



THE  
FICTION  
INTERVIEW 2

*Senior Editor Charles Pinch with Andrew Campbell*

*This is the only time in the life of FOTD that I am interviewing an author whose story I have no hope of understanding. I read it three times and I'm still writing from square one. In any other case this would mean a polite (and encouraging) decline. So why are we here and why are you reading this? The answer is VOICE. That, and that alone is what makes just any writer a good writer. Each time I read this story I enjoyed it more; the language, the rhythm, the both artful and clumsy way the words bump up against each other, along with an appealing primitivism that is anything but primitive. It's very close to that enigmatic literary hybrid called prosody and yet it is truly a prose narrative. What rises from the page with the energy of star power is authenticity. Everything about this story is genuine, even if the subject is not discernibly real. You can't be taught to write like this. You either have those talents that define Campbell's work, or you don't. I'd wager he has them in abundance.*

**CP:** *Welcome to FOTD, Andrew, and thanks for agreeing to this interview. First question. What inspired you to become a writer? How old were you when you wrote your first story and do you remember what it was about?*

**AC:** In the mid or late 90s I was sat in Glasgow airport waiting for a flight back to Germany where I was based with the British Army. I was reading FHM magazine and it carried a review for a book called *Trainspotting*. It said something along the lines of ‘deserves to sell more copies than the Bible’ so I walked to the departure lounge store and bought a copy. I was instantly captured. I had no idea books could be like this – written like how I spoke; with characters and situations like I knew. It made me laugh out loud and I thought, *I want to try and write like that*. For years afterwards I wrote like I spoke and paid no attention to any writing teacher who told me to try a different way. I even got a refund from one course where the tutor told me to stop using ‘dialect’. *Fuck you* I thought.

It was 2000 and I was 25 and due to leave the army. It was a short piece that formed part of a GCSE English coursework portfolio that I was studying via distance learning while based in Germany. I can’t remember the exact story but I recall it was an embellished military experience

that ended with a soldier banging another soldier’s head off the hull of a tank. My tutor thought I was telling the truth and insisted it was factual writing and I had to remind him it was entirely fiction, which it was.

**CP:** *Where do you get your ideas and what triggers your creative imagination? Who were your literary influences along the way? You mentioned Irvine Welsh and Brett Easton Ellis in your ‘Author’s Note’. In what way have they impacted your work and why, specifically, do these writers (and the other two you listed) appeal to you?*

**AC:** I regularly listen to the radio news and podcasts and my creative imagination is always triggered by stories that document an abuse of power or could be construed that way. Be it MPs filling their pockets with public cash; or underpaid or unvetted care home staff exploiting or abusing the people they’re supposed to be caring for; or police officers using their powers for nefarious ends I see material everywhere. Often, I’ll write ideas down thinking *One day I’ll write that story* but I rarely revisit these notes and pretty much all my ideas appear when I start scribbling having little clue about where I’m heading other than perhaps a prompt to fire my mind or a *What If* type of scenario loosely circulating in my mind.

I was never a bookish child and didn’t give school a chance. Like my brothers and my pals, school was something we endured until we could leave at the earliest opportunity. My brothers and some pals have never read a book and I probably wouldn’t have bothered either if I hadn’t stumbled upon *Trainspotting*. As said, that was a lightbulb moment and from there I began to search for other voices I connected with.

I suppose they have impacted my work by making it clear that you can write in a rough Scottish voice and about anything you want be it drug taking, mutilating folk, blowing up buildings or hunting down presidents – if such activities are your thing.

**CP:** *In NO NEED the characters and actions are so beautifully and skillfully smithed together as to seem indivisible. We don't so much read the story as experience it. Can you comment on that?*

**AC:** I'm truly humbled by that compliment. 'No Need' was created in response to a prompt from a short course I was studying in 2020. Around that time, I experienced a similar scenario to the private soldier and when I started writing / embellishing the truth, 'No Need' is what appeared.

When I spied the FOTD submission call I was working on another piece that I intended to send but it was getting late and it wasn't happening so I went to my bed frustrated. I suddenly thought of 'No Need' so got up, turned on my laptop, found it, edited it and sent it off genuinely not expecting anything to come back let alone the piece being accepted.

**CP:** *You mention madness in your 'Author's Note'—the madness around us, the madness that we, as a species, has become. Is this a frequent theme in your work.? And how do feel is the best way to express it? What is so compelling to you about madness? How do you feel it has influenced writers today?*

**AC:** For me, it's usually the 'moments of madness' that capture my imagination and feature in my work rather than any particular focus on madness as a condition that could affect any one of us should circumstances conspire to flip us. That's certainly fascinating but I think the moments of madness are all around us and we've all acted in such a way at some stage in our life – be it using a phone while driving or drinking too much alcohol and doing something a bit nuts. For some folk these moments could have tragic consequences and I'm sure we've all read about the person who took their eyes from the road for a second or two to check their phone and caused a catastrophic crash or the drunk who threw one punch on a night out and ended up killing their unfortunate victim. It's these wee moments of mental that turn lives upside down that really grip me.

The writers I read seem to have done pretty well out of it but perhaps they wouldn't see their characters or actions or scenarios as mad. For me, it's everywhere but that might just be my view of the world. As an aside I typed 'madness in literature' into Google Scholar and it returned a whole load of interesting articles I'd like to read – one day – so thanks for making me think a bit deeper about this!

**CP:** *You may have heard us rag on FOTD about the duplicitous nature of MFA programs. Do you think good writing can be taught in the classroom? What's your personal feeling about Creative Writing courses and how do you feel they impact on emerging writers today?*

**AC:** I think the craft can be taught but the good writing will come from applying that craft to the writer's experiences and imagination.

