



Andy Marino

379: Bending Genres, Defying Expectations, and Crafting Characters in a Horror Novel

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are over at diymfa.com/379 because it's episode of 379. Also, if you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on Apple, Google, Stitcher Radio, Spotify, you know, all those places where you might listen to a podcast, and please leave us a review. This will help other word nerds out there, discover the show as well.

Today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Andy Marino. Andy was born in Upstate New York, spent half his life in New York City, and now lives in the Hudson Valley. He works as a freelance writer and *The Seven Visitations of Sydney Burgess* is his first horror novel, and we're going to be talking about that today. Welcome, Andy. It's so great to have you here.

Andy Marino: Thank you so much. It is excellent to be here.

GP: I always like to start by asking about the story behind the story. I'm guessing there's got to be some sort of interesting backstory to *Sydney Burgess* because this book is just so-- Oh my gosh. Tell me, like, what inspired this story? Where the heck did this come from?

AM: Well, this is going to take a dark spiral quickly, more quickly than I had anticipated, but it was inspired by-- I mean, this is a fairly universal issue, but there is some addiction issues in my family.

I kind of had it in my head that one of the most existentially terrifying things that people face is the cycle of addiction and relapse where it's like, there's this true nature that can't be escaped, that you can put in all this work and dedicate your life to getting sober and to getting yourself on track, and that something will always kind of pull you back. I just thought that that was really, really creepy territory to mine for a horror novel. Like I said, also something that was pretty universally relatable.

GP: Yeah. It's interesting that you brought up the addiction issues because this is kind of a recurring thematic element that contributes to Sydney's characters growth, and just all of the different threads in the story, tie back to this idea.

Can you talk a little bit about how the issue of addiction is woven through the story, particularly because it didn't feel like an addiction story to me? It felt like it was very clearly Sydney's story, and there's a lot of horror stuff going on. And then, the addiction is like this added wrinkle to it. It's not like the one thing driving the narrative.

AM: Yeah. Sydney is a striver and her sobriety is, you know, she scratches and she claws for everything she has. I think that sobriety was just kind of a natural fit for that kind of character. One of

my goals was to sort of pit, like, I just-- Yeah, you're right. I jumped right into kind of discussing the themes, but I kind of married the addiction trajectory to this almost this, sort of, modern thriller or crime novel framework that starts with a home invasion.

It starts with an investigation into the self and things like that. I didn't want either of those elements to be secondary. I wanted them to be interwoven and just feed off each other in a way that that was really propulsive. Just being up-close-and-personal with addiction issues for most of my life, I think really helped me just add a lot to that character.

GP: So let's talk a little bit, it's sort of hard to talk about the themes without talking about what the book actually is.

AM: Sure.

GP: Without spoilers, you mentioned the home invasion, can you give us like a overview, sort of, what would be the flap copy summary of the story of what the book is about?

AM: Sure. Sydney Burgess is nine years sober. She's got her life together. She's got a house that she loves, a job that she loves, a boyfriend that she loves, an 11-year-old son that she's kind of dedicated her life to. That all sort of comes crashing down one day when she comes home from work to surprise an intruder in her house, she gets knocked out.

She comes to, and later in the hospital, the cops are like, "Why don't you tell us a story of what really happened there, because that guy's lying dead in your house, and he was gruesomely murdered", and she has no memory of that. The story kind of unwinds from there where she investigates what really happened while she's under all this suspicion.

And then, the horror elements come into play when her old addictions kind of resurface, and they've taken on a dark new presence, let's say. It's the culmination of all her old urges coming back to haunt her as she tries to sort out what really happened, and if she was capable of slaughtering this person. While that's all going on, she's struggling to hold onto her sobriety and to hold onto the life she's built for her son. It's a lot of stuff happening to Sydney at once.

GP: Yeah. One of the things that I found really fascinating, especially right at the beginning, is it starts off feeling almost like a police procedural kind of thing, right? Like, we've got the home invasion, so the crime, and then she's being interviewed at the hospital by the cop. At first it feels like, oh, okay, we're going to put the pieces together. Like, as a reader, I know how this goes, they're going to investigate.

Maybe she's going to help the cop figure out what's really happening. Of course, it does not go that way at all. Spoiler alert folks, it's not a police procedural, it's a horror novel. What I thought was really interesting was how you were able to sustain the kind of suspense of the story, because the home invasion is kind of a dramatic way to start the book.

So, how did you do that because it is hard to-- Once you've given your reader this really shocking scene, how do you keep that momentum going without constantly having everyone be slaughtered constantly in front of the reader, like, that also wouldn't be particularly exciting?

AM: Yeah. You run into that issue with the cold open of building in a really dramatic scene before the reader has a chance to get attached to the characters.



GP: Yeah.

AM: That was like an interesting problem. I don't know exactly what advice to give for other people who are trying to do that because I kind of just winged it. But I think part of it is just like in the really small details, like you can build, even if it's a really short three-page intense situation, you can still build in these little details of this person's life, like flashes of memory, flashes of things in their house that represent the aspects of a lived-in life.

You know, things on the mantelpiece, the photographs she sees out of the corner of her eyes. You know, this idea that your safe sense of normalcy and your space is being violated by this person, like, that is also this kind of relatable fear.

