

**EVERYTHING ON THE VERGE OF BECOMING
SOMETHING ELSE: AN INTERVIEW WITH TED MOONEY**

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Ted Mooney's first novel, *Easy Travel to Other Planets* (1981), never attracted a large readership, but it ranks with DeLillo's *White Noise* and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* in terms of its success in capturing a palpable sense of what life feels like for people living in a culture running on the logic of hyperconsumer capitalism. This sense principally involves life's strangeness, its sense of dislocation, its ability to overstimulate us, the fears and anxieties it instills within us (often without our even being aware of it), its frightening power to separate us from each other, its distortions of our erotic impulses. Although *Easy Travel* retains many of the surface features of traditional realism, there's also a way in which the book feels like a work of science fiction since, for all its familiarity, Mooney's world is not quite our own world—at least not literally. Rather, it's a world in which people suffer from a disease called "information sickness," whose effects can be warded off temporarily by assuming the "memory elimination posture." It is a world in which ice cubes fall to the ground, in which a new emotion is emerging, in which telepathy is becoming a reality, in which the wealthy nations are about to go to war over Antarctica.

Mooney conveys all this by disrupting the linear flow of events, using rapid cuts between scenes (and within individual paragraphs) which often contain wildly disparate elements presented in a simultaneous, collage-like fashion. The overall effect of this presentation is to recreate the sense, increasingly common to all of us, of being bombarded with many different sorts of stimulation and information at once, of having our physical sensations being constantly strained to the breaking point. I should add that the novel also presents one of the most unusual love affairs in contemporary fiction—a shocking and erotically charged relationship between Melissa (a young scientist specializing in dolphin research) and a dolphin named Peter. What's more, Mooney develops this affair not as some sort of freak show but as a sensitive and utterly convincing part of a larger context of people shown to be lost, and who are trying to cope with a world which seems to be spinning out of their control. Money's

accelerated, highly detailed and hauntingly lyrical prose (marked by radical and sudden shifts in point of view) provides a stylistic equivalent to the massive bombardment of information we somehow sort through every day, even as our lives remain utterly bound to the messy bodily existence dominated by death, loss, and desire.

Projecting a time, somewhat like the one found in Max Headroom (“twenty minutes into the future”), Mooney created a fictional world that strikes some readers as fantastic (reviewers understandably made comparisons with Márquez and other Latin American realists); but many of its most memorable scenes were actually less “magical” than the result of technological interventions into our own world. In fact, what Mooney describes in *Easy Travel* is disconcertingly *likely*—a woman with memories of her mother’s voice telling her a bedtime story (through a speaker phone); school kids who’ve rarely seen life unframed by a television; a society for which information sickness is not a metaphor but a real illness caused by sensory over-load, and capable of striking like epilepsy; the new sensations—of speed while standing still, of being in a crowd when alone; the emergence of a “new” human faculty of being able to tune into another person’s reality (an extension of what we already experience through technologies like pagers, modems, fax machines, computers, and security systems that allow us to “see” into each other’s lives).

But the interview which follows makes it clear that although Mooney is interested in how the forms and metaphors inherent in certain technologies influence the ways we process and organize our perceptions, he resists the idea that specific technological developments have a direct, one-to-one effect on people’s basic emotional structure. Mooney’s second novel, *Traffic and Laughter*, is a souped-up, audacious alternative-world novel that underscores this idea with a simple premise: what if the atom bomb hadn’t exploded at 8:16 that warm and sunny New Mexican day. What would contemporary life be for people without the looming threat of a nuclear holocaust?

This sort of alternative world premise has been a staple of genre SF for decades and in the hands of a visionary writer like Phillip K. Dick, the results have occasionally been fascinating. But as is true of Steve Erickson’s use of the alternative world premise, associating Ted Mooney with genre SF is highly misleading for a number of reasons. Not only does Mooney (like Erickson) not read SF, but his approach isn’t “extrapolative” or predictive so much as a formal means of examining not the future but the present. At any rate, Mooney’s answer to the question of what contemporary life would be like without Hiroshima or Nagasaki is at once extremely simple and extremely unsettling—that it would be not much different from our own. People drive cars with names like Phoenix and drink sodas called Stripe; but the same urban stream of information, messages, images and simulated experiences washes over everything, producing the same sense of urgency, paranoia and/or confusion for everybody, that they do in our own world. In Mooney’s second book the nuclear nightmare is yet to come, being played out in the secret never-never land of well-hidden diplomacy; but the public somehow senses that something enormous is coming even without being privy to the relevant details, something that feels very much like the apocalypse, though its shape isn’t that of a mushroom and it may not be the end. Instead it’s a woman—a woman with a bucket, walking in the sunshine, swinging a bucket in wider and wider arcs until it becomes a full circle. This haunting image plays itself

out in the psyches of the main characters until it is finally literalized in the last scene of the book, where a movie is being shot of a scenario described as, “A woman laughing. It is the sound of history.”

What this image “means” exactly is never really explained, but its effect somehow evokes an oddly balanced sense of dread and exhilaration, tied in as it is to the suggestion that life can change utterly at any moment. The notion weaves its way through an intricate, convoluted plot that consists of three main threats, three locales: LOS ANGELES, where Sylvia Walters, the main character, is a d.j. who provides the “sound of the city of angel? —the roars of oceanic freeways, the low fitting spray of automatic sprinklers, the crackle of burning manzanita, “ablaze with flames as high and fast as a running man.” Sylvia becomes involved with Michael, a special-effects wizard whose specialty is miniaturized battle scenes. GENEVA, where secret negotiations are going on to decide whether the newly developed atomic theory should be put to an actual test, with two of the negotiators being fathers of Sylvia and Nomanzi Lolembela, a television star from South Africa, who has come to L.A. to help her brother rock band and (perhaps) to aid the revolutionary forces back home. And SOUTH AFRICA, where all these forces come together in a weird and violent collision of first and third worlds and of mythic prophecy and technological evolution.

