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**Exploring the Writing Process with Andrew Pyper, Craig Davidson,  
Gary McMahon, Ramsey Campbell, and David Moody**

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## Exploring the Writing Process with Andrew Pyper, Craig Davidson, Gary McMahon, Ramsey Campbell and David Moody

Jeffery Klaehn

Writer | Kitchener, Ontario, Canada

This article explores the practice of creative writing with authors Andrew Pyper, Craig Davidson, Gary McMahon, Ramsey Campbell and David Moody, discussing prewriting and drafting; the extent to which creative association and the question of “what if?” play into the writing process; narrative voice; approaches to thematic and metaphorical elements; the importance of sensual research in creating resonant characters and vivid fictional worlds; writing goals and daily word targets within the context of the overall writing process; and the relative pros and cons of writing workshops and of sharing ideas while at the drafting stage. The article is organized as a panel discussion. Each of the interviews was undertaken individually throughout 2015 via email.

horror | writing | fiction | storytelling | creative industries

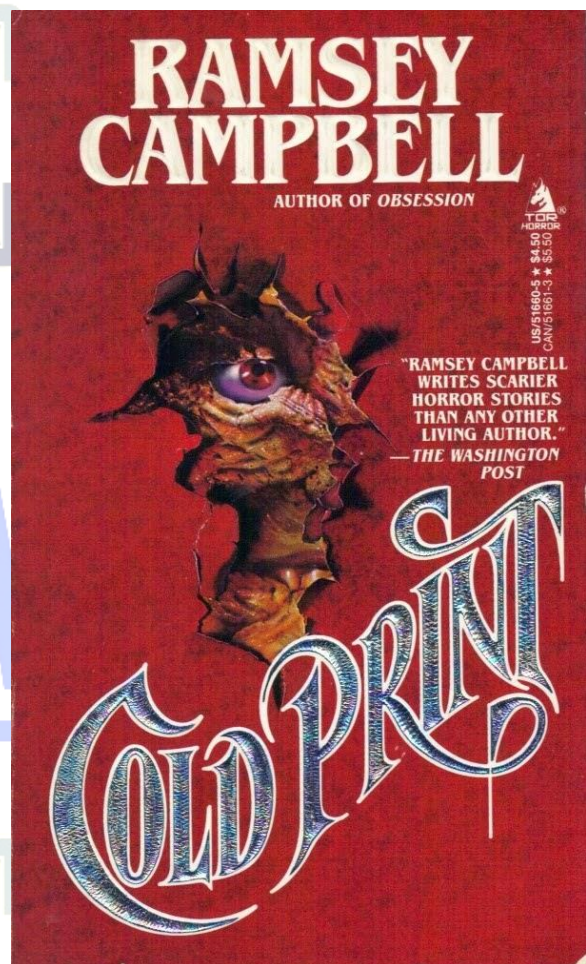
Andrew Pyper is an award-winning novelist of seven international bestsellers. His most recent book, *The Damned*, is being developed for feature film by Legendary Pictures and Universal Pictures. His previous novel, *The Demonologist*, has been published by Simon & Schuster in the US and Canada, as well as internationally in over sixteen foreign languages. Among his earlier novels, *Lost Girls* won the Arthur Ellis Award, was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year and appeared on both the *New York Times* and *Times* (UK) bestseller lists. *The Killing Circle* was a *New York Times* Crime Novel of the Year, and *The Wildfire Season* a *Globe and Mail* Best Book.

Craig Davidson was born in Toronto, Canada, and is the author of *Rust and Bone* (2005), *The Fighter* (2007), *Sarah Court* (2010), *Cataract City* (2013) and *Precious Cargo* (2016). Writing under his Patrick Lestewka pseudonym he is the author of *The Preserve* (2004), *Imprint* (2011), *The Coliseum* (2011), and *Vehicles* (2012). And using his Nick Cutter pen name, he is the author of *The Troop* (2013), *The Deep* (2014), *The Acolyte* (2015) and *Little Heaven* (2017). *Cataract City* was shortlisted for both the Giller Prize and the Trillium Book Prize.

Ramsey Campbell's contributions to horror literature have been recognized with three Bram Stoker Awards, four World Fantasy Awards and twelve British Fantasy Awards. He has also been awarded the Horror Writers Association Lifetime Achievement Award and the World Horror Convention Grand Master Award. In 2015 he received an Honorary Fellowship from Liverpool John Moores University for outstanding services to literature and was presented with the World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement.

Gary McMahon is the award-winning author of nine novels and several short story collections. His latest novel releases are *The End* (2014) and *The Bones of You* (2015). His acclaimed short fiction has been reprinted in various ‘Year’s Best’ volumes. Gary lives with his family in West Yorkshire, where he trains in Shotokan karate and cycles up and down the Yorkshire hills.

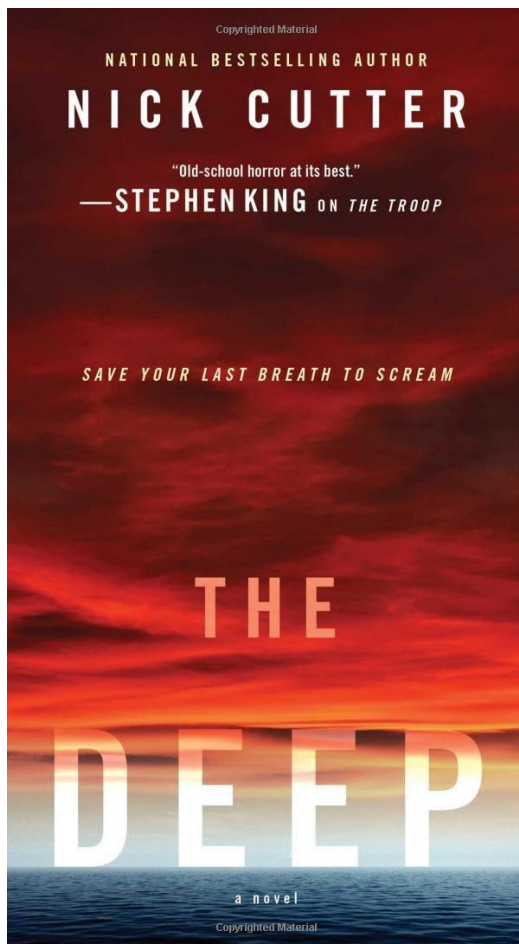
David Moody is the author of the *Hater* and *Autumn* series. The first *Autumn* novel was filmed in 2009, and Guillermo del Toro originally bought the film rights to *Hater*. David formed his own publishing house, Infected Books, in 2005, and has published a series of apocalyptic novels and collections including *Trust* (2012), *Straight to You* (2014), *Last of the Living* (2014), and *Strangers* (2014).