I think that even if you've got, you know, you're jumping right into something and asking readers to kind of do some heavy-lifting, to get attached to a character to care what happens to her right off the bat, the least you can do is give them these sort of trappings of her life to kind of get immersed in right away. I guess, to answer the second part of your question, it was really just about sustaining a sense of dread.

While I didn't want it to be a genre mash-up novel, I was really interested in turning kind of a crime thriller on its head. I certainly set out to write a horror novel, full stop, but I kind of wanted to take some of the elements of, especially this sort of modern thrillers, where they play a lot with time jumps and unreliable narration. Although I didn't want to lean on that trope too heavily, all that stuff I felt like I could learn from and take from to build a sense of dread into what amounts to like a pure horror novel.

GP: Okay. We need to unpack that because there's a lot in there.

AM: Sure, yeah.

GP: The first thing that jumped out at me was, you know, you were talking about how it's hard with a cold open to trust that the reader is going to be invested in the character if they don't really know them yet. The first thing that popped into my head was, well, first off, we're in first-person, right? If I recall correctly, the whole story is told in the first-person, so we're in Sydney's head.

So, to a certain degree, we kind of have to root for her because we don't really have anyone else to root for yet in the story. Usually, when we're in a first-person, unless the first-person character is just horrifically despicable right off the bat, I'm thinking like Edgar Allan Poe's protagonist in the Tell-Tale Heart, who's just awful right out of the gate, deliciously awful, but still awful.

Unless it's a character like that, that we love to hate or like a Humbert Humbert kind of character that we love to hate from the beginning, we kind of are drawn to the first-person character. Like, we want to root for them because they're all we've got, really. I feel like that was going for Sydney right at the beginning of the story, regardless of what we really knew about her.

Yes, the details helped, right? Like seeing the photo of her with her son, and hearing her thinking, you know, reading the thoughts about her thinking about her kid and her partner, that helps, but it's not the only thing that we have going for her.

AM: Yeah, no, you're absolutely right. I think once again, I've jumped into a secondary element of addressing this. But yeah, first-person, this wasn't one of those cases where it was like, I mean, you always hear writers talk about this where it's like, "yeah, I wrote 300 pages and then I decided



it should be like second-person present, so I rebuilt the whole novel.” This was absolutely not that case. I started with Sydney’s voice. I wrote it.

It wasn’t like an assemblage, like, the first line is the man in my house is wearing a mask. I think that was just the very first thing I wrote, and I just went from there. So yeah, there was no question that for a novel like this, I wanted to just be in Sydney’s head while I was writing it, I wanted people to jump right into Sydney’s head.

I think you’re absolutely right, and you said it better than I did, in that, it goes a long way toward sucking people into a cold open and creating this kind of sympathetic bond for readers and Sydney. And yes, the details certainly helped build in that sense of a lived-in life. But yeah, the first-person narration goes a long way, for sure.

GP: It’s almost like the details are what allow us to have that ripple effect and keep wanting to follow her. But the thing that kind of grips us by the throat at that visceral level is the fact that we’re in her head and her voice is compelling, and we’re rooting for her because she’s all we’ve got in front of us.

The other thing I love that you mentioned the first line, like, when you’re in the perspective of a character and they walk in and there’s someone intruding in their house like a home intruder- bad; person whose point of view we’re in- good. Like, those are the snap judgment associations that a reader will make.

In a way, you kind of play with upending all of those snap judgments as the story continues on, like, it becomes a whole series of gray areas. But at the beginning, we kind of think that the person who’s intruding, they’ve got to be the bad guy because he’s breaking into her house. I don’t know, there is that element also, like, we kind of have to root for her because of the situation she’s in.

AM: Yeah. That’s well said, because like you said, it does have this pattern where it goes from almost this binary thing at the beginning, and then the gray areas start to get introduced as you dig a little deeper. I think, were it to be the reverse that would have been a way too much heavy-lifting for a reader at the beginning.

Yeah, that was just well-put. I mean, you jump right in. You’re nervous because there’s no real world-building I have to do for that opening scene is just someone walking into their foyer and finding a guy in a balaclava and a tracksuit going through their credenza. And it’s like, everybody can just be like, eh. [laughs]

GP: Exactly. It’s interesting, also, like you said, with the different layers of the gray areas too, in a way, it almost becomes like we start to see-- First, it’s very binary, and then the reader starts to see gray areas, but Sydney is still thinking in very binary sort of rigid ways.

It feels like the journey that she goes on throughout the story, without giving spoilers, but it feels like the journey is really about her grappling with the gray areas and being willing to open herself up to these gray areas, and eventually, embracing these gray areas.

AM: Yeah, for sure. I think this cycle of addiction and relapse too, is often seen as so binary.

GP: Yeah.

AM: It’s really just one giant gray area. I mean, anyone who has been an addict or is an addict, or has dealt with close family members or friends who are in the throes of addiction, I think people like to



look at it as sobriety being this like ironclad thing. And then, you break your sobriety, and then you're back in your addiction hell, and really, it's just this constant overlap. That's part of the existential horror in this whole thing.

It's like, it's a constant overlap that never quits, that's her whole life. That's sort of one of the things I wanted to explore with Sydney. I think, unless you take a really dim antiquated view of people's addiction issues, or you're a total dick, I think that it takes a lot of courage to face that. People don't always see that in addicts because of a lot of the other unfortunate behaviors that go along with that. But I have a lot of respect for anyone who goes through that.

