

# Out of Balance



## Robert Neilson talks with Colin Harvey

Colin Harvey is a novelist, critic, and editor who lives between Bristol and Bath in the UK with his wife Kate. He is the author of the novels **Winter Song** (Angry Robot Books 2009) and **Damage Time** (Angry Robot Books, 2010); the short story collection **Displacement** (Swimming Kangaroo Books, 2009) and four earlier novels published by Swimming Kangaroo Books. His short stories have been published in magazines such as *Interzone*, *Apex* and *Daily Science Fiction*, as well as original anthologies.

Colin is the editor of the anthologies **Killers** (2008) and **Future Bristol** (2009) for Swimming Kangaroo Books, **Dark Spires** (2010) for Wizard's Tower Press and the forthcoming **Transtories** (2011) for Aeon Press. He has reviewed and written non-fiction for *Interzone*, *Salon Futura* and *Strange Horizons*, and is featured writer for *Suite10*

**Robert Neilson: Let's start off with you telling me one little known fact about Colin Harvey.**

**Colin Harvey:** I have absolutely no sense of balance. When I was a kid there wasn't this tendency to label things that we have nowadays – Aspergers, Attention Deficit Disorders, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia – so I was just considered clumsy.

I can't ride a bike, skate, swim – anything that requires some sort of a sense of balance. In fact, if I stand up after I've been sitting down for a while people have suggested that it looks as if I'm drunk!

**RN: Can you remember when and to whom you made your first sale?**

**CH:** I started writing back in 97, so this would have been back in 1999. I submitted a short story to a guy called Steve Algieri in the US, who was editing a

magazine called *Pulp Eternity*. When I sold it to him – 4500 words at 3 cents a word – I thought I'd died and gone to heaven – how hard could this professional writing be? A year later and I've made no second sale, but it's okay...I've got a sale...but there's no word back from him. I'm too inexperienced to know about querying him.

And then I get a letter from him, saying that he's closing the magazine for personal reasons, and he's returning my story. It was one of the worst days of my life. I kept going and keep submitting, and eventually I sold a story called 'Dreamstalker' for the love (i.e. no money!) in 2001, and another, and then *Allegory* bought 'Lee Hoffman' in 2002 for actual money. None of them were as dramatic as that first sale that never was.

**RN: What was the progression until your first novel?**

**CH:** While that first story sale to *Pulp Eternity* was rumbling along to its eventual return, I was busily working on my first novel. That eventual first draft of **Vengeance** ran to about 85000 words and came out in late 2001, between 'Dreamstalker' and 'Lee Hoffman'.

**RN: Your first novel came out after only one short story sale? Who published it?**

**CH:** I'd been gradually writing longer and longer stories over the last couple of years, and at about the time I sold that sale that never was, I finally plucked up the courage to tackle a novel. (It may be, although I can't remember, that the story sale gave me the impetus).

So I spent most of 1999 - early 2001 writing **Vengeance** but what I wasn't doing was writing – or indeed submitting – any short stories. It was only in early 2001, some time after *Pulp Eternity* returned the

story and as I neared the end of the novel, that I began subbing again.

I actually sold a couple of stories before I 'sold' the novel (like that story, it was sold for the love) but they ended up as novel chapters, one of them so altered that an editor who saw both didn't at first connect them. So yes, I sold a novel after only a couple of stories, but that was because I was concentrating early on a novel, and had actually neglected the short story side of writing.

Bear in mind that I was working in isolation, so I had no idea that some publishers were better than others, and indeed that some publishers were best avoided. I had no network at that time to raise alarms and knew no experienced writers to give me advice, so when I saw an ad saying "send us your novel and we'll publish it" I thought, oh-ok, that sounds good.

The problem was that they were coming in a few months after the end of the dot-com boom when all start-up companies had to say was 'internet' and financiers would wave bundles of fifty-pound notes at them. With no business plan (as far as I could tell), no advertising and probably no capital...well, I never even saw a finished product.

