

# INTERVIEW with WILL ELLIOT

*By Brian Evenson, September, 2008*

Australian Will Elliott came to international attention when his book *The Pilo Family Circus* won the inaugural ABC fiction award. The book dances along the tightrope between grotesque nightmare and the blackest kind of comedy you can imagine. It is a novel of perilous pratfalls, freakshow fates, and sideshow surrealism.

It is also an exploration of what any one of us might do were we to don the white face-paint, were our inhibitions to be stripped away and a full menu of anarchic delights laid out before us for sampling.

Elliott's debut novel went on to be awarded two of Australia's most coveted genre accolades—the Ditmar and the Golden Aurealis. It was short-listed for the 2007 International Horror Guild award for best novel. Not recommended for coulrophobics.

**EVENSON:** Can you talk a little about the writing of the book? Where did the idea come from? Are you as afraid of clowns as most of the rest of us are?

**ELLIOTT:** The book was just another continuation of the formula I'd been trying to establish for writing novels set partly in our world, partly in a "nether world" or "slipstream" setting. Books that excited me at the time were Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*, Simon R. Green's *Shadows Fall*, so on. The plan's always been to find a different reality and throw a real person into it, see what happens. So I needed a smaller, "enclosed world" type setting, and a circus seemed pretty ideal. That choice of setting was probably responsible for the horror elements coming out—the plan hadn't been to write horror necessarily, just to use whatever speculative fiction tools were on hand to tell the tale. Being set in a circus made the story a darker one, but there was also great opportunity to mix some really bizarre, absurd elements with the rest. By the end I was hoping the reading of the book would feel a little itself like a carnival ride . . . sometimes scary, sometimes funny, sometimes kind of nauseating.

**EVENSON:** In *The Pilo Family Circus* I think you do an amazingly good job of blending different kinds of horror and violence. Much of the book's violence feels psychological, and that's enforced by Jamie's constantly wondering whether what he's experienced is real. But there's also a kind of blackly funny slapstick violence going on, especially early on, and by the end we've seemed to enter into a fantastic/mythic/apocalyptic realm. Part of the satisfaction of the novel is the way you get the best out of all those different aspects of violence. How did you sort out how to balance those impulses in a way that would make for a satisfying book?

**ELLIOTT:** I guess it was just following intuition at each particular fork in the plot, seeing which particular emotional note needed to be struck. Early on the violence is a little hard to take seriously—a bouncing rolling pin? Harmless slapstick. But yes, as Jamie/JJ go down darker paths, as JJ discovers there is nothing to limit his newly discovered tastes, and no one to stop him, things get much more serious. Same with the rest of the circus, as its mask is gradually pried loose to show what's really beneath there. I guess it showed that genuine evil can be allowed in via small incremental steps, even beginning with something as seemingly innocuous as wicked laughter.

**EVENSON:** In reading *Pilo*, I thought of other clown-related fiction and movies I'd read or watched, from Stephen King's *It* to the way Heath Ledger plays the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. Did you have other literary clowns in mind when you were writing *Pilo*? What makes your novel stand out?

**ELLIOTT:** Quite a few people have made comparisons to *It*, which is fine by me—who wouldn't want to be compared with King? Still, I don't see many similarities between that specific novel and mine, although I welcome Stephen King as an influence, and was certainly aiming for a King-style edge and suspense. I guess I was trying to do a Mervyn Peake-influenced, character-based, enclosed-world fantasy, with a hard Stephen King edge to it. There weren't any other circus-based books or films that went through my mind during the writing of the book, which may be what made the clowns different; the emphasis was on their personalities, rather than what the genre conventions expected of clowns in a horror story.

**EVENSON:** Also, I wonder if you know an early lesser-known circus novel from the 1930s, *The Circus of Dr. Lao* (which was later made into a movie starring Tony Randall, called *The Seven Faces of Dr. Lao*)? It's mostly different from what you're doing, but there are one or two echoes.

**ELLIOTT:** Unfortunately no, I haven't read Dr. Lao . . . certainly I'll track that one down and add it to the ever-growing "must read" pile.

**EVENSON:** Even though the circus is basically a fantastic place, you focus a lot on the business dynamics of it, think about it as a very weird capitalist enterprise. We get to see the way the management provokes competition between the clowns and the acrobats, for instance. We also see the different social levels that exist as well—who is disposable and who's not, and a lot of emphasis on making a curious profit. Do you see the novel as commenting on the workplace (in the same way, perhaps, that George Saunders' stories do)?

**ELLIOTT:** I didn't personally see it that way during the book's composition, but many readers have made similar analyses. One of the mysteries of the craft, I suppose, is the way a book's deeper meanings can look so different from different standpoints. With all writing I've done, even the most obvious symbolism is never planned from the outset as a conscious choice of theme—it kind of bleeds into the story organically, for want of a better word. It can then be shaded or emphasized with rewrites. I suppose, though, the day-to-day life of the clowns, their relationships with their bosses and competitors, were probably influenced by my own not-always-rosy dealings with employers. I definitely don't lampoon it all with Saunders' precision—that guy just strikes bullseyes every time he writes.

