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## Interview

Timothy Findley

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## Interview

### **Abstract**

Terry Goldie interviewed Timothy Findley at the 'Fiction and Film Conference' at McMaster University, 5 November 1982.

6. It is interesting to note that Pound's attitudes to World War I as portrayed in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* bleed back into *The Wars*, as we see on a re-reading of that novel after *Famous Last Words*. Findley's fictive record of life at the Front could be read as a gloss on the lines of 'E.P. Ode pour l'élection de son sépulcre', IV.
7. The name of the hotel itself finds its echo in Pound's *Canto LXXXI*, as the quotation (*FLW*, p.37) and Findley's prefatory note indicate.
8. See J.J. Espey, *Ezra Pound's Mauberley: a study in composition* (London: Faber & Faber, 1955).
9. See Espey, *op. cit.*, p.76.

# Timothy Findley

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## INTERVIEW

Terry Goldie interviewed Timothy Findley at the 'Fiction and Film Conference' at McMaster University, 5 November 1982.

*The last time, the main thing that we talked about was The Wars and so, today, I'd like to talk about the film of The Wars. Also, the last time you mentioned the novel that you were working on, which was Famous Last Words. Now that's out, so maybe we can talk a bit about that tool.*

All right.

*How did you find working on a film of a novel that was so well established? Was it difficult to turn it into a different medium?*

Yes, but I think I was helped, Terry, in the way you're always helped by knowing the people who are working with you. Working with Robin Phillips and, ultimately, with the actors the film came first. Of course, there were arguments and there were disagreements, but the film was what mattered.

*One thing that a lot of people have been talking about at this conference is how difficult it is to change a novel into a film, particularly because the brief space of time forces you to leave so many things out. I would think that most people in your position would be upset that something that you liked, and that you feel is very important, is going to be left out. Or perhaps you didn't find that in the end?*

Oh, no. I did find that. In *The Wars* there are lots of things left out that break my heart, and some for very difficult reasons. We decided, ultimately, that we would not have the running in the film because so much had been made of *Gallipoli*, in which there is running, and then *Chariots of Fire*, and although both *Gallipoli* and *Chariots of Fire* came, in terms of their inception, long after *The Wars* was a book, they got out first as films. We also had a mishap with the first running sequence with the coyote, out west. So we decided we wouldn't have the running. That's an element that's missing, that I'm very sorry to see go.

*It's interesting, though, that you mention Gallipoli because when I was listening to you talk about your film, it seemed to me so different. One of my complaints about Gallipoli was that it is so absurdly heroic. People talk about how in the end they actually confront the fact that all these poor young men were dying out there in the war but it's confronted in an almost Walt Disney way. There's no real blood. There's no guts. What you said this morning suggests that in *The Wars* as a film there isn't necessarily a lot of blood but there is the guts that need to be there.*

Yes, there's an image that people can't escape. You mustn't let people escape, any longer, from what war really is. Now that can sound like Sam Peckinpah and I think Sam Peckinpah is a different kettle of fish. Do you remember *Bonnie and Clyde*? When they shot the first man, there were no consequences. With the second man, the consequence was that they actually had to see the blood, and they found that terribly, terribly disturbing. Then there was an incredible scene when they were all getting shot up trying to make an escape, Bonnie and Clyde and the garageman and the sister-in-law. I have never forgotten Estelle Parsons in the back of the car, screaming about her eye, 'I can't see, I can't see'. If that had not been there, the film would have been a lie. In other words, there is a justifiable quotient of blood and guts and violence which, if it is done with integrity, is there to say, 'this is what this is really like'. If there is a reason, other than simply showing blood and guts, then it's wonderful. In the case of *Bonnie and Clyde*, I was never once offended by what I was shown, whereas in a film by Peckinpah, I am offended. I'm offended because I know I'm being had.

