

Dean Koontz interviews Michael Koryta

DEAN: Your new novel, *THE PROPHET*, is a crime novel, a suspense novel, but also a good novel about brothers and family relationships. I know you a little, and I'm 99% sure that you weren't cloned, that you have a family, but I don't know about siblings. You write so well about brotherly relationships that I wonder – do you have any? And football – playing it, coaching it – serves both as a background and as a solid metaphor for the value of traditions. Did you play football in school? Have you coached any?

MICHAEL: I was a natural athlete. Played every sport, and the responses from my coaches were unanimous and emphatic. Whether it was a basketball or football or baseball bat or golf club in my hands, they'd say, "Son, I think you should be a writer." It's good to have consensus. So, no, never played football beyond pick-up games, I bruise too easily and lack fundamental coordination, but I was hopefully able to bring some authenticity to the book due to the tremendous level of help and access I received from Scott Bless, Tyler Abel, and the rest of the Bloomington High School North coaching staff. I spent a full year with them in coaching meetings, practice fields, and on the sidelines, and it was tremendous and fascinating. The bad news for them is I'm hooked now and currently drawing up plays. If they'll just give me a chance...As for brothers, I have none. Just friends who feel like brothers to me, in the good ways and the infuriating. And I have a sister who brings only the positive side.

DEAN: You quickly built a reputation for crime/suspense, and then went for a touch of the supernatural in *SO COLD THE RIVER*, *THE CYPRESS HOUSE*, and *THE RIDGE*. Did your agent freak out? Many years ago, when I first began ricocheting from genre to genre, I received more than a few heartfelt lectures about how I was destroying my career. Now *THE PROPHET* has no supernatural edge. What is it with you, pal? Easily bored? Creatively restless? Enjoy walking a cliff's edge? Multiple personality?

MICHAEL: Dean, please stop answering the questions before I can. Yes, yes, yes, and, certainly, yes to those last four. As for the genre ricocheting, I had a supportive agent. I lost a publisher, but that'll happen, and somehow I fell into the hands of Michael Pietsch at Little, Brown, who I think is one of the all-time-great editors. Can't say enough about the team over there. They've indulged my flights of fancy and I know it isn't easy and I've heard plenty of lectures from other parties about the career suicide I'm cheerfully carrying out, but I'll always say the same thing here: you've got to tell the story that wants to be told. That's the joy of it, the privilege of it, and, I'd argue, the responsibility of it. To write the best story you can. That won't always fit the same tidy box. And to try and do so seems far too close to actual work. I'm not cut out for actual work.

DEAN: When researching *THE RIDGE*, you became interested in big-cat rescue – lions, tigers, nothing as safe as your common tabby. Now you participate in rescues. In a way, your fiction entered your life and became part of it. The same has happened to me with *Canine Companions for Independence* and other things that I wrote about and subsequently became involved with. Tell us why big-cat rescue so appeals to you. And are there other examples of research/writing changing your life?

MICHAEL: The experience of working with the Exotic Feline Rescue Center is one of the truly special things in my life, I couldn't imagine *not* having those cats and those people in my life at this point. It's an amazing mission and deserving of support and, as you did with *Canine Companions*, I simply fell in love.

I'd drop anything to go on a big-cat rescue, and will continue to do so as long as they'll have me. Research is forever changing my life and bringing new interests and new people into it, and that's one of the great privileges of this craft, the chance to visit so many different worlds.

DEAN: You're young. From my perspective, you're a puppy! Yet you've already published nine substantial novels and are at work on number ten. In your book-jacket photos, you often look intense, driven. In person, you're not like that; you're relaxed and easy-going. Which is the real Michael Koryta? Or are they both real – professionally driven but personally at ease? Given the commitment that's required to write well, do you find it difficult to strike a right balance between writing and downtime?

