

An interview with Ted Dawe, author of *Into the River*

By Tom Peters
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The World Socialist Web Site recently spoke to writer Ted Dawe, whose novel *Into the River* was temporarily banned in New Zealand in September following a campaign against it by the fundamentalist Christian group Family First and sections of the corporate media. The WSWS reviewed Dawe's novel after the ban was lifted.

Tom Peters: You've said that you see the ban of your book as part of a wave of conservatism sweeping the country. In my review I made the point that it was not simply the sexual content and drug use that sparked the campaign, but the novel's realistic depiction of class divisions in New Zealand society. This would certainly have upset the upper classes.

Ted Dawe: Family First is supposedly about defending family values, whereas my books are usually about people alienated from their families. That is what young adult novels tend to be about. Mine are usually about kids doing adult things. This alienation from families is at the root of it all. The swearing, the sex and the drugs give them substance to their complaint.

I have to say I'm no great commenter on New Zealand society. Since my student days I've become very non-political, much to my sisters' annoyance—they're Labour Party members. But the fact that we live in a country that has had three terms of laissez-faire, pragmatic, make it up as you go along governments—it says something about this country, that it's saying: just keep things the same. During this process, we've slipped backwards. I feel sad that kids growing up now won't know the sort of New Zealand I knew when I grew up in the 60s and 70s.

TP: Social inequality has sky-rocketed since then.

TD: I work on K Road, which is the centre of so much of the dispossessed in Auckland. They all live around here and they kill each other from time to time, they sit around abusing substances, getting drunk, getting arrested and fighting and having miserable existences.

When I grew up I didn't even know what a "hobo" was. There were none in Tokoroa, and when I first came to Auckland there were very few. They were known by name. Now, there's a whole underclass. When you drive past the Salvation Army there's a couple of hundred outside there in the morning.

I didn't vote in the last election. I used to be a Labour Party voter but the party has fallen to pieces and it hasn't left me with much motivation.

TP: Well, they are responsible for the social disaster.

TD: Of course they are. What they did in the days of [1980s Labour prime minister] David Lange is still with us today.

TP: You say you're not a social commentator, but both *Into the River* and *Thunder Road* show this vast social divide. Barwell's College seems like a microcosm of society as a whole.

TD: Yes, it's an extreme version, but in essence I don't think there would be very many Maori kids who go to big city schools where they are a minority who would find much to argue about in *Into the River*.

TP: The teachers condone the bullying by the upper class students; they promote it. Devon is constantly being told that there is nothing he can do about it.

TD: He and his friends feel quite powerless. All they can do is find strategies to avoid it, like for instance becoming reasonably invisible, keeping your head in, keeping out of places where you're liable to get cornered or trapped. It's quite a miserable existence for a lot of people.

I knew a guy aged about 45 who marked School Certificate exams with me at a meeting held at Dilworth School. It was the first time he had been back to the school since he was a boy, and he told me he felt like vomiting as he drove up the driveway. He could hardly bear to come inside the school, he hated it so much. This was because of the brutality he had experienced there.

One thing I wanted people to notice in the novel is that the bullied become bullies. Devon becomes tarred with a similar brush and he will bully other people too, because it's a culture of nastiness and that's how one maintains one's prestige or position. There's no room for compassion in that sort of environment; it's seen as weakness.

TP: An interesting theme in the book is what lessons Devon learns from his experiences. At the end, when Devon is expelled, the teacher Mr Faull says "life's not complicated, it's just a series of choices between right and wrong."

TD: That's the little reductive speech he makes as he's about to pass Devon back to his "people." In fact the choices are terrible and often good decisions go wrong for no apparent reason.

TP: On the other hand Big John, the father of the working-class boy Mitch, tells Devon success is just about luck and timing.

TD: On the back cover of the book I'm about to publish, it quotes Devon at the end of *Into the River*: "I've learned plenty, Mr Faull, but it comes down to this: there's freedom and then there's everything else. And today I give away everything else and I choose freedom." In my blurb I say: "So ends the first part of Devon's journey from nearly drowning in a tapu river to his expulsion from an exclusive boys' school. *Into the World* is where Devon learns to understand just how costly that freedom is; that decisions made quickly can lead to disaster; that loyalty counts for nothing until it's been tested; and love, like security, is nothing more than a commodity." Those are the lessons of the next book.

TP: Can you tell me more about *Into the World*?

TD: *Into the World* runs from the moment Devon jumps out of the car at the end of *Into the River*, and it finishes at the moment he walks into the boarding house which marks the beginning of *Thunder Road*.

The publishers, once again, have been sitting on it for too long. The eventual critique contained a couple of criticisms that I didn't like very much. I was told that the main character, Devon, was too powerless and unassertive and it reminded the reader of Tess, in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. This interested me at first, then it really annoyed me after I had time to think about it. There's a good reason why Tess is so powerless. It's because she is a country girl with no money, no position and she's being pushed hither and yon by bloody nobles using her for their own purposes. She wasn't a twenty-first century assertive woman with her own means and independence and lots of choices.

Devon is in the same situation: he's a young Maori boy, out of his depth and out of his element. That's the whole point of the book.

The other point that annoyed me was: "Your female characters tend to be at either end of the whore/madonna continuum." I thought, well, it's not about the female characters. They're relatively minor and not terribly important in themselves. They're only important in as much as they reflect values of the main characters. That's what minor characters do in a novel—except for Dickens, who used to fall in love with minor characters.