GP: Yeah, I love what you're saying about sort of the kind of binary thinking around addiction. I find that it's also, so coming from a perspective of mental illness, I have bipolar disorder, which I've shared numerous times on the show. There is also that black and white thinking around mental illness, like either you're doing well or you're not, like you're in the throes of depression.

Even something like bipolar, people think of it as like you're manic or you're depressed, and it's like one or the other, and they're these sort of polar opposites. Like you said, a lot of it's about that daily recommitment to getting well, and you kind of never get there because it's like every day is a new opportunity to maybe stumble.

But if you let that stable-spiral you, then you're screwed. So it's interesting to see how you dismantle that binary black and white thinking in the way that Sydney deals with this intruder in the horror elements in the story, and then obviously, in her journey in addiction as well and recovery.

AM: Yeah. I wish I could remember the reviewer, but a pretty recent review mentioned that one of the things she responded to and enjoyed was that addiction wasn't a sort of cheap way to make a character seem weak, or to add some grit to a character, or something like that. Like, it was her life and it was explored. I wanted to make sure I was exploring it with honesty and with nuance.

And the last thing I would ever want to do is use that as a signifier of something else, something simple, because there's nothing simple about it. And this is just part of creating a well-rounded character that people enjoy reading about, and whose head they want to be in, but it was just important to me that there were elements of great despair and also great joy in her life that while addiction plays a huge part in this, it doesn't define her. She has a lot of other stuff going on like everyone does.

GP: Yeah. You know, it's interesting, I love what you said about that review because when I reflect on Sydney and on the story, you're totally right. Like, I don't think of Sydney as an addict, and this is a book about addiction. It's a horror novel, and there's a lot of weird stuff going on.

The character just also happens to have as part of her well-rounded personality, she happens to be in recovery, and she happens to be grappling with a very long-term addiction. It's not the defining characteristic. It's also not the element that defines the novel. It doesn't read like a problem novel. You remember those books in the 70s or 80s, for YA teens, where, like, there's the book about addiction, and the book about sex, and the book about pregnancy?

AM: Right. Almost like those 50s hygiene films.

GP: Exactly. But it's not that.

AM: Honor your mother and father. Father has had a hard day. He comes home and expects his dinner.



GP: Exactly. Like, it's the antithesis of the problem defines the story. It's like, yes, she's got problems. She's got lots of problems, but who doesn't? Right? We all have problems.

AM: Yeah. That was interesting actually, even the way you reacted when I answered the first question because I sort of launched right into this, because I think for me it informed the character so strongly just because I was drawing from some experiences.

It is interesting, I wonder if I did a disservice to the novel by jumping right into that. But yeah, no, it is a huge part of it. I hope that I explored it with the nuance it deserves, and both the sense of despair and with the sense of humor that something like that deserves as well.

GP: Also, a sense of hope, right? I would imagine that you can't possibly be in recovery and not have hope because if you don't have hope, then why are you trying to recover? I know for me in grappling with bipolar, there has to be a daily dose of hope in my life. Otherwise, what's the point?

Why would I try to battle this thing? I think there is that element also in Sydney, like, the whole story is her somehow hoping that this horror thing isn't really as horrifying as it is, and it's her dealing with that hope. And even like the moments of the deepest despair are moments where the characters go, 'oh my gosh, it's so beautiful'. They're these transcendent moments of almost joy, even though it's terrifying.

AM: Yeah. That was really important to me to build in, not just the idea of beauty in this almost cosmic horror sense of being like totally flabbergasted by something beautiful. But I guess, like I was saying before too, even in a really dark novel, it's important not to write like an edgy teen and make everything really, really despairing.

I mean, it is a despairing novel in a lot of ways, I hope authentically so, but it was really important to me to reflect the fact that like, it's totally absurd to write something horrifying that's horrifying on every page, for 350 pages, because that's just exhausting and ridiculous. Sydney felt so real to me, and it was really important for her to be able to experience just this, yeah, sense of hope, sense of joy and all these things to counterbalance the dreadful things that were happening to her,

GP: It reminds me of the first Hunger Games movie. There's this wonderful moment that actually isn't in the books. It's one of the things I love that the movie added that weren't in the books. It's this moment with President Snow, I don't know if you're familiar with the books, but the President dude is talking to the Gamemaker guy, I forget his name, Seneca. He basically says, why do we do this?

Why do we round up kids and put them in an arena, and let them fight to the death? Why not just line them all up and kill them, and execute them? And Seneca is flabbergasted, like, he has no idea. And the president answers with one word, hope. Like, if there's hope that they can survive, then that hope is enough, like a little bit of hope.

Then he goes on, and he's like, "A little bit of hope is good. Too much hope is bad, and we can't control it." And that's the whole Hunger Games thing. But in the story too, like in any horror novel, there needs to be a hope that the character will survive, otherwise, why are they fighting? Like, if a character is running from the guy with the chainsaw, the character needs to believe that they're going to be able to outrun the chainsaw dude or else, what's the point?

AM: Absolutely. You know, you can turn any character you want on its head, but yeah-- Especially if you're writing a first-person novel, those kind of deeply felt first-person novel, I would hope, you're asking readers to follow this person. And if they're completely hopeless, that's going to be an uphill battle.