*In your talk this morning you said that when you write a novel you begin with a series of images that just start drifting through your mind. That must make it easier for you to take your novel and then yourself, as a scriptwriter, work it into a film.*

I think it probably does, Terry. I think I have a facility, which is natural and innate, to grasp what film is about. I have no real problem setting out the details of a scene and having a scene unfold in my mind and therefore onto the paper. The only thing I have to learn to do when I'm writing a script is to put *less* on paper, not to tell everyone what to do, because it doesn't leave any room for the stage designer or the actor to have an idea of his own. Instead of putting the shadings in with precision — her mouth curls at the left hand side for the following reasons — you've got to leave the actors and the director room to discover why you've said she's smiling at all. So you can wipe out half of what you might intend to put on the paper before it gets there.

*You were saying this morning how important it is that you do not control your characters but let the novel happen. When you're at that point, though, and turning the novel into a different medium, everything is set. But I suppose if you are creating new scenes, if you are creating new images, then you still give it that freedom.*

But there is a slight difference. Since the whole thing now has a shape that is established, you really are still working within that whole shape, with whatever you create that's new, and you're not very apt to break out of that whole, with anything startlingly new.

*Did you find that the director, Robin Phillips, and the other people did create something new which they suggested to you and then you worked with it?*

I talked this morning about a scene in the church that was pure Robin Phillips. It is not so much that Robin Phillips comes along and says 'I have this terrific idea to do a scene about blah, blah, blah'. He says, 'I have decided in my mind that I want to try to do this with the scene you have written.' There's where the creativity comes. He says, 'and I do this with it,' unfolding his hands and making a large shape coming from a little tiny envelope of two words. He will find within the nuance of two or three things that I've put on paper a whole relationship which is important to establish and the way of establishing it. In that moment where I have provided two little superficial words, Robin Phillips will find the most surprising means of saying, 'Ah, this is where I can establish this part of that person's relationship with that person'. That's

where the creativity comes in. 'Pass the salt' doesn't really seem to resonate with an awful lot of character-building but in Robin Phillips' hands it does. 'Pass the salt' can become the most rivetting thing in the whole film. It doesn't, I'm making that up, but you see what I mean.

*Did you find, then, that this was your best experience, of writing for film?*

Oh yes, absolutely, bar none. And it was because Phillips is not only a great director, but also a great teacher. I have to clarify that by saying that in all great directing and all great teaching the thing they hold in common is the creation of a means to an adventurous situation. The teacher comes and says to the writer, 'You give me the map,' and to the actors, 'you will climb the mountain. I know you can stand the cold and the heat and the weather. That's why I've chosen you. Now we're all going to read the map and we're all going to try for the mountain. I know how to get up *this* part — you know how to get over *that* part. So, if the map is accurate — we will probably make it.' There's this wonderful sense that he injects into the thing: the adventure and excitement of exploration. He gives you the confidence that if anyone can get you there he can, but he doesn't ever override the whole situation by saying, 'I'm terribly sorry but I have made up my mind and there is no way we are going to do anything more with this scene than what I've decided to do'. He is always open, right to the last, to the creative inspiration of what might happen.

One perfect example is an English scene, in which Lady Barbara D'Orsey makes her first entrance. The scene takes place in a hospital and Robert Ross is sitting beside the bed of his friend, Harris, who is dying. Barbara comes with another character to give flowers to a man who is dying in the same room, further down the way. Barbara says to her companion, 'You give these flowers to him,' meaning her friend in the bed, who is in terrible pain and swathed in bandages. 'I can't stand this any longer.' And she walks away while the friend stays to give the flowers. Here we get pure Phillips. Everything up to this moment in the scene is in the book, but Barbara walks past all these beds in Robin Phillips' film-making version and she looks sideways at a stranger, in one of the beds, who only has something wrong with his arm. He is very sexy, and very alive, and the exchange between these two people! This woman who has come to give flowers to a dying man, she's already on the make for the guy in the next bed. It's astonishing. Then she walks on and you know that she's going to have to come to Robert. She disappears behind a screen and then steps out the other side. When she does this, she stops

and she looks around *everywhere but at Robert*, and Robert is glued to her. Then the chance thing happens that Robin Phillips is brilliant at catching. As Barbara steps back, out of sight, *the floor creaks*, and that sound is like something yawning open underneath the whole building — and, indeed, the whole safe world. This is the first indication of what Barbara represents. Then she's gone. But it so happens it was just happenstance that the floor creaked! Another director might have cursed and asked them to fix the floor-boards and re-shot the scene. But Phillips was open to the suggestion the sound gave him and he used it. A very powerful effect.

