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‘Eroticism is a safari’

He once said he hated women and that children needed to be traumatised. Now the artist Tomi Ungerer has swapped outrage for peace. **Andrew Billen** meets a controversial genius

When German friends gave my daughter a picture book called *The Three Robbers* I woefully failed to predict that six months later I would be watching its octogenarian author rummaging through leather fetish gear. All I perceived was that Tomi Ungerer's dark, Gothic picture-book with its sudden redemption of a trio of violent criminals was special. His *Moon Man*, about the persecution of the man in the Moon, was just as good and as odd. So was *CriCTOR*, which starred a respectable Parisian

who adopts, not an elephant, as in *Barbar*, but a boa constrictor. I am still looking forward to *Zeralda's Ogre*, which concerns a child-eating giant reformed by the cooking of an abductee. Reader, she marries him.

The blurb on the back of *The Three Robbers* did make obvious that his children's stories only skimmed the surface of Ungerer, "illustrator, writer, designer, toy collector and archivist of human absurdity, whose work spans storybooks, poster designs, political campaigns and films". His publishers politely omit "eroticist" from his CV, but our continental friends would have known, for in Germany, where his memoir, *Tomi: A Childhood Under the Nazis*, is taught in schools, he is a legend.

Born in Alsace, which, for all but four years of his life, has been French, he is equally acclaimed in France, where he holds the Légion d'Honneur. In 2007 a

Tomi Ungerer at his home in Co Cork, Ireland, and, right, his unpublished illustrations of his home in Canada, and from his books *The Three Robbers* and *Moon Man*. Cover image is from *Zeralda's Ogre*

museum in Strasbourg was opened and dedicated to him. As for America — he is both famous and infamous there, in the Sixties enjoying sensational success as an adman and political artist before his books managed to get banned by the library service.

Why Ungerer is so little known in Britain is a mystery. The last time he trespassed on our consciousness was in the early Eighties when feminist protesters aerosoled their misgivings about, and on, his sexual illustrations at an exhibition held in the Royal Festival Hall. Phaidon, however, is giving us a last chance to admire him by lavishly republishing his books one by one. The latest is the adult (not in the *Playboy* sense) *Far Out Isn't Far Enough*, a funny and beautifully illustrated account of his years in the mid-1970s as a farmer in a mad and savage corner of Nova Scotia, where he had arrived from New York

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having left behind two ex-wives, a child, a swoon of socialites offended by his lampoons of them and a woman who had volunteered to be his sex slave.

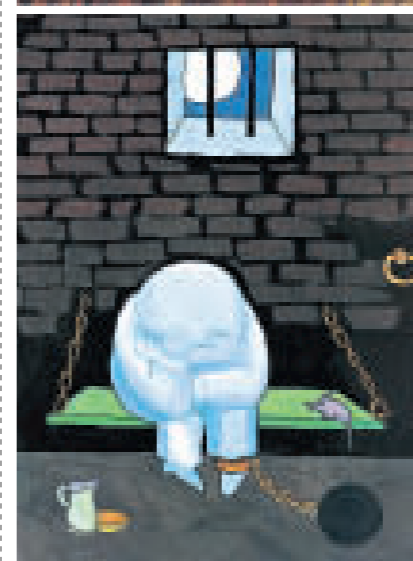
In 1976 he re-emigrated to the west coast of Ireland and raised a family. It is here, on his not-so-smallholding, that he greets me by grabbing my shoulders and looking in my eyes. "He is sympathetic!" he announces to Aria, his eldest daughter by his third wife. Ungerer has a snowfall of white hair, a bird-beak nose, freckled skin, a guttural Franco-German accent and world-forgiving laugh. In his studio, Aria sits in the corner, a Boswell transcribing his bon mots and acting as his doomed-to-fail spin doctor. When, for example, he says that one must traumatise children to give them identity, she explains that he does not really mean it. He reminds her by saying how on Easter Day he would take down his gun and tell the children he was going to shoot the Easter Bunny.

We are sharing the room with a skeleton in a fez and a blindfolded female mannequin with a red suction pad for a nipple. He soon leads me to the subject of bondage and his 1986 book *Guardian Angels of Hell*, in which he interviewed Hamburg dominatrices, women he defends on the grounds that better a man is beaten professionally than that he kills a little girl in the woods out of frustration.

I ask if art provided a comparable safety valve for him. "My work is my escape route," he says. "But, you know, I'm basically a satirist. Even my children's books are satirical."

We are surrounded by the eruptions of his satirical imagination: six empty sardine tins painted white and lined up like coffins; a block of wood shaped like an Easter Island statue with a saw blade through it; a canvas on which a floor-rag's chance configuration suggested itself as, and duly became, *The Irish Wanker's Long Johns*. This morning he woke up dreaming of a sunset composed of meat and he started photocopying images of beef, veal and kidneys and sticking them, not to paper — which would be pedestrian — but to baking trays. "I would call it an infirmity," he says of his imagination. "I know no rest."