**Jeffery Klaehn:** How would you describe your writing process?

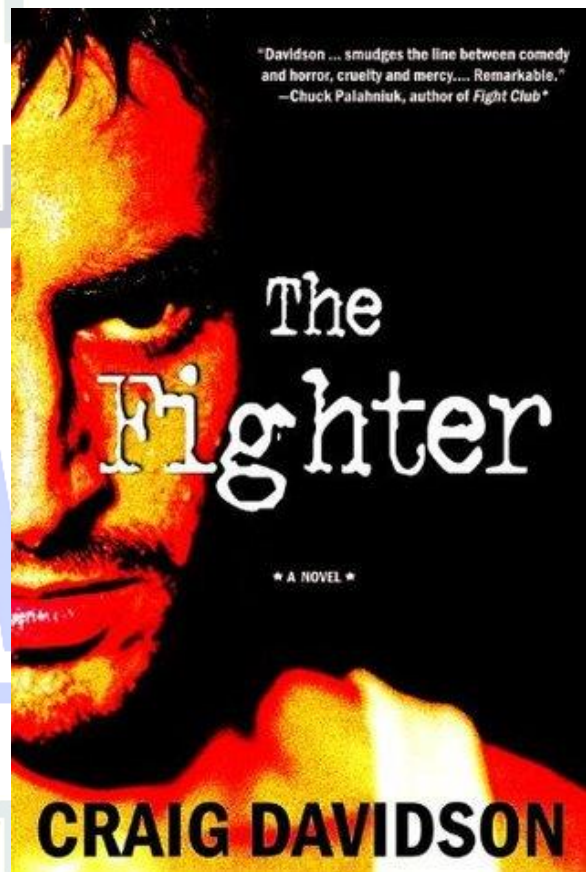
**Andrew Pyper:** In a word? Multi-staged. It begins with “the idea,” which is not an “idea for a novel” in any whole sense,

but much slighter, something glimpsed from a distance, intuited or half-dreamed, a flickering candle in a window through the trees. To this vague starting point a thousand details slowly attach themselves, often randomly at first and only revealing their coherence far along the path. Small observations that feel indispensable, like the rolls of aluminum foil and shoeboxes in a hoarder's house. Scenes arrive without much sense of what precedes or follows them. Characters replace concepts, and like new inhabitants of old houses, they demand renovations. Eventually I'll try to find a structure in the bits and pieces and often find an order has already been subconsciously applied to the material. I pitch myself at that point: What's this story about? By "about" I don't mean the story's theme, but something at once more superficial and essential than that. What makes it live? Why do I care? An interrogation of sorts. If the material survives all this, I start to outline the beats and events and crucial utterances. This outline, in the end, takes the form of a kind of map, a line I draw on stapled-together printing paper I tape from the office ceiling to the floor. If that makes sense – if reading it from top to bottom promises something good – then I can start making sentences.



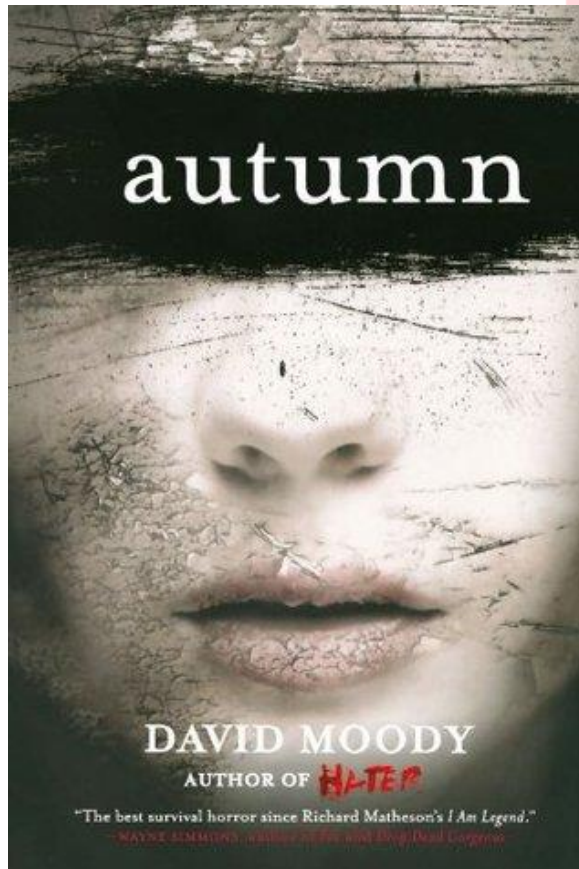
**Craig Davidson:** I'm a fly by the seat of my pants type of writer. No outline, a little research maybe but not much, just pull the trigger and get going.

**Gary McMahon:** I always find this a tough question to answer. In the past, my writing process consisted of writing in a white-heat burst of creativity. I would sit down to write and not get up again until I was done. In terms of a short story, that meant producing a rough first draft in a single sitting. In terms of a novel, it was usually a chapter. Lately, though, all that has changed. It was an unsustainable way to work, and in recent months I've begun to write at a more sedate pace, editing as I go rather than doing endless redrafts. I used to write five or six drafts of a story or novel, but now I think it's more like three or four. My whole creative process has undergone a massive change and I'm still trying to come to terms with it.