MICHAEL: I simply cannot take a good picture. If I smile for a photograph, I look evil. Possessed. Since I don't want to reveal this truth, I try to look brooding, haunted by remarkable stories and gorgeous prose. Now, they're not my stories and prose, of course, but no one need know that truth, either. Professionally driven? Absolutely. It's a privilege to have the chance and I want to do it well. Better than well. I'm not anywhere as close as I'd like to be. Personally at ease? Depends on the day. Striking the right balance isn't terribly hard, or hasn't been so far. The only real cost to all this is sleep. I've been a chronic insomniac since I began writing seriously and I've given up on that ever changing.

DEAN: You're writing a novel about wilderness-survival training, so you went to a survival school. Presumably you survived. I went to Las Vegas so I could write about it, and I have drunk numerous California Cabernet Sauvignons so I could write about them. But I have my limits. Do you? Is there anything you wouldn't do yourself – aside from commit a crime – so you could better write about it? At survival school, did you have to eat grubs or rodents?

MICHAEL: I shouldn't have committed the crimes? Oops! I do love field research, though. That traces back to my PI days and reporter days, but I'd much rather step into the world I'm writing about than Google it. You simply can't achieve the same level of understanding if you go from the outside in. You'll find no gold if you don't pan for it, right? That sounds like a fortune cookie found at a bad steakhouse. Such is my gift with words.

I did not eat grubs at survival school, though I did learn which ones were edible, and I also learned that if I came to the point where I needed to eat them, then I'd screwed up in every other lesson I'd been taught. As far as further research goes, I'm always on the hunt for something bizarre and fascinating. I see those chances as a tremendous gift that comes along with being able to do this as a living. I'd like to learn at least a little about as many things as possible. It's the journeyman approach, I suppose, but there are so many fascinating things in the world to me, from people who rescue big cats to people who fly airplanes to people who understand how to replace the leaf spring on a farm truck. These are all things I can't do, they're all fascinating, and I'd like to learn a little about as many worlds and skills and trades as I can.

DEAN: Most of us grab the chance to adapt our books to film. But film writing is highly collaborative, with every executive a potential master. I found I really liked the screenplay format, its fluid nature and ease of revision, but disliked everything else about the film process. Have you done some film writing? If

so, how close to madness did you come? How close to homicide? Or are you one of the lucky ones who feels comfortable in both worlds?

MICHAEL: Past madness, short of homicide. I love the form. I've been fortunate to work with great writers and producers, genuinely good people. But if your novel becomes an irrelevant piece of source material, with an entirely new cast of characters and story, then it's awfully tough, not just letting go – you would probably not be surprised to discover how easily I can do that! – but because you've got to love a story to write it well, and supposing you don't love the one that's handed to you? It's tough. It's a grind, everything in it is foreign, the emotional investment between writer and characters and story that is imperative for good work is one that can't be forced. Delivering quality work from that place is difficult for me. Every circumstance is different, though. I love movies, always have, always will, and one of these days it sure would be fun to see one of my stories break through to the big screen. We'll see.

DEAN: You were once a private investigator. I have a good friend who's a rather celebrated PI – there have been TV shows about a couple of his cases – and he seems to thrive on the challenge of bringing a case to a good resolution and on the occasional adrenaline rush. Did you enjoy the work? At what point – and why – did you give it up?

MICHAEL: I loved the PI work, particularly when the investigation was such that a resolution made a tangible difference in someone's life – child custody cases come to mind. I gave it up when I was able to make a living as a writer, because I think to do anything well you've got to commit at as deep a level as you can. I think the PI work would have suffered as the publishing schedule became more demanding and that's not fair to clients who come to you with too much on the line. I do miss it, though.

DEAN: Do you ever suffer writer's block? For a day, a week, longer? If so, how do you trick yourself into getting on with the book? If not, why do you think you haven't been thus plagued? I know you from time to time suffer heavy self-doubt, as I do. I think I know you well enough to say that you use your self-doubt in some constructive way. Am I right?

