

Group Dynamics

John Tomerlin Talks About Charles Beaumont, the Southern California Group, and Writing for The Twilight Zone

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John Tomerlin has enjoyed a richly varied career in books and television. An original member of the “Southern California Group,” Tomerlin collaborated several times with the Group’s leader, Charles Beaumont, and broke into TV writing at the same time as Beaumont and other Group members, including Richard Matheson and George Clayton Johnson. His credits include scripts for *The Twilight Zone*, *Lawman*, *Wanted: Dead or Alive*, and *Thriller*. An avid pilot and sports car enthusiast, Tomerlin has penned numerous novels touching on these topics (*The Sky Clowns*, *The Magnificent Jalopy*, and *Challenge the Wind*, most notably), as well as nonfiction for magazines such as *Road & Track* and *Car & Driver*. Tomerlin recently reminisced with *Filmfax* about the Group and his television writing career.

FAX: You were one of the original members of the so-called Southern California Group, those emerging writers of the 1950s such as William F. Nolan, George Clayton Johnson, and Richard Matheson, who centered around the great fantasist Charles Beaumont. What are your early memories of Beaumont, and what was it like being part of the Group?

TOMERLIN: In addition to great natural writing ability and an off-beat imagination, Chuck had the kind of energy that attracted people to him. We first met in 1949, and in subsequent years he drew William F. Nolan and George Clayton Johnson into the core of what was later termed The Group. Richard Matheson became a good friend, as did Jerry Sohl, and we had close associations with writers like Harlan Ellison, OCee Ritch, Bill Idleson, and Rod Serling. The interactions between such people are by nature stimulating, and I think everyone benefitted from them creatively. I know I did.

There was, of course, no such thing as The Group in the beginning. We were just a few guys trying to find out how to be in the world. It was Chuck’s wife Helen who first used the term—not always admiringly—in connection with our get-togethers, which tended to be boisterous and run late. Later, when children needed to sleep, we moved our meetings to all-night diners or car trips to the beach.

Chuck loved to compete, and we had inter-Group “championships” at everything from pool to miniature golf. Chuck and I raced sports cars for a while, and after going broke

at that, moved to the Long Beach Pike Amusement Park to stage races in bumper cars. Bill Nolan proved accomplished at avoiding drunken sailors and teenagers, and emerged as “King of the Bump’ums” (his term). Later, someone bought a board game called “Grand Prix,” which we expanded with a hand-drafted playing board that covered an entire dining room table, leaf included. We played one night—all night—while my wife was in the hospital giving birth to our first child. The story became “The Great Kitchen Table Grand Prix,” published in *Road & Track* magazine.

In fact, I ended up writing about most of the wilder scenes inspired by my association with The Group. Trips to Paris and Monte Carlo for the Monaco Grand Prix, to New Providence Island for Nassau Speed Week, to Tijuana for the bull fights, and several driving tours of the country, all accomplished on little or no money. There were women along the way, of course, but these we will save for another time.

FAX: You collaborated with Beaumont more than once, perhaps most notably on the novel *Run from the Hunter*, published under the pseudonym “Keith Grantland.” How did that come about? And why was the name “Keith Grantland” used?

TOMERLIN: In 1950 I started working in radio, first at a station near Riverside, California, later at an NBC affiliate in Bakersfield. Chuck began writing short stories about the same time and, over the next few years, sold them to markets like *Esquire* and *Playboy*. About 1956, the station I worked for turned to playing Top-20 rock and roll, and I decided to look for other enjoyment. I knew Chuck had started a crime novel and put it aside for some reason, and I asked him if I could try finishing it. He agreed, and after doing the final polish, he got his agent to put it on the market.

We wanted a pseudonym, I don’t remember why. Extreme modesty, perhaps. We decided on the middle names of our two sons, Christopher Keith Beaumont and William Grantland Tomerlin. It sold to Gold Medal Books as *Run from the Hunter*. They paid a *fortune* (\$2500 I believe it was). I promptly wrote another book under my own name, and when it sold, I was hooked.

