

## Interview for “Specific Gravity” by J. Matthew Neal

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by J. Matthew Neal, who is here to discuss his new book “Specific Gravity.”

*Dr. J. Matthew Neal was born in Muncie, Indiana, where he has resided much of his life. Although he has been a medical writer for many years, “Specific Gravity” is his first novel. As a physician and residency program director, he has found plenty of inspiration in the medical field for his fiction.*

Tyler: Welcome, Matt. Thank you for joining me today. To begin, I understand “Specific Gravity” is a thriller with Dr. Alexander (Alex) Darkkin as its main character. Will you tell us a little bit about Alex and why you think readers will find him to be an attractive character?

Matt: Alex is a complicated guy with lots of problems, and at first probably won’t seem likeable to readers at all. He’s a brilliant cancer specialist who has also created his own medical software company. He’s good-looking, smart, and has money—but is also an obnoxious, womanizing alcoholic who is unhappy with his superficial life and self-destructing relationships. He’s tried therapy, AA, and religion, none of which seem to be working.

But he has a deeper side that he doesn’t yet realize, and much of the story revolves around his self-reflection and realization that he can do much to help those other than himself. He just needs a special person to show him the way.

Tyler: Is Alex haunted by demons that led him to womanizing and alcoholism? Would you tell us a little bit about his past before the book begins?

Matt: Alex felt he didn’t have a very good paternal role model; his father Conrad was an alcoholic who cheated on Alex’s mother on numerous occasions. His sister left town after high school and developed a relationship with a normal, “surrogate” family (the Mendozas); meanwhile Alex stayed fairly close to home, and lives in Nashville. He never saw his parents in a loving marriage, and as a result, finds it difficult to engage in lengthy relationships. Despite seeming arrogant, he actually suffers from low self-esteem and depression, and this has resulted in dependence on alcohol and frequent one-night stands.

Tyler: What is the situation Alex finds himself in that is the focus of the novel?

Matt: Alex, hoping that a change of location will do him some good, relocates to San Diego for six months to fill in for his sister Wendy’s friend who is taking a sabbatical. After his arrival, he curiously inspects the files of a patient who recently died—billionaire pharmaceutical CEO John Markham. His software background leads him to discover that Markham’s medical records may have been altered, and he comes up with a theory that Markham may in fact have been murdered.

Unfortunately, he can't seem to convince the police or anyone else, and realizes he can't do it alone. He then reluctantly seeks the aid of Wendy's best friend, Bonnie Mendoza.

Tyler: Tell us a little bit about Bonnie and her involvement in the story.

Matt: The arrogant Alex finally meets his match in deaf forensic scientist Bonnie Mendoza—a mathematical and lexical genius who inherited from her mother the rare neurological trait "synesthesia," which means, literally, "a union of the senses." She sees numbers and letters as colors, for example. Living humans have unique colors and smells as well. These odd sensory perceptions allow her easily to manipulate words and numbers.

Her physical disability has compelled her to exceed in other ways, also. Like her other family members, she is a gifted athlete. She cares deeply about sick and disabled children, and she frequently performs for charity as stage magician "Mendoza the Miraculous." Her mathematical powers allow her to perform amazing mentalist tricks, but she is best known for being an escape artist who has become somewhat of a local celebrity. The last ability is extremely important in the plot of the story.

The seemingly perfect Bonnie has many flaws, though—she often seems to lack common sense and makes rash decisions. Like many strong synesthetes, she has perceptual problems—she cannot tell left from right, for example, and has poor direction sense. The geeky, mild-mannered scientist has a bad temper, is virtually fearless, and can be lethal to anyone who tries to harm her. Her training as a forensic scientist has given her the knowledge of how to use weapons most effectively. But, despite these abilities, she has an almost childlike, naïve quality, and Alex becomes strongly attracted to her.

Tyler: Wow, she sounds like quite a character. Where did you get your ideas for Bonnie, and how do her abilities enhance the novel's plot?