**RN: So the novel, though sold, wasn't published at that time. Did you ever sell it again?**

**CH:** I actually sold it again, in 2003, and this time I got paid (a tiny amount, but it was pay!) and even got to keep the advance, when this publisher folded as well. My first novel to actually see print was **Lightning Days**, which Swimming Kangaroo Books published in 2006. It actually took me seventy-two attempts, going through agent after agent, and publisher after publisher. Swimming Kangaroo Books were a dream to write for; they couldn't pay advances, but they were wonderful to work with, and everything I ever pitched to them, they took. Three books after **Lightning Days** was published, they put out a new edition of **Vengeance** as well, which was nice.

**RN: You talk about building a network - can you tell me about this aspect of writing? How did you build it, who is in it, what advice you could give other budding writers about networking?**

**CH:** It wasn't anything as considered as building a network, but rather a case of giving something I did without too much thought a name. While I'd been trying to sell a novel, I started to review books for *Strange Horizons*. This gave me the chance to analyze the work of other writers, to articulate my thoughts, and to get some publishing credits, which I badly needed at the time to give me some confidence.

Soon after that, the then editor Mary Anne Mohanraj came to London, and invited various contributors to come and meet over

dinner. I was one of them, and when she learned that I was a writer, suggested that I attend a writing weekend. That started a number of friendships that persist to this day.

What also came out of that dinner was a call for volunteers to help the Speculative Literature Foundation. I judged the travel grant that they underwrite for five years, and got to meet more people – at least electronically.

The common denominator here is writing to people and organizations, putting oneself forward as a volunteer. Most SF-nal bodies are chronically under-resourced, and anyone with a brain who is willing to help them is unlikely to be turned away.

A second strand is to go to conventions, and again to offer to help in any way possible, from staffing the SFWA table in the dealer's hall as I did in Montreal, to appearing on panels.

And that's how you make friends as well. I've called it building a network because it sounds more professional, but it's really about making friends, whether through meeting people at conventions, through social networking, or through working electronically with committees, conventions or critique groups. And no, I wouldn't do it any differently because that would mean that I might never have met some good friends along the way.

**RN: What's next in your plan for world domination?**

**CH:** At the moment I'm promoting *Damage Time*, my latest novel, and **Dark Spires**, an anthology I edited for Wizard's Tower Press; come Eastercon I'll be at the launch of Ian Whates' anthology, **Further Conflicts**, which includes my story 'Occupation,' and I've just been invited to contribute to another anthology, which sadly I can't say anything about at the moment.

And for the future, I have a third novel awaiting a decision from Angry Robot which is called **Ultramassive** and returns us to the universe of **Winter Song**. I'm just about to start reading for an SF anthology for Aeon Press called **Transtories** which will be published in Autumn 2011, calling for stories based on words from the dictionary prefixed by 'trans'.

**RN: You seem to have a lot of projects on the go. Are you a full time writer?**

**CH:** Yes and no. <g> (You know you never get straight answers from me!) I am a full time writer in that I don't have a day job, and I work considerably more than sixteen hours a week, which is how H.M Revenue & Customs define full-time work; since they pay me Low Income Credits, what they think is important. So the novels.

However, I'm also a full-time student, studying for an Honours Degree in Creative Writing. Both years have included what's called a Core Workshop, which



includes projects such as writing and presenting a Murder Mystery evening. I also study three electives, which are modules that I get to choose; last year I took Media Communications Studies, Poetry and Scriptwriting. This year it's Planning and Making A Film, Feature Journalism and Genre.

Each of those electives has taught me a new skill. Poetry calls for incredible precision; scriptwriting requires that the writer lays everything out for the viewer; Media Communications offers a useful insight into the politics of the media; Planning and Making A Film shows the effect that a script has on the film-making process, and what the constraints are on film crews; Feature Journalism is over-whelmingly practical. And Genre offers a theoretical framework to accompany my practical experience.