**Ramsey Campbell:** In a word, intuitive. The seed of a tale can be the smallest thing – a familiar object or experience that suddenly reveals a different potential, an overheard remark, a random train of thought whose destination my subconscious may well have settled on before I'm aware of it. A recent example – being handed back my passport at Reception in a holiday resort on Rhodes this October almost

immediately prompted a story I subsequently wrote, in which the protagonist is given someone else's passport (it's called "The Dreamed"). But the process of writing a tale is equally intuitive for me, as we'll see.



**David Moody:** I'm definitely a planner. I collect ideas (I have a document synced across my computer, phone and tablet for maintaining the collection that I can access pretty much all of the time) and usually one or more of those ideas will take root in my mind and grow into something more than just an initial scene, character or line of dialogue. I usually start with one aspect of a story, then build the rest of the plot around it. Once I have a general outline very loosely plotted, I'll start planning in earnest. It's worth saying that it can take me any length of time to get to this stage – I'm currently working on ideas I've been thinking about for years. Once the main beats of the story are in place, I try to fill in the blanks. I expand what might be just an initial one-page outline into something longer, then refine that further and further until I've written a scene-by-scene breakdown. It's only when I have this in place that I start writing the first draft in earnest. It's where the planning mutates into writing. For me, the first draft is often the hardest part of the process, because it's where I put the flesh on the bones of the story. I estimate that most of what's written first time around will eventually get edited out,

but completing that draft is invaluable because it's the stage where I really get to work on the intricacies of the plot. It's also where the characters come to life, and getting to know those characters often has a huge impact on the development of the story itself.

**JK:** From a creative standpoint, why are prewriting and drafting so important?

**Andrew Pyper:** The process I've come to think of as "pre-writing" (what otherwise goes by the name of outlining, though that's a more particular thing in my mind), from a purely practical point of view, increases the novel's chances of success more than any other approach. You test the idea, challenge it, ask yourself if this is the book you want to be writing right now. You see if the thing stands a chance of working. But even as important as all that is, pre-writing to me is the most explosively creative part of the whole enterprise. It's all about the "what-ifs?" – moving the pieces around effortlessly because you haven't actually written anything yet and therefore don't see the work-in-progress as set on its course, too old to learn new tricks.

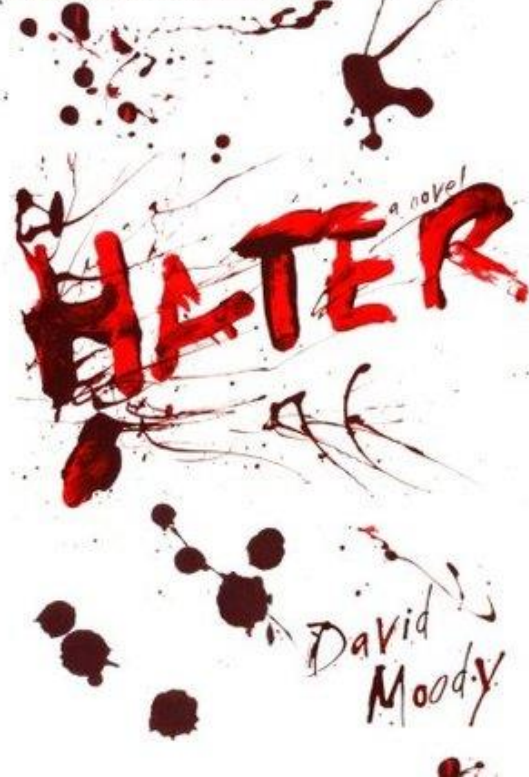


**Craig Davidson:** I don't do a lot of pre-writing, so from my point of view it's not that crucial. You can over-plan, too. But drafts, yes, I like to do a lot of them. It's important – again, from my perspective only – to let your manuscript sit for a bit

and fall out of love with it before getting back into it. So you draft and draft and so on, pruning and improving. That can take many drafts. In most cases that's good for the book. Though you can overdraft, too, and rip out some of what made the work alive in the first place.

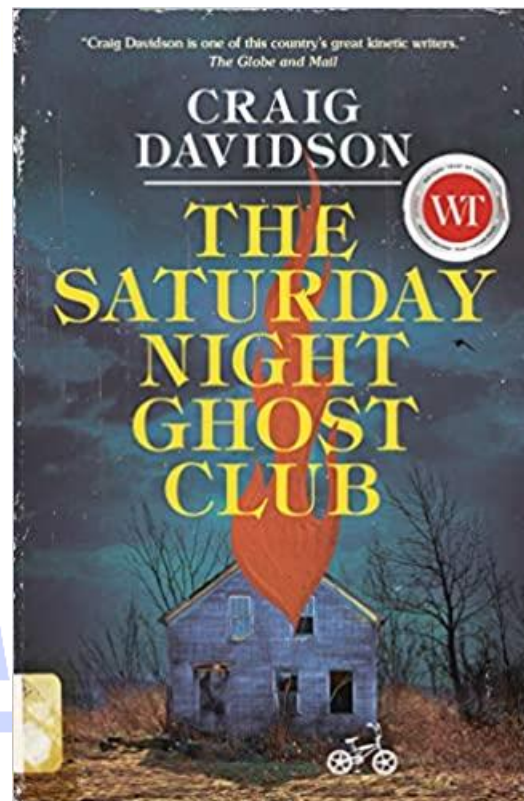
**Gary McMahon:** I need to get a first draft down on paper as fast as I can – no matter how rough it is – so that I can then focus on pulling it into shape. I always tend to see my first drafts like a film script, full of incident and movement. Then I go back in subsequent drafts to add the finer details – style, imagery, expanding on thematic concerns and clarifying subtext (both of which usually make themselves known during that initial draft). I write “short,” adding words to each draft of a story – putting layers of flesh over the skeleton – rather than cutting things away. I believe this is the opposite of how most writers work.

