

# The Crime Cafe with Joe Lansdale

Presented By:



**Debbi:** [00:00:12] Hi everyone, 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 9-Book boxed set and the short story anthology. You can find the buy links for both on my website [DebbiMack.com](http://DebbiMack.com) under the "Crime Café" link. You can also get 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:** [00:01:04] It's my great pleasure to have with me today one of the most eclectic writers doing crime fiction, among other things. An author in multiple genres including mystery, westerns, horror, science fiction, and suspense, he has also written for comics, and several of his novels have been adapted for film and TV. My guest is none other than the very awesome Joe Lansdale.

**Debbi:** [00:01:31] Hi Joe I'm so excited to talk with you today. Thank you so much for being here.

**Joe:** [00:01:36] Thank you, Debbi. I'm glad to be here.

**Debbi:** [00:01:39] It's so great to have you on. I first got to know your work as a reviewer for *Mystery Scene Magazine* actually.

**Joe:** [00:01:45] Really? That's a great mag.

**Debbi:** [00:01:48] Yeah, it's great, it was wonderful. I got these wonderful free books and I got to read them and talk about them. It was great!

**Joe:** [00:01:54] (laughing)

**Debbi:** [00:01:56] So my Lansdale starter book was *EDGE OF DARK WATER* and, boy, did that make an impression on me.

**Joe:** [00:02:03] I'm glad it did.

**Debbi:** [00:02:04] Tell me when you wrote it—did you think of it as a young adult novel? Because it is a very mature young adult novel, and I love that about it.

**Joe:** [00:02:14] No. I didn't really think of it as a young adult novel. It was the first novel I did for my new publisher Mulholland, which is a branch of Little Brown. and it was just a story I wanted to tell. And I've always liked stories with young people as protagonists. In fact, I've written quite a few with young people as protagonists and so it just seemed natural to me and, you know, it just rolled out.

**Debbi:** [00:02:40] I know that feeling actually. The feeling that something is just rolling out.

**Joe:** [00:02:43] Mmm ... it's good feeling.

**Debbi:** [00:02:45] Yes it is! I have this one young adult novel I've done and it's kind of like this real kind of variation from what I usually do. But the fact that you write in multiple genres to me is so encouraging, but let me get to the latest thing you have out which is in the anthology *A TIME FOR VIOLENCE*. Am I correct about that?

**Joe:** [00:03:09] Ah, yes, there is an anthology that has my story in it among others.

**Debbi:** [00:03:14] I got to tell you, I love that story. It was like the world's most twisted holiday story.

**Joe:** [00:03:22] Thank you! Thank you so much.

**Debbi:** [00:03:24] It's the highest compliment I can think to make for that particular story. It's awesome. One thing I enjoy about your writing is the way you combine serious social issues with humor. Can you talk a little bit about Hap and Leonard and where those characters came from?

**Joe:** [00:03:42] Well, you know, Hap and Leonard really were an accident. I had a two-book contract for Bantam, which I was very excited about, for two crime novels, and the first one I wrote was *COLD IN JULY*. And when I finished *COLD IN JULY*, I thought, you know I'd like to write another novel that kind of has that old Gold Medal novel feel. Fawcett Gold Medal was a branch that did crime, and then there was another branch that did westerns, science fiction and so on. And I've collected those Gold Medal novels for years, and I like the way they told stories and I like the attitude, so I wanted to capture something with something of that tone.

And I had always thought that I would like to write something about the era that I grew up in, that I became adult in, which was the '60s, early '70s, and about civil rights and the Vietnam war and the kind of contradiction of people and ideas of that era. So, I don't think I was conscious of it when I started writing the novel, but I said I'm going to use my own background to a great extent in this book. Now Hap is not me, but he's damn close. He went to a prison for being against the Vietnam war, and I dropped out of school to be drafted to kind of protest the Vietnam war so therefore I was drafted. I said I wouldn't go. I thought I was going to prison for 18 months, but they gave me a 1-Y for whatever reason. I think they threw me a bone actually, and sent me home. But I used that as kind of the basis for Hap, and the fact that he experiences the '60s and the feeling that in the '80s a lot of that idealism had gone the way of the passenger pigeon. And I wanted to sort of bring that back up and try to have Hap experience that again and be touched by it, but I also wanted to show that there were a lot of divisions and sides of it, and the fact that really young people had sort of led that "revolution", because it was really a varied group of different ideas.