So I have a short SF story that's going into *Asimovs*, a horror story I'm about to finish off, and synopses for three (non-SF) novels, one of which I've turned into a 60,000 word novel. All of them are in areas I'd never have considered before starting the course.

And as a final bonus, I'm staying at home this week for Reading Week. My reading list includes **Dune**, **Pavane**, **The Man in the High Castle**, **The Forever War** and J.G. Ballard's **The Atrocity Exhibition**. Tell me how many other people get paid to stay at home and read good books?

**RN: What else do you like to do with your spare time?**

**CH:** I don't get an awful lot of spare time, and what I get is largely eaten up by reading, but Alice the dog has to be walked every day, and walking her is both a good way of stopping my waistline from spilling out across the Irish Sea, and gives me time to actually think rather than racing from job to job. Plus we're firm believers that if you walk the legs off a dog, they're too tired to trash the place when you have to leave them! So that accounts for a couple of hours each day.

I like to go to the pictures when I get the chance – we've seen *The King's Speech*, *Black Swan* and *Paul* this year alone, and if we had more time and money, we'd go to the theatre as well – we saw Agatha Christie's *The Verdict* earlier this year, but have had to miss out on *Avenue Q* and *Yes, Minister*; we simply couldn't get tickets in time.

While reading various sets of instructions on the sides of packets and/or from cookbooks hardly counts as *haute cuisine*, I usually cook in some form or another during the middle three or four days of the week – Monday depends on whether I have a late finish at uni – while Kate cooks on Friday, Saturday and Sunday; this week I've had a stinking cold, so I've been banned from the kitchen. But normally it's a nice change of pace after sitting staring at a screen for

several hours.

And sometime or other, Kate and I are going to take a holiday together. We haven't had a proper one for four years because a lot of cons take place over holiday weekends, and she's not a great fan – she'll happily watch *Doctor Who* and loved *Star Trek: Voyager* when it was on, but ask her to read an SF novel, and she'll ward you off with *Sherlock Holmes* or the latest Henning Mankell. I'm still working on getting her over again for another P-Con (she came two years ago and spent a couple of days exploring Dublin).

**RN: If you were some sort of creative artist, but not a writer, and you were to be known forever for one piece of work (someone else's existing piece, e.g. Leonardo's Mona Lisa), what would that piece of work be and why?**

**CH:** Hmm, that's an interesting question, and one that since you've ruled out other writers, heads off answers like Rex Stout or Alfie Bester! Shame you said one piece, because the non-writer I admire most is Clint Eastwood, but that's for a body of work.

Okay, I would say Robert Towne, the scriptwriter – does the stricture against writers extend to scriptwriters? – but the one thing I have learned in the last year is that a film is more than the sum of its parts. *Chinatown* is my absolutely favourite single film, and has been for years. That it's so good is more than due to Towne's script; Polanski's direction, Jack Nicholson as Jake Gittes (apparently the part was written for Nicholson), Faye Dunaway as Evelyn Mulwray and John Huston as oligarch Noah Cross act as if their lives depend on it, and together with an Oscar nominated score by Jerry Goldsmith and brilliant editing by Sam O'Steen they all make it the definitive film noir.

It deals with land rights outside Los Angeles in 1937, which makes it sound as dry as some of the landscape, but it's the love affair between private eye Gittes and the beautiful Evelyn Mulwray, and the tragic ending – brought about largely by Gittes' cynicism – which lifts the film from the merely good to the absolutely sublime. (I don't think I've given too much away there...the soundtrack and the cinematography make it clear that this story is never going to have a happy ending) I'm glad I've never seen the sequel, because by all accounts it's better left that way. If you have a free, wet weekend, go get the DVD of *Chinatown*. It'll be worth it.

In a final twist the film got eleven Oscar nominations, including for all those named above and others, but only one of the nominees won – Towne for Best Original script. It had the misfortune to be up against *The Godfather Part II*. But for me, *Chinatown* is the better film. What does Hollywood know, anyway? }{

