

# The Crime Cafe with David Putnam

Presented By:

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**00:13 Intro Debbi:** *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 e-books for sale; the nine-book box set and the short story anthology. You can find the buy links for both on my website, [www.debbimack.com](http://www.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] Today we have an author with an extensive and impressive background in law enforcement. He's worked in narcotics with the FBI on violent crimes. He's worked on a SWAT team. He was with the U.S. Marshalls. He was co-sworn in as a U.S. Marshall, among other things. And, according to his bio, was a member of the real life Hawaii Five-O, which I found very interesting. In any case, it's pretty clear where this author gets his material. Today's guest is bestselling author David Putnam. Hi, David. It's great to have my show today.

**David:** [00:01:48] Thank you for having me.

**Debbi:** [00:01:49] Oh, it's my pleasure. Thank you. Tell us about your protagonist, Bruno Johnson, and what prompted you to write about that character? What prompted you to create that particular kind of character?

**David:** [00:02:03] Well, that's kind of a long explanation. I've been writing since like 1989. And I was constantly writing. I'd written 38 manuscripts when I finally sold my 34th manuscript, and I was trying everything. I tried police procedural, mystery, young adult, sci-fi. And I had four agents. I had a 156 rejections when I quit counting. And Bruno Johnson was just another one of those attempts to try to find a market for my writing. And Bruno Johnson, he is an ex-cop, ex-con who rescues children from toxic homes in South Central Los Angeles. He couldn't do it when he was a cop because there's too many rules and regulations. So now he goes outside the law to rescue the children. I chose Bruno and made him an African-American, because it adds an extra layer of conflict. When I was working for the sheriff's department, I left the jail after six months and went to work patrol in South Central Los Angeles. I went out with two African-American deputies and one was a good friend of mine. I got to see firsthand the added layer of conflict that he had to deal with. I thought that would work well in my books. So that's why I chose to do it that way.

**Debbi:** [00:03:25] That's very interesting, yeah. I'm reading your first in the series, *The Disposables*, and Michael Connelly called it "raw, powerful and eloquent", which I have to agree with.

**David:** [00:03:39] Thank you.

**Debbi:** [00:03:41] Did you have direct experience with seeing children in abuse situations?

**David:** [00:03:47] Oh, yes. You know. Readers read for the emotion. That's what they're in the game for, they read for the emotion. And conflict is emotion. So I thought that I would also write about something that was most emotional to me, and the most difficult part of law enforcement was dealing with children who were abused, because they had no advocate except for law enforcement or social services.

**Debbi:** [00:04:15] Yes. And social services can often be . . .

**David:** [00:04:21] Overwhelmed.

**Debbi:** [00:04:21] Overwhelmed, yes. Not due to any fault of their own necessarily.

**David:** [00:04:27] Exactly.

**Debbi:** [00:04:31] The idea of an underground railroad is so intriguing. What made you think of that?

**David:** [00:04:39] Well, he had to rescue the kids and he couldn't do it legally, so he couldn't keep the kids in the US because they'd be constantly hunting them. So, throughout the series, he collects these children and sometimes I'm writing them. I'll turn a book in to the publisher, and they'll send me an e-mail back saying, "Don't you have 12 kids now?" I started to lose track of my kids.

**Debbi:** [00:05:08] Oh, my. But, yeah. I just thought that was a very innovative approach to trying to save these kids.

**David:** [00:05:17] Well, thank you.

**Debbi:** [00:05:22] I guess I've already asked this question, but how much of your experience in law enforcement finds its way into your novels?

**David:** [00:05:30] Well, I try to write a scene that was most powerful to me, to start the book. And that doesn't necessarily mean it's the first chapter. I just write the scene that's most powerful. And that's what I did with all the books, including *Disposables*. And in some cases like *The Reckless*, I turn that book in. And that one was the most emotional book that I had ever written. And I put a lot of background into that book to establish the motivation for what happens. And the publisher. I sent the book to the publisher. They loved the book, but they said the book actually starts on page 101. So I had to cut the first hundred pages. So I always try to put my actual experiences in the books. For instance, *The Innocents* I would say is 50 percent true, even though I fictionalized it, there are actually scenes, 50 percent of book actually happened. *The Reckless* is about 90 percent true. The other ones have different scenes that I pulled from my experience and I just craft them to fit in with the storyline or the story arc.

**Debbi:** [00:06:43] I was going to say you said you start with a scene that's very emotional and then kind of build out from there? Is that kind of the way you write?

**David:** [00:06:52] Yes. And sometimes I have to build in the front, too. So there have been times where I write what I thought was a first chapter, the opening scene, and then I would put probably 10 chapters in front of it, because it wasn't working for me. So to make the story arc work, I had to re-craft it. So it all depends. It's like putting a puzzle together sometimes, and I really enjoy writing because of that. I never know what's going to happen.

