

The courage Jeff had

Jeff Torrington published only two books in his lifetime, one a novel and one a linked collection of stories. There is an exuberance in his work which is at its core literary and derives from his love for literature. Jeff was at home in art, in music, in philosophy, and most of all at home in literature. It was his, and his of right. This was the most powerful assault on that essential elitism that stops many from experiencing the pleasure, the excitement and joy that might lie in wait if we dare to engage properly with literature. Jeff was somebody who dared, and his great novel was his expression of that. The confidence Jeff had reveals something of the best of us and people respond to that in his work.

He was a literary man whose preoccupations were formal, and he was never afraid to laugh. There was a wholeness and maturity about Jeff and his writing that I do not see as typical. He accepted responsibility and created in that fashion. He was of a kind to whom young people also respond. His novel *Swing Hammer Swing* has had an influence on such as Duncan McLean, Alan Warner, James Ferguson, Irvine Welsh and others, not only in Scotland but in the USA. In 2007 a Baltimore-based magazine judged the “Scottish masterpiece” to contain “One of the funniest sex-scenes ever written . . .”¹

It was wonderful seeing people in different parts of the world responding so readily to his work.

It is thirty years since we met. In January 1979 I began as Writer in Residence to Renfrew District. Jeff came to a writers group I started at Paisley Central Library. He had tried different writers groups over the

¹ This may have been The Baltimore Review.

years. I was wary of him at first. I was thirty-three. Jeff was ten years older. Not only did he know as much, he knew more; and while he was less prejudiced he was at least as opinionated. I was working on a variety of projects myself and soon we were talking literature in a way that I was not used to doing with writers other than Alasdair Gray and Tom Leonard. I formed another writers' group in Linwood, and one in Spateston, by Johnstone; and Jeff came along to each when he could.

We saw common ground in the formal problems we faced. In an interview with Deborah Orr,² Jeff said

One reason why I took so long to write *Swing Hammer Swing* is that I wrote four or five different versions. I didn't have a voice at all to begin with. Third person was a liberation, but it didn't feel right. I wrote a version in American usage as well. The Scots so readily became fans of American culture that it sometimes seems like ours is body-bagged ready for dumping. I went back to first person, because that's how I felt comfortable.

At that time I also was working back and forth between third and first-person narratives, in particular with my novel *The Busconductor Hines*. Eventually the narrative had to exist in third-party and I remember heated conversations between the two of us about that, and Jeff settling on a first-person narrative for similar reasons, so that in the quote above, when he talks about 'feeling comfortable' I think he was also referring to the freedom this first-party allowed Tam Clay to be the guy he became. There are some great stories we read where the central characters become our friends as readers, some good, some not so good, others

² See *The Guardian* 26 January 1993.

exasperating. ‘Thomas Clay’ was not Jeff Torrington, not even a ‘thinly-disguised’ one, but I have been fortunate to know both as pals.

There were the writers we both loved for what they did as story-tellers and as writers too, especially Kafka, Chekhov, Dostoevsky and Camus, and there were writers each of us enjoyed separately from the other. I respected the fiction of Hermann Hesse and Vladimir Nabokov but I was never able to read either for pleasure, unlike Jeff who enjoyed them both. He also read Camus, Sartre, Balzac and Stendhal in French and I envied him being able to read these great writers in their own language.

He never hid in these writers workshop groups and was generous with his time, generous with his criticism. He prepared his comments on people’s stories and poetry individually, working his way through on a line by line basis. In those groups there can be demanding individuals. Jeff would be amused rather than annoyed. But we had fun too, and some fine conversation.

He had published some early short stories in the old Argosy tradition. He called them ‘scorpions’, ‘scorpion tales’, because they had the requisite “sting-in-the-tail”. He didn’t enjoy puns, he loved them. I fucking hate them! But he loved them, and the more stupid the better. He also wrote poetry and revue. His novels then in progress were *Swing Hammer Swing* and *Go Down Laughing* which he never managed to finish but contains enough for some brave publisher to take a look. He also worked on the linked collection *The Devil’s Carousel* which eventually was published in 1996.

I remember during my second spell as Writer in Residence to Renfrew District he missed a couple of the Monday night meetings at Paisley Central Library, later confiding he had appointments at the Southern General Hospital. Then he was diagnosed with Parkinson’s

disease. He was still in his forties. What an extraordinary and massive blow. Then he fought back, strengthened by the support of his wife Margaret who was his greatest champion. The pair married young, both Gorbals born and bred.

After that diagnosis, he undertook yet another rewrite of *Swing Hammer Swing*. What courage Jeff had, and perseverance, like all great artists. He further completed *The Devil's Carousel* and continued his work on *Go Down Laughing*, a title he had before the onset of Parkinson's, and he continued the struggle over such a long, long period.

That sense of fun did not desert him. He used a typewriter for most of those difficult years and finding the right keys was problematic. He went through a lot of Tippex. It flew about the room like white paint. He said, I'm the first writer that ever needed a pair of dungarees.

Swing Hammer Swing was an immediate success, not only lifting the prize for the Whitbread first novel category but its overall Book of the Year Award, in the face of strong competition, including *Poor Things*, a very fine novel written by Alasdair Gray.

The launch of *The Devil's Carousel* was held in Brendan McLaughlin's Clutha Bar. Jeff was no longer able to perform readings in public but he and Margaret were there. It was a special night, with musicians present and readings from his work by writer friends, of whom he had many. Other writers held him in great esteem.

A couple of years before he died Jeff had become very ill and his wife Margaret started reading sections to him of his unfinished novel *Go Down Laughing*. It still made him smile, still made Margaret smile. Me too. During the last period of his life I visited him in hospital and read sections of the manuscript to him on a couple of occasions.

He was a respected man in his own locale. He was big and powerful and handsome too, the kind of guy Glasgow women call ‘a fine big fella’ but he was also a man for friends and community: and he was a part of his community, and enjoyed it greatly. He had been an employee in the local Rootes car factory. It isn’t that he disliked football at all but Saturday afternoons were not spent on the football terracing but in the Clippens Bar, Linwood where the weekly ‘philosophy club’ met.

He died on Sunday 11 May, 2008 at 6.30am, more than twenty years after that first diagnosis. He had had such a hard time of it the last few of them, supported through it all by his wife Margaret. Heroes the two of them.

