

UNRELIABLE NARRATOR MEETS ANDY MACDOWELL AND DEAN KOONTZ by Ken McGoogan

But let us leave the commanding heights of nonfiction artistry. Here in the foothills of journalistic craft, nothing will move us forward more quickly than grappling with Point of View. We can do this simply by pushing the boundaries of conventional newspapering. Journalists don't do it often, but they have been known to deploy Unreliable Narrators or to roll out the occasional story in Second Person.

The Unreliable Narrator is familiar from fiction. But it can be useful to the nonfiction writer seeking to entertain, for example, while imparting information. The following, which I wrote back in the day for the *Calgary Herald*, employs the device. The story remains true to the facts of what happened while depending for effect on Point of View -- on voice. The central conceit is that here we have a mystical event. In truth, we have an unreliable narrator. Happily, he remains in character from beginning to end. He finds a way to rationalize his experience and clings to his illusion -- which is what makes this piece amusing (I hope).

Eat your hearts out, fellas. Actress Andie MacDowell swam with me Friday. For twenty, twenty-five minutes, back and forth we went, alone in the pool at the Banff Springs Hotel. Yes, we're talking heaven.

But already you've realized that I'm a fan: *Groundhog Day*, *Multiplicity*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Michael*. Never mind Bill Murray, John Travolta. For me, MacDowell alone is worth the price of admission.

When I heard she'd participate in the Celebrity Sports Invitational this weekend, I warned my colleague Bob Blakey: "If we end up alone in the hot tub, just you, me and Andie, I expect you to beat a retreat." He thought I was kidding.

On meeting the event organizers at the Banff Springs Hotel, I managed to wait six or eight sentences before inquiring: "What about Andie MacDowell? Is she here yet?"

Over the next eighteen hours, I received several different answers to that question. In the end, I accepted that MacDowell had arrived late Thursday night, around 12:30 a.m., and would not be available for interviews on Friday -- my own last day to share the fun. Friday morning, just in case, I hung around the lobby as celebrities piled into the buses, bound for the ski hill at Sunshine Village. No MacDowell.

I refused to abandon hope. If I'd arrived late the previous night, and didn't feel ready to hit the slopes, what would I do? Why, I'd head for hotel's luxurious spa.

It's tough work, chasing a story. But I've always been willing to go the extra kilometre. I was sitting in the hot tub, which is located at the end of the mineral pool, when the sole woman swimmer stood up and shook water out of her goggles.

Yes, it was Andie MacDowell. She wore a modest one-piece and a black bathing cap -- but I'd know those cheekbones anywhere. By the time I'd stumbled out of the hot tub and plunged into the thirty-two-metre pool, the actress had reached the far end. Away I went. And so began our time together.

The Banff Springs has roped off two lanes for lengths: one marked "practice," the other "competitive." I'm not a competitive swimmer, but MacDowell had taken the practice lane, so what could I do? I didn't want to crowd her.

Back and forth we went: five lengths, ten, fifteen. Slowly, I gained on her -- mainly because I stuck to my dogged crawl while she varied her strokes: crawl, breast, side, even did a couple with a board. On the twentieth length, I passed her. This made me glad, because I'd begun to worry that, if I wasn't quite a stalker, I was the next worst thing. Now, at least, MacDowell was chasing me.

For ten more lengths, still just the two of us in the pool, back and forth we went. It was balletic, magical. As heaven is my witness, it was absolutely synchronistic.

At twenty-eight lengths, MacDowell paused at the hot-tub end and stood up. Was she leaving? I did two more lengths, then surfaced. No sign of MacDowell. Not to worry. I emerged from the main pool and made for the heated one outdoors, pushing my way through the plastic hanging doodads. MacDowell, I felt, would be waiting. You don't share an interlude that meaningful and then pfft! just disappear.

But no! No sign of the actress. I floated on my back, stared up at Mount Rundle in the sunshine. This, too, was surely a moment to share? Maybe MacDowell didn't realize this outdoor pool existed? That was it! Back inside I went, and yes! MacDowell, dressed now in an attractive white sweatsuit, was walking towards me along the edge of the pool. She approached, glanced my way, then made as if she was looking for someone else. She turned on her heel and walked away, disappeared into the women's locker room.

In retrospect, I can see that she wanted to speak to me, and to bring closure, somehow, to the magical interlude we'd shared, alone in the pool at the Banff Springs Hotel. At the last moment, she lost courage. I can understand that. Or, no. It was delicacy. Speaking, she'd realized at the last moment, would only spoil what we'd shared. We were two ships passing in the fog. Best just to leave it at that.

For the record, I was never a passionate fan of Andie MacDowell. As a working journalist, normally I would have been expected to go for the direct quote. But I had time to think while I swam. And the last thing I wanted, when we had finished, was to

exchange words. By that time, I had a sense of what might be possible, and I knew that if we spoke, it might kill the whole yarn. What if I had asked her about her latest movie and she had told me to buzz off?

A second unreliable narrator, different in delusion but equally naive, surfaced in a column I wrote about novelist Dean Koontz.

Will the real Dean Koontz please stand up? Ha! Don't hold your breath, folks. The "real Dean Koontz" no longer exists. He's been abducted, dispensed with, and replaced by a small army of clones. This happened, near as I can determine, in the early 1980s.

If you compare various photos of "Koontz," you can see that the clones are similar but not identical. A 1983 photo, for example, features a "Dean R. Koontz" with longish sideburns. Now, certain credulous individuals will assert that this is Koontz himself, the same man, only younger. Don't believe them. They haven't done their homework.