Matt: Alex is an arrogant blowhard who always wants his way, and I needed a strong female character who can take anything he dishes out and throw it right back at him. At first, they have strong disdain for one another, but, paradoxically, this strength eventually attracts Alex to her, and they develop an unlikely relationship. She seems, on the surface, quite different from Alex, but we soon learn that they share many tendencies.

In addition, I have long been a fan of magic and escapology, and wanted to feature a character who used those abilities in the story. To my knowledge, other female escape artist characters in the popular media are pretty nonexistent.

Alex is a skilled physician and software engineer, but doesn't understand the intricacies of forensics and police work, and needs Bonnie for that. In addition, her abilities are important in solving several puzzles and getting them out of a number of tight situations.

Tyler: Tell us a little bit about Alex's sister Wendy, who appears to be an important character in the story.

Matt: Wendy is Alex's younger sister by two years, and is also a physician. The extroverted, plus-sized pediatrician moved to San Diego after high school to attend college. She began volunteering at a pediatric rehabilitation center, where she met wiry deaf teen Bonnie Mendoza. Over the years, the two developed a special friendship, and Wendy helped Bonnie improve her self-esteem and physical strength.

She is an avid charity fund-raiser who often performs magic acts with Bonnie. She even has a local public access TV show, "Dr. Wendy's Science Squad," which teaches children about science and technology. She is married and has one child.

Tyler: I understand "Specific Gravity" is categorized as a techno-thriller. Will you give us a bit of a definition of a "techno-thriller" and explain why this kind of novel appeals to you?

Matt: Techno-thrillers are works of fiction where "technology" is, in essence, a character in the story. They tend to include a large amount of technical detail in subject matter, and focus on the inner mechanics of science. Much of the novel centers on the detailed workings of computers, medical information systems, forensic science, and even magic tricks. This genre allows me to do what I like to do best—write in great technical detail about science and its inner workings.

Tyler: What difficulties do you find in writing a techno-thriller? Do you have concerns about readers following the details around technology, and does technology give you artistic license to create technologies and make them believable to readers?

Matt: I think one problem is that it's possible to include *too* much technical detail. I have gone to great trouble to ensure the accuracy of the science and disciplines in the book—but I realize that some readers may not have the same interest in detail as I.

Personally, I enjoy reading techno-thrillers where I may not understand all the science and technology—this allows me to read about it elsewhere and learn new things. I think, in a way, techno-thrillers may be harder to write than other types of fiction, because the science must be believable. Attention to detail is a must, and requires a lot of revision. The research takes almost as much time as writing the book.

Tyler: Are techno-thrillers a form of science-fiction, or do you see a difference between them? Are techno-thrillers striving more for realism, or at least to appear realistic?

Matt: I think there are a lot of similarities between the two genres. To me, science fiction tends to explore scientific disciplines (such as robotics, time travel, cloning, etc.) for its own sake. Techno-thrillers are kind of a hybrid of science fiction and mystery, usually about espionage or a threat to society that the protagonists must solve. There is a subgenre of science fiction called "hard SF" where there is rigorous attention to accurate detail in the quantitative sciences (such as physics and chemistry). I think there is some overlap.

Both genres can be realistic, but I think the main difference is the mystery/puzzle angle of the techno-thriller. The latter also may focus on societal and political issues; "Specific Gravity" takes aim at some of those.

Tyler: What sorts of influences have you had in writing techno-thrillers? For example, other writers or medical TV dramas?

Matt: I'm actually more of a non-fiction reader than fiction. For fiction, my major influences have been Michael Crichton, Martin Caidin, Robin Cook, and Tom Clancy, all of whom go into great technical detail in their stories. I also read a lot of Isaac Asimov's science fiction stories growing up. Although I enjoy watching medical TV dramas, they really don't influence my writing.

Tyler: Why did you choose the title, "Specific Gravity"?

Matt: "Specific Gravity" refers to the physical measurement of the relative density of a liquid to water. The mystery unfolds when the protagonists decipher some of John Markham's unusual laboratory values, which leads them into a heap of trouble. I chose the title because of its importance in the story. It also sounds scientific and technical.

