

**MY DINNER WITH TIFF:  
How An Aspiring Writer Cornered Timothy Findley For An Impromptu  
Reading**

By Richard Taylor

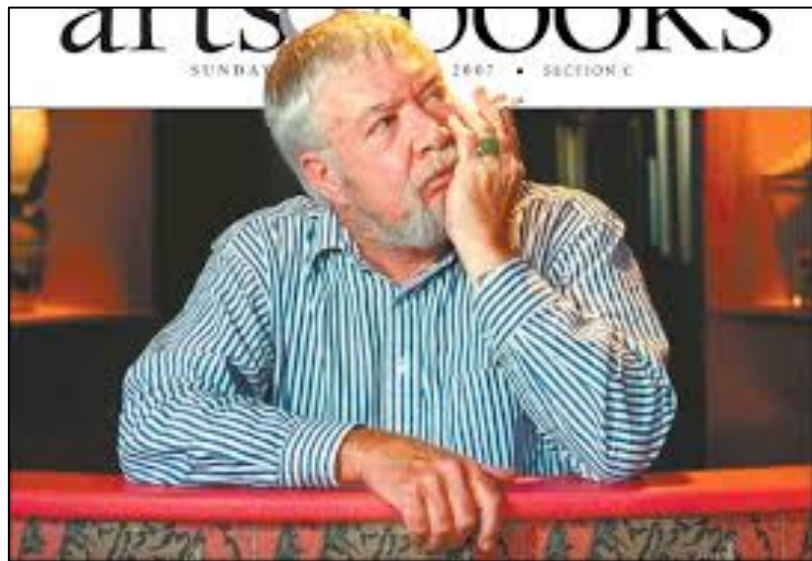
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***Richard Taylor says he had an out-of-body experience as he read his short story to Timothy Findley and other dumbstruck dinner guests.***

Aspiring writers are a desperate bunch. I've been teaching them how to write for 15 years. Sometimes they will stoop to the most shameless antics to expose their manuscripts. In 1980, before I had published a single word, and before writing workshops were everywhere, one of my literary heroes, Timothy Findley, was emerging as Canada's best writer. And so I devised a plan to spring an unpublished manuscript on Findley at a private dinner party.



Tiff, as Timothy Irving Frederick Findley was known to his friends, had published two novels, *Last of the Crazy People* and *The Butterfly Plague* that both disappeared over a bison drop before he became famous for his 1977 Governor General Award winning novel *The Wars*. He used to come to Ottawa on promotional reading tours and stay at my best friend Frank Cole's house. Frank's mother Jean had attended school with Tiff's partner William Whitehead. And every time Tiff came to town he and Bill stayed at Frank's parents' house, and my wife Dale and I got invited to wonderful dinner parties.

In those days I'd written earnest letters to other famous Canadian writers like Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Laurence and Norman Levine. And bless them, they dutifully read my early work, and wrote kind, helpful letters. I read their books, taking copious notes. I collected expensive first editions. I scrutinized writers' lives to find clues about what a writer's life might be.

I knew everything about Tiff's early years as a struggling actor and then later when he was a seemingly confident, yet intensely insecure writer. Like most writers Tiff had a catalogue of personal obsessions and themes. His characters seemed troubled by memory, and they held onto secrets. They loved evening lamplight, music played on a distant gramophone, Colt revolvers hidden in drawers, rabbits, cats and gardens. For a dime, at a yard sale, I purchased the Autumn 1956 inaugural issue of the literary magazine Tamarack Review that included Timothy Findley's first published story, About Effie.

One evening when Tiff and Bill were in town at Frank's parents' house, half way through a formal dinner party with 8 people, I worked up the gumption to shyly announce, "Does anyone want to hear a short story I wrote?"

Of course, no one said a word.

Certainly no one wanted to hear the rough draft of a story written by an unpublished writer. Frank had already softened Tiff up by telling him that I wanted to be a writer, and so against all good judgment - like a rabbit pulled from a hat - I produced a scruffy typewritten manuscript of a 2,500-word short story.