**Debbi:** [00:07:18] Yeah, it's kind of like, you know what you wanna say and it kind of gets summed up in the scene and then you'd construct this plot to get there maybe?

**David:** [00:07:28] Yeah, exactly.

**Debbi:** [00:07:31] I know what you're talking about. Well, let's see. Can you tell us a little bit more about how Bruno's character develops over the course of the six novels? And I know that some of them are prequels?

**David:** [00:07:50] Well, Bruno, as I said earlier, he continually gathers more children in the first three books, *The Disposables*, *The Replacements*, and *The Squandered*.

*The Disposables* starts in the U.S. and ultimately ends in Costa Rica. So then *The Replacements* and *The Squandered* start in Costa Rica and I had to have a strong motivation to get Bruno to come back to the US to write that storyline. And at the conclusion of the fourth book, *The Vanquished*, I left Bruno particularly emotionally and physically damaged. And the publisher said, "A great book, and we love it. But we don't know how you're going to pull Bruno out of this." So I thought about that. And they're probably right because it was going to take a lot of writing to get him back on track because of what I did to him. So I decided to go with a prequel and that's what started. So, I started *Disposables* and I gave Bruno a lot of backstory. So on my prequel, I'm going back and I'm actually showing all that backstory that I gave Bruno while at the beginning of the first book. So there's four prequels, and the first one is *The Innocents*. The second one is *The Reckless*. The third one is *The Heartless*. And it's already coming out in February 2020. And the publisher just picked up the fourth and final prequel, which is *The Ruthless*, which will come out 2021. So now I'm back on track and I'm writing the current day book that comes after *The Vanquished*. So I'm working on Book Nine right now.

**Debbi:** [00:09:33] So you figured out where Bruno goes from there in your ninth book.

**David:** [00:09:37] Right. Right, right. Exactly. I had four books to think about it and how to get him out of it, out of the mess I put him in.

**Debbi:** [00:09:44] There you go. It's all you have to do. Just write the prequels.

**David:** [00:09:49] That's right.

**Debbi:** [00:09:50] Let's see. How would you describe your writing to someone who has never read your work but would like to learn more about it?

**David:** [00:10:00] You know, I try to write, I try to put the reader right where I was in the scene. So if I was in an incident, I try to write it just the way I saw it, felt it, smelled it, heard it. I try to put all those senses into the story. I also try to stay true to the dialogue. And people have said that one of the things they like about my books is the dialogue, because it is true to what they think happens on the street. I also play heavily on police procedurals. Because I read extensively in that genre and a lot of readers accept certain things in the mystery genre, even though they're not actually happening in real life, it doesn't happen. So I'll read a book and sometimes I'll pick up

a few of those things that aren't real and keep reading it, if the craft is well done. But if there's too many of them and it turns into a fantasy, then I don't. I put the book down.

[00:10:59] So in my police procedurals, I try to make everything as close to what happens as possible and I still have to walk the line on sensationalism, as well.

**Debbi:** [00:11:10] Yeah. Who are your favorite authors? Who inspires you?

**David:** [00:11:16] Oh, I like a lot of authors. Currently, I like Jonathan Moore. He's not very well known, but *The Poison Artist* and *The Dark Room*. Those are just some fantastic books. John Sanford. I can't get into a book because I'll read a really great book. Next book I pick up, it pales. Even though it's a good book, it pales to what I just read. So I drop back and I read John Sanford. I'll start rereading those books because I think those are so perfectly crafted with the voice, the character, the storyline that they're just great novels. So I think John Sanford and James Lee Burke, you know, all the big ones. Robert Crais. Thomas Perry. So I read the heavyweights.

**Debbi:** [00:12:03] Let's see. You have so much background, so much experience in so many different law enforcement agencies and functions. How did you end up doing so much? And have you ever considered consulting for writers?

**David:** [00:12:18] Anytime an author asks, I'm happy to. I help all kinds of authors. In fact, I think I'm probably at book 15 or 16 in the acknowledgments on some of these books. But anybody who wants to e-mail me, I'm happy to help out on police procedurals. I always wanted to get into the most action that I could when I was a cop. So I always looked for that kind of avenue. So I was on an FBI-sponsored violent crimes team and they co-swore us as U.S. Marshalls for that. But I was also on a narcotics team where I had a deputy badge from Mojave County, because we would leave. We would go from Samuel County in Arizona and work in violent crimes. We'd chase murder suspects in Arizona, Nevada. That's why we had U.S. Marshall status. I did two tours on the SWAT team. I had a great time, my career. I'd still be doing it if I hadn't gotten too old. I retired. Well, what happened was my big mistake was I left the detectives and I promoted to sergeant and I lost my autonomy. And I ended up supervising people who were like me, which I found out then how bad that was. So I eventually went to Internal Affairs and it was just a horrible job, the worst job that I'd ever had in the sheriff's department. Did that for a year. I was

going crazy. So one day I was on a computer just messing around in my office and pulled up Hawaii and saw that they had an opening for a special agent. I applied thinking that I'd have a shot at it. They called me for an interview. I flew out to Hawaii, did a two-hour interview, the most extensive oral I've ever taken. They asked me every question, you know, case law, procedure, all kinds of questions for two hours. And then they hired me.

