

cover story

# GHOST WRITER

Bestselling author **DEAN KOONTZ** talks to **TIM GRAHAM** about his long career and prolific output, his new ghost story, **What the Night Knows** - and whether he might be hypergraphic.



Dean Koontz

Parents take note: if you want your child to grow up to become a *New York Times* number 1 bestselling author, then you might want to try emulating an experiment that was unwittingly carried out on Dean Koontz – the phenomenally successful American writer of suspense thrillers – when he was a child.

Born in Everett, Pennsylvania, Koontz was sent at four years of age to live with Louise Kinzey – a friend of his mother – when his mother became ill and had to be hospitalised for months. Dean's father, Ray Koontz, was a violent alcoholic, incapable of taking control of his own life, let alone the life of a small child. So Ray was never considered at the time as a possible guardian for his son. Mrs Kinzey, on the other hand, was a positive parental presence whose own children had recently left home.

'She took me in for six months and put me in her son's former room, which was at the top of this house, with interesting ceilings and dormer windows.' Dean remembers that a reading lamp was hooked over the bed frame.

'And every night she would give me a cherry ice-cream soda while I sat in bed drinking it, and she would read a story to me. That's my earliest memory of storytelling.'

I suggest to Dean that perhaps he acquired his love of storytelling in a Pavlovian way, learning to associate storytelling with the sugary satisfaction of the cherry ice-cream soda.

'Well, any time you give me ice-cream soda and a book I'm going to love it,' he says.

Your child may not turn into the world's sixth highest-paid author with an annual income of US\$18 million, but at the very least this benign experiment should instill a love of reading – although dietitians and dentists may have a few qualms.

Dean Koontz is not only successful, but also astonishingly prolific. Some people tell him that he's written over



100 books, but he says that he stopped counting years ago. Surprisingly, he's expended quite a bit of effort to keep many of his titles out of print.

'They were books I wrote because I was learning my way and they helped me earn a living. But I eventually graduated to very different and more ambitious novels. So I've kept those early books out of print. But I know that there are about 56 in print now. And that's the number I generally stay with.'

In the week before interviewing Dean Koontz I had read about hypergraphia, a condition in which the person who experiences it feels an overwhelming and persistent urge to write. Famous hypergraphics include Edgar Allan Poe, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Danielle Steel. I ask Dean if he thinks he could be hypergraphic and if he gets anxious when he's not writing.

'I don't get anxious. But writing is always a struggle. Sometimes when you're writing you can get into what psychologists call a flow state where it goes more smoothly than usual. It'll still be 10–20 drafts per page. I write one page until I can't perfect it anymore, then I'll move on to the next. So I move my way very slowly through a book.'

I had read that the inner critic that bedevils so many writers is silenced in hypergraphics. This need for constant revision of the same page – confirming the presence of a very vigilant inner critic – would seem to rule out any possibility of hypergraphia in Dean Koontz.

The writing of multiple drafts must leave very little work for his editor to do, I suggest. Dean confirms this, telling me that he never has to spend more than about three or four days addressing editorial suggestions.

'But a good editor definitely helps a book,' says Dean. 'I know that there are bestselling writers who refuse editing once they become big enough. I've never felt that was smart. If I get some good suggestions – and I always will – and I address them, then when the book

comes out it doesn't say "A novel by Dean Koontz, with excellent suggestions by ..." They don't have the editor's name on the cover, so I get all the credit. So of course I'm going to take the editor's suggestions.'

Dean is speaking to me by phone from his home office in Newport Beach, California. I ask him to describe his writing environment. He tells me that the room where he writes is about 30 feet by 40 feet, its walls covered in anigre wood panelling. Above his workstation is an antique Japanese screen, and his desk is surfaced with black granite that surrounds him on three sides. The floor is made from limestone, enabling him to roll his chair anywhere he needs to go.

'On the other wall I have a lot of books. They tend to be classics. I'm a big poetry reader, so I have things like T S Eliot, who's probably my favourite, and Dickens and that sort of thing over there.

'I've also have a photograph on my desk of some friends of mine that they gave me for Christmas. The picture shows them fallen asleep in a couple of chairs, with my books on their laps – it's a dig at me.' We both laugh. Dean adds that he has library of about 60 000 books, of which about 20 000 are reference books.

Dean's latest book, **What the Night Knows**, tells the story of John Calvino, who is only 14 years old when his parents and two sisters are sadistically murdered by Alton Turner Blackwood. John was out of the house at the time of the killings, but returns in time to confront Blackwood, whom he kills. Twenty years later John is a police detective and has a family of his own. But although the body of Blackwood may have long ago been consigned to the hereafter, his spirit seems to have returned, and is bent on revenge.

John is not given to supernatural explanations for strange events. But when young Billy Lucas, who has no prior record, kills his own family in almost exactly the same way that

Blackwood killed John's family two decades earlier, and divulges information that only John and Blackwood knew, John starts to suspect that the ghost of Blackwood may be at large. And it becomes clear to John that his own family could become the next target, as the spirit of Blackwood starts to possess vulnerable people and force them to do its bidding.

We learn that Blackwood underwent horrific psychological abuse in his childhood. This appears to be the motivator behind his urge to kill – he couldn't kill his own family, so he seeks to destroy other families.

I ask Dean if he believes that people who commit crimes are always entirely responsible for what they do or if the culpability can be attributed at least partly to extreme psychological torment, such as Alton Turner Blackwood experienced.

'It can certainly be explained partly that way. But I'm a responsibility fanatic. I don't believe that experiences like that relieve the responsibility from the person for the acts they commit. That responsibility is always there. But I think we owe them a certain degree of sympathy for why they became what they became.'

Dean Koontz may be a responsibility fanatic, and an unquestionably disciplined writer. But I ponder to what extent he can take all the credit for his astonishing success – and how much he should attribute to that cherry ice-cream soda experiment carried out on him all those decades ago. **97**

*What the Night Knows* by Dean Koontz is published by HarperCollins, rrp \$32.99.