FAX: How did you become involved in television writing? Did you consider it an artistic endeavor, or was it more for the money?

TOMERLIN: You have to understand, I was in radio. I loved radio. I had wanted to work in radio at least from the time I was in high school, and when television took over, all the best shows—ones I might have worked on or even written for—were gone. It was as disappointing as it was disorienting. So, I have a love/hate relationship with TV: Love writing it, hate the business.

In 1958, at a car show in Beverly Hills, I met the president of the Mercedes-Benz club, a man named John Robinson, who also was story editor of the Steve McQueen series, *Wanted: Dead or Alive*. He asked me what I was doing, and when I said I was starting a new novel, a Western, he invited me to come in and talk story. John was a good man, a rarity in the business (he ended up in a mental institution, after the 1960 strike), and I

wrote four segments for him before the series ended. The pay was good, and by this time Chuck and Rich Matheson were writing for television too, so I just kept on at it.

All of us were under the curious delusion that the quality of programming would get better in time. That may seem naïve now, but back then there were still some fine dramatic series coming out of New York—*Playhouse 90* and *Studio One*, *The Defenders*, I think—and we believed sooner or later we could start doing that kind of work.

What we didn't understand was that television (and most motion pictures, for that matter) is about business, not drama, or art of any kind. The industry is run by businessmen who are good at what they do, which is only incidentally what my friends and I do, or hoped to do. The reason writing is held in low esteem by most Hollywood producers, and it is—the joke about the starlet so dumb she slept with the writer is classic—is because although they know that a writer is necessary, they have no idea what he's doing or how he does it. It's the reason for all the multiple credits you see these days: producers aren't sure what they want, but hope to recognize it when they see it. They don't, as is obvious from the number of bad films and television shows.

FAX: Perhaps your best-remembered program is the *Twilight Zone* episode “Number Twelve Looks Just Like You,” which is credited onscreen as having been written “by Charles Beaumont and John Tomerlin.” Beaumont's health problems were certainly getting in the way of his writing by this point. How did this collaboration work?

TOMERLIN: Chuck and I collaborated a number of times, on television shows, articles, and a couple of short stories, plus the novel you mentioned. “Number Twelve Looks Just Like You” wasn't a collaboration. I wrote the script based on his short story “The Beautiful People.” Somehow the credits got changed while I was out of the country. I've never known why. They should have read: “by John Tomerlin, Based on a Short Story by Charles Beaumont.” Neither do I know why the name of Chuck's original story was changed, but the fact that it was illustrates my point about producers.

Consider: Few viewers would have paid attention to the title of the episode anyway; Chuck's original story had been bought by the producers for adaptation to TV; and someone sat at his desk and thought, “I like my title better than the author's, so I'll just change it.” And this at a company reputed to be more respectful of its writers than most.

Chuck and I went to New York, in the summer of 1964, to begin collaboration on a new novel. He was unable to work when we got there—extremely unusual for him—and finally returned to L.A. A week or two later, he phoned to say he had an assignment to turn “The Beautiful People” into a *Twilight Zone*, and asked if I'd be willing to write it. I now believe his Alzheimer's had reached the point where he couldn't work, but I didn't know that at the time. I changed the focus of the story slightly, thinking it would play better for TV.

FAX: You mentioned that you had never watched the episode until recently. Why did you avoid it for so long?

TOMERLIN: I've always thought the reason I didn't particularly want to watch the episode was because I didn't want to see what had been done to my script (if, in fact, anything had). I now think the reasons are more complicated. By the time I returned home, Chuck was far advanced in his illness. His home life was a shambles and his wife, Helen, had become an emotional invalid. My wife, Wilma, took charge of some of their family responsibilities, and we took their newborn, Gregory, into our home for a while until Helen began to recover. I spent most afternoons with Chuck at a restaurant in the Valley called The Tail of the Cock, drinking Tanqueray martinis (only two or three, which was all either of us could handle), trying to figure out what the hell was wrong with him.

FAX: We sent you a tape of the show—what did you think of it, nearly 40 years after the fact?