MICHAEL: I suspect you smiled as you typed "Am I right?" because you've talked me off a ledge or two in the past. Yes, every book comes from a place of self-doubt, from the thought of, "when will I be exposed as a talentless fraud, when will they take my writer's permit away?" And in this is the thing that has thus far kept the writer's block away. I'm always anticipating the need for heavy, heavy revisions because I'm always convinced that what I'm creating is dreck. So I write every day, because I don't understand any way to improve other than to continue to work on it. And I also write every day because I love it. There's a quote from the songwriter Josh Ritter on my desk: "I sang in exultation, pulled the stops, you always looked a little bored. But I'm singing for the love of it, have mercy on the man who sings to be adored." I love that. It's a guiding light.

DEAN: I would never put a writer on the spot by asking him what living authors he most admires – which always leads to at least one friend having been unintentionally forgotten. But what deceased writers do you must admire – and why?

MICHAEL: There was once this guy named Dean R. Koontz. Had a middle initial, a mustache, and a bald head. I don't know what happened to him, because dust jackets tell me he is long-gone, but I loved his stuff. Let's see, in all seriousness, keeping the list to a respectable length: Raymond Chandler, John D. MacDonald, Ross MacDonald, Dashiell Hammett, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Charles Dickens, G.K. Chesterton, Mark Twain, Ray Bradbury, Ira Levin, Robert Louis Stevenson, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Why? Because I think they were all storytellers first, and writers second. The story was the thing.

DEAN: We share some tastes in writers. As for Dean R. – now let's be fair, he wasn't bald but balding. You might find this funny, so indulge me. Being a tad vain, I long considered a state-of-the-art surgical procedure along with transplants, by a specialist. I did not go forward when I was told the several procedures would take months and would be painful. Then when I changed dentists, I learned that I had for years been brushing my teeth too hard and, in the process, had worn away my gums. I needed to undergo eighteen months of gum transplants, and the tissue for the gums would be carved out of the roof of my mouth! My instant reaction was that the gum surgeries would be so painful that I wouldn't notice the scalp surgeries, which proved to be true. By the time my mouth was set right, I had a full head of hair. But the periodontist wasn't able to save one of my molars, which kept abscessing. I went to his office at 5:00, and he said I'd be out by 5:30. Instead, when he pulled the tooth, the roots proved to be fused to the bone, and they broke off. He wanted to sedate me, because novocaine wouldn't be effective when he was drilling in the jawbone, but I didn't like being put to sleep, so I remained awake for the three hours it required to remove the roots. When it was done, he told me that I had the highest pain threshold he'd ever seen--and I told him I needed to use the restroom really bad. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, I saw one side of my face swollen as round as a basketball--and because the periodontist worked on that tooth from every imaginable angle, all of my glorious hair was disarranged and standing straight out from my head like Christopher Lloyd's in *Back to the Future*, like any cartoon character struck by lightning. I thought it was so funny that I didn't even try to comb it but paid the bill and went home that way. I'm not sure which was the better pain killer that night: the medication the doctor gave me or the sight of myself in any mirror, which reliably cracked me up.

Now, a final question for you, Michael. When your doorbell rings long after midnight, who do you think will be standing at your threshold: (a) some thug I have hired, (b) my periodontist with a drill in hand, (c) my dog Anna wearing her stainless-steel attack teeth, (d) me wearing my stainless-steel attack teeth, (e) an IRS accounting squad to whom you will have to explain all those foreign bank accounts that have shown up in Credite Swiss files, (f) Wile E. Coyote with an Acme killing machine that will finally work? Also, what are your two favorite Ira Levin novels? My first is *A KISS BEFORE DYING*, and second is *ROSEMARY'S BABY*.

MICHAEL: You realize I had to make that remark in 2012 when I had the chance, because my hairline is retreating faster – and with less hope of success – than Custer at the Little Big Horn. But my answer would certainly be, C, Anna, because she is kind, forgiving, and blessed with a fine sense of a humor. And hopefully remembers that I once brought her a treat. As for Levin, the two titles you mention would be my favorites, but I have always thought that *THE BOYS FROM BRAZIL* is a sadly overlooked gem of a thriller. Many thanks for allowing me the chance to do this interview, and, if you will excuse me, I'm off to lock the door and hire a security sniper.