As said 'No Need' was in response to a short course prompt I was undertaking in 2020. I don't doubt if I didn't undertake the numerous short courses I have then I would never be published in FOTD. Without that stimulus to create I probably wouldn't have bothered. I enjoy having a

course on my calendar and I feel fortunate I'm able to afford the one or two short courses per year that I like to complete. I've also had my eye on a few of the longer courses, be they part-time undergraduate or postgraduate courses but they're well beyond my budget right now and I doubt I'd have the time to commit to them anyway.

I think the short courses I have undertaken are primarily positive experiences for emerging writers like me who feel they need the stimulus of a course to keep them going and to help them understand the craft of writing.

**CP:** *Does writing come easily to you? Do you plot and plan your stories or are they more intuitively written? Have you ever had writer's block? If, so, how do you deal with it?*

**AC:** My daily journaling comes very easy. Trying to create stories is a different matter! I have tried to plot and plan but I struggle and it seems to kill my enthusiasm. I just like to start scribbling and see what I can discover.

I have sometimes faced a blank page and thought, WTF am I trying to do here? To deal with that I open something I've already written and try to continue that or look at an old journal entry and see if I can use it to get going.

**CP:** *Is there any type of writing or style you don't like? On the flip side, what kind of writing fires your imagination?*

**AC:** Unless it's an academic tome that I'm studying to try and understand something then I'm not keen on dense text full of description and devoid of dialogue. I like plenty of chat and I'm a fan of e-readers because I can try a sample of the writing before parting with any hard-earned cash.

Plenty of chat and a character or characters having a moment of madness, creating chaos and order being restored in some way (only for the process to repeat again and again in a Hegelian type dialectic but not necessarily in the same book!).

**CP:** *How do you see the future of literature, especially fiction? Is the picture encouraging or discouraging to you and why?*

**AC:** I've got no reservations about the future of literature. So long as there's folk there will be writing and whether it's good or bad is a matter of taste. That's life in general. Of course, there's plenty of gatekeepers who decide who gets rewarded for their efforts and what gets pushed onto the market but I love that any old walloper like me can collate their thoughts and send them out there into cyberspace for folk to buy – or not to buy as is the case with my own self-publishing attempt, *Hand Grenade You*.

I dismiss this work as pish and that's why only one copy was sold, bought by my beloved out of sympathy for my efforts but perhaps I just needed to be a bit more aggressive in my marketing. Who knows, maybe if I'd even tried to market it, I would have got a few more sales and perhaps it might have found an audience who genuinely liked it but I doubt it. For now, I've resigned

myself to the traditional gatekeeper route: if someone thinks my writing is worth publishing then superb. If not, I'll crack on having a pop and who knows, maybe one day. Either way I'm encouraged the self-publishing route is available if I fancy another pop down the line but for now I'll just enjoy the process. My livelihood isn't dependent upon me attempting to produce fiction that folk might like to buy. Thankfully!

**CP:** *If you could choose only three books to read what ones would they be? What do you do in your spare time?*

**AC:** If I can only choose three books then am thinking I might be in a sticky situation and I want something to last. First up: the *King James Bible* because I've only read small parts of it and I like 'Proverbs,' which I think about fairly regularly having read it into a Dictaphone many moons ago and listened to it numerous times since. Number 2 would be the *Quran* because we're often told we're living in a 'clash of civilisations' so going to the source material of both these particular civilisations may prove useful in trying to understand the clash. Third up is difficult. I want to say *Trainspotting* since it was my inspiration to write but I'm opting for any collected works of Immanuel Kant that contain his essay on 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose.' I read this into a Dictaphone in 2003 and have listened to it fairly regularly ever since. This piece outlines an idea that our 'asocial sociability' aka moments of madness in my eyes may have a purpose and it fires my imagination. I'm sure there's similar wisdom in his other works too so if I'm only choosing three, I want big ones that hopefully get right to the reason for our existence – as mental as I think it is.

**CP:** *And finally, tell us a bit about Andrew Campbell the person.*

**AC:** I'm 49 and live just outside Glasgow with my partner Suzanne and 4-year-old son, Alasdair. I also have a 22-year-old son called Luke who lives near Newcastle upon Tyne who is studying to be a lawyer and is much more sensible than I ever was at 22.

I grew up in a place called Campbeltown on the west coast of Scotland and left school at 15 approaching 16 with zero qualifications worth mentioning. From there I enrolled on a Youth Training course learning welding and metal fabrication, which subsequently enabled me to gain an engineering apprenticeship in the local shipyard and the qualifications to join the Royal Electrical Mechanical Engineers as a Metalsmith. In 2000 after 7 years in the REME I decided to leave the British Army and enrolled on an access to university course at Aberdeen University.

While at Aberdeen I got involved with a university writing group and thoroughly enjoyed sharing my attempts at stories with like-minded souls. In 2001 Luke was born so I transferred to Newcastle University to complete my undergraduate studies in Politics and Sociology and in 2006 I graduated with a postgraduate diploma in Social Research from Strathclyde University. It should have been a Master's qualification but I failed the dissertation and had no interest in rejigging it after two attempts at gaining PhD funding failed. Gatekeepers say No. I then tried to join the Army again as an officer but was told – at 32 – I was too old so I drove trucks, welded, chapped doors asking folk to take part in market research surveys and drove a Google car – all sorts of shite jobs to earn a crust while living in a high-rise ten floors in the sky in the south side of Glasgow.

On Christmas Day 2008 I was broke and thinking I can't keep floating in and out of jobs the rest of my life so I applied to join the Military Provost Guard Service as a Private MPGS soldier and I'm still there now.

**CP:** *Thank you, Andy. I really enjoyed our exchange as I'm sure our readers did too. Good luck with your future endeavors and keep writing!!!*