

The Crime Cafe with Danny Lopez

Presented By:



Debbi: [00:00:10] This is the Crime Cafe, your podcasting source of great crime, suspense, and thriller writing. I'm your host, Debbi Mack. Before I bring on my guest. I'll just remind you that the Crime Cafe has two ebooks for sale: the nine-book boxed set and the short story anthology. You can find the buy links for both on my website, DebbiMack.com, under the "Crime Cafe" link. You can also get a free copy of either book if you become a Patreon supporter. You'll get that and much more if you support the podcast on Patreon, along with our eternal gratitude for doing so.

Debbi: [00:01:03] Hi, everyone. I'm pleased to have as my guest today the author of the Dexter Vega Mysteries, as well as highly-regarded novels such as PLAYING FOR THE DEVIL'S FIRE, a young adult novel that has received a couple of honors in terms of Best Fiction and Best Young Adult Fiction. Again, it's a pleasure to introduce Phillippe Diederich [aka Danny Lopez] Glad you could be here today.

Danny: [00:01:30] Hi. Thanks for having me, Debbi.

Debbi: [00:01:32] Well, I'm just glad you can be here. And before we talk about your mysteries, let's talk about the novels that came before that. What was your first novel about?

Danny: [00:01:44] My first published novel is SOFRITO. And it's a novel about a Cuban-American who was born in the United States, has a Cuban restaurant in New York, and he travels to Havana for the first time in order to steal the recipe that had once belonged to his uncle. And in the process falls in love, discovers his late father's past, and mainly it deals a lot with the different shades of ideas on why people leave Cuba. You know, not necessarily political. So it's a double love story. It's a return to your own roots. It's a foodie book. It talks a lot about food and the restaurants. And it's a bit of a tour of Havana. I've met some people who have read it and say, "Oh, we went to Cuba because we read your book."

Debbi: [00:02:45] That's really cool. How would you describe it in terms of genre?

Danny: [00:02:53] Just straight up fiction. I got into writing because I like stories. So I try to create a story for all of my books. There has to be something beyond just characters or pretty writing. One of the things that happened with SOFRITO is that I had spent a lot

of time in the 90s in Cuba, in Havana in particular, as a photojournalist. So it was still a forbidden place for Americans to go to. So I thought it would be interesting to write a book based on this place. I was so close and yet so far. And I also wanted to write about the different opinions that Cubans and Cuban-Americans had about Cuba and the Castro regime, etc. It took me so long to write and revise and get it published that by the time it got published, Obama had lifted some of the traveling sanctions that he had on. So it worked out quite well, I think, in the end that it got delayed in publication. Yeah. I'm just after a story. So I would say general fiction, you know. I'm really rooted in the classics of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. And they all have stories, great writing, great stories. And that's what I try to do.

Debbi: [00:04:17] That's excellent. And that's really the whole point to write good stories. Now, your mysteries are written under a pseudonym, Danny Lopez. What made you choose to take on a pseudonym and why Danny Lopez?

Danny: [00:04:37] So what happened is I publish SOFRITO, which is a general fiction book, I suppose. And then PLAYING FOR THE DEVIL'S FIRE, which was marketed as a young adult. I didn't write it as a young adult. The publisher saw that the main character is, you know, 12 going on 13. It's a little bit more like a Huck Finn or a TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD type book.

Debbi: [00:05:04] Coming-of-age?

Danny: [00:05:05] So, yeah. Coming-of-age, but dealing with a lot of adult issues. An adult can really enjoy the book. So I allowed the publisher, we agreed that it would be young adult and we went in that direction. I have to say that both SOFRITO and PLAYING FOR THE DEVIL'S FIRE, which are written under my name, are mysteries of sorts. You know, they're not really genre mysteries. But SOFRITO's a search for this recipe. And basically this journey, the search for something that's missing. PLAYING FOR THE DEVIL'S FIRE is based on the main character searching for his parents who have disappeared after drug [00:05:51] traffickers, narcos [00:05:52] moved into the town where he lives in Mexico.

[00:05:56] So, in a way, they're mysteries, but they're not straight genre mysteries. So I had this idea for Dexter Vega. And I wrote it without really discussing it with my agent.