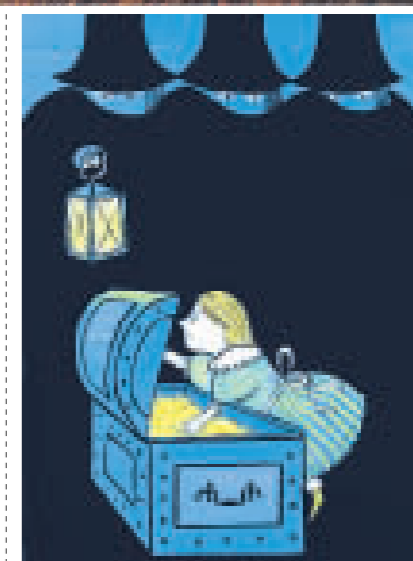
On a notice board are photographs of two long-dead people possibly culpable for his affliction. They are his father, a clock factory owner, whose contribution to his son's psyche was to die of septicaemia after he was stung by a hornet when Ungerer was 3, and his mother, a beauty with airs who, after her bereavement, sent him to board with an uncle so puritan that he believed Tomi's childish cartoons were sacrilegious. Returning at weekends, Tomi would be "drowned" by maternal kisses, which he found disgusting. He tells me he wrote a book, *No Kiss for Mother*, and how pleased he was when it won an American DUD award for worst children's book of 1973. He says it is about a boy who hates being kissed. He forgets that in it he made the protagonist a cat. Did he never kiss his mother, not even after the Nazi invasion forced her to take him back? "I never did, not to the very end." Not even on her deathbed?



"No. Her hand, yes. It is very sad. It's a source of great guilt too. But I just couldn't do it. You're marked. Now, when I talk that children should be traumatised, I'm not talking about this kind of trauma, you see? I'm not wishing this kind of trauma."

The gravest charge that could be levelled against him was one he copped to in an interview with *The New York Times* 30 years ago. Asked why so many of his drawings showed females in submissive postures, he replied that, as a breed, he simply did not like women. His stance has softened since and so has received opinion. Feminists can be heard arguing the case for sex workers and for the sovereignty of a woman's erotic imagination. They might even applaud him when he says: "I always thought the most interesting thing when you have an affair with a woman is to find out what her fantasies are. Once you play out those fantasies, you're bound to go beyond some borders. Eroticism is a safari."

Yet when he arrived in New York in 1956, he was quickly hailed as a children's author with the publication of *The Mellops Go Flying*. He maintains it is one of life's disciplines to retain your innocence. But they are not innocent books, I object. "Oh, they are the nightmare of the pedagogues," he agrees. The head of Swiss kindergartens said that she would never allow them in her nurseries. Under Reagan, they were excluded from US libraries, punishment, he thinks, for his agitprop in the Sixties. "The head fell first and the axe came later," he says, meaning, I assume, that by the time of the ban he was already



abroad. "I'm sorry, I'm very pretentious here. I think I have to make a drawing." He turns to Aria. "I'm OK, right?" She replies: "That's a relative term, Tomi."

If his parents lent him early insights into death and betrayal, the war filled in the gaps. At school he was indoctrinated into Führer worship and anti-Semitism. At home Nazism was mocked. When his town was liberated, he witnessed such bloody carnage he can still paint the scenes from memory. His early suspicions of the human condition were surprisingly confirmed when, in an attempt to get away from it all, he and his third wife, Yvonne (also a toiler in children's publishing) took voluntary exile in Nova Scotia. His neighbours' lives in what, he insists, was a wildly exceptional Canadian community were as elemental as those of the animals he reared and slaughtered. The population's main hobby was burning down buildings. "I had no idea that I would land into this morass of delinquency and freedom."

"Maybe it was all fine until you got there," Aria suggests.

In 1976, with Yvonne pregnant with Aria, they left for Ireland, where they raised three children and kept farming. Yvonne is away when we meet, but it has been a successful marriage and their children live close. "But I was not a very good father. I was sporadic. With the children, what I liked the most was playing with them. But my wife was great." When he arrived the parish priest gave him a prayer by St Francis, which he carries in his wallet. It beseeches God to make him an agent of peace. Somehow along the way, he says, he

gave up on hate. More recently, he allowed himself to like his own work. The breakthrough followed the award in Berlin in 2008 of two coveted gongs presented by the art critic Werner Spies. His self-admitted need for recognition, even as he approaches his 80th birthday this November, reminds me a little of Doktor Bunsen van der Dunkel in *Moon Man*, the boffin who builds a rocket to the Moon but whose greatest pleasure is to then be "elected chairman of an important scientific committee". Ungerer's neediness either merely reflects the fragile ego of the artist or tells us something more about the quality of his self-esteem. I ask him about the guilt he has mentioned.

"Oh yes. I mean, this is the torture of my life, my guilt. I always say I'd be a free and happy man if I didn't have guilt." What is he guilty about? "Everything: people I have offended, talking too much, my short temper, being reckless, selfish, egoistic. It haunts me, totally."

Does he see Phoebe, his daughter from his second marriage? "Yes, we are in touch. But I just saw her occasionally. I was just in my work. I was no father to her, only occasionally. Big guilt. And the guilt there is a case of lack of respect."

He was young and he had a difficult childhood, I say. "To have a difficult childhood is no excuse. In fact, when you have had a difficult childhood you should be much more understanding."

I ask him if he heard Martin Amis say recently it would take brain damage for him to write for children. Ungerer barks with joy. "This is very refreshing. You could not have told me anything better. Excellent! I have brain damage." He opens his Nazi memoir to show me an X-ray of his skull. "I was born sick. For the first two years of my life I was not allowed to run and then I crashed my skull. Surely I have brain damage!"

It seems a pertinent place to stop, although the day happily extends into a lunch of tall stories and recollected practical jokes, a walk through barns where lichen on concrete surpasses, he thinks, art. Then he retrieves a trunk of leather outfits donated by a dominatrix who was retiring. "Tomi," Aria says, "you really need to use talcum powder on these or they will crack."

At his door, he grasps my hand. "I am genuine," he says, quite unnecessarily. The G-word that rather suggests itself is one I use very rarely: genius.

***Far Out Isn't Far Enough* is published this month at £19.95**