Following this branching tale —with its false scents, numerous sets of paired characters, motifs and plot twists— is not all that difficult once you get clued in to certain motifs which help draw the disparate materials together: watch for a diamond, the number 8:16 (the moment of detonation of the first atomic bomb), and a mysterious brother whose purpose seems to be to ignite the atomic holocaust. On the other hand, making sense of the novel psychologically and thematically is more difficult. The self-consciousness that the principle characters’ jobs and environment produce is heightened still further by attention to gesture and nuance that is reminiscent of Henry James (imagine James in the ’90s —he has a camcorder). Overlaid on this is Mooney’s interest in the effects of colonialism on both the colony and the colonized --specifically explored in the subplot involving Nomanzi Lolembela, television star and revolutionary. The result is a LOT of information and thematic ambition.

Clearly Mooney is exploring large issues here —the relationship of individuals to the whole, the role of luck and destiny in shaping whatever version of reality we happen to inhabit, and the connection between private and public life. If he is not altogether successful in recreating a coherent resonance among all these plot elements and if his characters have the habit of talking too long-windedly, *Traffic and Laughter* leaves us with a proposition that is both unsettling and mysteriously hopeful: with catastrophe (whether man-made or natural) comes the end to all we know, and with that end of everything maybe comes a new beginning. In the end, then, the novel’s lack of clear resolution to the questions it raises is not a failure of will or imagination on Moortey’s part so much an indication that he’s more concerned with the exploration of a complex series of questions which ultimately have no answer than in providing us with a series of tidy, sound, mundane —and ultimately trivial-answers.

Larry McCaffery: Is there a sense in which writers today are living in a different world —both a different literary world but also a different “literal” world— than the one inhabited by the ’60s generation of postmodern writers? For one thing, a lot of

the battles that they fought no longer seem to be relevant for writers today —for instance, those impassioned debates we heard back then about the difference between “realism” and “formalism” don’t seem very relevant today...

Ted Mooney: When I first started publishing my work back in the ’70s, there was a distinct division in American letters between those who wished to use formal means to stretch the medium of fiction, and those who wished to hide the artifice. At that time I very much wanted to avail myself of the fullest possible ranges of aesthetic options. If my narrative interests had required me to use mathematical or musical notation, I wouldn’t have hesitated to include it. But today I think the battle about what one can write about and how it ought to be rendered has been resolved, or at least the struggle has become non-partisan. I still remain someone who is still unlikely simply to report on quotidian life —what’s happening at the shopping mall if you will— but I’m not going to dismiss it, either, partly because the choice of format seems far less important than the strength you bring to bear on the one you choose. To think in terms of “experimental” writing seems needlessly defensive since in fact *anything* one writes is an experiment in conviction. There are no real shackles for a writer to throw off except those of self-imposed blindness.

LM: How do you mean?

TM: Imagination is, as always, the key. Solipsism, perhaps more than ever, is the enemy. And no one who writes to be published really writes just for him —or herself and a few friends. The aim of all seriously intended fiction is to clarify the world, give it the sense and velocity of a story. A good (but not necessarily flattering) model for the writer is Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner: we’re always interrupting weddings to tell a tale. We’re gate-crashers who try to make up for our rudeness with a not-always-welcome clarity of expression.

Sinda Gregory: That wouldn’t necessarily be a bad situation as long as achieving clarity is something you feel is valuable in your work (this isn’t the case with several writers I admire —Don DeLillo, for example). Is clarity something you’re aiming for in your fiction?

TM: Certainly. DeLillo also writes (in *Mao II*) of a young woman who has devoted a large portion of her life to photographing writers. She describes herself as lacking in absolute belief but constantly seeking comfort in those who have it, whole populations of believers, people the Western press still describes as religious fanatics. She doesn’t want to be around these believers, but she needs to know they’re there. What she envies, although she knows she herself is unsuited for it, is their clarity of purpose. Again, I think all fiction writers share that envy. It animates our enterprise. It forms our sentences and makes us feel like responsible citizens.

SG: You told me when we spoke earlier that your approach changed a bit as you were writing *Easy Travel* —that when you began *Easy Travel*, your characters were going to be more like cardboard characters, but that as you got deeper into the book you became more interested in character.

TM: That’s true. While I was writing *Easy Travel*, I began to grow up. I started that book being very arrogant about my characters. I felt they were just objects for me to control. Youthful folly. But as I got deeper into the novel, I began to let them take on their full flesh, and in the process of doing that I discovered that they were richer in every way than I had hoped. I wasn’t sure I wanted that at the time, but there was no

stopping it. To write a novel is not to control your characters but to control a fabric of demonstration of what we know about the world. What I'd come to realize is that it is incumbent upon a writer to take his or her characters seriously. How else can you expect anyone else to? And, far more important, if you don't let fictional characters have their strengths and weaknesses, their personalities, what does that say about the way you take real people? Art is made in life, not vice versa.

SG: But do your characters actually seem "real" to you in some basic sense?

TM: Very much so. I've dreamt about the people in *Traffic and Laughter*. Not only do I dream about them, but sometimes the people closest to me dream about them. So when I'm writing about these characters, they are people I am getting to know, as real as my friends. That may sound odd, but it is just another way to continue learning about the world, one more way to be alive in it. Maybe that kind of thinking is at odds with a more purely formalist way of writing, but I think formalism for its own sake is behind us for now. Tearing at the fabric of belief, as we did in the Ms, reminded us that characters and events in a novel are fictions in the most literal sense. And not to know that is, at the very least, to be ignorant of the means of literary production. But we don't need to be reminded of it anymore; we get it from all sides. Truth is a relative thing.

LM: Do your characters ever surprise you?

TM: Constantly. As far as I'm concerned, these are people I'm trying to find things out about, and this process is inevitably fraught with the unexpected. If my characters didn't surprise me, I couldn't understand them as real people. There is not a single day in which I am not surprised to the point of befuddlement by what they do. That's the pleasure. Reacting to the befuddlement, straightening it out, is the responsibility.