But because they had and they were young—they didn't really have a realistic view of what was going on. That doesn't mean the idealism was wrong, but it meant the expectations were a little bit dramatic. And so I had this in the background, and I had this sort of story I wanted to tell, that took place where I grew up and took place around the kind of people that I grew up with and the kind of people that we were in the '60s and early '70s or a lot of us were. And so I just started

writing from that standpoint and Hap was the only character. I didn't plan for it to be a buddy book at all, and I had Leonard in it as just kind of a side character, but all of the sudden Leonard starts really becoming prominent as I'm writing it. And I had this white, liberal heterosexual whose best friend was a black, gay Republican who had been to Vietnam and had a different viewpoints than Hap had.

And, as I wrote it, I realized this was really good, because it gave you the chance to kind of explore both sides and both kinds of people without making it a lecture. And I just found I really, really like these two characters and I felt so close to Hap because of the connections with my life and I felt close to Leonard because he was made up of a variety of different people I had known in my life. So I felt like when I talk to him I was probably talking to a flip side of myself in some way and yet also this combination of characters that I had melded together to make Leonard and then I brought in Hap's ex-wife, and I did have an ex-wife, but I want to rush to say—that was not my ex-wife. But I had been through the whole early divorce as a young man during the '60s, early '70s and the disappointment that a lot of us had in how we thought we going to change the world.

But again we were naïve, which doesn't mean that the intent is naïve, but it means our expectations of how it would be done and how easily it might be accomplished were. That was all in the novel, more to me than the storyline, and I've put people that conflicted with what Leonard believed and what Hap believed because they were war extremists. Yet there was this connection that he had with these people in a funny way and with his ex-wife who was an extreme idealist and who was also somebody who abandon men easily because she always wanted new fresh ideas. She was in love with being in love more than anything else, yet she was at the heart and at the bottom of it, the most idealistic of all of them and the most sincere about her idealism, I think. Maybe there is a character Chub that might have been equally so, but I just sort of let that story unravel. And then when I got through with it, I thought I'd left Hap and Leonard alone.

I tried to write another book for a new publisher I was with. I moved from Bantam to Warner or Mysterious Press, and I wrote an entire book and I wasn't happy with it. The publisher was like not sure what to do with it, because it was really dark. And I said, you know what? Let me go home and think. So I went home. By the time we flew home from New York where we had been visiting with our editor at that time—my wife was with me—we got home and immediately Hap started speaking to me. And I realized he'd been trying to speak to me for a while and I wasn't listening, cause I thought I was through with that book. I thought I was through with that character. And as this character spoke to me, I sat down and in about three and half to four months, I wrote a brand new novel, and I wrote it in a much more relaxed style like SAVAGE SEASON had been. But I think by that point from MUCHO MOJO, which is the second in the series which many people thought was the first, because the Bantam edition had gone out of print at that time. I think I began to realize how deep their relationship was, Hap and Leonard's and I began to realize how traumatic their experiences in life had affected them. They were dealing with post-traumatic stress in ways of a different sort. Leonard's would have been from Vietnam, of course, which would have been a much more dramatic sort, but you know Hap had been to prison. He had been disappointed in what he thought the world could be, and so they were both dealing with these things which in some ways changed them and made them different people and

when they were together they made a third entity that was both of them. By that point, I was caught up in who the characters were. I hope that wasn't too long, but I was trying to answer your question in full, about who they were.

**Debbi:** [00:10:56] That's a great answer, thank you. That's so true all about the '60s and the youthful stuff and personifying those issues within real people, people in a novel, interacting.

**Joe:** [00:11:16] You know, the thing that I didn't know when I was young was how many people were just on board with it because it was the fad of the time for them. I mean, long hair, beads, being anti-establishment, and as soon as they get older, as soon as it was time to get up and head up against the wall, they bailed. And I realized that it was just easier, because to be the person that stands up against the war or to be the person that stands up for civil rights—it has consequences. I suffered some of those consequences. For me, it wasn't particularly important, because what I was trying to do was more important, but certainly a lot of people did more than I ever did. But I began to have that feeling of faded ... wounded optimism I guess is what you would say, because I began to realize that most people don't believe anything very deeply.

Character is what you have when you're under stress, when you're in a bad situation and you maintain that character. But if you just blow with the wind, it's not character nor is it a really dedicated belief. And I don't want to overstate all of this too much, but what I'm trying to do is give a background on how I saw these characters and how they were rooted in my own life. So when I wrote about them, and some books vary, some books are more just entertainment, excitement. They're all suppose to be entertainment, but the best ones I believe have much more information about social issues and political issues and they don't always come down with an exact stance, because life is just full of little disappointments, and I try to put those in the stories and yet make them something that people want to pick up and read no matter what their convictions are.