*In reference to sound, how did having Glenn Gould do the music affect your perception of the film, and of the novel?*

Having Robin Phillips, having Martha Henry, having William Hutt, Brent Carver, Domini Blythe, Jackie Burroughs, made me regret that my sense of nuance wasn't on a par with their sense of nuance. Actors have a very powerful sense of nuance. *Wonderful*. But, of course, I have to realize that their insights are only a step ahead of mine because I have provided some sort of background, from which they can jump forward.

The same was true of Glenn Gould. The first thing Gould said was 'I want to do this film. I love the story, but I have to tell you I cannot accept it.' He'd read the book and he'd loved the book, but he said, *knowing* the book, 'I cannot score this film unless I am assured that no animals have really been killed in the process of making it.' And they weren't. Any dead animal that does appear was got from the knackers. And there was always a vet on the scene. There's a horse that's 'killed' in front of you but it's only faked. The vet was there all the time. Once Gould was assured of this, he said, yes, that he'd do it.

Well his first thing, having viewed the film, was to say, 'All right, most of the music must emerge from the seat of that piano bench in the Ross house.' He was referring to an early scene in which one of the characters is playing the piano. And he said, 'I know an Edwardian house would have the Brahms Intermezzi and the Schubert sonatas and some other things and, of course, a songbook.' So, almost all the piano music emerges as only what could be in that house, in that piano bench. You hear a young man singing, '*Hello, My Baby!*' That's one of the first things you hear in the film. Later, you hear, in the distance, military bands, playing way off down the street. Gould uses that. Then you have a classical piece, a Brahms Intermezzo, which becomes thematic.

Then there are variations. For instance, you go to church and you have hymn music, and Gould plays around with that. He gives you a trumpet descant for this church music which adds a military air to it. Then he extrapolates from the church choir, the voices of the boy sopranos, which then get reduced from twenty to two and then to one, so that you've got this wavering, *lost* sound, trying to praise God. The nuance is just astounding.

Every bit of music in the film begins with found music — which was indigenous to both place and time: songs, hymns, bands, choirs, pianos. Then Gould strips it — tears it apart — puts it back together, melded. He was a genius. His contribution to the film was the last thing he did. After he died, we all gathered in St Paul's Toronto. This was his Memorial service. For me, it was very touching because his favourite scene in the film was the scene shot in St Paul's — the one for which he wrote the trumpet descant and from which he called the voices of the boy singers. It's private — but I cannot see that scene without thinking of him.

*Had you finished Famous Last Words before you started the film?*

No. I was still doing the final editing. I didn't write the Queen Mary episode, for instance, until about six weeks before the book was published. I went right on writing until the very last minute.

*So did you find filming The Wars to be much of an influence on you in writing Famous Last Words? Or was it very much two separate things?*

Oh no, I think everything was set in *Famous Last Words* and *The Wars* couldn't influence it really, because all the filmic elements in *Famous Last Words* were already there.