SG: You can see this even in the opening paragraphs of both novels: both books have women characters who have come to a sense of recognition about how life can change, how unpredictable each moment of our lives is. Even the emotion of those two paragraphs—that combination of sadness and dread and exhilaration in the face of this flux—and the way they both build to the last sentences of those paragraphs is similar.

TM: You're completely right about that. I wasn't aware of it when I wrote that first paragraph of *Traffic and Laughter* but the similarities are definitely there. I love that sensation of everything on the verge of becoming something else.

LM: Your own work seems to show the real becoming transformed. Is that why you write?

TM: I write to explain the world to myself and to those I love, and those whom I imagine might love what I have to say. I do care that I somehow stay in touch with the world. I hope I don't sound too virtuous in saying that. My agent recently asked me why I wrote, and I said "Well Harriet, if being an actor meant you had only one person in the audience, and this person was already predisposed to love everything you do, then I'd be an actor. As it is, writing is a kind of absentee acting, taken up by those who are fatally attracted to performance and the attention it attracts but fearful of its evanescence. Every time I go to a reading or give one myself, I'm aware of this contradiction. Writers are actors with stage fright. We deliver ourselves to our audience at second hand. If what I have to offer the reader is useful, that's wonderful. If it's not, I obviously will be informed.

SG: Could you talk about the way your books seem to originate? Was there a specific image or character, or a notion for a story, that got them started? Or was it a matter of several things coming together at once?

TM: In the case of *Easy Travel*, the original impulse came together over a very long period of time. I used to live in an apartment a few blocks north of here, and the top floor was occupied by myself and a woman architect across the hall who owned an enormous black labrador that seemed three times her own size. The entryway to my apartment had this sort of half-screen, so that if you were sitting in the living room you couldn't see anything below your shoulders. One day she came over to my place, and the dog, who absolutely adored her and was apparently wondering where she was, simply opened my door and came in. But because of the half-screen, what I saw was the door open and shut by itself. When her dog suddenly appeared around the corner, I thought, "Ah, this dog really owns the floor!" It was at that point that I began to imagine a house in which such a thing could happen—which eventually led to the house for the dolphins.

LM: Did this connection between the house and the dolphins arise because you were already interested in dolphins—or were dolphins the only animals you could imagine such a house existing for?

TM: My interest in dolphins goes all the way back to my childhood, when I used to go to the Virgin Islands with my parents in the spring. I remember swimming with dolphins—their touch, their nature. The silken feel of their skin is something that is unforgettable. All this must have stuck in my head until at some point the house and the dolphins came together, which made me begin to wonder if I could do something with this material. Then I threw myself into it as far as I could.

SG: When I spoke with you a while back, you told me that *Traffic and Laughter* began for you with an image that you wound up basing the last scene in the novel on. Was that the image of the African woman with the buckets of water and the two suns rising?

TM: The image was a little less specific than that. I saw very clearly a woman with a bucket, going down to a river to get water for her family. That was the image, which isn't quite the same way it appears in the book, but pretty close. I wrote that ending, thinking it was the beginning. I wanted a way to write about an historical event which took place in South Africa in 1856—the story of the Xhosa people, their "Great Infatuation," as it was called when I learned about it in 7th grade. I've always wanted to write about it, but without writing an historical novel. So I did. But I didn't know what I meant by that image, how it was going to work out when I completed the novel.

SG: Isn't that image based on a folk tale?

TM: No, it's a historical fact that the Xhosa people were the only people in Southern Africa never to be conquered by the Zulus, but that after a lengthy series of wars with the Boers they were near defeat. Just at that time, a young woman, sent down to the river to fetch water for her family, met a small band of men who claimed to be the ghosts of her ancestors and said that if her people did what they asked them to do—destroy all their cattle and food supply—then a great whirlwind would sweep the white invaders off to sea and their land would be transformed into a kind of paradise. The Xhosa complied, and within a matter of weeks they were starving to death by the

thousands, effectively ensuring the triumph of the Boers. I found something profoundly moving in the depth of belief this event implied, and I became preoccupied with the notion that out of hope comes disaster and out of disaster, new hope and belief. The only thing I could think of that might make this notion of hope-disaster-hope available to an American reader was the notion of nuclear armament, with all the conflicting aspects of what nuclear armament actually is. It is obviously incredibly deadly. But it is also entirely possible that it has saved millions of lives. That possibility is not a popular view (and it is not necessarily even mine), but I wanted to explore it. And so I began to see these two systems of belief as parallel. I also felt that there was something very contemporary about the Xhosa story, and I wanted to show that, find out why it felt that way. That led me to develop the whole Los Angeles aspect of the book. Los Angeles is a city that is predicated on dreams and unbridled expectation, most obviously as filtered through the movie industry, but it is also a site of chronic disaster—fire, earthquake, massive mudslides. Are the two conditions somehow connected? If so, does this suggest that the presiding mentality is one of resilience or pathos? These were the kinds of things I was thinking about as the novel began to take shape.

LM: I love the car wash scene in *Traffic and Laughter* —it was as you brought everything together at once. And there was something both ominous and very funny about that scene. Where did that scene come from?

TM: I don't know. I don't mess with the machinery of my books. But I'm glad you saw that it was meant to be funny and tragic both. In one's life, not to mention in a book, the comic and tragic are so often the same thing. That is where television so often goes wrong. It's very rare in American television that: you can see something that is not slotted as a comedy or a drama—or as some other form that has a distinct tone or mood. It's as if Americans are unable to contain two things in the same viewpoint—whereas in England you can see something like Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective* which was utterly bizarre, funny and horrifying, totally whacko. I suppose *Twin Peaks* might be an exception. At any rate, certainly my own sense is that these sorts of violently conflicting emotions belong together.