GP: Exactly. It's like the entire story is this push-pull between the character slowly realizing that there isn't hope, or slowly edging into despair, but then still holding out hope that they can make it through, that they can somehow get past this experience. I think horror by definition is that push-pull between despair and hope.

AM: Absolutely. And finding out that your situation is hopeless is really horrifying, but there has to be an interesting way to get there for sure in horror novel. That's part of the challenge. It's like, it's got to be scary and gripping and propulsive, but it can't just be wall-to-wall terror, otherwise, you know?

GP: Yeah. It's like if it's blood-and-guts the whole time, then that's just boring. Like, blood-and-guts, but then you've got that like deeper inner turmoil, then it's interesting. But just blood-and-guts, it's like, eh, whatever.

AM: Yeah. I mean, in any genre, but it's also going to be a lot more horrifying, you know, the deeper you care about somebody when something horrible happens to them. Again, that goes back to the challenge of the cold open. But hopefully, by the end of the book, your investment in Sydney's travails have been multiplied exponentially so the horror hits.

GP: Not just our investment in her, but as we get to know the other characters in her world, and as we get to know even the characters who she didn't necessarily think were important, but we slowly start to put the pieces of the puzzle together. We start to feel for those characters too.

Even if we don't like them, we have to empathize with them on some level. Like even her ex-boyfriend, we might not necessarily like the guy, but we understand him, or at least, we can accept him. We recognize that he's got a part to play.

AM: For sure. It was really important to me, especially again, going back to this kind of sense of deep immersion, first-person, it was really important to me that the other characters didn't kind of feel like ghosts, comparatively. It was an interesting challenge for sure, because I was so deeply in Sydney's head, and then it was like, 'you're filtering these other characters through her perceptions, but they also have to kind of stand on their own'.

So yeah, it was important for me to have really intriguing behaviors and their own kind of pattern, their own speech patterns. Again, this is probably Writing 101, but these were things I was discovering along the way, but yeah--

You don't want it to feel as solipsistic as our lives sometimes feel, where it's like, you want there to be empathy, and you want there to be still a way for these characters to jump off the page and to be able to be judged by the readers who can filter out Sydney's perceptions and make their own mind up, even though it's first-person.

GP: Right. And that I think is especially important because Sydney's perceptions are not necessarily accurate at all times. I wanted to talk a little bit about her as a narrator and also the way you use the timeline stuff, because you had alluded earlier to time jumps and sort of the modern-day domestic suspense, you know, suburban family and then scary stuff happens.

Often, those are driven, like, the typical *Gone Girl* type stories, where it's back and forth time jumps or point of view jumps. But then also we have that unreliable narrator, like, who's really telling the truth? Here, you do it differently, right? Your time jumps are shorter in terms of time and scope.



They're almost like unpacking of memories, and sort of unlayering of memories or excavating of memories, I think that's the best way to put it. Can you talk about what that does to Sydney as a character, as we start to experience her memories with her?

AM: Sure. Just from kind of a structural perspective, I tend to be a pantsner in the parlance of our times, and when I'm writing something that's so adjacent to a thriller novel, it has to be a little bit clockworky. Just to kind of force myself into that mode, I wanted there to be some formal rigor involved in this. So each visitation section has six chapters that jump back and forth in time. So it's like three in the present, three in the past.

They all interweave, and each one is six. There's a little bit of math involved where, and I'm hoping it's one of those things where even if you don't necessarily realize it where you're like, 'oh, here's the six chapters in this section, here's the six chapters in this section'. I'm hoping that overall, it provides this kind of atmospheric segmentation, I guess, that makes sense in people's brains.

From a formal perspective, that was what I was trying to do there. It was helping me organize the book and it also helped it be, I hope helped it to be propulsive. But what that did for Sydney was like on a basic level and going back to addiction, especially when you're getting sober, a lot of memories resurface, and a lot of horrors from the past that you have a just part of it is like finding new tools and techniques to deal with these trauma, essentially, without turning to substances.

That's just a huge part of recovery. I wanted the book to reflect that journey. Also, that is just basically tailor-made for like a horror-thriller plot, and to have a character kind of continuously stumble upon new memories.

I will also say, now that we're getting into the, kind of, that well-worn unreliable narrator territory, I don't want to give a lot of way here, but I certainly didn't want it to mine any territory where it's like, 'this person's crazy. You can't judge what they're saying at all'.

I wanted to do the exact opposite of that, where some of the horrific things that she's unsure about get born out, like, maybe she's being gas-lighted and maybe she finds out the truth, but I definitely didn't want to rest on this kind of cop out of like, 'you never know what old Sidney's going through because she can't be trusted'.

Even though there's elements of that, just to build suspense, I have too much respect for Sydney and for readers too, just to kind of fall back on that, like, 'well, she was lying the whole time', kind of thing. It was just important to me not to do that.

GP: Yeah. I'm so glad you didn't because I feel like that definitely is a trope that, you know, it may have worked the first time an author thought of it, but it doesn't really hold up anymore because so many people have done that whole, like 'they were dead all along', or 'they were crazy', or 'I see dead people, he's a dead person'. Like, it gets old after a while.

But I think what's interesting is how it really did feel like an excavation, almost like the way archeologists as they're digging through the layers of dirt. And almost like each of the visitations are a layer, and we're slowly getting more detail and getting a better picture of what really happened. Even in moments, I'm not going to give details of the scene, but just so that you and I can discuss it, the trailer scene, when she first talks about it, we see one version of it.