And when she read it, she said that she could not represent it, because she had issues with one of the characters, one of the bad guys. It's not graphic or anything, but he's involved with abusing young women. Teenagers, really young teenagers that he finds in the street and he brings into his home. And she had an issue with that, And she also said that I should use a pen name, because it was very different from my other writing. I was new. I'm fairly new to the writing. There's no real guide for all this stuff that I've ever found that tells you everything about the marketing of the different books and what fits in what shelf, etc..

[00:07:05] It is a big deal in writing or in publishing. And this whole genre and subgenres and sections and where it fits on the shelf, and I think both SOFRITO and DEVIL'S FIRE really didn't have a shelf to fit in that well. Because just like you were asking what genre and it's like, well, it's kind of a mystery. just general fiction, kind of literary. So with the Dexter Vega mysteries, the first one, THE LAST GIRL, what happened is we decided to go ahead and market it myself and send the manuscript out, and based on what my agent had told me, the idea of using a pen name would separate the brands. I just didn't know how hard it was going to be to have two identities, promote two separate people. And so we publish with Oceanview. And the name Danny Lopez? Dexter Vega. OK. I grew up in Mexico City, and I was born in the Dominican Republic. But my parents are not Latino per se. But that's what I write about. So I wanted to have somewhat of a Latino name that would work well. And Danny Lopez, a pen name, comes from, kind of, two characters that I like a lot are comedians or, you know, Danny DeVito and George Lopez. So it kind of built that way. I thought it would work well for the series since Dexter Vega's Mexican-American. And in that first book, he goes to Mexico, even though he doesn't really speak Spanish and he doesn't know Mexico. Kind of similar to SOFRITO in that sense. To try to solve the mystery.

Debbi: [00:08:56] I like it as a name. It's kind of snappy. It must be tricky, though, marketing under two different names. I am currently enjoying the first book in that series, by the way. I love your writing style. What prompted you to write mysteries?

Danny: [00:09:22] Well, I like reading them, and I think that what works really well for mysteries is that you want to turn the page. I mean, I find it's almost like a thriller to me to find out what's next, especially if you have really good characters. And some of the events that happened in THE LAST GIRL, as well as in THE LAST BREATH, happened

here in Sarasota. So I was inspired by things that were happening locally here in order to write those books. And I just think it's an interesting genre, especially if you have really good characters.

Debbi: [00:10:04] I think that's essential. Having good characters is so important. Characters that you care about and want to follow and find out what happens to them. Are you writing a third book?

Danny: [00:10:19] I sort of am. I had kind of a false start late last year and feel like I'm starting again. Because the third book is a really important book. Dexter is divorced, and his wife and his daughter live in Houston. And one of the recurring themes in the book is---other than Dexter's drinking---is his seven-year-old daughter that he can't connect with very well. But he also has some background to him that is alluded to in THE LAST GIRL, in the first book, which is that he witnessed his father, when he was about his daughter's age, he witnessed his father getting shot by a policeman on a side road, a side highway in Texas. So this led him to become a journalist and to write about exposing the police department. You know, that's his real motivation and his sort of contentious relationship that he has with the Sarasota police and the Sarasota sheriff's office goes back to that. So even though it's touched upon in both books, but especially in the first book, my idea was that in the third book he would end up going back to Texas and has to face some of these demons that have been haunting him. So a lot of what is very subtly laid out in the first couple of books will come to fruition in the third book. And unfortunately, that makes it really difficult.

Debbi: [00:11:55] Well, I mean, but it shows that there is an arc to his character that you've planned out.

Danny: [00:12:01] Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I mean, for me it's very character-based. I get feedback from readers and it goes both ways. Some people either love him or hate him. Some people don't understand him. Some people feel like the plot is maybe too easy to figure out or the mystery to figure out. I talked to somebody last Thanksgiving and they said, "Oh, yeah, I read about halfway through the book. I knew what was going to happen." It's like, well, I don't think that was the point. The point was why did it happen? And the point was a little bit further on how he reconciles with everything that's happened in that book, because he's a laid-off reporter, investigative

reporter, and he stumbles into this case. So it's not just about solving the case, but about how he comes to terms with everything that happened there, because he was sort of conned into the case and in a strange way. And I think for somebody that has such high ethics and certain standards for himself, he has to deal with the fact that he accepted this money from this bad, sick person, that he has to deal with this thing. So it's beyond the case. I think that one of the things that happens is my characters in my novels don't really have complete fool-perfect, "everybody lives happily ever-after" type resolutions.