LM: You mentioned that you began to see that these hope/disaster, disaster/hope systems of beliefs were actually parallel. And of course *Traffic and Laughter* seems filled with parallels, mirrors and mirror-opposites...

TM: Absolutely—and very consciously so. There are half-brothers and sisters, and all that stuff about black/white, north/south, east/west. Even the jacket, designed by Carol Curson at Knopf, was designed so that there is a mirror image.

LM: Some of the parallels and contrasts aren't so obvious—the links between Los Angeles and South Africa, for example...

TM: Yes. Los Angeles is a city that was invented: it exists only by virtue of the water diverted from the San Fernando Valley. South Africa is also an invented terrain: the country as we know it today is a tragic mutation brought about by colonialism. In both cases human will imposed itself awkwardly on what already existed, and the result was, to choose a neutral term/ bizarre.

LM: It seemed obvious to me while reading *Traffic and Laughter* that you must have spent some time in L.A. You capture something about its frantic pace and apocalyptic sensibility that seems very authentic.

TM: I know Los Angeles quite well, although I've never really lived there for any extended period of time. I find it an immensely intriguing and mysterious place—or exfoliating of places, really, since you can't begin to talk about a single L.A. Do you remember that old “Twilight Zone” episode where a scientist looks through his microscope at a piece of the L.A. freeway, then, in that portentous voice that all scientists of the '50s were supposed to have, announces that it's alive? Funny, but telling, I think. It's not hard to think of L.A. as a vast organism lacking a central nervous system.

SG: It's interesting that you brought up water in regards to L.A. because it's so important to both your novels. It's obvious from the first paragraph of *Easy Travel*, but as I was reading *Traffic and Laughter* I also noticed that water kept appearing in various strategic ways: the heavy water needed to create the bomb; Nomanzi's name means “mother of water.” Then there's the contrast, with the Kalahari desert and L.A., which as you've just said is in a sense a desert that's been artificially transformed into an oasis. And in our earlier conversation, you referred to water as “the base” of the novel. How did you mean that—that water was an image you were consciously pursuing and working with? Or was it more connected somehow to a set of feelings or emotions you were associating with water?

TM: You're right about water being central to *Traffic and Laughter*—as, oddly, it is to the first, though very differently so. I seem to be fascinated by water: its fluidity, clarity, flash. And of course without water, nothing—at least as far as life on earth is concerned. But beyond this, my interest in water is probably too primal to talk about usefully.

LM: How did *Traffic and Laughter* begin to evolve once you had that initial image of the woman carrying a bucket down to a river? Was it a case where you had a flash and suddenly you knew the whole trajectory of the book?

TM: No, not at all. I used to believe that William Faulkner was just making himself interesting when he said that he began *The Sound and the Fury* with nothing more than the mental image of Caddy's muddy underpants. Now, though, I think I see what he was talking about. You start with this very rich image or metaphor that you don't understand, and then you trouble it for a long time, asking yourself questions about it and vice versa until you've teased the sense from it, and, from the sense, the story. It's an extremely labor-intensive way to work, and I don't recommend it to anyone. On the other hand, it has the advantage of being organic. If you make it to term, the thing is born live.

LM: It strikes me that there is a crucial difference between writers who feel they are writing a book because they are expressing something they already know, and writers who write because they want to find something out.

TM: Absolutely. I don't have much use for the old writing workshop adage about writing from your experience, since in the deepest sense you can't do otherwise. I don't write from what I know so much as from what I want to know. The pleasure and difficulty of writing fiction is in the discovery. This doesn't mean that the only effective subject matter for fiction is exotic; quite the contrary. Discovery is everywhere and keeping your eyes open to what you really see is crucial. Look at a writer like Jane Smiley, whose work I admire enormously: she extracts momentous insights from what at first seem the most trivial doings of domestic life.

LM: You've said that you don't read science fiction, yet one of the premises of *Traffic and Laughter* is the familiar SF premise called "the alternate world premise." In your book, the A-bomb had never gone off; and your world (which is not quite our world) is one where people have not lived under the specter of the bomb through the '50s and '60s. And yet what you seem to be showing here is that even without the bomb being used in WWII, it would eventually happen again. This seems pessimistic in a way. It's almost as if you have given people the chance to not have this thing, but they are going to do it anyway.

TM: I would say that I'm an optimist disguised as a pessimist. Life certainly doesn't break down into a set of happy or unhappy endings, so why should art? The critic John Banville recently wrote that "the finest fictions are cold at heart." I find this an exceptionally beautiful and inspiring notion. What I take it to mean is not that fiction must be unfeeling, but rather that the deepest passions value truth over moralism. That's the way, as the man says, love is. So when, for example, Melissa shoots the dolphin at the end of *Easy Travel* or when the nuclear bomb is invented a second time in *Traffic and Laughter*, I'm not trying to say that things always turn out badly. I'm really just trying to suggest that the complexities, accidents, and exquisite imperfections of human life are more valuable than simple happy endings might allow.

LM: When I got to the last scene in *Easy Travel*, I found myself feeling very sad about what happened—but at the same time it would have been being artificial if you had done something different. You were being true to the characters...

TM: I hope I did what had to be done. I hope that the way the book ends demonstrates something about the way life works—which is what happens, is life is never simply tragic. The dolphin is lost, true, but the girl is saved. It's kind of rough for it to be that way, but that's the world we live in. Above all, as a writer, I am interested in *imagination*. Writers have a profound obligation to their audience, if they want to have an audience, to think through the stuff of everyday life, both private and public, then give it a newness that somehow restores its luster. Our sense of wonder is easily atrophied. Invention, or—to take up again the term from *Traffic and Laughter*—reinvention can serve as a powerful antidote to the enervating effect of experience. "What is it like to be dead, Daddy?" asks a child in the book I'm working on now. And the father answers, "It's just like how it was before you were born. Don't you remember?" I like to think there's something to that.

SG: You said earlier that your writing process involves discovery—your trying to learn things about the characters, explore the significance of certain images or motifs. Does this mean that you literally don't know where your novels are taking you—you don't use any sort of outline?