“A head-spinning thrill ride, a cautionary tale about the most salient emotion of the twenty-first century... *Hater* will haunt you long after you read the last page.”  
—Guillermo del Toro, director of *Pan's Labyrinth* and *Hellboy 2 and 3*



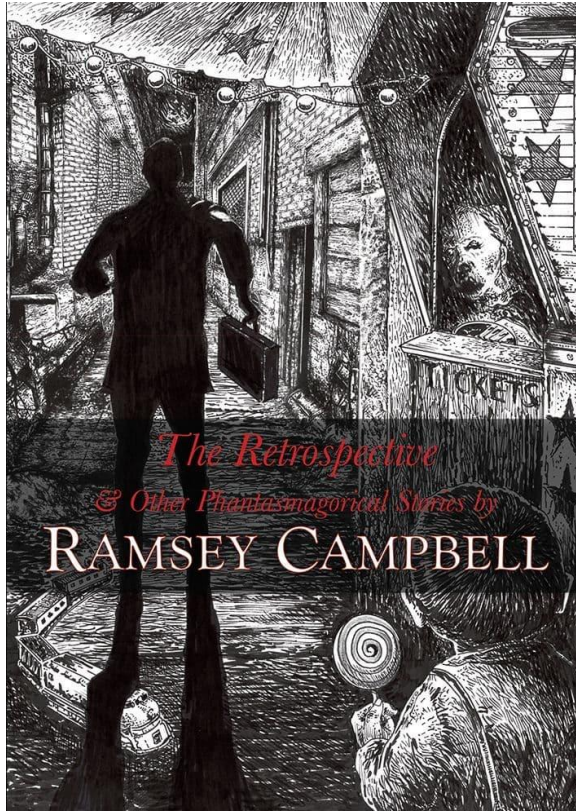
**Ramsey Campbell:** Prewriting – well, for me that generally consists of blundering about inside my head until a development (often enough not the first I try to work out) of the idea engages my imagination sufficiently to grow into something worth writing. At some point of the process I manage to think of the characters' names and what they do in life, what they look like, the only elements I try to plan in

advance rather than letting them grow out of the writing. Drafting – well, the most I generally do of that before actually starting the first draft of the tale is the occasional sentence or image that suggests itself in advance and seems worth incorporating in some form, rewritten or unchanged. Once I've begun the writing the work is in my mind all the time, even if I'm unaware of it, and I frequently find that I'll have ideas for it anywhere at all. Increasingly I regard the actual complete first draft of the story as a way of setting out the material I have to work with, and allowing it to grow organically. Usually I'll rewrite that draft very substantially. It's generally the case that the final version will be about twenty per cent shorter, and the majority of sentences will have been rewritten, paragraphs condensed or freshly constructed, extra material introduced. On occasion even the names of characters are changed.



**David Moody:** I think all writers ultimately do the same amount of planning and drafting, we just do it at different stages of the process. After all, we're all in the business of taking the first spark of an idea and turning it into a finished story. For me, though, initial drafts are the key development stage creatively. I think of the overall writing process as looking at the same thing through microscopes of increasing magnifications: you get to see more and more detail each time. I often use the analogy of sculpting when I talk about this (not that I'm a sculptor, of course!) because it makes it

easier to visualize the concept. You take delivery of a block of stone, and you're commissioned to carve, say, a bust of your favourite horror author. You start by carving the general shape and getting the right proportions – the shape of the head, features, etc. Once that's done, you'd start putting in the next level of detail: nostrils, eyes etc. Then you get into fine details – hair, wrinkles, etc. That's what I'm talking about here. You wouldn't start sculpting a human head by carving an individual strand of hair, and in the same way you wouldn't start writing a novel by working on a descriptive passage from the middle of the book.



**JK:** To what extent does creative association and the question of “what if?” play into your prewriting and plot construction?

**Andrew Pyper:** “What-if?” is the animating mantra of prewriting. You ask it enough times and a genie appears. But in addition to the creative implications of the hypothetical, there's something regenerative about the “what-if?” It turns the prism and lets us see anew every time. And on the other, more cautionary hand, there's always a danger of getting too attached to concepts and storylines if we don't ask it enough.

**Craig Davidson:** I think pretty heavily, sure. Most every book I've written was a “what if” scenario. In fact, I'd say that's the first question I ask myself, or the one that get the juices

flowing. Plot, characterization, settings – they all flow off that question.

**Gary McMahon:** For me, this happens organically as the writing process begins to move forward. I usually start off with a strong idea and a theme, and the “what if” factor comes in almost subconsciously. It's not something I'm aware of at a conscious level as I'm writing. I don't think I write that way. One thing leads to the next, each answer providing another question in terms of the story I'm trying to tell. I write everything in sequence, too. I can't write disembodied scenes to work into the story later.

**Ramsey Campbell:** On an instinctive level, often quite a lot. What if the headphone commentary you listened to while touring a stately home proved to be more sentient than it should be? “At Lorn Hall” was my tale that resulted. Suppose you returned from abroad only to discover that life in your home country had changed in a way nobody seemed to want to acknowledge? *The Pretence* was the novella I wrote. Creative association – sometimes I have ideas lying unused in my notebooks (some of which I always carry with me, to work on the novel in progress and to note down other observations and ideas) that don't work by themselves but become fruitful once I put two of them together.