Debbi: [00:13:42] I love endings like that.

Danny: [00:13:43] Yeah. I mean, you know, life goes on. So in SOFRITO, something happens, you know, in the end. There's a touch of possibility at the end. And some people love the ending. Some people are like, "I wish I would've known this. I wish I would've known that." And DEVIL'S FIRE was an awkward book, because it's very realistic in what's happening in Mexico and the issue's that it's not a happy ending. And, at the beginning, when we were sending the book out, the big issue was that the ending didn't really work a hundred percent. And, you know, with young adult [fiction], a lot of people want that happy ending.

[00:14:33] So when I had the publisher and we were working on it, we discussed the ending and we gave it a certain twist that left it open. It made it a little bit better. And that made a huge difference in the novel. And a lot of the feedback I get is how much people once again either love the ending and think it was the perfect ending or it was that they didn't understand, that they wanted to know what happened afterwards. And what I tell them is, "It's Mexico, and it's a reality." You know that people are disappeared every day there. There's the hunt. There's thousands, tens of thousands of people disappeared and over 120,000 dead in the last decade and a half.

[00:15:21] And I can't give you a resolution that is not true to that or the book would be fake. And with the Dexter Vega mysteries, it's kind of the same way. The mystery itself is solved, but he has so many other things happening in his life that make him the character that he is, that despite solving the mystery, we see that he has not resolved himself.

Debbi: [00:15:51] That sounds really fantastic. I mean, like I said, I am reading the first one and I am enjoying it very much. I like Dexter and so I'm looking forward to see where that goes then. There was something else I was going to ask you. Of course, it escaped my mind. Do you have a favorite author or authors who inspire your writing?

Danny: [00:16:16] Well, I go through stages. I'm kind of an eclectic reader, when I read, When I was first starting to try to write, many years ago, of course, like I said, it was a lot of the classics. Some of the Russians and, of course, Hemingway. Steinbeck is a huge influence because of the way he handles his characters. He's a very humanistic writer. Cormac McCarthy's THE CROSSING, "The Border Trilogies", are big with me. Everybody talks about BLOOD MERIDIAN and I enjoy that book, but "The Border Trilogy" just really speaks to me, especially THE CROSSING. And one of the things I did early on was to write some short stories, and I was kind of finding my voice by writing about Mexico. And what I was writing was not about people coming to the states, but about people going back.

[00:17:21] Because I find that, visiting Mexico, I see the changes that happen based on the remittances people send back. So small villages in Mexico are going through a really important cultural change shift because of the the returning from the United States, workers and migrant workers that come back and that send money back and then bring back with them certain things. One example of that is the use of bicycles in these little pueblos. Didn't used to be that way. But now everybody brings back their bikes and you see bikes everywhere.

[00:18:02] So with Dexter, it's a similar thing. The writers that I was reading. I was reading some of the Hard Case [Crime] books. I don't know if you know the publisher. They're reissuing older books. They're very plot-driven. So they're very quick to read.

Debbi: [00:18:25] Yeah. I love their books.

Danny: [00:18:25] Yeah, I enjoy it because in a couple of nights, I'll read a book or a couple of dentist appointments and I'll be done with with one of the books. But, you know, Dennis Lehane is really good with his characters. And of course, there's John D. McDonald, the Travis McGee series. I haven't read them all, but the few that I've read. My big problem with Travis McGee is that he's too much of a hero. And I like antiheroes.

You know, I like people that I can relate more to. And I'm not the guy that knows all the moves, that gets all the girls. So I can't really write from that point of view.

Debbi: [00:19:02] I understand. I like that. Yeah, I like that kind of hero, That sort of antihero or imperfect hero.

Danny: [00:19:11] Right. That's one of the things, you know, in fiction, your characters need to have flaws. And I tried to write my characters with certain insecurities and baggage that they have. You know?

Debbi: [00:19:30] Well, that's great. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us before we wrap up? Anything about your latest book? What do you hope to do in the future?