TM: My first two novels both involved a fair amount of blindman's bluff. With *Easy Travel* I knew the beginning and the end; with *Traffic and Laughter* the image I've already described. Those were the starting points, fairly meager-seeming but densely packed, and from them I just set out, thinking through the storyline as I went. In both cases I fixed the number of chapters from the start, estimated the length I wanted the book to be; these were the rules and within them I played. The magic, when there is magic, is not something that for me comes out of the will but out of playfulness. I try something out to see what will come of it, trying to surprise myself.

My work depends a lot on physical detail-tropes or motifs from which I more or less extrapolate the larger substance. Without that physicality, I am lost. I frequently work from photographs that are somehow evocative for me —looking, always looking. In *Easy Travel* the color blue served a function as lively in some ways as that of a character; in *Traffic and Laughter* the unaccounted for diamond earring (which was meant to be the extra bit of matter added to, the reinvented universe Sylvia “creates” in the first sentence) is used to, somewhat similar ends. The senses have a life of their own in my writing.

SG: Do you do much revision of the text?

TM: Generally not. Once I write a page, it’s more or less done. If things are fit together properly, they are too interdependent to be much tampered with. So in that sense, I produce only a single draft. This is not a method I recommend to anyone, because it’s very expensive creatively speaking: your investment in what you’ve already produced grows exponentially as you go along without your ever really knowing if it’s going to prove fruitful until you reach the end. I don’t know if I will always write this way; in fact, my current novel-in-progress, *Singing into the Piano*, “does” have an outline, though I see that as I near the end I’m having to depart from it increasingly. But all this is very idiosyncratic, and probably not of much interest. Each book is different; each writer writes in his own way. The point is to, flirt with distraction while remaining on course.

SG: Why do you write books with such prominent female protagonists?

TM: I’m not sure. But I am certain that I will always, undoubtedly, write about strong women. If I am going to spend five or six hours a day with my characters, I want to be quite fond of them. I wouldn’t want to spend that much time with a woman who was weak or despicable.

SG: The title, *Traffic and Laughter*, did that occur very early on?

TM: Yes, it occurred early on, before a single word was written. I knew exactly what I meant. But I can’t speak about this. It’s an extremely private matter, a very personal moment. That’s all I can say.

LM: When you said a moment ago that you didn’t know what the term “science fiction” meant anymore, I knew exactly what you meant. I’d say that just about any writer who is in touch with the world today is writing some version of what used to be called science fiction. One of the reasons for this is because of the ways technology has transformed our lives so much —which is something your books are very much in touch with.

TM: If so, thank you. The term “science fiction” is not useful anymore. What I think about this is terribly simple (and I hope I can make this sound as simple as it really is): I’m going to be alive a certain number of years. This is where I live and this is how I live. I can be resistant to it, and hate it, or pretend I live somewhere else; or I can look at it and see what it is and be part of it. Since I find the second option more congenial than the first—it’s a little more comradly—I’m inevitably going to have to deal with, among other things, the changes that technology has wrought on our lives. That’s just the way it is. And that’s also the extent of it.

LM: Would you say that the sense of confusion and change that we talked about earlier is basically the same for people living in the ’90s as it was for people living 100 years ago? Or is it something that technology has exaggerated?

TM: I don't think there's any question that over the last century we've seen a worldwide deterioration of cultural tradition and stability, and that this shift is in large part due to technological evolution. A hundred years ago, the industrial age, with its radical redefinition of values, was just getting under way in the Western world; it has since given way to the age of information and electronics. So we're talking about a period in which things like the locomotive, the automobile, the airplane, the assembly line, the telephone, the camera, radio and television have all been introduced—to grow, flourish, decline, or triumph. There's an incredible shift in what we know about each other and the world implicit there—not just (or even necessarily) how much we know, but what *kinds* of things. Our knowledge is more anthropological, less intimate. Of course this shift in experience is inevitably disorienting. But is it progress? Well, I can't imagine anyone was sorry to see small pox vaccinated out of existence, but neither can anyone in his right mind be happy about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So progress is a red herring.

The point is that technological mastery confers worldly power—by that I mean power of the crassest kind—so people tend to want it whatever the consequences. Who cares about a little confusion when the palace is yours? Well, eventually everyone. See Shakespeare on the subject.

LM: But weren't you using "Information Sickness" in *Easy Travel* as a way of suggesting that people today are encountering ever-greater amounts of stimuli? Theoretically that would create even more opportunities for people noticing these sorts of juxtapositions you were just describing.

TM: Yes, I do think that. But I've also backed away somewhat from the view I had in *Easy Travel* in that I don't think this onslaught of stimuli is as debilitating as I depicted it there. This is simply how we live now, and perhaps we overestimate the "sickness" that technological change is inevitably bringing with it. Is there really anything we encounter today that seems as odd as it must have been for someone to see a motor car for the first time? This world of image and duplication of image and constant movement is simply the way it is right now as we are heading for the millennium. It's probably no more debilitating or strange for people to live in this world as it was for my grandmother.

LM: Yes: what could have been stranger than seeing a photograph for the first time back then?

TM: Exactly. The camera changed the whole way we perceive the world—and surely as radically so as the perceptual changes that computers are introducing into our lives. So I've come to resist *Easy Travel* notion that we are a privileged generation, a privileged time. It has always been difficult to live. Change has always been there—we grow up, we grow old, people die, the seasons don't stand still—and change is always difficult for anyone to deal with emotionally. I once happened to hear my grandfather say aloud as he looked in the mirror, "Who is this old man?" Someday I'll feel like saying the same. I'm halfway there.