And then later, we excavate the version that comes out, and that was what really happened. It's not polar opposite, but we see facets of things that are like, oh, this is a different picture. Like, it doesn't



do that whole pulled the rug out from under the reader thing, but it does make us feel like we're seeing more three-dimensional version of Sydney.

AM: Yeah, thank you. That was incredibly well-put. That was definitely one of my goals was to not rely on any cheap twists, but to make everything feel earned, and to make-- Especially in a thriller, like I said, where that relies on some kind of clockworky plot elements and some strategically-placed flashbacks, I still wanted to be able to tie that structure into decisions that felt organic for characters to make. So there was a lot of threads winding in these sort of weird maze-like directions that had to be tugged and pulled on and re-tied and things like that.

GP: It's interesting too, with the time jumps and the unreliability, they aren't very long time jumps. There are very few times. We do have the occasional flashback, like you said, but we don't have really big time jumps. It's not like we're going 10 years into the past, and then, you know what I mean, with the exception of a handful of flashback scenes.

I think that also helps with keeping the reader grounded in Sydney's character, because we don't feel like we're like in the movie *Memento*, where we're jumping these massive back and forth things. It's a much bigger jump and we get a sense of like, 'okay, all is not right with this character'. With Sydney, because the jumps are smaller, I feel like the discrepancies are more subtle. It puts the burden on the reader to really think about who Sydney is as a character.

AM: Yeah, definitely. I mean, there are plenty of moments, I think the majority of the book really where it kind of flashes back to maybe an hour ago--

GP: Right.

AM: -and then flashes forward again, and then it kind of runs these parallel threads. So if she were doing a *Memento* thing, she would have to get tattoos of things that happened like an hour ago.

[laughter]

GP: Exactly, exactly.

AM: It'd be kind of a cool story, but yes, it was important to me because as a writer, I love relying on flashbacks to fill things in. But sometimes as a reader, I'm just like, 'Man, I just want to stay in the present. I don't want to go back. What am I doing here?' There's definitely that push-pull in my mind of like, 'I've got to keep people cruising through this book, but some of the stuff's important. I have to find a way to tie it in'.

GP: I think as a writer too, it takes a tremendous amount of trust in the reader because like, you probably could have written this book if you had wanted to, you probably could have done it chronologically, and it wouldn't have been half as interesting. Part of the interest is the layering back and forth of the times, and how you set *The Seven Visitations* and the back and forth six times throughout.

The structure is part of what makes it interesting and what keeps the reader reading. But there is also that level of trust of, when we do go back in time by an hour, the reader might go at first like, 'oh, why are we here? Why do we need to revisit this?' Then, eventually we see why we need to revisit this.

But you also, as a writer have to trust that the reader's going to go along for the ride. I'll admit, the first couple of chapters, the first time it flashed back, so I think it would've been chapter three, I was

a little thrown because I was like, 'whoa, why?' And then once I got that that's what the book was doing, I was like, 'I'm in'. But you have to trust that your reader will feel that and will go with you.

AM: Yeah, I do. I have a ton of trusted readers, and I also, like I said, there's a rigor to the structure of this book that I hope, sort of, without any handhold, just kind of informs people right off the bat, how it's going to go. So if there's no rug pulled, it's not going to change up on you. Every visitation has six chapters, three and three parallel timelines.

That may sound complicated, but it's really not on the page. I'm glad that you brought that up, and that you were all in by chapter three because I think it shows you what's there. It shows you what kind of book it's going to be, and hopefully, it drags people through it.

GP: It also doesn't talk down to the reader too, because you could have done it where you would write at the top, like, Present, and then, An hour ago at the top of each chapter. But when we're in each visitation, we just get, like, Chapter One, Chapter Two, Chapter Three. It's not being spelled out for us that, oh, now we're flashing back to an hour ago, or, back to the present.

I think that also takes a level of trust that the reader will get it. But like you said, it's not that complicated once we're in it and once we're reading it. We're so used to seeing time jumps like that these days that the reader will get it. Once we know what the pattern is, we can follow the pattern anywhere.

AM: That's exactly why I wasn't too concerned about this sort of Free-Floating genre defiance that, I guess-- To me, it made perfect sense that, like, I didn't really think people were going to be like, "I thought I was reading a home invasion thriller, and I can't believe there's horror elements in it."

I also didn't think people were going to be like, "This isn't a horror novel. Why does this start with this woman and a burglar?" It's just a novel. It goes in what I hope is an organic direction towards really scary stuff. Yeah, I trusted people not to be too rigid in their sense of what a horror novel could be.

GP: Yeah. It's interesting too, that I definitely want to talk about horror as a genre and writing a horror novel because that's definitely something that has come up a few times in conversations that I've had on this show. But before we do that, I wanted to touch on one more thing that you mentioned earlier.

You talked about how we have the seven visitations, and one of the things that piqued my interest and that kind of kept me, aside from the fact that the story is gripping, kept me wanting to read more, was I wanted to figure out, what the heck these visitations really were like, what does it mean for something to be a visitation?

Like, is there an actual person visiting? Is it like spiritual visitation? Like, what is this thing? That, I think, is part of mystery that the reader wants to uncover is figuring out like, what does visitation mean in the context of the story?