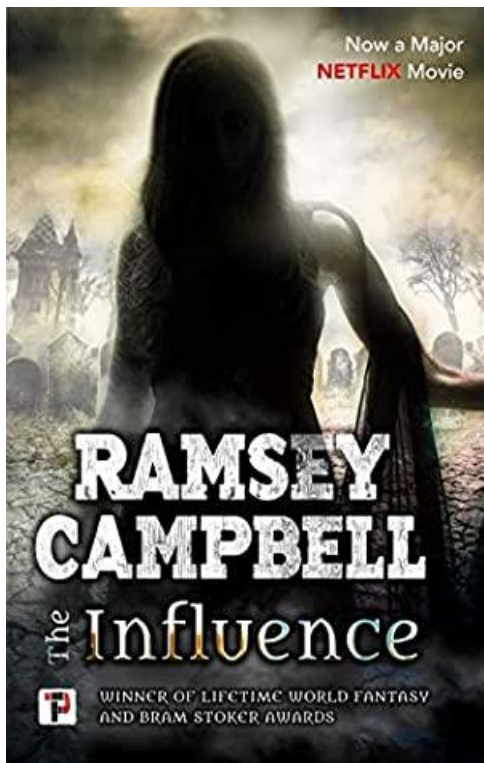
**David Moody:** I'm something of a compulsive planner, and much of my “what if” work is done in my head before I've written a single word. Stories do occasionally take on a life of their own (that happened, for example, in my novel *Hater*, where I made a spur of the moment decision with a character two-thirds into the book which completely changed everything). Generally, though, for me it's the “what if” that informs the entire story. My books are typically about ordinary people who find themselves in extraordinary situations, so I'm constantly thinking about what might be about to happen in the real world, and how things might pan out. “What if the sun was dying and we only had a couple of days left?” “What if aliens appeared in the skies over a quiet little Welsh fishing village?” “What if everyone dropped dead then, two days later, they got up again?” It's the juxtaposition of the mundane and bizarre that really appeals to me.

**JK:** What guides your decision-making regarding the structuring and architecture of your novels?

**Andrew Pyper:** There's no single directive, but I do think that a story has to announce its primary turns before it can be productively started. What marks its beginning, middle, and end? What marks the midpoint? How does the journey begin? What event pushes us over the edge and into an accelerating descent to the climax? I have to know what the big turns of the screw are. You might think these come to mind rather early in the process, but in my experience, perhaps counter-intuitively, they generally arrive last.

**Craig Davidson:** Intuition for the most part. Or, to be honest, I've seen a technique used elsewhere that I like and think, "Hey, this ought to work for what I'm writing." And I listen carefully to my editors, too, and they often suggest architectural changes – often I'm happy to go with them.

**Gary McMahon:** My novels tend to be very organic in terms of how they grow and develop, with each idea springing from the next during the writing process. Even when I outline, I leave plenty of scope for that organic process to happen. I do note down certain touchstones – plot points that I need to hit at certain points in the story – but everything between these can be fluid. It's a difficult thing to do, but I just have to trust my instinct and hope that I'm making the right decisions.



**Ramsey Campbell:** Pretty well pure instinct. I want to surprise myself by what I write. I haven't plotted a novel in advance since the turn of the century, when I tried returning to that technique (having abandoned it more than a decade earlier) and produced by far the worst constructed novel I've ever written – it certainly needed the several thousand words of email my editor Melissa Singer sent as criticism. I like a book to grow organically in the writing. I do have scenes in mind before – sometimes months before – I write them, and as a rule they do end up somewhere in the narrative, but usually transformed by the process of getting to them. I generally don't know the ending of a novel until I'm close to it – perhaps as close as the final chapter.

**David Moody:** Generally my books will be about the implications of an "event." I touched on a few of them in my previous answer. To govern the pacing of a book, therefore, I often pin events to key moment in the event I'm writing about. In the case of *Straight to You*, for example, where the sun is dying and the planet is gradually heating up, the premise leant itself to pacing. As the temperature increases, so the stakes get higher. Whilst I wouldn't want to give the impression that my characters are completely passive, there's definitely an element of the situation driving the pace of the novel and threatening to leave the characters behind. I like the idea of having to make these people work harder and move faster in order to stay alive or reach their goal. I'll often think of a thriller, for example, as a long run on a treadmill, the speed of which is being steadily increased. I think it's important to pace evenly and to keep the passage of time constant where possible. It helps ramp up the suspense.

**JK:** How do decide upon narrative voice and thematic elements?

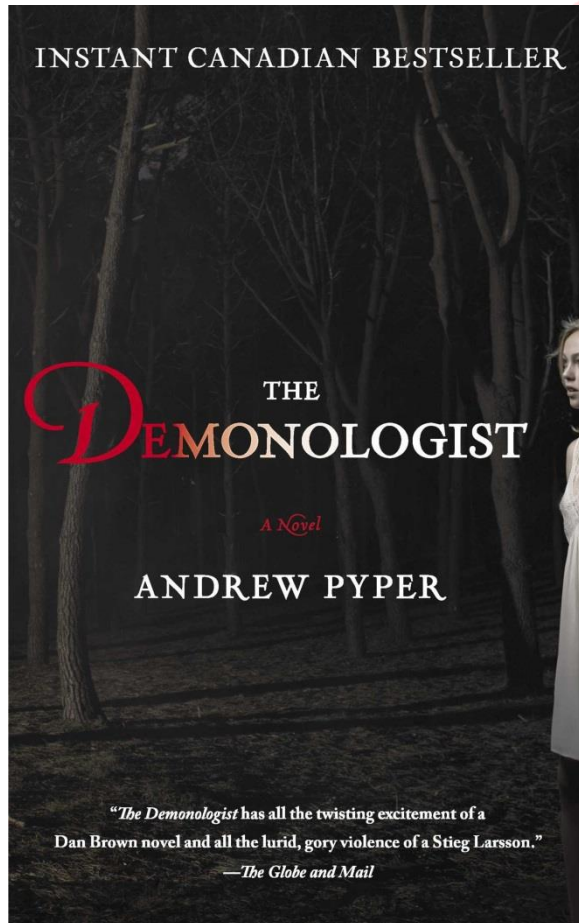
**Andrew Pyper:** Voice is hard, but theme isn't. First, as to voice – I think of that as the "way in," the point-of-view that will be shaping and describing and judging the world we're making. You need to know who this is and how they think as intimately as you would a lover before proposing marriage. On the other hand, theme requires next to no effort, as I believe that theme proceeds from story. You get the story right and its theme is a self-generating by-product. But if you overthink theme – or mistake it for story – you're doomed.