Broken Harmony could be described as a lean, poetic Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Laurence, Norman Levine, Timothy Findley -type story narrated by a dying grandmother who lives with her single - parent daughter and her granddaughter Cora. Even though the grandmother is in a wheelchair, Cora learns that her grandmother secretly walks at night into the garden to hide gifts for her.

As the table of dumbstruck guests at Frank's parents' dining room stared at me, I took a breath and launched into the first paragraph: "The flowers are thick strokes of colour moving on light. Little Cora is following the cat through flowers near the picket fence. I know she is lost in a great forest

of the garden. This house with its white boards, open windows and run down verandah must be the world to her. It is now my world, together with what I can see out of the windows and what I call my own secrets and memories..."

While reading Broken Harmony, I had my first out-of-body experience. Like an apparition I stood up, and stepped away from my reading self who droned on and on. Everyone trapped at the table sat mesmerized, not because of my literary or oratory skills, but because of the embarrassing audacity, and my cheeky presumption that anyone would want to hear an impromptu reading by a nobody.

But there I stood, looking down at myself until I lifted both hands up into the air and then hoarsely berated my reading self:

"Are you crazy? What the hell are you doing? Holy crap, this is nuts."

I wanted to run out of the room. But of course my shaky reading self continued word by word, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, reading on while people scraped forks on half empty plates, coughed politely, and sipped wine, no doubt thanking the Lord that it wasn't one of them reading alone, but this poor fool.

Ten long minutes after moving my story through its stages of exposition, and rising and falling action, I had made it to the ambiguous denouement of the final paragraph: "We cross a vacant lot past boulders and down to the weeping willows. The river smells of cold and fish and rock. It rushes thickly down the centre and spreads itself beneath the willows. I can feel the strength in me rise to my mouth. Cora is holding my hand tightly. My little girl will be all right, her mother is a good woman. Something is trying to climb out of me as we stand here. I smile; my daughters, my life, dance before this river of night."

In the acute, suspended silence of the Coles' dining room I waited.

And waited.

To use an overworked cliché - it seemed as though this moment would last an eternity. But I was grateful that Tiff sat at the opposite end of the table. As an actor and brilliant reader, Tiff had honed an impeccable sense of timing.

Everyone stared at Tiff as though he were the messiah.

Depending on his response, I was totally prepared to quit writing forever. Tiff's boyish middle-aged face and coy body language reflected his trademark, vulnerable, slightly precious manner.

And then he uttered only three words.

"Are you prolific?"

I was stung, but still hopeful. Was he suggesting that I'd be a success if I could write more of the same? Was he warning the reading public? Or, because he had been manipulated into saying something critical yet gentle, was this all he could come up with?

Probably many things were going on in Tiff's mind, including the notion that what he really wanted to do was enjoy a quiet, uncomplicated dinner that didn't require yet another literary judgment. If Tiff had been a dentist, I'm sure he would resent a dinner guest leaning forward with their mouth wide open to ask his opinion about a wonky molar.

His response certainly didn't give me or anybody else anything to go on, and after a terrifying silence, the dinner moved on to other topics. I never really found out what he meant.

Broken Harmony ended up being my first published story, and it appeared a couple of years later in the literary magazine Quarry's Autumn 1982 issue. It was included in my first published book of short stories, *Tender Only To One*. Cora became the 25-year-old narrator of my first novel, *Cartoon Woods* because I needed a fatherless woman to tell the story about why a middle aged man would take his own life. Over the years after each of my books was published, Tiff wrote short congratulatory letters, I suppose to quietly praise my far from prolific output.

Tiff, Margaret Laurence, and Norman Levine have all passed away into memory. Inscribed in the hard cover of my priceless copy of Famous Last Words is a paragraph in Tiff's flowery handwriting: "From one writer to another - the only thing to say is there are no last words, only first words." From Tiff at Ottawa, November 1981.

Richard Taylor teaches writing at Carleton University and is working on a new book about swimming with writers called Water and Desire.