[00:14:23] So my wife grew up in Hawaii. So we sold here. We kept the house as a rental and we sold ... I had a library of 6,000 first editions signed by the authors. But in Hawaii, the humidity would have torn them up, would have wrecked the books. So I had to sell those for a song because we had to leave in a hurry. And then we went. I went to work for Hawaii Five-O. And that was an absolute culture shock because they have--what people have heard and it's true--the aloha spirit. And so they handle their crime the same way. So I did my first case. It was an assault case. I worked it up, got a warrant for the guy. And I told my boss, I'm going to go kick this guy's door in and take him to jail. He says, "Whoa, whoa. We don't do that here. What do you mean?" He looks at the calendar and he says, "Call him up and have him come in on Thursday. We'll have the bus here on Thursday." So they don't chase crooks there. It's an island. So you call the crook up, they come in on a designated day, and you drive them over in a bus and you book 'em. So that was my first.

**Debbi:** [00:15:28] How very civil.

**David:** [00:15:28] How civilized. Exactly. So it was an interesting place. But also, even though there's 1.3 million people in the state of Hawaii, 900,000 of them were on Oahu. But even so, everybody knows everybody else. So you can't do any kind of investigation without everybody finding out about it. So that was an interesting, you know, in California, Southern California. You know, a crook comes through from L.A. and holds up a bank. It's hard to backtrack him. But in Hawaii, it's interesting. It is the safest city for its size in the United States, which wasn't a place I need to go to because I wanted one action.

**Debbi:** [00:16:10] Well, I still envy you getting to live in Hawaii. Although I'm sure it was probably expensive. Do you have any advice for listeners who either want to go into law enforcement or would like to write about it?

**David:** [00:16:28] Sure, law enforcement is a fun career. And even though people are saying, society is disgruntled toward law enforcement right now, the pendulum

keeps swinging back and forth and it'll come back again. But still, it's a fun job. I would never do it now. What with all the cameras and videos and media, because that's not the way I was brought up in law enforcement. I don't think I could deal with all that. But if you're just starting out and that's what you're used to, I would say I still highly recommend the job, but it's a fun job. As far as writing, if you want to write about law enforcement, there are different ways that I would do it if I wasn't a cop. I would go on ride-alongs for one, but also the citizen patrol program that most agencies have. They have the citizens patrol academy. You get to go and learn laws of arrest and actually puts you in your own car. You drive around and you call out different situations to the cops that come out and handle them. So you really get a firsthand look and training by the cops and it's all free and it's all volunteer. So I think that would be the best way to get into it.

**Debbi:** [00:17:40] That's fantastic. Good advice. Have you ever had any thoughts about who would play Bruno Johnson if they made it into a movie?

**David:** [00:17:53] Sure. Denzel Washington is the first one. Will Smith. You know, those kind of guys. But, you know, that's pie in the sky. Any great actor.

**Debbi:** [00:18:07] Well, why not?

**David:** [00:18:11] Exactly. Yeah. And the father's a good character, too. You know, Morgan Freeman would do an excellent job as Bruno's father.

**Debbi:** [00:18:19] Well, I could see that. Yeah. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about before we finish up?

**David:** [00:18:26] No. We've covered it pretty well.

**Debbi:** [00:18:30] Okay. So in any case, it was really great to have you on. David, thank you so much for being here.

**David:** [00:18:38] Thank you very much for having me.

**Debbi:** [00:18:39] It's my pleasure. And as always, I'd like to remind you to please, please leave a review of the podcast on your service of choice, whether that's iTunes, Stitcher, or another host. Please leave a review for the podcast if you enjoyed it. If you're watching on YouTube, don't hesitate to like and share the video if

you wish. Also, I'm continuing to add content accessible only to supporters on my Patreon page for the podcast. My Patreon page link is on my web site, [www.DebbiMack.com](http://www.DebbiMack.com). And finally, I have a surprise guest coming on next week. It's rather unusual for me to do an interview one week after the next, but he just released his latest book in the Elvis Cole/Joe Pike private eye series. I'm speaking of bestselling author Robert Crais. Until next time, thanks for listening, and happy reading.