The Suicide's Library* evokes much of the despair and darkness of so much twentieth century Western literature . In Part 1 of our discussion you mentioned *zeitgeist*-- the *zeitgeist* of so many things stacked toward nightmare and against fulfillment

TB: I think that book begins with the narrator saying he's having a mild midlife crisis and it's not the kind that involves sports cars and young women and that sort of thing. Then it goes on from there to look at Weldon Kees, an American writer of the twentieth Century who probably committed suicide.

Q: He's perceived as a "minor" arts figure in history.

TB: Yes, known as a poet but very marginal. Yet actually what's happened since the writing of that book is, like so many people, by the time I got to my late forties I was starting to come closer-- and I don't think the writing of the book led me to it, I think it's

just life-- but by the time I was in my late forties shortly after the book was published in 2010,so this would've been around 2011 or so-- I started to experience some of that feeling of depression that was new to me. I hadn't had it. Who knows, maybe the writing of that book helped me cope with it better than I would've otherwise. Art often does that, helps keep you away.

Q: Some struggle was and perhaps is going on?

TB: I seem to be battling with the culture I want to live in, because a lot of the poems I want to write these days are poems of midlife. But our culture, our poetry culture is very young, and it has to be. I think the people to whom the poems that I'm currently writing speak the most are the people who have the least amount of time to read poetry. It's the students, the twenty year olds who are excited about poetry, twenty to thirty-five.

Q: Fitzgerald talks about writing to the younger generation.

TB: Well, but I think he's talking about writing to that younger generation while you're in it. You write for your generation and then the critics of the next generation and the schoolmasters of all time. But what do you do if you're middle aged? I think you write poetry specifically. Well, all forms, but if you want to write a non-fiction book you can choose to write about anything at all. Whatever the current fashion is, I could write about it as a seventy-year-old or an eighty-year-old. It doesn't matter. You can write about it. You have to do all the things that anybody has to do when they write a good non-fiction book – you have to research and you have to have some affinity for what you're writing about. But when it comes to poetry, lyric poetry anyway, and it's coming out of your life, well, you write naturally out of the experiences you're having. I wouldn't expect someone who's twenty-five years old to necessarily have an understanding of some of the pieces in my latest book of poems *Circa Nineteen Hundred and Grief*.

I don't know…. As a teacher of writing, what practical advice can you give them about what they should write or how they should go about being writers?

Q: That's a very good question. Most people I think would say, find your own story. Fitzgerald suggested you only have one, maybe two or three, but you tell it different ways throughout your life perhaps. Is that true? In some ways it makes sense to me that that might be true.

TB: *Circa* has a poem in it that's called "Childhood." The opening line is, "I want it back, it is unseemly to admit so." It's right there, because childhood is not something we respect in our culture very much. It's also something that's not appreciated for what it really is, as it should be, this wonderful opportunity for freedom and imagination and things of which ideally we keep a strong element through our lives. But we're biological, we're made up of forces we can't control to some extent, so as we get older our relationship to everything alters. I think obviously when it comes to somebody like Weldon Kees, why does he kill himself? When he killed himself he was forty-one. Why didn't he do it when he was twenty-one? Well, probably because he had changed and what he was coping with he could no longer cope with. I think when it comes to any kind of writing, you have your story and you tell it. I think what I like to tell young writers, and I excite myself when I say this because it's the truth, is that, look, no one can stop you, that's the beautiful thing. No one else can stop you from writing a book.

Q: I think you said writing is one of the few things where you can be somewhat free of authority.

TB: Writing it and publishing it are two different things. But the writing of it, you can do whatever you want. In how many areas of life is that true? That's wonderfully freeing, I think. But then the negotiation you have to make as a working writer, as a writer in the world, who wants to reach readers and whatever else, well that's different. But if you look at the history of literature I suppose you find that most writers who eventually mean something to people have come fairly close to doing both things at the same time.

It's ongoing. I set out as a writer early on. When I was a young guy going to university at UBC, there just simply were not any novels or there wasn't any literature, very little, about the place I grew up in. So as a kid I couldn't read a book that was sort of

dramatizing my place and mythologizing it and making it alive to me in a way that some kid growing up in Mississippi would. Fitzgerald said that we end up writing the books we can't find to read.

Q: Yes, that we want to read.