*I would say, though, that Famous Last Words is not as overtly filmic as The Wars. Although The Wars was perhaps less filmic than photographic.*

That's what I was going to say. I don't think *The Wars*, as written, was so much filmic as it was photographic. *Famous Last Words* is not so much filmic in structure as it is obsessed with movies, in an iconic sense. I'm really sort of sad, Terry, that no one has quite picked up on this iconic aspect, which is a very important factor — or was for me. It wasn't chance that I chose Lana Turner, for instance. Lana Turner was *the*

movie star of that period. She was the one everyone wanted to fuck. 'It Lana Turner is the best fuck in the land then it's her I'll fuck.' She was the icon of fucking. And what does that say for poor Lana Turner who's got the royal round-up in the street? I mean talk about screwing people up, and that's not a pun. Here's another icon: if Private Oakley is a sharp shooter, you reach for the iconic version of the sharp-shooter, and call him 'Annie' Oakley. And another: Freyberg *sounds* Jewish, so immediately Quinn assumes he *is* Jewish and assumes the basis of his rage is racial. I thought it was rather cunning to then have Freyberg react by saying, vehemently, 'I am not a Jew, I am not a Jew.' And perhaps he isn't. It's never said whether he is or not but *he knows* that it mitigates what his rage is about, if it is only based on his being a Jew. He wants his rage to be unconditional. So then, Quinn says, very smartly and rather meanly, 'Oh, does it matter?' That exchange is about the icons we're saddled with and the icons we *think* we're saddled with. Quinn is right in knowing it shouldn't matter: Freyberg is right in knowing it *does* matter.

*It's interesting, because the central icons, of course, are the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, and Hugh Selwyn Mauberley.*

Precisely.

*How did you decide to use those people? Did the image of these characters come to you and you had to use them?*

Well, no. Yes and no. Actually, you see, the book started out being a book about the murder of Harry Oakes, and once I was in there I had to have the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, and it started working backwards. At first Mauberley wasn't there at all, although Pound was. Mauberley didn't come in until about the third draft, as the unifying voice, to keep the whole thing in one voice. Once I discovered that voice, then I put in everything that Pound had put into Mauberley. I was slavish to the poem sequence, to the detriment of the book, so I'm told. I wanted to get every bit of that poem in there. When the newspaper lady destroyed Mauberley in the press, for instance, she destroyed him with a re-writing, verse for verse, of one whole passage, saying how he was unable to function in the twentieth century; anchored to Flaubert and so on. God, I worked hard on that, and I resented terribly having it cut. Part of it got in but not all. I did a whole thing on Beerbohm, who lived up the hill from Ezra, and Ezra was always teasing Max. Teasing, *hah*,

*hah.* I mean Ezra could be a vicious old bastard, he really could. He never let Max off his hook — taunting him that he was a Jew, and saying terrible things about the homosexual situation. All these things are all in the poetry, all in the Mauberley poems. In another section — so we're told — the model was actually Arnold Bennett — the image of the writer who has sold out for money and fame. I did change this — and made it Hemingway. Hemingway was the literary figure of the book's period who made all the money and worked so hard at creating a public image — a fame. Originally, I had several Hemingway scenes. Now only one. Anyway, all those portions of the poem were slated to be adhered to, and then they had to be taken out of the book because it made a different book than the one that needed to be. There is one remaining — which I rather like — which is 'Mauberley's' poem to the Duchess of Windsor — 'braving time'.

*A lot of people have talked at this conference about the need to write a film which is true at least in spirit to the novel. But some people have said that anything, any narrative, any story, or whatever, can be used as a spur for a film and it doesn't really matter whether you're true to it or not. It just becomes an imaginative device. How close did you feel that you had to stay to history in writing the novel, say for example, in the characterizations?*

Well, I think the fairest thing to say is that it would never occur to me to do something with someone real that was unlike them. Nothing that any of the people do in the book that is *in fact* fictitious even remotely oversteps the boundaries of possibility. Given their character and given the situations they find themselves in they behave as they should. All the scenes between the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, for instance, are very carefully researched. You learn quickly that distortion of real character would distort the fiction. But you still have to make your point and sometimes that involves heightening or underlining characters' traits. This is where you must be most careful of defamation. There's a way Lilli Palmer found, a wonderful way, of not getting in trouble with the Duchess of Windsor. In her book, *Change Lobsters and Dance*, she says, when she met the Duchess of Windsor, her first impression was of an old nutcracker that she had as a child. She had '*that kind of mouth*'. Well, there, you see, you have the image of the 'ball-breaker', but Palmer hasn't *said* that the Duchess of Windsor is a 'ball-breaker'. Nonetheless, she has made the portrait of one by providing the image of a toy. That was Lilli Palmer's way of saying it. I found other ways of saying it.