TOMERLIN: It wasn't a painful experience. I was reminded that pacing was of less concern back then. This story was "talky" by its nature, and I wish I'd written in a little more action; but the production was true to my script as well as to Chuck's original ideas, with one added dimension: the use of the same cast members to play different roles. I think that worked.

One element I missed was having the Head Man (played by Richard Long, with his face partly in shadow) remain invisible until the end of the scene, and then revealed as normal, i.e. untransformed. I wanted to imply that the transformation was a scam to keep the public in subjugation, and was not indulged in by the true leaders. I still like the notion, but it would have been hard to shoot, and the point was too subtle to play well. The director was right to drop it.

In sum, the production was better than I'd expected, if less than I'd hoped for—which is to say, a considerable improvement on many of my experiences in TV.

FAX: Though *Twilight Zone* is probably your best-known TV credit, you did your largest body of work for the 1958-'62 Western series *Lawman*, starring John Russell and Peter Brown. How did you get involved with that series?

TOMERLIN: Richard Matheson had written an episode, and recommended me to the producer. I ended up doing a dozen originals and a couple of re-writes. Westerns were fun because you could write about virtually any subject—capital punishment, racial prejudice, political corruption—and people wouldn't object because they didn't recognize what you were doing. All they saw were white hats and black hats. You had to be careful about some content, though; this was just after the McCarthy affair, and story editors were still asking, "Are you now or have you ever been....?"

"Payola" was making headlines too, so on some shows you had to be careful what you asked for in the way of props. You could call for a telephone, but not a colored phone or a "Princess," as that would be construed as advertising. There were fewer constraints of this type in Westerns.

FAX: You also wrote an episode of Boris Karloff's series *Thriller*. What do you recall about it?

TOMERLIN: Nothing good. A key concept of fantasy is suspension of disbelief. Every competent fantasy writer knows what it is and how to do it. The task is more difficult in film and TV because less is left to the imagination. You have to be subtle.

I wrote an original story, "Dark Legacy," about a magician who dies and leaves a book containing the secrets of his illusions to another magician. The secret is, they aren't illusions; he's been conjuring up a demon to assist him. Now, it's absolutely crucial not to see the demon—at least not before the final scene—because the minute you see it, it ceases to be magic and becomes just another monster. Without consulting me, the director (John Brahm) decided to have the demon appear halfway through the show, after which the story had no further suspense and became rather silly.

Those interested in this sort of thing should see a film called *Night of the Demon* (a.k.a. *Curse of the Demon*, 1957) with Dana Andrews, based on M.R. James's "Casting the Runes." When the demon finally appears in the last scene, it's superimposed on the vapor rising from a locomotive, and only barely glimpsed until...Well, I won't spoil the ending. I know too well how *that* feels.

FAX: You also worked with *Dark Shadows* creator Dan Curtis.

TOMERLIN: Curtis is amazing. An extraordinarily versatile and, in my opinion, underrated filmmaker. His production of *Dracula*, written by Richard Matheson and starring Jack Palance, is the best of all versions of the Bram Stoker classic. And his production of Herman Wouk's *Winds of War* is one of the finest World War Two stories ever done for television. He also did a fine job with Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*, from a script by William F. Nolan.

I was fortunate enough to get the assignment for a three-hour adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (which appeared in two parts on the *ABC Circle Theater*), and I was set to do *Jane Eyre* when the series was discontinued. I regret this, not only because I enjoyed working for Dan (a writer himself, and understanding of the writer's task) but because I had hopes of setting the record straight on the correct pronunciation of "Eyre." There is internal evidence in the Charlotte Brontë novel that Jane's name is pronounced "Ire," not "Air." Now, the world will never know.

FAX: Another of your credits is *Genesis II*, for Gene Roddenberry. Tell us about that.

TOMERLIN: Okay, you've got me. Having criticized people in TV production, I must admit that here was someone else I liked and admired. Gene was a writer, which may have made the difference. I did one of the pilot episodes for a new series he had planned, called *Genesis II*. The concept was evocative of *Star Trek* in that it was a "journey" series: in a post-apocalyptic world, a future-tech subway system is found to have

survived. The cast travels to an unlimited number of “new beginnings”—mini-societies founded on every variation of human (or mutant) behavior imaginable. I loved the idea, but the network couldn’t quite visualize it.