**Debbi:** [00:13:10] Yeah, that's great. It's funny because I'm not far behind you in terms of age. I'm old enough to remember the hippies, but too young to have been a part of them. So that feeling of disappointment in the potential there is something that I eventually felt in the '70s. It was like "Hey, where did you guys go?"

**Joe:** [00:13:25] Well, the funny thing is that when people talk about the '60s, they're also really talking about the early '70s, because there's no exact time when this started. I mean, you can date it back to the '50s and further back when people were interested in trying to correct racial situations or protesting the war. Early on, there were people who said, "Hey, this is probably not a good idea."

But it was just from about the middle '60s when music began to be welded more to social issues. You started seeing that become more important, and music was kind of like the soundtrack of our lives at that time and I guess that's true of every generation. But this was, you know, the Beatles and people like that had a lot of social agenda in their music, as well as very well written tunes. And that all went over into the '70s, and when the Vietnam war ended and that threat of the draft ended for a lot of people, so did their idealism, because they were no longer in trouble. I have friends that were opposed to the Vietnam War that are Trump voters. They were for civil

rights. I don't know where they're coming from. I don't know how they went that way. I mean, they get to choose who they want to vote for, but it's different knowing people that were always like that than knowing people who weren't like that who switched. And of course I also have people I've known who were conservatives who have gone the other way.

But it's just amazing to understand how transient people's views are, if they're not really, truly dedicated to those views, or how easily they can be changed if it just makes it easier to get along in society sometimes, because it's hard sometimes to be an outsider. Like, in my case, it's really not that hard, because I've always been sort of independent. I worked for other people. I never really cared what they thought, but I've always gotten along with wide variety of people, a wide variety of interests. I'm politically different than a lot of people here. Not all. There's a lot more of us in the moderate to liberal camp than you would expect, but I'm also an atheist in a very religious society. So those things I think can wear the edge off a lot of people and they eventually just go with the flow. And I didn't want to do that and I didn't want to have characters, at least in those Hap and Leonard books which we're talking about now, that did that.

**Debbi:** [00:16:12] That's so cool. I happened to catch your interview on the Prolific Writer podcast where you mention that you read pretty much all the time. I'm like that, too. Talk about the importance of reading, please.

**Joe:** [00:16:26] I think that most people that write begin being writer or want to be a writer because they love to read, and a lot of times what happens to some of those writers is that the more they write, the less they read, because it's so demanding and can wear you down, but a lot of times the real reason people cease to read is that they fail to have the exact same experience that thrilled them in the first place. And they don't realize that there are so many new and different kinds of experiences that you can have out there.

Some writers continue to give you that experience no matter what over a lifetime of work. But I can say that my sentimental favorite writer for example is of all time is Edgar Rice Burroughs. Now, a lot of his things have dated, social issues, stuff like, makes no difference. I'd already wanted to write, but this was the writer that when I read him, I knew I had to write. And so that writer gave me an impetus to get excited about books.

Well, then I branched out and read other books. When you start reading books and you find that is the same familiar story over and over sometimes you lose interest, and so to be a writer and to be a dedicated reader, which gives you about as much great satisfaction as anything, you also had to be willing to get outside your comfort zone.

I used to read almost a book a day at certain times of my life, when I had that time and also ability. I could also read a little faster than I can now, although by most standards, I'm fast reader. But I still read three or four novels a week or books a week. Not always novels. Sometimes nonfiction, collections of short stories, what have you. But that's about my average. And when I don't do that, it's usually because I'm spending the time cramming on a series of TV shows or movies, or I listen to radio shows. I do martial arts a lot. I've been doing that all my life—56 years. I'm older now, but I still keep my hand in that by teaching, so you can have a bigger life than just reading books.

And if you're working a full-time job, you might not be able to read three or four a week, but you know what? You probably can read one, certainly you can read a couple or three a month, and if you want to write that's what gives you the fuel and that's what gives you the ambition, because you may not necessarily be competing against other writers, though some people do that, but you can be inspired by other writers. And so many writers gave me an understanding of how to do better prose and you start out when you really young, you're kind of copying these other writers, but pretty soon you start (if you doing it right) to abandon that and find your own voice, but you're still straining through cheesecloth all of these other writers that you've read. In my case, it would be like Robert Bloch, Richard Matheson, Ray Bradbury, Charles Beaumont, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, Harper Lee—all of these writers.