LM: I was living in Okinawa as a kid during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and somehow the specter of the bomb, total annihilation for everybody, seemed palpably real to me. In one way or another, all of us kids knew that the world could change utterly in a single moment with one blow of the air raid siren. One of the reasons I think I like your work so much is that both your novels seemed written by somebody describing

the fears and concerns (and the exhilarations) of the world I feel I live in. It's always bewildered me how the vast majority of writers (even outspokenly ambitious writers) can feel they are dealing with large issues when nowhere in their works does the idea of the atomic bomb appear. It's like the bomb never happened, all those warheads were never poised for takeoff—and all that anger and fear and suspicion and paranoia wasn't there. It's not that I expect writers to deal with this specifically, but somehow the fact that they don't feel they have to deal with it *somehow*, through some context, make me feel those writers aren't writing about the world I grew up in.

TM: Exactly—and in the case of *Traffic and Laughter*, I felt I had to. It wasn't a matter of me choosing a theme I thought was important. I simply wasn't able to write the book in any other way. Maybe because I had grown up in Washington, these sorts of global concerns were permanently imprinted on my mind or imagination somehow. All during my formative years I had people connected with the government coming in through my father's and mother's house, talking about these issues. I don't know. To me these are the sorts of things that one thinks about in our times. And that's that. I don't write about the things consciously or because I've got any answers or a lesson to teach. These concerns appear in my books because I read newspapers, I talk to people, I live in the world. I write about the world I inhabit.

I also remember distinctly the day of the Cuban Missile Crisis. I was at a private day school in Washington. The buses went home early. I remember thinking, "Oh, damn, my parent's fallout shelter is really kind of fucked up. We're going to die. Oh well..." [laughs] Those days certainly informed my world in the deepest sense. The first thing I remember writing that was "published" was something I wrote in the fifth grade about the atomic bomb.

LM: It sounds like you were drawn pretty early on to writing, and not to politics as such. So you *really* never wanted to be a senator or something?

TM: You can't grow up in Washington and not think that if you aren't the President you're a complete failure. However, you can't graduate sixth grade without realizing that's stupid.

LM: Was the fact that your parents were both writers maybe something that specifically pushed you more in the direction of a writing career?

TM: Almost certainly. My father's writing was very directly involved in politics—he worked for Lyndon Johnson for a while, before Johnson became President. My mother also, but to a lesser degree. But they were both writers, so the idea of being a writer seemed very normal to me. I think I was very lucky in that way because unlike a lot of people I know, I never had to feel that I had to make a break with something in order to be a writer. I think for most people being a writer usually means they are going to have to drastically change their expectations about what their lives are going to be. Whereas frankly I would have to make a break with something to not be a writer.

SG: *Traffic and Laughter* is partly about this way that we are both individuals in a very personal world, a personal domain, and yet we're never free of the larger historical maelstrom around us. You can see this with the two daughters who have diplomatic fathers: their childhood and beliefs and personalities in all kinds of ways were affected by what their father did for a living. And of course what their fathers did was affected by these larger matters.

TM: I'm delighted you say that. I think that in whatever fashion I continue to write—and I hope it will be various—it will always be to tell myself and anyone else who cares to listen, that the bedsheets lead directly to what you find on the pages of the *New York Times* or the *London Times*. The personal strikes me as being very much a continuum with large public events. Those public events are being created by people who also have private lives. So private life is not entirely private, public life is not entirely public. I am enormously interested in this. The media has made this continuum or interaction of public and private lives more obvious to people generally—tabloid journalism the last few years has increasingly emphasized the connection between public and private life—but, really, there's always been such a continuum. Certainly, it was in place long before the media explosion.

LM: You told Sinda in the earlier interview that you are an essentially intuitive writer rather than somehow who consciously plans and controls your books. But were there things you did more or less consciously set out to differently in *Traffic and Laughter* than you had in *Easy Travel*?

TM: Not really. I was a slightly different person, and that naturally had some effect on what I was writing. For one thing I was more grown up. And as I've gotten older I find I'm not so quick as I once was to say that something is taking place "just now," or that whatever I'm describing is unique or different now. I've also become more of a public person (or at least I have more of a sense of what it means to be public), whereas when I was writing *Easy Travel* my existence was more private. These changes affect the writing you do, the perspectives you're drawn to write about. In a way, writing a first novel is a great privilege, because no one knows who you are. If you don't succeed, it's no big deal, no one will even know you didn't do it. Whereas if you are lucky enough to write something that you and maybe some people feel does succeed, well, you haven't really risked anything except being ignored. But once you've had some success with the first novel, then when you write a second novel you've got people out people who already know your work, who have expectations, who can be disappointed. So the whole process of whether your book is received well or badly (or received at all) becomes part of what you think about the world. It's an initiation into what it is to be a grown-up, a public person, that's all. One hopes that being judged makes you grow up a little more. But even if it doesn't it doesn't matter because you have put yourself in a position so that you have to live with such judgments. There's no turning back.

LM: In addition to this widening of perspectives more dramatically from private to public lives, there are some formal differences between the two books, as well. For instance, there is a lot more dialogue in the new book, and not as many rapid jump-cuts or juxtapositions of materials as you had in *Easy Travel*.

TM: Yes. Part of the reason for these changes you're pointing to is that when I was a lot younger I thought that dialogue was a waste of time. Now I find it the richest part of human speech. Therefore I find myself writing a lot more dialogue. I don't say that I make the best of my efforts to create this sort of speech, but I do say that I respect it a lot more than I once did.

SG: Another difference between *Traffic and Laughter* and *Easy Travel* is that from moment to moment, and from one event to the other, the characters in the new book seem to understand one another better—they're able to read one another better on a personal level, even if it's not clear that they're successfully communicating in

some larger (public?) sense. One thing that happened over and over in *Easy Travel* was that sense of miscues, misreading gestures and words all down the line, with some tragic results...