*Did you always feel the danger of saying something that was going to get you into trouble legally?*

Oh, sure. For instance, I had to make it very clear that Lindbergh merely delivered a message without knowing that the results of the message would be the murder of Edward Allenby. To imply that Lindbergh would be party to murder *would* be libellous — and, incidentally, I wouldn't dream of saying he was. Lindbergh wasn't like that at all. But I had to make it absolutely clear I was not even remotely suggesting such a thing. If I had been careless, it could have appeared that I was saying something I wasn't saying. And likewise, Wallis must not say to Mauberley, 'I want that man killed,' meaning Oakes. So what she says, instead, is a very diplomatic thing from the writer's point of view, which is simply, 'We must do *something*.' Mauberley contracts the killing: for Wallis. Wallis doesn't even know about it.

*Most of us would think that the essential icons in your novel are the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, but Hugh Selwyn Mauberley must be a central icon in a certain sense as well because you could have easily created a fictional character who could have done similar things, being around in certain places and reacting to them.*

Oh, sure. But then the point would have been missed which is that Mauberley is the creation of Ezra Pound. Ezra is an identifiable fascist sympathizer — and he created, perhaps unwittingly, in Mauberley the perfect image of a different kind of fascist sympathizer. I didn't want a lot of *overt* fascism. It had to be the kind of situation where one who should know better opts for the fascist cause because it is his only means of finding safety in a world that otherwise would crush him. This is Mauberley. Pound was different. Pound *used* fascism to further his own polemical views of history, finance, politics and anti-semitism. I wanted to express both of these facets of fascism. The carelessness of Mauberley: the determinism of Pound.

On the subject of the Windsors. I have been angered by reviewers who write: 'Oh you know, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor are such *superficial* people. Why would we want to pay any attention to them? How could they possibly have had anything to do with swaying major events of the time?' To which I reply, 'Well, take a tiny look at Ronald and Nancy Reagan. Aren't they rather superficial? *Ahem!* But just one minute: remember that around that dining room table down in Washington Mr and Mrs Reagan are making sure that a hell of a lot gets done that they would like to see done and their friends would like to see done. This is

where policy *can* be established that can't be established through the *public* mouth of the President. Well — the Windsors, and a good many 'superficial' others in their coterie, *did* hold sway over public and major events in *their* time. Try Charles Bedoux on for size. But the point really is, the Windsors were large enough and important enough for people like Hitler to want to use them. And a whole world of truly powerful people — ambassadors, diplomats, lawyers, jurists, etc. — clamoured to sit at their table. The pro-MacArthur people, for instance, used to gather over Windsor's wine during the Korean conflict. They made things happen, too — 'safe-guarding democracy'.

*But there is documentation that the fascist elements in Britain thought that something could be made of this. That's historical fact.*

Oh absolutely. Oh sure. I'm only talking about the character element, people saying that they're *merely* superficial. They're not superficial. They're only superficial to people looking at them from a disinterested prospect. But in another view, if you could get to sit at their table, you could have anything you wanted, and that's the point. Wallis wanted to create the kind of dinner table where king-making and influence peddling were possible, and the fascists knew that was her talent. It was her supreme talent. You don't walk off with the king of England and destroy the whole constitution of an Empire without such a talent. People who under-estimated her tended to dismiss her by saying, 'Of course she's nothing but a tart.' That was the popular British view. But the fascist view was more truthful: she caught the king/she destroyed an element of empire. That's hardly superficial. Wallis is best compared to the mistress of a King of France.