And even now I discovered Ellen Gilchrist about two years ago, and of course she's been around a long time and has a stack of work, but except for a couple of short stories I hadn't read her. Well, now I'm excited about her work. And so that's constantly giving me fuel to do a better job with what I do, even if what I'm doing is nowhere similar to what they've done or are doing.

**Debbi:** [00:20:02] Yes, yes, and I couldn't agree with you more. I mean, reading widely and reading all the time is exactly that—fuel.

**Joe:** [00:20:12] Yeah, and you have time to do it. When I worked full-time jobs, sometimes eight and ten hours a day—maybe I read a little less per week, but I read every day. I made sure that I did that I wrote every day. And I'm sure there are people out there saying, "Well, I just can't do that." And if you can't, I'll leave that to you to make that decision, but a lot of people who think they can't just won't. They might find time to watch four hours of TV or spend time to go out and get a case of beer and bullshit with their buddies, but they can't find 30 minutes or an hour a day to write, or they can't find 30 minutes or an hour a day to read. It's hard for me to have a whole lot of sympathy for people who claim they want to write, or claim they would like to have time to read and they won't take that time.

I've got to the point now in my life—I'm busy all the time, but I've always heard this old saying, "If you want something done, ask a busy person." Because they know how to get it done. That doesn't mean they're always going to do it or be able to do it, but they're more likely to do it if it interests them and that's because they've learned to manage their time. I manage my time, but it's not like I make a list, I don't have that kind of mindset. I couldn't follow that kind of program, but everyday I get my writing done. I read everyday. I usually spend a little time watching television or movies. I try to exercise everyday. I try to teach martial arts, private classes at least once a week. And I'm willing to do that until I'm too old to do it.

My wife and I, we travel a lot. I take my laptop with me, and sometimes I'll work 15 minutes while she's in the shower, while we're on the trip. And then later in the evening, I might work another hour or I might work another 15 minutes, but when I get through and come home, I may not have been able to write as regularly, all at the same regular times as I normally do, but I'm often surprised to find out how much time I do write. I was just on a book tour, and it was one of those things where you get up at the crack of dawn and you get on the plane or you go to the

airport to get on the plane, you fly to where you're going, by the time you get there it's time to go there, then when you go there, it's time to go to a hotel, go to bed early so you can get up the next morning. And I still found time to write most of those days, even if it was just like for 15 or 20 minutes before bed.

On midday, occasionally, I'd be back at hotel while I was waiting for a secondary event, but I wrote an entire story and a half over that three weeks, which is a little less than I might do if I were home, but you know what? It was done and I felt better. If I had not written at all, if I'd not tried to write at all, I would've been miserable, and so that keeps the juices flowing and so I don't have those periods where I stop and you feel like you're starting completely over. When I finish a book or a story, I rarely take time off or I take one or two days, a week, but then I'm back at it again, because writing is one of those things that the tools get dull very, very quickly, so you have to keep them sharp, and that's how you do it or at least that's how I do it.

**Debbi:** [00:23:28] So true. For me, it's keeping the journal.

**Joe:** [00:23:31] Yeah, some people do it. I know several people that do that. I never could keep one. By the time I sit down to write a journal, I just write.

**Debbi:** [00:23:41] Well, it's funny the way my journal has the tendency to go back and forth between ideas for stories and...

**Joe:** [00:23:47] I can understand that totally. When I talk about what I do, my belief is simply that my way is not the only way. It's just for me it's the best way, and I arrived at my way through by a trial and error especially for the first seven to eight years.

But I also arrived there by paying attention to how other people work and what works for them and so I would borrow a little piece from this and a little piece from that and sometimes I would discard this and I would retain this. And then over a period of time, I found what works for me, and it's basically: I write in the morning. I write about three hours and then I usually don't write anymore that day. Three hours, then I have the rest of the day to do other stuff which sometimes deals with business.

You have other aspects of your business, if you're a full-time writer other than the writing itself. But that's the main thing. I get up, three hours and I'm done. Rarely do I go back—every once in a while I'll go back in the afternoon, maybe to work on something that's really driving me or sometimes at night. I've awakened in the middle of the night and gone up and wrote.

But nine times out of ten, the way I work is I get up in the morning, I write roughly three hours. I have a rule. I have to do three to five pages a day. And it's rare that I miss that, and most of the time, I get more than that, I might get six, I might get eight, in some rare cases I've gotten far more than that. And I correct as I go and then I do one little polish when I get done, so that on average in three to six months, I usually have a book, because I showed up every day. And I have those days when I got more than three to five, and I polished as I went. And I've been doing it now for 46 years and full-time for just under 40, so you tend to give it regular exercise when it's tied to a passion and it's also tied to the way you pay your bills. That also helps.