TM: I'm delighted you think so because I think so myself. I'm not sure that everyone does. In fact, I must say that probably I'm in the minority in thinking that both books end happily. And I do think that. In *Traffic and Laughter*, the guy gets the girl, as crudely as that. Sure, things are a real mess, but they know each other. I'd agree that there is more of this personal communication and understand in this book. And in the future I hope I can see more of that, and write about it so that it seems real and not forced upon the characters, without losing the sense of disjunction which I think is part of our time. I'm very interested in how you live with so much disjunction and yet you want to communicate with people and understand things—when these things actually mean something in your life, or even *define* it, and you're responsible, and you can't just get by being cool.

LM: For all their stylistic oddities, your books are able to powerfully communicate feelings. It often seems that foregrounding stylistic innovation usually produces a kind of distance from these emotions, but somehow you avoid this.

TM: I believe very much in style, but style without content means nothing to me. At the other extreme, content without style is mere self-expression, which doesn't have anything to do with artistic expression. Oh, self-expression is perfectly OK for the person who is expressing him or herself—it's what we all do, and we strive to do it as well as we can. But this may not be an example of so-called art—which is, after all, what the novelist aspires to create. Or at least I do.

LM: Although both of your books have strong women protagonists, you chose to use a third person narrator in each case. Was there any particular reason you chose this narrative perspective, or was there a moment when you were thinking about using a first person narrator?

TM: No, I never considered using a first person voice with these books. I may try my hand at that in the future, but up to now I've avoided it because 1) it is a great fashion to use first-person narrators; and 2) often (though by no means always), the decision to use a first person narrator seems to me to be a basic misunderstanding of what it is to write fiction. Perhaps "misunderstanding" is the wrong word, but it certainly involves a slight bending of the truth. By that I mean that you as a reader might identify with me because I am speaking to you as "I," or you will hate me because I am speaking to you as "T." But in either case, you won't participate in this *as you*. That's a big drawback as far as I'm concerned. I can see ways in which I might want to write a first person narrative, but at the moment I don't, because there are more options using third person approaches. And because you have many more possibilities, the whole writing process seems richer, more interesting to me.

SG: In *Traffic and Laughter* there are several places where the narrator says something to the effect "And this is the truth." That made me feel there was an identity in that voice, whereas with *Easy Travel* that voice somehow seemed less tangible, less recognizable as a specific person. Did you feel you were moving more towards identifying yourself as a narrator as you were writing *Traffic and Laughter*?

TM: There is a real reason for what you were feeling, and for the presence of those insinuations on truth-telling by the narrator as well. The epigraph to the book is a slight

misquotation or mistranslation from the “Book of Job.” And throughout the book, the question of truth and falsehood is up for grabs. As it happens, the person who said the memorial service for my mother used that passage. It can be translated in the way I have it in the book —“If it were not true, I would have told you so”— although it’s not ordinarily. Basically what I wanted to be getting across was that truth is relative; and in fact the book is about relativity in just about every possible way I could think of, including the Theory of Relativity.

LM: This view that there are no stable truths, no source of absolute assurance about anything —so we live in a “postmodern” world where every value and meaning is up for grabs— seems to be just a given part of the world your characters are living in. And this situation isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Jettisoning dogmatic perspectives can be liberating as well, it frees you to invent your own systems that might suit you better than somebody else’s...

TM: True, and in fact if you were to ask me the main difference between my first book and my second book I would say that in *Easy Travel*, I noticed what you were just describing; in the second book I not only noticed it but I thought it was *good*. For what it’s worth, I do actually believe in a notion of God, but it’s very unconventional. The only way I can explain it is that I would assume that it would be some way of thinking about the world where there is a fact. But humans don’t live with facts. They live with contingencies, disasters, politics, history, emotion all sorts of things that are always blowing any momentary sense of order, and meaning and safety all to hell. And yet we are always telling stories to ourselves about the way the world is. We do this incessantly; it’s a response to a profound need within us. And we will do it until we die, and then, when we are done, people will tell stories about us. That is the way it is to be a human, so if one were to think there is anything larger than that, it would be that somehow there actually is a real story, not just something we’ve made up out of our fear and ignorance and instinct to protect ourselves.

LM: This seems related to what you have some of the dolphins speculating about in *Easy Travel* where they “talk about” the kinds of confusions humans being get into by their use of language. The point of one of their legends you recount has to do with the human tendency to use language to say things that aren’t true, to lie. And certainly throughout that novel, you show people using language to deceive or conceal, or even if they are trying to say the truth, they’re not really being understanding.

TM: And I believe what the dolphins are driving at. On the other hand, I’m not yet forty. If I tell you the story of my life, or even my recent life, it will be a story. I can guarantee that it will entertain you, but it will be a story, one that I, in concert with other people, made up. No one else has made it up. And yet somehow I don’t think that telling these stories is wrong. In fact, I think the way we think of our lives and relate this to others as being sort of lovely. Of course, a writer would naturally think that. As for myself, I try not to lie to myself. But do I believe that there are truths that can be spoken about ourselves? Yes, it seems to me there are truths for humans —which are the truths with which you live. Do I believe there are larger truths? Probably, but I don’t have any grasp on them, so I presume they have a grasp on me. [laughs]

LM: We’ve asked nearly all the writers we’ve talked to about how (and in what way) fiction writers have been affected by the media: television, the movies, computers, and so on. Sometimes this affect is very obvious —so, for example, you have

people back in the '60s like Vonnegut or Robert Coover or, in a different way Donald Barthelme, self-consciously using formal devices borrowed from the movies and so forth. But there was a sense in which that generation of postmodern writers seemed to be writing about all this more or less from the “outside” —as people who grew up in a print-dominated world, who wrote about characters for whom these media systems were exoticisms, perhaps frivolous or even dangerous. But in your books —and I think this is true in a lot of the books by second generation of postmodernist— it's now not the author but the *characters* who are seeing the world through the forms, aesthetics, even the technical jargon of television and movies. It just seems perfectly “natural” that they see life and translate their experiences in this way. It's what they've grown up with, it's their milieu.