*One thing I wanted to ask you about was the narrative device of having Quinn and Freyberg reacting to things all the time. Many people have told me they have found that difficult. They have found the narrative structure, the frame, doesn't work for them.*

I've had some problems with that myself. I'm not saying it was wrong. I didn't perhaps handle it, or know how to handle it, delicately enough to keep the ball bouncing. But when I wrote them first, there was more of them and therefore they were more complex people. By the time the book came down to the wire, it was much too long, and one way to cut it was to say, 'well, okay, there is a lot of stuff the *reader* will be doing here.' Every time I came to Quinn and Freyberg, I was pausing, in essence, to give the

reader a chance to breathe. Also, I was pulling them into thinking what that pause might be about by saying, 'okay, let's start an argument.' These 'arguments' start with Quinn and Freyberg, but in fact it should be the reader who finishes the argument, who has that argument with himself and with his own judgement of what Mauberley has written on the wall. So Freyberg and Quinn tend to become black and white people: a device. They're difficult to deal with because they're almost too ironic. They represent very much two opposing camps and there's hardly a subtle bone in either of their bodies. But there's not much room for subtlety in their surroundings. I was always very nervous about them, but nevertheless I don't think the book could do without them. They have to be there: somebody has to be there to direct the focus. In film, you do this by cutting to a close up — or by changing the point of view. It's a necessary device.

*I was trying to think this morning about how you could get the story across without them and it's very difficult, with the simple device of the wall. You have to have people reacting to the wall. How did you decide to use the wall to get Mauberley's memories in print?*

When I first saw Mauberley, I had a flash vision of him standing on a chair, wearing a great coat, like that. I had already decided that I wanted to do something about the pictographs of Altamira — about how nothing changes and how the pictographs tell us that. Even before the ice age 'we made these wars, we saw these stars', etc. The image, I guess, came out of that. Here was another man in another time, standing on a chair, putting images on the walls and ceilings. While another ice age came down around him, closing him in, and creating the moment in which the present is frozen and the future takes off and becomes a new age.

*The original cover that I saw had a picture of the wall, with writing on the wall, and I found that quite an intriguing thing.*

The American cover now is a variation on that. It's beautiful, it has the rooms, the sunlight streaming through, and in the middle room there's a gramophone standing on a table, and it's very effective. The only thing I didn't like about that cover you saw was that the candlestick looked like...

*The menorah, the seven candles, and the wall looked like the Wailing Wall, or something like that.*

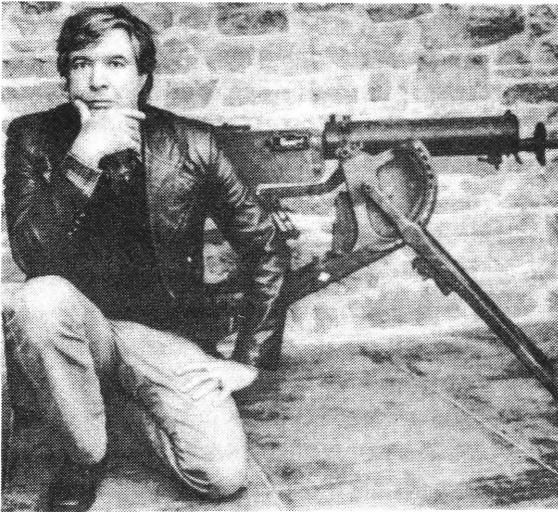
I thought we cannot have this because people are going to think this is another Holocaust book and that's the last thing anybody needs. And so I said, 'I'm sorry, that is the wrong interpretation of this book. It is not about that.' And then the artist got all apologetic and said, 'I hadn't realized it had that look.' But it had.

*What's the next step after Famous Last Words? What are you working on now?*

I'm working on a play about T.S. Eliot and his first wife, Vivien, and I'm working on a book about a blind cat.

*Sounds great. Thanks.*

Thank you, Terry.



Timothy Findley. Photo: Robert Lansdale.