TB: I felt that regardless of whatever fortunes happen to books, the wonderful thing about them is that they do take on a life of their own. When I'm gone, somebody growing up there now can still read *The Paperboy's Winter*. I know they've taught it in my old high school on a few occasions. One of the neatest things about it is somebody told me they had the book, they brought it home, because kids bring their schoolwork home. They had the book around and some of the parents would be the age I am or younger, and in that novel there's a tree, there's a tall Douglas fir that's in the neighborhood I grew up in. It's gone now, but it was a memorable tree I guess for more people even than just in my neighborhood. Some of these parents, they were asking the kids about the book and they'd say, my dad said, "Oh, I remember that tree. I used to bike over there," and that kind of thing.

Q: The scenes with that tree are especially vivid and evocative for me. You return to it in *The Lost Coast*: "A Douglas fir, a hundred and twenty feet high, hundreds of years old…." You describe your persona self as a child climbing, looking out over the town, and history. You even weave in uses of the wood: "to make spear handles, harpoon shafts, spoons, dipnet poles, harpoon barbs, salmon weirs, and halibut and cod hooks. Its pitch was used for sealing the joints of harpoon heads, gaffs and fishhooks, also for caulking canoes…." Readers should check out that remarkable sequence from pages 102 to 107 of *The Lost Coast*. You spoke earlier of poetry in prose: this passage surely has that in spades. Poetry.

TB: A wonderful thing about publishing books is poetry. When I published my first book of poetry, which has to do a lot with the fishing industry and the Fraser River, a whole bunch of people came to the poetry reading in my home town for the launch of the

book because they knew my parents. They weren't interested in poetry in particular but this was Hec and Jean's son, who's published a book, so let's go, including the barber that cut my hair when I was a little boy. He figures in some things. He had said to me-- and this may be the greatest compliment I've ever had-- he said, “That book of yours,” he said, “It made me look at everything with new appreciation.” That's all that I really could ask for, regardless of what the subject is. It makes someone look at it.

Q: For young aspiring poets wanting to express themselves, hoping to help readers to look at things with new appreciation, what advice do you give?

TB: I always tell people, if you want to write, poetry especially, you've got to read a lot, read poetry-- and you should walk a lot. The combination of the rhythm that you get from walking and thinking about poems as you're writing-- and I think that's true for everybody-- it's just physical, it's breathing and pausing. And this doesn't mean having a device in your hand so that you can immediately record what you're thinking, because I've often found as much as technologies can help in some ways, when it comes to writing poems I think one of the great things is just relying on your memory. If you get the rhythm in your head, if you get a line in your head and you're walking and by the time you get back to your house it's still there, then its chances of being memorable are much better.

Q: You have to work at keeping it sometimes, and that sort of strengthens it?

TB: As much as people hate it in elementary school, I do think that learning poetry by memory, by rote, repetition, is a great help. As much as it might turn some people off poetry-- and it probably does-- for those who are not turned off by it, it's a wonderful thing for your own process, for remembering your own poems.

Q: Is it somewhat similar to the aspiring new masters of art who used to literally copy the recognized masters? They knew they were copying, but, wow, what a learning experience.

TB: Was it Hemmingway or one of the great twentieth century writers who would hand-write prose that he admired just to get the rhythm of it?

Q: I don't know if Hemingway did that, but I read recently about a writer who said she wrote out one of Hemmingway's stories by hand, from start to finish. She said she did that just to completely grasp and appreciate the work. That's mentioned in Robert Lamb's book on the modern short story and Hemingway, *Art Matters*. Hemingway also once commented that the secret of his style was writing prose as poetry.

But I believe you were just back very recently (June 2014) to Ladner and the coast for readings?

TB: It was good. And in October I'm going out to the coast again for a number of readings from my new book (*The Tinsmith*).

Q: What can you tell us about this latest one?

TB: It's two different points of view told in the third person. One's an American surgeon who'd been a surgeon in the Civil War battlefields and met this character, this mixed-blood character, there. The first third of *The Tinsmith* takes place on the battlefield of Antietam in Maryland in 1862. Then the narrative switches to the Fraser River a decade later and it takes off from there. Then it goes back and forth.

And going back to the question of writing about the local, when my agent tried to place the book with American publishers they routinely said the Civil War stuff was interesting but the Fraser River stuff, the B.C. stuff, the stuff that really motivated the book, wasn't.

Q: Not an "American" story. No doubt this befalls other home-grown Canadian material, even as perceived exotic settings may be advantages in other cases.

TB: If I'd been, some people would say smarter, but in my case a different kind of writer, then I would've simply written a Civil War novel and set the entire thing in the United States. That would've been a very different kind of book. It wouldn't have been as honest a book to me but it might've sold well… So there's always that negotiation.[3]

Q: Did you feel particularly challenged taking on the mixed blood American character, who would have been considered black?

