

Tom Cox and the Power of Friendship

by Fanny Charles



If you tried to find a link between golf, vintage vinyl, cats, and books that explore a beguiling blend of dark myth, history, landscape, wildlife and strange, inexplicable happenings, you might be forgiven for throwing up your hands in total bafflement.

Enter the world of Tom Cox, one of the most interesting writers around—cat-lover, former professional golfing journalist, one-time rock critic for *The Guardian*, keen walker and a man with an eye and an ear for the quirky and eccentric, for the undiscovered secrets of old houses and the unheard voices of the landscape.

Tom Cox is the antithesis of the short-attention-span writer. He doesn't use text speak, trendy abbreviations or any of the life's-too-short-to-actually-read-something scraps of Tik-Tokery or Instagramery that pass for writing these days.

Tom writes long sentences. He writes long paragraphs—sometimes very long, but you stick with it because, like Cicero's audience in the Senate waiting for the final verb to know what the hell he is actually saying, you want to know where he is going. And he writes long books—such as the latest novel, *Everything Will Swallow You* (albeit not Tolstoy-long). Asked to describe one of Tom's books, I suggested (sounding a bit pretentious—sorry!) that it was like James Joyce's *Ulysses* meets *Mrs Dalloway*-era Virginia Woolf.

When I met him in Bridport to talk about *Everything*

Will Swallow You, the new short story collection *Curious Events Lately Occurring In This Neighbourhood*, and his life and writing generally, he seemed quite happy with this description, since he had only recently read any Woolf, and that was *Mrs Dalloway*, which he enjoyed.

Tom has for many years led a peripatetic life, moving between rented homes in Derbyshire, Cornwall, East Devon, Somerset, Dartmoor and Norfolk. While this had many downsides, he says the constant changes and moves did his writing good, enabling him, via Ordnance Survey maps, exploring, talking, long walks and learning about new places, to 'inject colour'.

Now he and his wife Ellie are living in West Bay, in their own home—'I'm not moving ever again,' he says. While living in Norfolk during Covid he realised he wanted to be in the West Country. After thinking about Dartmoor, which he loves, they settled on Dorset. Tom sold half his vast record collection and they 'saved like crazy'.

He loves Bridport, the town, the people, the culture, the welcoming atmosphere. And this autumn, he will be one of the guests at Bridport Literature Festival, talking about *Everything Will Swallow You*, which is published by Swift Books, and the new collection, which is published in September with Breakthrough Books.

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As well as the frequent moves, Tom has also changed publishers for various reasons, including the collapse of the crowd-funded Unbound, while he was writing a previous novel, *1983*. For a while he was on Substack, sending out newsletters and excerpts from his books, but he left it to make full access to his prolific writing more affordable for more people via his website.

The power of long-form writing

It is easy, as you are drawn deeper into the strangely-involving world of Eric, Carl and their eccentric friends and acquaintances, to wonder if Eric represents Tom’s old soul, while Carl is his alter ego. Tom says he identifies with every single character, and that Carl is painfully affected by the suffering of animals, (as Tom is), but he is also a keen knitter, perhaps also channelling Ellie, who is ‘an obsessive knitter.’ Eric is more like his father—who will be familiar to readers from several previous books (his talented mother provides the lino-cut illustrations for *Everything Will Swallow You*, as she has for many of his books).

Born in Nottingham, Tom says he didn’t have much of an education (although he was an avid reader) because he was so into sport, particularly golf, which he wrote about for national newspapers and magazines.

‘In 2015 I decided to ban myself entirely from doing that and instead devote my time to books and writing the other stuff I really wanted to write.’ In the era before Substack and writers earning a living from subscription-based newsletters, it must have been a scary move—‘Why on earth would people actually pay to support my writing? But I worked hard at it and I noticed that my work improved (and, most crucially of all, became more enjoyable for me),’ he says.

Tom believes passionately in the power and importance of nuanced, long form writing. ‘I see it as a protest against the surface-level, unoriginal, algorithmic drivel that now, from virtually every digital orifice, attempts to oppress us and ruin our brains.’

Humour and humanity

Everything Will Swallow You is a beguiling, involving, stimulating and endlessly fascinating book whose central characters are a middle-aged dealer in vintage vinyl and a semi-aquatic, 24-fingered, dog-that-isn’t-a-dog. There are various cats, a crow called Frank and a lot of things happen that might not be real but you want to believe in them.

It is frequently funny, sometimes laugh-out-loud, and at times very sad. It is also very wise and it makes you think about so many things—from all the forgotten or hitherto unheard-of bands waiting to be discovered in tubs of vinyl in vintage record shops and car boot sales to the strange histories of ancient manors and farmhouses and the geology of the Jurassic Coast. It is crammed full of memorable characters—people you would be lucky to meet in a pub or on a country walk—and is a beautifully written hymn to the complexity and importance of friendship.

What it is not is a page-turner ... or, at least, not THAT sort of page-turner. It’s not one of those books you read to take you from tired-but-still-awake into sleep, so that you have to re-read several pages next night because you can’t remember where you got to or what happened.

You definitely do want to know what happens next to Eric and Carl, where their journeys will take them, what happens when Mel tries stand-up or you discover that Penny can levitate.

You come away from *Everything Will Swallow You* richer for its humanity and humour, and rejoicing in the sheer love of words that is Tom Cox’s hallmark.

PS If by any chance, you read the review of *Everything Will Swallow You* in The Guardian, and were put off by the description of “comfy cardigan fiction”, please ignore and forget it. That is as wrong as it would be to describe Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet* as “chicklit”.

Tom Cox will be at this year’s Bridport Literary Festival. Visit BridLit.com for tickets. To purchase Tom’s books visit: <https://www.tom-cox.com/#books>