

Interview with Dan Rhodes on bookmunch:
<http://www.bookmunch.co.uk/view.php?id=961>

Dan Rhodes' third book is his first novel and Timoleon Vieta Come Home is by far and away the grandest first novel – Hell, I'd go as far to say the finest novel - full stop – it has been my good fortune to read this year.

If you read Paul Auster's The New York Trilogy or Magnus Mills' Restraint of Beasts and found yourself shaking with that desire to proselytise (to thrust copies of the book into the hands of strangers, turn all conversation in the direction of your latest "find", rant, rage and rave that shite like Grisham's King of Torts is even available – become apoplectic at the fact everybody on the face of the planet isn't reading what you regard to be the finest book of the year so far) – then prepare yourself: you have a real treat in store. Oh yes. Peter Wild spoke to your man Dan Rhodes (6/3/03).

Peter Wild: Timoleon Vieta Come Home is one hell of a shaggy dog story. Are you a fan of shaggy dog stories?

Dan Rhodes: I consciously wrote it in the tradition of "doglit" and own up to this with references to Lassie Come Home (the Eric Knight original of course, which I read towards the end of the writing process and which I was pleased to find is similarly structured to Timoleon Vieta Come Home. Good book too) – and Madame Bovary.

PW: In between the sly laughter and dark thrills of Timoleon Vieta Come Home, one arrives at the conclusion that you're either widely travelled and enormously erudite or adept at manipulating Google to conjure a narrative that incorporates all manner of wisdom. Which is it?

DR: Well I've been to Cambodia, which is a place that made a big impression on me, and is somewhere I hope to return one day. I went to Italy for a few days while inter-railing when I was 17, then to Umbria for a few days on a family holiday when I was 19. While I was writing the book I had planned to spend a few weeks travelling around Italy, soaking it all up, but I'm not particularly adept at managing my finances and in the end I could only afford to spend four days in Rome. I had the ideas for the opening chapters of part two of the book ages ago, but I really nailed them in Rome. Otherwise I would sit at home with my sister's old copy of the Let's Go guide to Italy from 1988. Over-researching is dangerous. Whenever I've done it I've tended to over-write too and I've got myself in all kinds of trouble. I was amazed when the book sold to an Italian publisher – it'll be interesting to see how it's received.

PW: Timoleon Vieta Come Home shares certain similarities with David Mitchell's Ghostwritten (except where Mitchell slides a number of what I would regard to be short stories alongside each other and calls it a novel, you tie up your vignettes with Timoleon Vieta himself, appearing in the foreground or the background of intensely human, and at times intensely dark, dramas). Which came first – the vignettes or the dog? Or is this a chicken and the egg kind of a question?

DR: Ghostwritten has been mocking me from my bookshelf for years. I really should read it. The story of Cockroft, the dog and the Bosnian came first, and everything else followed on.

PW: Without giving the end away for people who have yet to read Timoleon Vieta Come Home, it has the savagery of something like Michel Haneke's Funny Games. Both me and the wife (on two separate readings, I should add) sat there aghast and said YOU CAN'T DO THAT! Is there a great thrill in so derailing expectation?

DR: I spent five and a half years writing the book, and even though I knew from the start that it had to have that ending for it to work dramatically, it made me sad every time I read it, and since I'm an obsessive redrafter I must have gone over it hundreds and hundreds of times, and I was thoroughly miserable every single time. The same goes for all the other sad things that happen along the way. Most of the time I could hardly bear to read what I'd written because I felt so sorry for all the imaginary people. I was never tempted to tone it down though. I quite often derail my own expectations. I'll be writing an episode and I'll think I know exactly where it's going, then all kinds of other possibilities appear and the story can take a completely different direction.

PW: You were recently added to the Granta list of the 20 most influential writers working in the UK today. How did that feel? Has the honour gone to your head?

DR: Yes, I've got it into my head that now I'm on the Granta list I should have a pied-a-terre in Bloomsbury. It's terrible, and particularly ridiculous since I'd never even heard of the list until a few weeks before it came out. Ultimately it's just a list, but I'm hoping it'll help the book along. The other people on it seem to be pretty clever compared to me, so I can't help thinking that I'm only on it because of some kind of clerical error.

PW: Your Granta list associate Toby Litt assigns titles to subsequent books based upon letters of the alphabet (Adventures in Capitalism, Beatniks, Corpsing, Exhibitionism, Finding Myself etc). Given that Timoleon Vieta comes from the spine of Encyclopaedia Britannica, I was wondering – how tempted are you to delve into the Encyclopaedia Britannica for the books you are yet to write (and name!)?

DR: Hmm... There's Edward Extract, Daisy Educational, Excretion Geometry, Halicar Immingham. All possibilities. I wonder what Toby Litt's going to do when he gets up to X.

PW: Saying all of that, I read recently that you planned for Timoleon Vieta Come Home to be your last book. Is this still the case?

PW: I'm really loving not writing anything at the moment. Writing Timoleon Vieta Come Home was a pretty joyless experience, and I couldn't see beyond it. It was only during the last year, when it started to resemble the book I was trying to write, that I could feel happy with it – and that coincided with me finding myself publisherless so it looked for a long time as if Timoleon Vieta Come Home wasn't going to come out, let alone any subsequent books. It was a pretty miserable time, but the darkness of those days helped Timoleon Vieta Come Home become the book it is – I wasn't tempted to soften it at all in the final stages. Right now I have no imagination or motivation, and it's a fantastic feeling. I wasn't able to switch off for six and a half years, and now I've managed it I'm very reluctant to go back to writing. I wrote obsessively, to the detriment of every other aspect of my life, and I'm not sure I want to go back to that, and I know I wouldn't be prepared to write with less commitment. Maybe I'll write something else one day, but if I do I'm hoping I would be obliged to approach the work from a completely different angle – not from the perspective of a miserable git.

PW: Timoleon Vieta Come Home is the kind of book you read and get wildly enthusiastic about - the kind of book you read and say well, I never have to write that novel I always planned to because I couldn't do better than this. Is there any author / are there any books you've read and thought, bollox: how good is that?

DR: Thanks for saying so. Yes, there are lots of books I think that about. I think it's true of all us writers – I've not met a published author yet who hasn't been in awe of many other writers. At the moment I'm evangelising about *Twenty Thousand Streets Under The Sky* by Patrick Hamilton. The man was a genius. It's very funny and very sad – the big two. *A Confederacy Of Dunces* blew me away too – it's the ultimate comic novel. All of John Fante's *Bandini* books, pretty much every story Carver ever wrote, loads of Chekhov's stories... I think the only way you can avoid despairing and giving up writing is to strive to write as well as your heroes but differently - in your

own voice. I also feel very inspired by bad writing. I had a burst of creative energy after reading Tony Parsons' execrable *Man And Boy*. It was a truly dismal piece of fiction, and I knew for a fact that I was a better writer than him.

PW: Would you say you were a dog person or a cat person? Or neither?

DR: DEFINITELY a dog person. Bollocks to cats.

Timoleon Vieta *Come Home* is published 3 April 2003 by Canongate priced £9.99.