But the other thing that I thought was interesting was you said that there were six chapters in each. It also felt like each visitation moved faster to the end. I don't know if it's that the visitations got shorter and the chapters got shorter, or if I was just zipping through them because I needed to know what happened next, but it definitely felt like the first visitation, the pacing was a little slower.

It was like, even though we're in the home invasion, and that's pretty dramatic, it still didn't feel like it was speeding along at like the breakneck pace that we had in, say, the seventh visitation. I'm curious to hear you talk a little bit about that. Like, was this intentional? Was this just my brain playing tricks on me? Please, tell me.



AM: Well, I think probably it's a function of some of the wilder/more overtly horrific elements starting to build in the second half of the novel, and kind of carrying it through to the end. I could see that those parts a little bit more like you are unmoored or on unfamiliar territory, and wanting to know what happens takes on a different meaning then.

Part of the reason I wanted to play a lot with atmosphere in this, even though it does kind of hang from the bones of a thriller, was because like you, I can gulp down thrillers. I mean, I love them, but a lot of times in suspense, like the notion of suspense itself becomes this kind of self-fulfilling thing that gets a little boring or worn-out to me.

I don't know if that makes any sense, but sometimes when I read something that's a little more plotless, I feel a sense of suspense more than I would for something that's intended to make me feel suspense, because you feel the tricks, you kind of are aware of them, you've read a million of these things. That's not to take anything away from all the great thriller writers out there, or the great mystery writers.

But I like books where I genuinely don't know what's going to happen. Sometimes the mechanics of things are so well-worn that even when people are subverting them, I certainly respect the artistry and I get into these things because I'm easy to please and entertain, but I hope this is something I succeeded at.

And maybe this is what you're getting at in terms of the book feeling like it picks up steam is that I feel like the second half of the book, there's almost this sense of like, now I really don't know what's going to happen. Like, I thought maybe I knew where I was in this thriller with an unreliable narrator and now those things are turned on their head, and it feels like I'm in a totally different, very strange world. I'm hoping that that for you made the book feel more compelling as it went along.

GP: I think it also has to do with-- When you said the word logistical, there's sort of two types of suspense. There's logistical suspense of what's going to happen next, but then there's the emotional suspense. That's much more wrapped up in the character, and the fact that we care about this character and we want to see how they survive and how they get through this experience.

But we're less hung up on the mechanics of, so and so has a gun, and so and so had this clue, or the bomb is about to go off in this many minutes, and those are more like logistical suspense elements. The best thrillers, I think, interweave the logistical and the emotional, where we care about the characters who are also in the process of saving the world from the big bomb or the scary threat or what have you.

But we also care about them as people, and therefore, we have the emotional and logistical suspense. What I thought was really interesting is that, once we kind of know what the mechanics of the suspense are, which I think happens around the middle of the book, it doesn't really matter anymore like, what happens next? Really, what we want is to see Sydney in her state of mind, and how she unravels as she starts to grapple with this new complexity in her life.

AM: Yeah. That's a really good point. I think part of the subversion of expectations involves like, there's kind of a mystery element. You can figure out who "did it", but like you say, it doesn't really matter when these other horrific elements are in play. That becomes secondary.

That got us to this point, let's say, but now that we've turned everything on its head, and there's this new almost like entity growing to wrap its tentacles around the plot, then you really don't have any idea what's going to happen.



GP: Exactly. Let's talk a little bit before we wrap up about horror as a genre because one of the questions that's come up a few times when I've talked to writers about horror is, really, is it a genre? I mean, clearly there's like a Horror Writers Association, so clearly it's a thing.

The question is, is it a genre the way thrillers are a genre or the way romance is a genre, or is it more of a mood, the way, say, humor is more of like a mood and you could have humor infused into any number of genres? I think you could also have horror infused into any number of genres. The question is, is it also a thing in and of itself?

AM: Well, I tend to fall on the side of it being a mood, and it being atmospheric, and it being applicable to anything. But, I mean, I do understand that things have to be segmented for business purposes. [laughs]

GP: Of course. Of course.

AM: I certainly describe myself as a horror writer in the context of these books that I'm working on and things like that. But for me, especially as a fan of a lot of the weirder stuff like Kathe Koja, and even the weirder end of Sci-Fi with horror elements like China Miéville and Samuel Delany, people like that, Jeff VanderMeer. For me, horror is more of the way you build in these unsettling moments that flip the everyday on its head, even dating back to like Kafka, things like that.

GP: Right.

AM: That to me is a lot. I love slasher movies. I love horror in all of its forms. This isn't any kind of value judgment at all about how people appreciate horror. I'm glad all this horror exists, but for me, the stuff that gets under my skin that is truly unsettling often has to do with a turn of phrase even, or an event situation or something that just feels so off and so troubling. That can pop up in any kind of work.

Like, what does David Lynch do? I have no idea. It's like unclassifiable, but it's horrific in so many ways. It's like, it's those kinds of feelings that I get when I read something that just feels so off-kilter. That's some of the things that I hope to bring into this book too, was that horror isn't just scary stuff happening.

It's like, it's just reality turned on its head. It's realizing that things aren't what they seem is like the most cliché thing I've ever said, but it's just that feeling that things are a little more malleable and not as solid as you thought, or all those senses, all those really vivid sensibilities for me, that's what horror is.

