

Dean Koontz

Suspense-thriller author

BY BEKAH WRIGHT

Best known for his nail-biting thriller *Watchers* (see page 26), Dean Koontz, 68, has penned nearly 70 books and seven graphic novels, with 62-and-counting *New York Times* best sellers and more than 450 million copies of books sold. One of the recurring settings in many of his books is his adopted home of Orange County. "When my wife, Gerda, and I first moved here almost 30 years ago, it felt like we belonged and were at home," Koontz says. "That feeling has continued to grow over the years. I find Orange County hugely interesting—the landscape and history are fascinating and it's diverse in every way." An avid car enthusiast, Koontz also likes to hit the open road with Gerda and their golden retriever, Anna.

Why do you love cars so

much? I've always been fascinated with being on the open road. I grew up in a poor family with a father who was a violent alcoholic. I would escape through books and a bicycle my uncle bought me when I was 10. From that point on, I could escape the house and anything bad there by cruising. We lived in a farm town and you could spend all day cycling to outlying areas and still only see a portion of what was available. That cemented for me the idea that being on the road, in the open and on the move, was a way to be safe and happy.

What was your first car?

A black-and-white '56 Buick. I needed it for commuting during college. It didn't cost much, but I loved that car.

What's in your garage now?

My wife's second Ford Explorer. Only out of necessity will she

drive anything else. Then there's a 27-year-old Mercedes S600 12-cylinder model. We've had that since the first year they sold the model. We also have a 2-year-old S600 and a GL550.

With all those cars, are you a AAA member? We've been AAA members since we got our first car as a married couple back in 1966.

Do you have a favorite road-trip memory? One year, we drove 3,948 miles with me behind the wheel for all but about 48 miles of that at my wife's insistence. We like driving the southern route to my home state, Pennsylvania. Because we love the beauty of the Southwest and the heartland quality of the towns along the route, we take Interstate 40 to Nashville, Tennessee. Also, the Southwest is beautiful and open. Our return route has often been I-80 to Salt Lake

City and then I-15 home. And we'd take side trips to places like Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to see friends.

Is there a road trip from one of your books that you'd recommend? In *Secret Forest*, which is set to release in July 2015, my lead character finds peace only while on the move, though trouble often finds him. Among other journeys, in New York State, he takes a scenic drive on NY 30 and 3, from the town of Speculator to Saranac Lake, through Adirondack Park. In Arkansas, he drives the gravel-surface levee from Lake Chicot State Park into all kinds of grief on a foggy morning. And when he teams up with the female lead, they find themselves on a road trip from Napa, on various state routes to I-5, north to State Highway 299 to the town of Burney and onward into the wilderness of Modoc County.

What would be your dream

road trip? Before I was a success, I plotted out my novels as I did my travels. I realized this was constricting me, so I started developing a premise and giving my characters free will to go wherever the story took them. I'd like to take a car trip the same way. Start with no destination and take whatever byroads look appealing. Of course, my wife has to use the GPS so I don't get lost as easily. I've also threatened that if I semiretire, we'll put together a cross-country trip to all the best restaurants from Guy Fieri's *Diners, Drive-ins and Dives* show on the Food Network. We'd probably have to lose 15 pounds, each, prior. **W**

Dean Koontz's new book *The City* (Bantam, 2014), a tale about a gifted musician's suspenseful experience with the supernatural, will go on sale July 1.