Craig Davidson: Oh, case by case basis. Voice is one of those fun things to come up with, but also – if you're talking a novel especially – one of those choices that you're going want to get right off the bat, as it will save you a lot of heartache later. Maybe you choose a voice that's interesting for a few pages, but grating after 10. That's not a voice you want to follow around for a whole book, as a reader. So yeah, getting that voice right is key. That's not to say it isn't something you can develop and refine as your continue to write a given book – you can – or retroactively edit into shape once you're finished.

**Gary McMahon:** Narrative voice seems to be a function of the plot. I think about what type of character is best to tell a specific story and try my best to work out what his or her voice is. The themes tend to be present from the start of a piece, and develop more and more as I work things out – often to the point that I can suddenly discover a story has themes that I hadn't realised at the outset.

**Ramsey Campbell:** I have to invoke instinct once again. Voice is simply what feels right: first or third person, multiple viewpoints or narration restricted to a single narrator, past or (quite often) present tense. And I tend to discover the themes in the process of writing. Sometimes – I'm not being

facetious, you understand – I don't identify some of them until the work is finished.



**David Moody:** The voice varies from book to book, and if often takes me a little time to settle on that voice. I'll sometimes have an initial idea of how I want the book to "sound," but that'll chance as I get to know the plot and the characters. With a book like *Hater*, for example, which is exclusively told from one character's perspective, the first person approach was a no-brainer. I think it helps the reader to buy into the story if they feel like they're in a character's head with them. That said, though, it can be equally important not to be restricted to a single POV (point of view) if you're telling a story which affects the entire world! Again, I think the voice is dictated by the story you're writing.

**JK:** How much research do you undertake for your novels, and how important is "sensual research" in terms of creating resonant characters, vivid fictional worlds, scenes?

**Andrew Pyper:** The trick about research is doing enough to achieve the level of veracity the story demands without falling

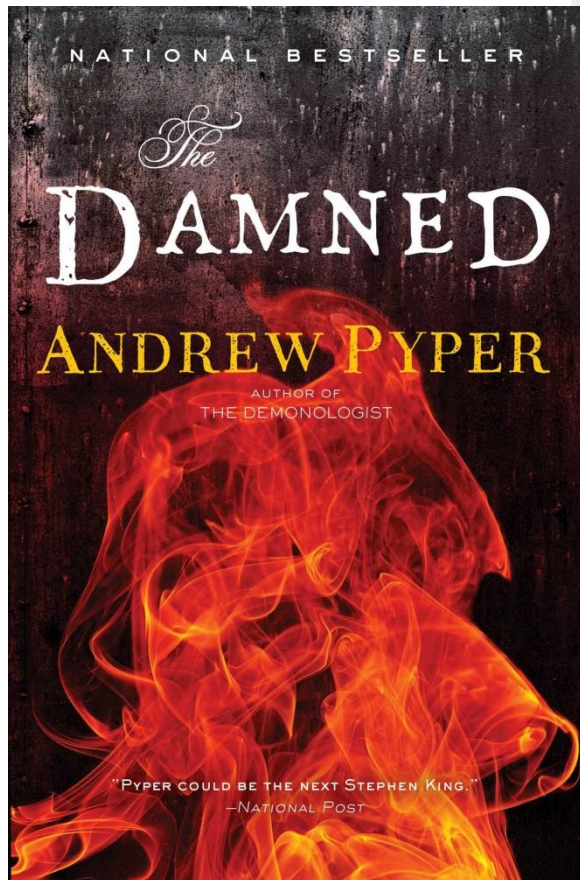
into a black hole of endless, amateur scholarship. I've seen more than a few colleagues start off into the dark forest of Novel Research and emerge years later, disoriented and hungry, novel-less. The goal is instant expertise, a kind of genuine fakery. For me, far more authenticating than research that achieves postdoctoral levels is being able to recreate a place on the page. What does it look like, feel like? What does it (above all) smell like? Traveling somewhere and being awake to its particularity is the novelist's more essential form of research.

**Craig Davidson:** Case by case basis again. Some novels I've really researched, others I didn't feel compelled to do so as much. But yes, I think having the senses be highlighted – what a character hears/smells/sees/tastes/touches – is really vital. So if you can pull in elements of that from your own experiences and recollections, well, so much the better.

**Gary McMahon:** I'm not big on research. I tend to write about characters I know and geographical settings I'm already familiar with. I believe that, as writers, we are researching stories, people, places every day – wherever we go, whoever we interact with, the things we do, it's all material to be worked into a story at a later date. Saying that, I'd love to have the time to write a big, research-heavy novel. Perhaps an occult novel set in 1970s New York City. The fact is, though, my time is limited. I have a day job and a family, which leaves very little time for extensive research.



**Ramsey Campbell:** It depends on the novel. *Creatures of the Pool*, my attempt to write my ultimate Liverpool novel (my home town, which has figured in and indeed generated many of my tales) drew on local history and legends, which I researched over the course of more than a decade – the more obscure the source the better. As I found useful material I copied it into a notebook or else improvised on it, and the result of taking so much time is that I no longer know in every case which details I discovered and which I invented. I admit this makes me happy. On the other hand, a novel such as *Ghosts Know* (involving a radio presenter who becomes involved with a stage psychic) simply required my listening to radio phone-in shows, which gave me the germ of the theme. The inner lives of characters seldom need much research – it's just a question of finding them inside my head and letting them loose. Sensual research – well, I think my whole life is that, which is why I'm never without at least one notebook. It tends to be a matter of finding the words to words to fix the observation as precisely as possible.



**David Moody:** On one hand I think I'm very lazy and do as little research as possible. As I've already said, I like to write about ordinary people, and I frequently use equally mundane and familiar settings. I think it helps the reader buy into what's happening in the book if they can easily identify with

the characters and location. Considering things from the POV of the man on the street also means I don't need to go into great levels of detail: the characters are often learning about what's happening along with the reader. On the other hand, perhaps I'm an obsessive researcher? I live in the locations I write about, and I often write about people I know (names changed to protect the innocent, of course). So I guess you could say I'm researching all the time.