TM: Yes, this has become second nature bit to me just as much as for my characters. My sense is that in so far as *Easy Travel to Other Planets* was known, it was noticed because it seemed it had somehow “made a deal with” the media. But making such a deal was certainly not something I felt I was doing. The perspective I adopted there felt very normal to me. I can recall the first time I really noticed this whole business about growing up in the media age. I was in the Forest Service, in the Northwest, and I went to visit a friend in Tacoma, Washington. I immediately noticed that when he came into the house he turned on the television —not so he could just watch it (he wasn't) but as if it were a person, or another being that was there. I'd never seen anybody watching television like that. But I remember being struck by it and thinking, “How strange.” Now, of course, I'm a lot more aware of how easily the words you hear, anywhere, comment upon, modify, and in some way inflect the conversation you are having with the people you care most about. All these words that are in the air, everywhere, even affect the conversation you have with yourself. Presenting this in a novel hardly seems unusual or “experimental” to me as a writer. Quiet the contrary, it's so normal that I can hardly imagine writing otherwise.

LM: You once told an interviewer that you were “fascinated by television,” but you went on to say that you didn't much care for the regular shows that most Americans seem to enjoy. What's the source of this fascination —the way it's managed to permeate the world so thoroughly?

TM: There are two distinctly different periods associated with my feelings about television. During the first one, I had this tiny Sony black and white that had an antennae, that wasn't hooked up to the cable and so on; but none of that mattered because I was simply fascinated with the whole idea that there was this television at all —this mysterious box that somehow transported these images and stories and characters and “events” into my room. I don't know how to describe my feelings except to say that I was fascinated by it as a *television*. Nowadays I have this much more elaborate thing, but even when it is on, I don't pay attention to it. It is a kind of a silent thing. I've always had it in my books, but I never really knew why. Now I know: because I do it. I turn the sound off and just let it *behave*.

SG: So despite all the hype about how tuned in you are to the media and its effects on people, you seem to be implying that, say, pop culture isn't really a milieu you find all that interesting or pay attention to.

TM: I've just come back from a book tour that's taken me all over the country, and I've seen how deepdown I am of America. I was born in Texas, and I really

cherish that part of me. But finally, the United States is not very interesting in a lot of ways. It has a nice landscape, it is various in the way that it's made up, and we have many other interesting characteristics. But as a people we don't have a very interesting aesthetic taste. One of the reasons for this is that we have no sense of a tradition of aesthetic tastes, something to build upon or compare things to. Our taste is constantly being remade. But we do have one enormous eccentricity which I value beyond everything—and that is the First Amendment. Having this is incredibly strange, and I love it. I read the First Amendment at this reading a while back, and at first it freaked people out because they didn't really know what I was reading. They thought I was making some other sort of statement. But by the time I was finished—and it is very short as you remember—everyone knew what: it was. I read it partially because of what is going on at the time with Bret's book, and I read it because I write for the art world. Sad to say, there has been censorship in the two previous administrations. Ten years of Reagan and Bush has done enormous damage to this country in my view, not the least of which are the restrictions being placed not just on artists but on everybody. Every day in the art world I get people who say to me, "How can we do what you guys did in the literary world?" And I say, "Use it or lose it." That's pretty much it. I believe that. And I think precisely because we don't have that many other qualities, maybe we are going to keep hold of that.

LM: You've worked for several years as an editor of *Art in America*, and certainly your books are very visual. Did you ever think of being a painter?

TM: Yes. I graduated from what was known as an art school, Bennington. I also lived with an artist for a period. I know that I see the world very much visually. The dust jackets of my books, for example, are of immense concern to me. There is a whole play in *Traffic and Laughter* about seeing is believing or believing is seeing. I know and learn things first and most intensely through my eyes. You'll notice there are many mirrors in this house; they're here not because I like to look at myself in them, but because I like to watch light and image bounce all around me, the more reflections and refractions the better.

LM: Did you ever take a creative writing class?

TM: When I was very young, yes. Twelve or fourteen. I can't say it is a bad thing that there are graduate creative writing classes, but they don't produce any more writers. They do help those writers who teach pay their bills, and they probably create some readers. But people who are going to be writers are going to be writers anyway. There are only three things, I suppose, that are important if you want to be a writer: read widely, voraciously, and without respect; write all the time; and look at everything and don't lie to yourself while you're doing it. The latter is harder than it sounds.

LM: One of the things that struck me about your first book was that the vision was so formed, so mature. Had you written other novels before that that you had stopped?

TM: Not long ago, I came across ten chapters of a book I'd begun in high school. What really struck me about it was how it contained a lot of the same interests that informed *Traffic and Laughter* and *Easy Travel*. There I was, at 16, somehow already pointing in certain directions. But I've only written one other novel, and it wasn't a very successful one. I had published a short story and then tried later to keep it going to novel length. There was always this problem with organization.

SG: One of the things I enjoy most about your fiction is the way it expresses this sense of simultaneity —lots of stuff going on and many, many takes on the connections and meanings of it all. As a reader, it's really fun to watch this dazzle of technique; as a citizen of my time, I feel at home in your books. Perhaps because everything seems possible, everything seems up in the air. When Nomanzi tells that story about how the men appear to her, the tribe does what they have been asked to do and it is a disaster. But at the very end of the novel, the appearance of the second sun seems ambiguous. On the one hand, the reader recognizes that what is being described is a bomb going off —which is horrible, it is the end of the world. But you also have her laughter.

TM: In the world that *Traffic and Laughter* takes place in, the bomb was not detonated until after what was World War Two. Now, was that good for the world or not? There is no judgment made. I really don't know what the last two lines mean. All I know is I completely believe in them. I know that I had them from the very beginning. I believe if you don't have your laughter, you can't bear the traffic. That's it. And I guess that is what the book is about, to a degree. It resists the notion that there is absolute tragedy, or there is absolute happiness. I just do not see the world that way. I find solace in many things that other people find disturbing, and I find disturbance in many things that people find comfort in. But I gather that enough people agree with me that I'll write another book anyway.