**EVENSON:** You've spoken elsewhere of coming to writing as a kind of recovery mechanism after you were diagnosed with schizophrenia at age 19. I know that some critics and readers have tried to see the novel as a metaphor for schizophrenia, some even going so far as to see it as autobiographical. I suppose one reason they're tempted to see it that way is because of the way Jamie, when he puts on his clown makeup, becomes JJ. Would you care to comment on that?

**ELLIOTT:** Yeah, it's definitely easy to see why people would make that connection. But the Jekyll / Hyde effect, brought about by use of the clowns' face-paint, isn't really an accurate description of what the illness does to someone. More generally, the descent into a far less pleasant otherworld, with different rules, would be a better representation of the illness. Also, Jamie's "morning after" grappling with the deeds of JJ, his alter-ego, probably had echoes of my own wrestling with symptoms, especially in those times when I'd come off medication and decided to try and work out on my own what was real and what wasn't. That isn't a healthy practice, incidentally—it can't be done long term. The illness wins that arm wrestle, even if it just toys with you for a while.

**EVENSON:** For me, the novel is less a metaphor for schizophrenia than it is one for addiction: the blackouts, the lost times, the sense Jamie and JJ both have of not controlling their behavior, as well as the way that Jamie's constantly cooking up the contents of the velvet bag and the idea that doing this might both take away his pain and grant his wishes.

**ELLIOTT:** I didn't initially believe the book was influenced by my experience with the illness at all, but having thought about it, maybe I was wrong. It was the defining experience of my adult life, so it became part of my writing "filter," through which everything passes on its way to the page (every writer has one, though each writer lets lived experience influence their work to varying degrees.). Which isn't to say the illness is the only thing in there, nor is it my intention, generally, to symbolize it . . . it just works out that way. Maybe one day future books won't have anything to do with it.

As for addictions, I regret they are most certainly part of my adult life too. I'm talking about things that are often fucking ridiculous . . . addicted to a brand of iced coffee? As in, unable to function without a few bottles of it in the fridge? God . . . how about the computer game I spent a year of my life playing around the clock, to the exclusion of all else? (I guess a benefit of the illness was it limited my options for addiction . . . can't exactly go and snort cocaine all night, now.)

But yeah, during the writing of the book, I'd based the JJ / Jamie switch on someone I knew, and their stark change when very drunk. My friend really veered sideways, but oddly in a kind of goofball-obnoxious way, similar to how JJ behaves early on in the book. It's possible to laugh at him even as he's disgracing himself . . . possible for a while, anyway.

**EVENSON:** You have a clean, crisp style, fairly spare, which offers us the details we need but always keeps things moving briskly along. Is that something particular to this book or something you strive for in general? Who are some of the writers you most admire?

**ELLIOTT:** I'd say it's particular to this book. Stuff I've worked on since then has been a bit different, the style more substantial. I may even have scaled back the language just a touch too far in this case, left it a little too sparse. My favorite writer, Mervyn Peake, wrote in a style completely at odds with the style of this book. Peake used very long, involved, poetic sentences. King of course is another of my favorite writers from a technical standpoint, especially his description and dialogue; his influence meeting Peake's (two styles quite starkly different), was what produced this book. These days I especially like reading books that mess around with techniques, like Thomas Pynchon. George Saunders is a brilliantly eccentric stylist. David Foster Wallace (may he rest in peace) was a genius at playing with techniques and showing the technical extremes a writer could go to.

**EVENSON:** Do you see *Pilo* as a straight horror novel? As a literary horror novel? On the one hand you were a finalist for the International Horror Guild Award; on the other, the book was published because you won the ABC Fiction Award, which doesn't distinguish between genres but is just looking for the best original book-length work of fiction.

**ELLIOTT:** I see it as a dark fantasy, which is a pretty close relation to horror. "Slipstream" may be a better description for it, since it involves a person from our world moving sideways into a different reality. The horror label doesn't bother me at all, of course. "Literary" is a flattering

description, but I'm not going to go around calling it that myself (may as well paint a target on my chest and waltz into a firing range.). Genre tags don't bother me, really, nor do they give the sense of limiting what may be written next.

**EVENSON:** *Pilo* was the fifth manuscript you wrote but the first published. Are the others in a similar space? Any plans to publish them? What's next for you?

**ELLIOTT:** Honestly I don't know. There's a memoir coming out in Australia, but I'm unsure about whether that'll be available elsewhere or not. As for the next novel, I've written one called *Nightfall* which is in some ways a serious departure, aesthetically, from the Circus. That may actually be a problem, since early on in a writer's career it's about establishing a "brand." So rather than trying to be too original, I may have to write something a bit more related to the first *novel*, and have *Nightfall* published at a later date, maybe as the third book. To me, nonetheless, *Nightfall* is the same kind of thing as the Circus—a dark, enclosed-world fantasy, based on strange characters, and a person from our world who encounters them. I guess it's back to the lab to think about it some more.