**JK:** Once you've begun drafting, do you aim to write a certain number of words each day?

**Andrew Pyper:** Yes. Having said that, the number changes over the course of the draft, typically starting out small and growing as momentum and confidence builds. But I find it helpful to have that numerical goal, and to stick by it. No lunch unless you get your 800 words.

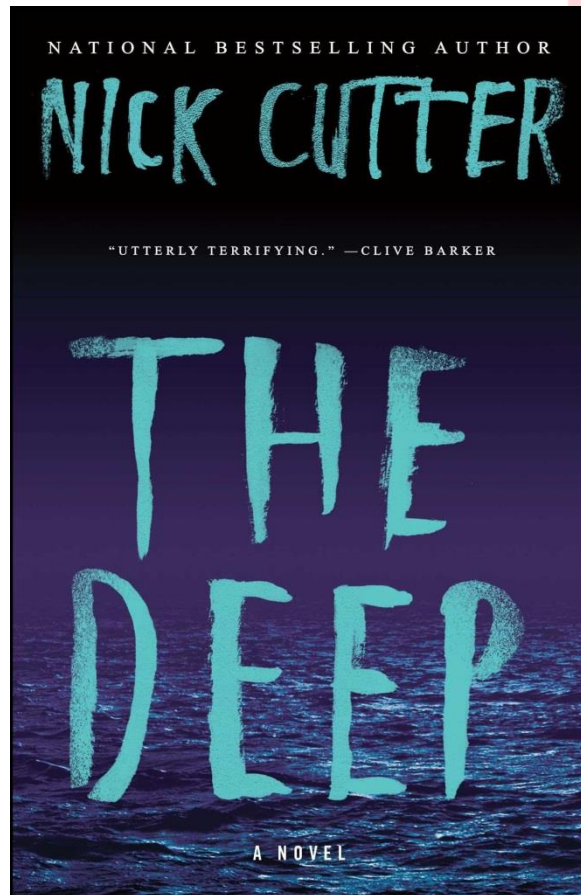
**Craig Davidson:** Yes. 1000 a day – minimum. Anything over that is gravy. Some days it's not hard to hit the mark. Other days it's a slog. And some days, yeah, you just don't make it. But overall, I'd say it averages out to 1000. So if a book is 80k, well, you could conceivably have one written in 3 months! But of course, edits and redrafting all factor, and for a lot of books you throw out as many words as make it into the final manuscript.

**Gary McMahon:** I used to aim for 2,000 words a day, and usually went beyond that, but after a lengthy period of creative block that's all changed. Now I just write when I can, and I don't put unreasonable demands upon myself. Writing is a bastard. It's emotionally draining. It can damage you if you let it. I learned that the hard way.

**Ramsey Campbell:** No, never. The one trick I play on myself is the notion that if I can progress onto the next page of the exercise book (which is how I always write first drafts, with a Parker Frontier fountain pen, leaving the left-hand pages blank for any early revisions and afterthoughts) I've done the day's work. I pretty well never stop at that, you understand – it's just a token reassurance to myself. I do generally write between four hundred and five hundred words a day of the first draft, starting at six in the morning (when I'm wakened by new ideas for the session) and usually ending before noon. That's every day, Christmas and my birthday included. When we go away on holiday or to conventions, the work in progress goes with me and continues to be written.

**David Moody:** Yes I do, and I know this is something many writers don't recommend. I find it useful to have a daily word count target for a few reasons. Firstly, a ninety thousand word undertaking can be a little daunting to say the least, but breaking that down into smaller, more manageable chunks can be helpful. Second, it's encouraging to complete those chunks and watch the whole project grow. Finally, when

you're writing to a deadline, I think it helps to have a more structured approach rather than leaving everything to the last minute (which, if I'm honest, inevitably happens anyway). I do have a caveat to all of this: daily word targets should be exactly that – just a target to aim for, not something you beat yourself up over. As I've previously found to my cost, writing can't be forced. If the words aren't flowing, step away from the computer!



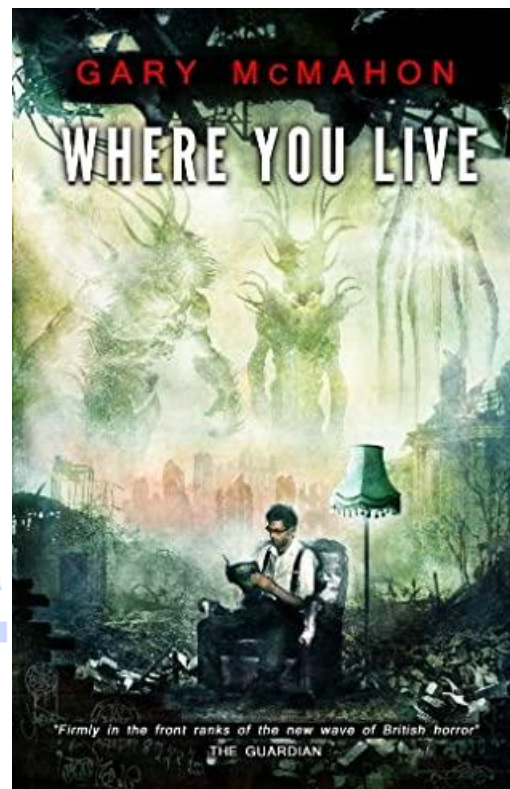
**JK:** How do you approach incorporating symbolism and metaphors into your work?

**Andrew Pyper:** As a story begins to take shape in my mind its most initially seductive elements, for me, are the concept. The overarching “What-if?” The way in. As I work toward building this concept into a full outline (the process I’ve discussed as pre-writing) I become increasingly alert to the emotional underpinnings of the project. I don’t think of it as theme or metaphor, but something subtler. Maybe we could call it mood. The book’s personality, its heart. I’ve found that as you work away at the mechanics of the novel it begins to announce itself to you in other, more personal ways. It may be what it’s like to be a doctor preparing a patient for surgery and then, just before putting him under, he tells you about his

kids, how much he loves his wife. It reminds you who you’re working on here, and more importantly, why.