That's what scares me, and that's what gets under my skin. I think like people in masks with knives are scary for sure, but for me, an off-hand glance that reveals something different about someone's face that you've always lived with is something much stranger and terrifying.

GP: Absolutely. It's interesting because I didn't think I liked horror, and yet there are certain, for instance, I was never a huge fan of Stephen King. I respect that he's an amazing author. I was never really big on his horror novels, but I read his Seasons book, the Four Novellas, and oh my gosh, the one that the body is, you know, Stand By Me was based off of freaked me out.

That kind of realism, but stretched to a limit where you're just like, whoa, this is creepy, that to me is so much more terrifying than, like you said, someone with a mask and a knife. Like, okay, if I ran into them on the street of New York City, I'd probably be freaked out, but it's not the stuff that'll keep me awake at night because it doesn't feel as plausible. Whereas when it's more the horror in the person sitting right next to you, that's much more terrifying, I think.



AM: Yeah. And the scene in the book, you brought up, like the flashback to her old life in the trailer with her ex, kind of, messy life, I wanted to make a lot of those scenes that don't involve any kind of horror element really, like you'd normally think of it like nothing supernatural or anything like that. I wanted to make those as equally horrifying as the stuff that couldn't happen in real-life. Like, if you calibrate the scene correctly, just people acting a little bit off is really scary, to me anyway.

GP: Yeah. In a way I find it even more scary actually because it could happen as opposed to something that is just so outlandish that we might just say, 'well, that'll never happen in my life'. And so it doesn't feel as threatening because it's not something that we really relate to on a realistic level.

What's interesting also with horror, and I'm so glad that you talked about it being more in the camp of a mood versus a genre, because I remember having a conversation with Tim Waggoner on this podcast some time ago. We were talking about how it really is hard to sustain pure horror for an entire novel.

Like, you need other stuff in there. It's one thing in a short story, where you can let the fear factor be the thing that drives the story, and you can do that for 3000 words. It's a whole lot harder to do that for 80,000 words.

AM: Yes.

GP: I thought that was really interesting too. I think the same thing is true of humor. Like, we could read a humor essay and that would be hilarious, but can we really sustain that for an entire novel for 80,000 words? I don't know.

AM: Yeah. No, I think that speaks to the reason that, like, if you want to consider horror a genre, short stories is a big fertile part of that. Probably more so than in a lot of other genres because it builds up to this gut-punch that you pull it off at 15 pages or whatever, and then you move on to the next one.

Yeah, I think Tim's right. Part of the challenge is sustaining that for so many pages, and if you don't have characters dealing with real-life horrors and things like that, there's only so much mileage you can get out of a person with a knife chasing a person in a novel.

GP: Exactly.

AM: It plays better on the screen probably, but--

[laughter]

AM: I think a lot of fantasy writers doing quest-based things run into this too, but you run into this whole, like, am I just writing a video game plot kind of thing?

[laughter]

AM: It's like, is this character just running from one thing to another? Like, what's the emotionality here?

GP: Yeah.

AM: That's why it was important-- Anyway, going back to horror as a mood, I think striving for that kind of thing to freak people out on the page for me is a lot more important, and achieving that, like some of my favorite horror writers do.



It's something like just really calculated prose, and just the weight of the line, and how off it even sounds to say, you can really engineer a lot of horrific moods that way. Everyone's mileage varies, but for me anyway, that's something that is important.

GP: Absolutely. I feel like we could keep talking about horror writing and your book and all sorts of things for another five hours, but in the interest of time, what's next for you? What else do you have going on that you want to share?

AM: I have another horror novel also published by Orbit coming out in about a year from now. I'm actually finishing it up, the draft this week, anyway. It also plays with this sort of crime narrative falling headlong into horror idea.

It's about a sculptor whose sister gets kidnapped at the beginning of the book. As part of the ransom, he's forced to use this 17th Century text to assemble this infernal sculpture that has these horrible effects on the town, and at the same time, try to save his sister.

GP: I love it. You alluded to a Yarn & Tea Shop that appears in this book, which of course, now I have to read it because Yarn & Tea are my favorite two things.

AM: Yes. There is a Yarn & Tea Shop in my town, and I am enamored with it. I'm paying it tribute, and it figures in the book, Yarn & Tea, so cozy.

[laughter]

GP: I know. It's like Yarn & Tea and horror. Yay!

AM: Yeah, exactly. But yeah, I'm excited about that. I really enjoy-- I love crime novel. I love thrillers, and I really enjoy taking them into more horrific territory than maybe readers might expect. I feel like that's just kind of a way of doing things that's worked for me.

This one is a little more overtly horror from the jump, but yeah, I hope that it plays with a lot of the same moods. I've always been fascinated by, I wanted to be a painter and a lot of people in my family are artists as well, so art figures in pretty heavily.

GP: That sounds awesome. I cannot wait. I always like to end with the same question. What's your number one tip for writers?

AM: That is such a good question. I knew you were going to end with it and I purposely didn't prepare because I wanted to speak off the cuff. So here's my tip for writers: When you're starting out and when you're DIY MFAing like I did, and like a lot of your listeners are doing, I think it's really important to do things like read Stephen Kings' On Writing, and just any--

There's a lot of stuff out there. I think it's important to take from it whatever you need, and to know that writing advice isn't the be-all and end-all for everybody. Everybody's totally different. Like, for me, for example, I had no idea what I was doing. I read that book, and he talks about a word count. It seems so, so simple and obvious in retrospect, but no one had ever told me that before because I never had any teachers really.