FAX: When did you leave television, and why?

TOMERLIN: “Why” should be fairly apparent. “When” was the spring of 1964. *Lawman* had ended, I’d done a couple of re-writes for other Warner Brothers shows, and was given scripts to read for several hour-long series. Reading them crystallized a thought that had been growing in my mind for some time, that with the passing of the pure dramatic series and anthologies, there was nothing left I really wanted to do in television. And because I’d started by writing books, and hoped to write more of them, I decided I’d better get on with that.

FAX: But you had some credits after 1964. You wrote for *S*W*A*T*, the memorably violent 1970s series.

TOMERLIN: Well, I considered my break with TV in 1964 to be permanent, and stopped seeking further work. But opportunities came along after I returned to California in the late ’60s, and I accepted several of them. I’m glad I did, or I would have missed the opportunity to work for Dan Curtis, for instance.

FAX: How is it that you have worked so successfully in so many different fields? What accounts for your fantastically wide range as a writer?

TOMERLIN: The tough answer to that question is that I wasn’t talented enough or dedicated enough to be a major success in any one field. A gentler assessment might be that I’ve had a variety of interests in life, but never one that’s obsessed me. I wanted to race cars, and had some success at the amateur level, but was not tempted to turn professional. I learned to fly, and enjoyed owning my own plane for a while, but never thought of making it a career.

Similarly, I discovered I could write short fiction and nonfiction; novels for younger readers as well as on adult themes; scripts for a wide variety of TV shows, and even a screenplay. A lot of this work followed my personal interests (“Live it up, and write it down,” Hemingway is reputed to have said), so that I’ve written about racing, flying, travel, and all the rest. Or *nearly* all the rest; I may have a few books still to go.

FAX: What are you most proud of in your writing career? What would you like to be remembered for?

TOMERLIN: The obvious answer is: the next book. But of my work to date, I’d probably choose the series of articles I wrote on highway safety, published in *Road & Track*

magazine in the 1970s and '80s. Based on a mountain of research, I established the true relationships between speed and safety, and advanced the only practical solution to the problem of drinking and driving ever developed (but not yet implemented). These pieces generated interest around the world, and two were read into the *Congressional Record*.

Considering only television work, I think my adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the scripts for *Wanted: Dead or Alive* gave me the most pleasure.

FAX: What projects are you working on now?

TOMERLIN: In addition to a second book for serialization, I'm working on a novel about board-track racing in the 1920s. I'm calling it *The Wooden Road*. I'm also collecting notes for a memoir covering the years of my association with Charles Beaumont and The Group.

FAX: One of your more recent publications is a wonderful short story, "The People of the Blue-Green Water," in the anthology *California Sorcery: A Group Celebration*. How did this story come about? It seems rather Hemingwayesque.

TOMERLIN: I can think of no greater compliment. This is an illustration of what I was just talking about. When asked to contribute to the anthology, my first thought was to give them a story published some years ago in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. Then, because I hadn't written a short story in several years, and was in the mood to do one, I decided to try an original.

Inasmuch as I have rafted down the Grand Canyon, and hiked one of its tributaries, Havasu Canyon, I thought it would be fun to do a story based on these experiences. There's a young boy who wanders away from camp and ends up learning something about growing up. The editors liked the story and accepted it for publication.

Now, a month or two later, I'm flying home from a legal conference (I should mention that I'm also an "expert witness" in highway safety-related matters), and I find myself sitting next to the publisher of serialized books for young readers. So, "The People of the Blue Green Water," with the addition of a Havasupai girl, a mountain lion, and quite a bit of incident, has become an 18-part novel, *The Valley of No Return*, appearing in 50 newspapers around the country. Now, if only Disney would like a turn-of-the-century adventure featuring Native Americans....

And so it goes.

In memory of John Tomerlin, 1930-2014