**Debbi:** [00:25:48] When it comes down to it, you got to pay the bills.

**Joe:** [00:25:50] You do, and you know, the idea that... I hear some people are “you know I’m just an artist” and all that and my take is “Oh, go to hell.” I try to be an artist too, but you know Hemingway cashed his checks. F. Scott Fitzgerald cashed his checks. So did Faulkner. All of those writers were adamant about being paid and wanted to be paid. And most of the time, when you hear people say that, they’re people who just really are not putting much effort into it or they’re not being very successful at it. I’m not saying that’s an absolute by any means, but I’m saying a professional writer writes. I’m not one of these people that just writes as a hobby. I do it because I love it.

When I was very young, I wanted to be a professional writer. When I discovered pencils, I wanted to write, and I remember hearing that Beatles song “Paperback Writer”. I said, “Yeah, that’s what I want to be,” you know? I wanted to be a paperback writer. Well, we don’t have much in the way of paperbacks like they did then, but I understood ... that song really struck me. And I’ve always thought that I’m one of the luckiest people in the world.

I was born relatively poor, you know, not destitute. My parents were good parents, but my father couldn’t read or write. My mother had what was then a high school education, which was 11th grade, and they were poor all their life and worked hard. And I worked in the rose fields. I worked in aluminum chair factories. I did janitor work for years. I did all kinds of odd and end jobs for years, and I had some college. I got about 60 hours over four years, I think. But thing is, I knew that writing was what I wanted to do, it was what I would do best, and it was what I was geared naturally toward, so I just kept working until I could sell and from there when I can make a living, and then I discovered almost by accident that perhaps I had a little more ability and talent than I expected and maybe I could do something a little unusual. I didn’t set out to do a specific thing. I just wanted to do as well as I could and I was fortunate—it worked out for me.

**Debbi:** [00:28:01] Well, that is so wonderful and it is to our good fortune that it has worked out for you, too.

**Joe:** [00:28:06] Well, thank you.

**Debbi:** [00:28:07] I could talk to you for three hours or for forever, but is there anything else you would like to add before we finish?

**Joe:** [00:28:22] No, not really. I’ll just say that I’ve got THE ELEPHANT OF SURPRISE, which is my new Hap and Leonard book that’s out. For those of you, that small group that are Ned The Seal fans, the last of the trilogy called THE SKY DONE RIPPED comes out this fall. Next year, is a non-Hap and Leonard novel called MORE BETTER DEALS. It’s a crime novel and JANE GOES NORTH, which is about two women on a road trip and my favorite of all the things I recently written. So, that’s what I got.

**Debbi:** [00:28:53] Oh, my gosh. I have to look for these books.

**Joe:** [00:29:00] Well, I have a couple of short stories collections, too. So, a lot of stuff.

**Debbi:** [00:29:03] Oh, very cool. Well, thanks again so much for talking to us today, Joe.

**Joe:** [00:29:06] Of course, of course! I enjoyed it.

**Debbi:** [00:29:09] Oh, this is wonderful. I've had a wonderful time, and I hope everybody out there listening is also appreciating this. This is just fabulous stuff.

**Joe:** [00:29:17] Well, thank you for having me here, and like I always tell people, it may not be the best opinion, but it's the only one I got when I'm talking about writing and stuff.

**Debbi:** [00:29:27] That's cool. And for those listening, look for A TIME FOR VIOLENCE and other works by the wonderful Joe Lansdale. Watch *Hap and Leonard*.

**Joe:** [00:29:40] Yes, on Netflix. Also you can find *Cold in July* on Netflix, which is based on my novel COLD IN JULY. Stars Michael C. Hall, Sam Shepard, and Don Johnson, and it's a corker, as they did a really good job. BUBBA HO-TEP's been on MGM, off and on. *Love, Death & Robots* actually has two of my stories.

**Debbi:** [00:30:05] Cool. Well, that's wonderful.

This is the final episode of Season Four. We'll be back in a few months. In the meantime, check out our back episodes and there are four years of them, so there's plenty to choose from. They're on my website [debbimack.com](http://debbimack.com), and I'll be posting content for podcast supporters on my Patreon page in the interim, so I won't leave you completely high and dry guys. In any case, thanks for listening and until next time, happy reading!