Danny: [00:19:43] Sure. An interesting thing about THE LAST GIRL and THE LAST BREATH, the two Dexter Vegas, is that I really liked the first book and maybe because it's the first book in the series, but a lot of people are liking the second one. A lot of the readers. I thought the second one wasn't as deep into him, but a lot of people are responding that they really like THE LAST BREATH. I wrote it trying to be very local with Sarasota. So it's really kind of a beach read, if you live in a coastal town or one of the Florida beaches here in the Gulf Coast or anything, you'll totally get it, because it all takes place on Siesta Key, which is where our beaches are. Number one beach in the country, I think, by Dr. Beach. So, you know, deals with with development, which is a typical Florida theme.

Debbi: [00:20:43] A Florida thing. Yeah.

Danny: [00:20:45] Yeah. It's happening a lot here in this town. I lived in Sarasota on and off since the 80s. So I see a lot of the changes. Dexter hasn't been here that long, but he's a bit old school in that while he accepts the changes, his life is in between a lot of things. So he's disturbed by that.

Debbi: [00:21:09] Since we're on the subject of Florida and Dexter. Do you read either the Dexter books or Carl Hiaasen?

Danny: [00:21:22] I've read some.

Debbi: [00:21:23] Because when I think of Florida, I think of Carl Hiaasen.

Danny: [00:21:26] Yeah, yeah. He's our guy. Hiaasen is very funny. And I read him, God, it must have been 10, 15 years ago. I read a couple of his books and I haven't kept up just because, like I said, I'm an eclectic reader. Last year, well not last year, but the year before that, I spent a lot of time reading nonfiction for research that I'm doing. Yeah, he's Florida, all right. Actually, South Florida.

Debbi: [00:21:59] And, as for Dexter, you didn't get the idea for that name from the serial killer, did you?

Danny: [00:22:07] No, I never saw that. Yeah, I'm not much of a TV person. And as a matter of fact, I think from the moment I left my parents' home, maybe at 18 to go to school until my first marriage, I think. At some point, it wasn't until I was pretty much in my 30s that I didn't own a television. And it helped me a lot with reading and writing. You know, that kind of discipline. And I just go through stages where I watch certain things. Now I have teenagers, so they're always talking about shows and movies they want to watch. But I've never seen the Dexter series. I know it exists and that it's a serial killer. But for your heroes, you want that kind of a name, you want a, you know, stone, rock, hard, bad boy name. So ...

Debbi: [00:23:04] It's a good name. And actually, Dexter was in books before he was on TV. So.

Danny: [00:23:12] Oh, Okay. I didn't know that.

Debbi: [00:23:14] Yeah. I'm also an eclectic reader, so I don't get to read everything that I want to either.

Danny: [00:23:18] Well, there's a lot of books.

Debbi: [00:23:22] There sure are. Seems like it's endless. But, in any case, thank you so much for being here and talking with me.

Danny: [00:23:31] Well, thank you for having me. I really appreciate it.

Debbi: [00:23:34] I could probably talk to you for hours about this stuff because everything you're telling me is so fascinating. I mean, really, you know, Cuba and Florida and all of that. I mean, it's just fascinating stuff. And the fact that you were a photojournalist. That must've played into your decision to write about a journalist, right? A little bit?

Danny: [00:23:55] Well, a little bit. A lot of my friends have been laid off from newspapers. So I also see the people who dedicate, journalism is very much a way of life for many. And so when you lose that job, when you're laid off after doing this for 10, 20 years, a lot of my friends were truly lost and didn't know what to do. And this is kind of what's happening with Dexter. I quit before I got laid off, I guess. But I thought it would be a good way to segue into somebody to become an investigator, although he's not really licensed. And I take this from the Travis McGee novels, that he's a sort of freelance do-it-all. Dexter kind of stumbles into his own cases, as well, and out of necessity. And, you know, like most people, he has an issue. He needs the money, but he's helping these other people and he wants to help. But maybe those people don't need the help or maybe they're the bad guys. So. Yeah.

Debbi: [00:25:01] Mm-hmm. Well, very interesting. And again, thank you for being here. And I would also like to remind everyone to please leave a review for the podcast on iTunes or wherever you listen to it. It helps us a lot. And check out the Crime Cafe nine-book set and short story anthology, which you'll find for sale on my website, debbimack.com. And we also have a Patreon campaign, a Patreon page and if you can support the podcast on Patreon, you'll get perks that go along with your various contribution levels that include early drafts of my work, the things that I'm working on right now, actually. And on that note, I just want to say thanks for listening. And I will be back in two weeks with author DP Lyle as my guest. In the meantime, happy reading. And see you later.