Tyler: Matt, I understand you're a doctor yourself. How has your profession lent to your interest in writing novels?

Matt: Well, most physicians' lives are not nearly as exciting as they are portrayed in the popular media. Nevertheless, medicine gives one many plot ideas, and a large hospital gives a writer access to many interesting people. It's like a small city, in a way.

Tyler: Why did you decide to write, "Specific Gravity"? Is there a message about our modern world in the book that you were trying to express?

Matt: As our healthcare information becomes more and more electronic, we must be certain that safeguards are present to protect those data and their possible manipulation. My novel shows what could happen if malicious individuals tried to use that information for their own evil gain. These events, however unlikely, *could* happen.

But most real-world medical errors aren't malicious in intent—they are simply mistakes, but mistakes that can cost lives. We must carefully examine our own healthcare delivery systems to make certain that hospitals are the safest places in the world.

The book is also about a selfish, unhappy physician's journey to redemption—to try and do something for someone other than himself, to make the world a better place. To succeed, Alex has to confront his demons, and also must face his greatest "moment of desperation"—the possibility of losing the most important thing in his life. During these times, he finds inner strengths he never knew he had.

Tyler: Matt, would you tell us one of the plot twists, or what you find to be the most exciting moment in the novel?

Matt: There are many, and I don't want to divulge too much—but I think one of the most exciting parts is when Alex and Wendy discover that the true villain is someone who has been lurking right under their noses all along. Another is Alex's realization of what the murder weapon is—something so bizarre that it's almost incomprehensible.

Tyler: Would you give us an example of how the novel is a techno-thriller? What kind of technology is involved in the plot?

Matt: There is much detail in the description of computers and medical informatics—the theoretical development of a “quantum” computer, for example. The unusual murder weapon also demands a great deal of explanation. Bonnie’s forensic science tactics, such as voiceprint, mathematical, chemical, and facial analyses, are explored in detail. Finally, the intricacies of Bonnie’s escape artist tricks probably qualify as “technology,” and are discussed in depth.

Tyler: Matt, what made you first want to be a novelist?

Matt: I had wanted to write a novel for years but simply hadn’t found the time. Believe me, it was a lot more work than I thought it would be. The best part of writing fiction to me is creation of characters—you can make them whoever you want them to be. It’s fun, but also a lot of frustration and hard work; some ideas simply end up in the trash can.

Tyler: I understand you also write books for the medical field. Will you tell us a little bit about those works, and what challenges you find in writing both fiction and non-fiction?

Matt: I have written three medical textbooks which have been used in traditional classroom settings. After I began writing a novel, I soon realized that the lessons learned in medical writing don’t necessarily apply to fiction—it’s totally different. Each has its own set of challenges. One similarity in a techno-thriller to a medical textbook is that both must pay meticulous attention to detail. But the structure and pacing of a novel is vastly different. I went to several writers’ conferences and took several courses on fiction writing, and I owe a lot to those instructors who critiqued my manuscript mercilessly!

Tyler: Do you see Alex as a recurring character in future novels?

Matt: I am currently writing a sequel, “Ontario Lacus,” which is set about three years from the end of “Specific Gravity.” Alex and Bonnie unwittingly uncover a pro sports steroid scandal that turns out to be something far, far worse—one of the greatest scientific discoveries of all time has been perverted into a government bio-genetic experimentation project. Bonnie must risk everything to save the friend who did so much to help her twenty years ago.

As far as a long-term recurring character, I don’t know about Alex. Part of his motivation in “Specific Gravity” is conquering his personal demons, which he accomplishes for the most part. He’s appreciably more mellow in “Ontario Lacus,” which is more Bonnie’s and Wendy’s story than his. We’ll see.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, Matt. Before we go, would you tell us your website address and what further information our readers may find there about “Specific Gravity”?

Matt: Further information about the book can be found on my website, [www.jmneal.com](http://www.jmneal.com).

Tyler: Thank you, Matt. I wish you lots of luck with your next book and hope you’ll join us again when it is available.