So it was like hit a word count every day, and then eventually you'll have a novel, that was like the biggest piece of advice for me starting out. I took from that like a really nuts-and-bolts approach to the craft and treating it like a job, and getting up every day and doing it whether you want to or not.



But that all goes to say, you can take anybody's writing advice; online, in books, whatever, and don't get stressed out.

Don't think that it's the be-all end-all just because this person is famous or successful, or this person you think is cool on Twitter says something about writing, and then you feel like s*** because you don't produce that much or whatever. I think it's important to listen to people and have your heroes, and carve out your own writing life.

And if you want to parallel theirs, that's cool. But if not, if you just want to write whatever comes to mind and you don't want to listen to anybody, then you can do that too. I think it's important for people to understand, not to take things as prescriptive or as gospel.

I would say explore all those things for sure, because there are valuable lessons in them, but use them in like, maintain your sense of humor and your sense of self and apply those lessons to a way that, to a life that doesn't make you crazy.

GP: I love that you said that because I had a sort of similar reaction to Stephen King's book on writing. I think I've mentioned it on this podcast before, I loved that book, except for the part about the word count, which really got under my skin because I tried to follow his instructions. I remember reading it and thinking, well, if Stephen Kings says it must be true, I need to do it his way. And his way did not work for me.

And then, I was beating myself up and like, 'what's wrong with me? Why can't I be more like Steven King?' Then I realized like, well, because I'm not Stephen King, I'm Gabriela Pereira. What I took from that word count part was I personally don't do word counts very well.

I do procrastination and pretending to procrastinate by writing really well, and that's how I've adjusted. I learned from Stephen King and the word count even taught me something, just the exact opposite of what you said. [laughs]

AM: No, that's great though that you and I, we could both agree that it was a important experience for us to have read that book, but we had diametrically opposed reactions to advice in it. That's what's so cool about it, and that's why it's important not to try to be what--

He also has another point, where he, I don't remember the exact math, but it's like, you know, your second draft is your first draft minus to 10% or 15% or 20%, it's some hard number. I don't work like that at all. That's bull*** to me. If I have the time I might write 600 words or 600 pages and cut it down to 300. Like, I may overwrite my face off and then cut it down. It's not going to work like that every time.

There's stuff to ignore, and everybody's-- There's tons of lessons to be learned, especially when you're starting out. For me, the prescriptive word count thing was helpful because it helped me view it as like, okay, I have to get this done every day. I have a day job so I have to figure out when I'm going to do it, or it's just never going to get done.

I never really thought of it like that before. I thought of it as like maybe inspirational strike, and I'll write 100 pages in a weekend, and I'm not that kind writer. For me, that was an important lesson, but yeah, it's cool. Everybody should take what they want.

GP: Exactly. Exactly, I wholeheartedly agree. I feel like we're both saying the same thing. It's funny that you mentioned overwriting. I remember when I wrote the DIY MFA book, my editor-- I emailed my editor and was like, "So it's 150,000 words long." I was under contract to write 60,000 words.



[laughter]

GP: So, what are we going to do? And she's like, "I'm not reading past 100,000." That was an adventure and a half.

AM: She's like, do you know how many books I have to read?

GP: I know. She was like, "I will stop at 100,000 words. So you better get it to fit under 100,000." But it was a better book. It came out a better book for it. Once I handed her the manuscript, we then further cut like another, I don't want to say 15, 20,000 words. So, with every cut, it got better. But if I had followed Stephen King's advice, that book would be like 600 pages long or something. [laughs]

AM: Hell yeah. No, I'm a huge proponent of your method. I feel much more comfortable having way too much written that I can hone before I deliver. It's just the way-- I know everybody's different in this. Like Kurt Vonnegut, supposedly just worked on one page at a time until he liked it, moved out to the next one. But for me, it's just like writing that 500-page flabby monster, and then cutting it down to a size somebody might actually want to read.

GP: Exactly. I feel like I don't even really know what I'm going to say. Like, I don't even really know what I have to say until I've written the last page and, and then it's like, 'oh, that's what this book was about'. [laughs] But like, I need to do all of that stuff, and, like you said, the flabby monster, so that there's something to work with after that.

AM: That's really funny. It reminds me, I played in a bunch of bands. I get slight nervous before a show maybe. I always remember getting to the very end of the last song and feeling so comfortable and being like, okay, I'm ready to play now.

GP: Exactly. [laughs]

AM: I'm ready to start the show. Like, I could play good now, I could do it. [laughs]

GP: It's like that with everything I write, whether it's articles or whatever. Like, I never really know what an article's going to be about, and there's always that leap of faith terror moment at the beginning. Speaking of horror, that moment where you're just like, what the heck am I saying in this thing? And then eventually it figures itself out by the end, but there's always this weird magic that happens that I have no idea exactly what it is.

AM: Yeah. It's like, if we could do it a second hour of this, it's going to be killer because we're--

GP: I know, right? Like, we should probably start the recording right now. No, we won't.

AM: I'm ready to start this podcast now.

GP: Anyway, it has been such an absolute blast chatting with you today, Andy.

AM: Yeah. Thank you so much. This is wonderful. I really appreciate you having me on. This is great.

GP: Awesome. All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing, and keep being awesome.