I want to test run the book on students from Northcote College. I want boys, ideally working-class brown boys aged about 16 or 17, to read it. They come at narrative from a different angle. They tell me whether my slang or my car knowledge is correct.

TP: The comparison with *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is interesting. Your writing conveys class divisions very strongly, in a way that is uncommon in young adult literature.

TD: Many of my colleagues, I tend to feel, write about things well outside that frame of reference. There's a lot of historical writing, dystopian writing and rural writing: books about kids that go off into the country where they experience the same sort of things that people have been experiencing for a hundred years—stories set against the elements, against nature. But we're a heavily urbanised country now. It's surprising that young adult literature hasn't changed as much.

TP: You're also one of the few Pakeha [European] writers who writes about a Maori protagonist. Has this presented any challenges? Why do you think other writers are reluctant to do this?

TD: The message out there is: If you're not Maori, don't write about things Maori. It's not a message that I've ever taken to heart. I've lived in a mixed culture for such a long time. Most of my values are universal humanist values, which touch base with Maori culture from time to time.

I was babysat by Maori people when I was young. I was taught Maori at the same time I was taught English, growing up in Ruatoria. My parents were schoolteachers.

TP: Ruatoria is a very oppressed town.

TD: It wasn't then, between 1950 and 1959. It was a flourishing area and there was no shrinking away from Maori culture. Maori was spoken commonly on the streets and with shopkeepers. The school was probably 75 percent Maori in terms of the staff and 95 percent in terms of the kids. I grew up thinking that this was normal. This childhood has given me a lot of empathy with Maori people, Maori language.

TP: You have been a high school teacher for many years. What is the atmosphere in schools today? How has it changed?

TD: I spoke at a meeting recently at the Auckland Association of English Teachers and it was interesting. Most of what teachers complain about now is the immense amount of time spent on scaffolded learning and assessment. Very little of the sort of teaching that I used to enjoy can happen now. It's become very transactional.

TP: What is your opinion of the World War I commemorations that are going on in this country and which are aimed at young people?

TD: I find them very distasteful. My grandfather fought in World War I and he was permanently damaged by it. As a result of that, my father would not allow us to do any celebration of Anzac whatsoever. He made disparaging remarks... he was so poisoned by the whole thing. Now it's taking on a "birth of the nation" character. It's fake as hell and all created by PR men. I think [film maker] Peter Jackson has a hand in it.

TP: We wrote on the WSWS about his Great War Exhibition in Wellington and another exhibition at the national museum Te Papa. It's like a theme park. There's almost no historical context and nothing about the widespread resistance to WWI in the working class. They are blatantly glorifying the war.

TD: I think when you make figures three times normal size, you're glorifying soldiers. It's like all those glorious statues you see in various post-revolutionary countries, North Korea springs to mind.

TP: Who are some of the authors who have inspired you?

Writers who made an impression on me when I was growing up were usually American. I particularly liked Jack London and John Steinbeck. One of the books that turned me into an English student rather than a science student was *The Grapes of Wrath*. You can't get much more socialist than that. Also, books like *Animal Farm*.

When I think about my fictional reading growing up a lot of it was politicised, social realist, it had a strong socialist flavour. I think that's what gave me the flavour of my own writing today. It is politicised, although it's very much implicit rather than explicit. The minute people feel that there's finger-wagging they block their ears.

TP: The writers you mention, Steinbeck, London, Orwell, were inspired by the socialist revolutionary movements of their times, the fight for an end to capitalism. In your own writing, Devon expresses rebellious sentiments, hostility towards the social hierarchy, but he doesn't find any positive alternative. He turns to crime and drugs. Do you see any potential for a progressive political alternative for young people rebelling against society?

TD: What you're asking is a bit outside my remit. The dispossessed young people that I write about don't turn to books and read history and political theory. They rebel because they know they are getting the short end of the stick. They use the tools at their disposal. That's what Devon's doing. He realises that the whole game is stacked against him. It brings out the nihilistic in him, as opposed to wanting a revolution. It's a common enough response.

People say, when they look at acts of civic vandalism and hoonish behaviour, that it's the desire to destroy. But the people who are doing these things have so little stake in society. All they're doing is venting their anger against the props of society, whether they are carving their name into the seat of a train or hurling bottles, smashing stuff.

TP: Of course a lot has changed since the 1930s. What your novels depict, I think, is the consequences of three decades of a right-wing offensive against workers' living standards. Combined with that is the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rightward shift of all the social democratic parties around the world. Labour and the trade union bureaucracy are no longer seen as offering any alternative.

TD: It's interesting that you see these broader social connections. When I was writing the book I didn't think about that at all, but when you stand back other meanings start to emerge from it. You get more of a distanced view.

The collapse of the Soviet Union is still causing shockwaves now, just like the Russian Revolution caused shockwaves that rebounded for decades afterwards. I think that so much of the scramble for power, the depletion of minerals and the redistribution of wealth is the result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. I don't know much about this but like everyone else I read the newspaper and I have opinions.

There seems to be a broad front, these days, of disaffected, worried people, who feel that elections are not really the pathway for them to bring about change. They prefer to express themselves through protests, like against the TPP [Trans Pacific Partnership], rather than running off to elections once every three or four years.

There's a sense that the world has become a mire of vested interests and immovable oligarchies. Most of the politicians on display are carrying a card for one of these groups.

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