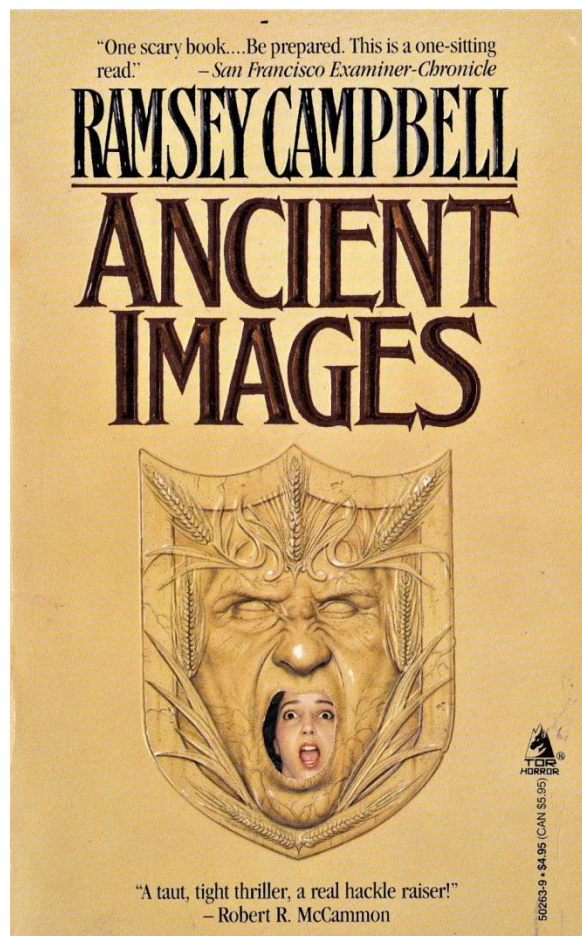
**Craig Davidson:** By feel, I guess? It’s not something I’m necessarily aiming for, symbolism. I think sometimes readers or academic readers especially are looking for that kind of stuff whether or not it’s really there. Thing is, you can find symbolism anywhere if you’re convinced it’s there. Anyway, once the book’s done I don’t have ownership of it anymore, and if people find symbolism in it – whether or not I meant it – well, it’s nice they’re at least reading that closely.

**Gary McMahon:** This is organic. I always call myself a “gut writer,” which, to me, means that I follow my creative instinct rather than trying to mould it in a certain way. I think that symbols are important, in life and in fiction, so there’s a lot of symbolism in my work. Saying that, it isn’t an essential part of the literary puzzle – it’s there if the reader wants it, and they can ignore it if they don’t.



**Ramsey Campbell:** It’s part of the intuitive process. I used to be a lot more extravagant with metaphors, but now I like them to be thematically relevant or appropriate to the viewpoint of the character. The same for symbolism, really, though that tends to be more unconscious, and often unapparent to me at the time. My feeling is that if I get on with writing this tale about these characters in this situation, symbolism will take care of itself (which is to say that the

subconscious is at work while my attention is elsewhere).



**David Moody:** Honest answer – I don't. I tend to write in a simple, direct and uncluttered manner, with very little in the way of metaphor or symbolism. That said, sometimes I can't help myself. I think the key is not to force any hidden meanings onto the reader. It's often the case that I'll look back at a completed story (or partially completed, at least) and realize that I've unintentionally drawn parallels with events, places or people.

#### JK: Your thoughts on writing workshops?

**Andrew Pyper:** I know for many the reflex is to hold onto your ideas, for fear of someone stealing them if you released them into the air. The fact is, the chances of another writer stealing your idea are fairly slight, for the simple reason that they regard *their* ideas as more valuable than any others. So if we dismiss theft as a concern, we can look at the benefits of pitching our ideas to others. I've come to see this as enormously helpful: articulating your thoughts on a story and seeing how an audience reacts, what they want more or less of, the direction they sense the story wanting to go in. This

isn't "focus group" marketing research or anything like that. It's merely letting the light of new points-of-view illuminate what's been lurking around in the dark.

**Craig Davidson:** I think they can be great. They can be borderline ruinous, too. It depends on the makeup of the participants, how it's run, who is running it, and a lot of factors. They're fine, they can be hugely beneficial, but I think you do have to know who you are as a writer and realize that some of your fellow work-shoppers just won't get what you're trying to do, and to realize that's fine and not feel like they're representative of the world, agents, readers, editors, or whoever you're eventually going to be sending your work to.

**Gary McMahon:** It's not something I do personally, but I can certainly see how sharing ideas could be useful to some people. I'm a very private writer. I guard the stories I'm working on, keeping them close at all times. I don't really use "beta readers," I don't talk much about what I'm working on at the minute, and I tend not to bounce ideas off anyone other than my wife, and even then, it's only if there's something I'm uncertain of, something that I'm not sure works in some way.

**Ramsey Campbell:** In a word, no. Certainly not for me. I've never conducted one, because I don't feel competent to do so, and I don't collaborate at all well, even to the extent of discussing ideas for work in progress. I should explain that I'm not afraid someone else will run off with my ideas before I have the chance to write them – *The Fothergill Omnibus* (1931) still stands as a rebuttal to the fear of using ideas others have used. But my principle is that I won't tell a tale before I've written it for fear of losing energy and momentum – enthusiasm too, perhaps.

**David Moody:** I'm an insular person by nature, particularly when it comes to writing. I know there are benefits from working with other people, but I honestly prefer not to until I've got the story into decent shape. I've made the mistake in the past of listening to others at the expense of my original vision (it was when I was first published traditionally and found myself writing under contract for the first time). Working with editors in the US and UK, I wrote a novel, then re-wrote it, then re-re-wrote it, and so on until it was unrecognizable. Then I stopped. I started again from scratch and ended up writing something very similar to my original version. It taught me that to involve other people can certainly have benefits, but also that I should do it on my terms.

#### Author Biographical Summary

Jeffery Klaehn holds a PhD in Communication from the University of Amsterdam and a PhD in Sociology from the University of Strathclyde. He resides in Canada.

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