TB: I felt I could write about him because we had a shared experience and a very powerful one about being on that river and the importance of that river. This happens to me all the time. I don't think I set myself up to be a spokesperson for anybody except myself. *Circa Nineteen Hundred and Grief,* for example, is a fairly dark, heavy book. Midlife seems quite a weight to bear, though there's elements of joy in it, too, I hope.

I encountered a neighbour in the river valley the other day, a man who's suffered some real health trauma recently. He was a neighbor of mine. Some years ago we lived side by side. Anyway, he and his wife had come to the launch of the book. They read the book and he said, "We really enjoyed it." Then he kind of laughed and said, "Well, I don't know if we could enjoy it." I thought at the time-- because we all have our struggles in life of different kinds-- I thought, well how do you read someone else's work who's saying a certain thing, and we all as readers place ourselves in relation to the work we read based on our own experiences. So sometimes I feel a little bit like I don't necessarily say what I say with the expectation that everyone else feels that way.

But when it comes to the relationship between people, I'm an old-fashioned humanist. I believe that the things that matter are birth and death and love, and all these things are the same. I know there have been all kinds of statements over the past thirty or forty years to say that's not true, there's no such thing as a general universal humanism. But as a writer and particularly maybe as a poet and fiction writer, I have to believe in a shared humanity. I have to believe that a woman who loses a baby feels bad about it everywhere or a man who goes to war and sees his compatriots killed carries that weight.

[3] *The Tinsmith* came out with Canadian publisher Brindle & Glass.

I can read Yehuda Amichai's poetry and feel that it's true, though my experience isn't his experience. I think that's the power of literature.

Q: You're taking a humanistic look at-- and inviting a humanistic response to-- the west coast.

TB: In the sense of the west coast, at that level I think Canada is a remarkable success story that isn't really celebrated that much, how so many people of different ethnic backgrounds really do live, if you look at the world, really do live in remarkable peace. Obviously there are problems, but if you look at history, if you look at the world, I feel very fortunate that way. Part of me feels my books do often seem heavy, there seems a real weight sometimes to them and a real darkness. It's like the past is this horrible force that's bearing down on us. At the same time, I'm leading a fairly privileged life. But I think partly it's the guilt of that which informs a lot of what I do. I'm so aware as a writer that history can just descend on us at any given time.

Q: Is this tension at work in anything in progress?

TB: My current project is dealing with Nazi war criminals in Canada because I'm haunted by justice and injustice. So the same with the west coast and the salmon industry. I hate the fact that the wrong people get blamed for the problems. You have fishermen on the west coast who still blame the Natives, for instance, for all the problems in the fishery. So a lot of what I do, it sounds arrogant to say correcting wrongs, but I think the archiving thing is I'm motivated with this new project because I see the rise of neo-fascism in Europe. I particularly see it as very strong in Greece. I grew up amongst a large Greek community on the Fraser River and hung out with a lot of Greek kids, played sports with Greek kids, went to their houses. With this project I started looking into the history of Greece in this century and finding out things. It's not different than the salmon. People don't know about the salmon, well how many people know what happened to Greeks, Jews in the Second World War? I certainly didn't know until I started searching.

Historical novels often get written out of the current moment. I started to recognize what was going on in Greece with the rise of the Golden Dawn far right party, and I looked at the history and I saw shocking things about the Holocaust in Greece. Most people don't think about a Holocaust when they think about Greece. But ninety percent--again, there's that ninety percent-- of Salonica's Jewish population was wiped out. I think about it and I think, that's a fact, that happened, and here's this party now coming to prominence there. It's the old, if we don't learn the lessons of history we're doomed to repeat them. So I think as a writer I feel like we're all living not so much, well maybe on borrowed time, but I feel like we're not as grateful for what we have as we ought to be. I think that informs much of what I do. I can't believe that I can get up every day and have a fairly comfortable and calm life. I'm too aware of the fact that other people in other time periods and in other places even today wake up with that same feeling and then it all changes.

Q: It sounds like this international interest is further informing perhaps but not displacing your fundamental sense of being a local writer.

TB: I think I've always wanted more than anything to be thought of as a local writer. When it comes to Alberta, well, in *The Bone Sharps*, for instance, I really got fascinated with that paleontological history down in dinosaur park. That novel is entirely about it. *In the Suicide's Library* is entirely set here.

Q: We're back to Alberta again, Tim, the place where we started this interview, and again I appreciate all you have shared in this discussion as well as your wonderfully productive year as writer in residence with Athabasca University. All our best wishes to you with the current project and those that follow.