First, "Koontz" has treated the subject of robotic clones with the kind of chilling authority -- I refer you to his 1993 novel, *Mr. Murder* -- that comes only from personal experience. Second, check out his latest book, *Sole Survivor*. At its heart you'll find a variation on the Frankenstein story, a scientific experiment gone badly awry. That, of course, is precisely what happened to "the real Koontz."

If you want a clincher, note the number of books attributed to this author. A frontispiece to the latest novel cites 30 titles, most of them fat mainstream thrillers -- but it's deliberately misleading. What about those science fiction novels from the 1960s and '70s, some of which appeared under pseudonyms? One bibliography I've unearthed lists forty-eight titles, and makes no claim to being exhaustive. . . .

The barebones cover story has it that Koontz was born in Pennsylvania in 1945. At twenty, he won an *Atlantic Monthly* fiction contest. He attended teachers' college, started teaching high school English in 1967, and became a full-time writer two years later. Fair enough -- as far as it goes. But what happened in the early '80s? Cloning, that's what. Cloning that somehow went horribly wrong.

Ever wonder why "Koontz" won't go on a bonafide book tour? Ostensibly, it's because he doesn't want to take time away from his work. Really, it's because half a dozen "Dean Koontzes" have been running around for years. Some people have met one, others another. Put any of these clones on tour and countless people would instantly spot the subtle differences. End of scam.

You can see the truth, too, in the work itself. This year's novel, *Sole Survivor*, is flawlessly plotted -- the work of a clone-leader. . . . Yes, the novel is scary. But this particular "Koontz" makes an effort to root his scenarios, no matter how far-fetched, in plausibility. In this case, as I say, he draws on his own experience of a scientific experiment gone horrific.

I don't want to reveal too much. The inferior Koontz clones have been known to slip up on details, to make mistakes and, occasionally, to overwrite. The superior ones craft fast-paced, suspenseful thrillers that unwind ineluctably once you've accepted their initial premises. *Sole Survivor* is a worthy addition to the Koontz canon. But don't try to tell me that one man created that entire body of work. The thought is just too scary.

This particular Unreliable made a second appearance after Koontz himself -- to his great credit -- joined the fun. My follow-up column appeared under the headline: *Revenge of the clones: Koontz reveals multiple existences with blizzard of letters and books.*

Talk about vindication. In the past few days, I've received forty-nine letters from Dean Koontz clones, all nearly identical, each subtly different. And now copies of *Ticktock*, the best-selling American author's latest paperback, have begun arriving: twenty-three and counting.

Eight weeks ago, before Dolly The Sheep made cloning the stuff of headlines, I argued in this space that novelist Koontz had been abducted and cloned. After all, who could believe that one man had produced forty-eight titles, never mind that they'd sold more than 175 million copies around the world?

Give me a break. I wasn't buying it. And now I get forty-nine letters post-marked California. These "Koontzes" try to throw me off guard with a couple of easy compliments -- ingenious hook, neatly developed -- but soon find themselves protesting too much: "I am concerned," they write, "that you may to some degree actually believe in this theory of multiple Koontzes."

You've got that right, fellas. But the "Koontzes" go on: "Were you to continue to promote this bizarre notion, you might convince others that it is true. Consequently, I might be taken into custody by agents of the U.S. government and imprisoned in some hellish laboratory deep under the Pentagon, there to be poked and studied for the rest of my days; therefore, I wish to assure you that your 'Theory of the Cloned Koontz' is half-baked, utterly without merit, embodying not a shred of truth, not a shred, zip, nothing, nada."

See what I mean about too much protesting? "You might more fruitfully apply your journalistic talent and energy to exploring

the very real possibility that exercise guru Richard Simmons was not born on this planet but comes from one of the moons of Jupiter. Or what about U.S. Vice-President Albert Gore? We have all seen him attempt to dance, during the campaign, so we know he is most likely not human but an audioanimatronic construct that has escaped from the Disney robotics labs. Get behind one of these real -- and much bigger -- stories and forget all this claptrap about me having been cloned."

If I had received a single such letter, fine. But forty-nine? And look: here's one post-marked March 27, while another went out on March 31. Didn't I tell you that some Koontz clones are more efficient than others?

Careful scrutiny of the ``Dean Koontz" signatures also reveal, even to the untrained eye, marked discrepancies. They're all in blue ink, but check out the capital Ks -- and those wildly divergent tails. I know, I know. The credulous among us will contend that one man could have sent all these letters, painstakingly licking forty-nine stamps. They'll remind us that Koontz has a reputation as a practical joker and claim it all fits.

That's just it, of course. With these Koontzes, it always does. At the bottom of the letter, as a postscript, the author promises to send me a copy of *Ticktock*, asserting: ``I wrote this book myself. No clone labor was involved." Why, then, do I find myself counting copies?

The plausibility of the clone suggestions -- Al Gore an escapee from Disney's robotics labs? hmmm -- demonstrate the group's desperation. Clearly, I'm onto something here. That's why they're so willing to point the finger at other curious phenomena. You think clones and lab-escapees don't stick together? It's a club, I tell you. It's a conspiracy, a cabal.

For the rest, I can only assure *Herald* readers that I will pursue my investigation with due diligence. I will not be dissuaded -- especially not now that this blizzard of letters has demonstrated the viability of my original hypothesis. Why forty-nine letters? Why not fifty? Are we to believe that each clone wrote one title?

Certainly, I intend to approach senior managers here at the *Herald*. The time has come, I submit, for the paper to send me to Southern California to conduct a full and complete investigation, no matter how long it takes. Our readers deserve no less.

After this, I did contact Koontz. We chatted on the telephone and I suggested that I visit him in California and write a profile. He said great, come on down. My handlers -- the ones who were paying the bills -- said thanks but no thanks. The Unreliable Narrator can only take you so far.