

The Crime Cafe with Robert Crais

Presented By:



Debbi [00:00:13]: *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 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 [00:01:02]: Hi everyone, I'm pleased to have with me today an author whose books I'm quite familiar with and whose writing inspires me. His latest novel is 'A Dangerous Man', the 18th book in the Elvis Cole/Joe Pike series. He's also written other series and non-series books. Our guest today is bestselling author, Robert Crais. Hi, Robert, thanks for being with us today.

Robert [00:01:28]: Debbi, it's a pleasure to be here. Thank you.

Debbi [00:01:31]: That's awesome. Well, I am thrilled to have you on. Before I get to your latest book, tell us about Elvis and Joe. Who are these guys and what brought them together as a team?

Robert [00:01:42]: Well, Elvis Cole, my core character, the guy I'm known for most I guess, is a private investigator in Los Angeles. You know, when I created—I go back with crime fiction for a long time. I mean, I discovered Raymond Chandler when I was a kid and he was my gateway drug and I fell in love with this world. And I knew and always wanted to create a private investigator of my own and that was in the cards for me from early on.

And when I created him, I guess you could say I took little bits and pieces—you remember Calvin and Hobbes, and Calvin had this cardboard box and he called it his transmogrifier. And he would get into the box and it would change; it would become a fighter plane or a speed boat or a motorcycle, whatever it was because it was his transmogrifier, this magical device. All writers have a transmogrifier, and I took little bits and pieces of myself and my sensibility and my worldview and I transmogrified myself very loosely into Elvis Cole. You know, he likes to talk, he's verbal, he's funny but he's so much better than me. And he's one of these people I think I aspire to be, I wish I were more like Elvis Cole. Believe me, he lives a much more adventurous life than I do; I sit in a room and type.

But I have also always been a fan of buddy pictures, going back to buddy comic books, you know, and buddy stories of all kinds. I think partnership is a natural order of things. And I wanted Elvis to have a partner and I thought, well, you know, what would be the most interesting partner is a partner who was completely different from Elvis. If Elvis is verbal, then Joe Pike is going to say very little; and if Elvis is funny and wears his heart on his sleeve, Joe Pike is going to show more emotion. And I began the creation that way. But what became apparent to me after a while is that there were reasons that Joe was so silent and Joe held his emotions in check and was such an internal character. And I began to sense that there was a well of great

sadness in Joe and maybe even pain, and that made him enormously fascinating and interesting to me. Because what I've done over the course of all these books, 18 books now, is explore these two characters, to try to reveal little bits and pieces of why they are the men that they are; why is Joe that way; why is Elvis so verbal and funny. And in *A Dangerous Man*, the newest book, Joe takes center stage and it's a story that allows me to get a little bit deeper into Joe Pike and show his true nature a bit more than in the previous books.

Debbi [00:05:13]: Yeah, I've always found Joe fascinating for that reason, that there's so much pain behind his stoicism. How do you handle having two protagonists like that? Generally, it seems like one gets kind of more of the lead than the other in most of your books. Is that about right?

Robert [00:05:31]: Yeah, that's true. You know, in most of the books, Elvis Cole is the primary character and the books are told from his point of view. But every once in a while, it's fun for me to have them swap roles and Joe will become the primary character and Elvis then becomes his assistant, and that's what happens in *A Dangerous Man*. And that's really a product of the stories.

All of my novels, each and every one of them and frankly, most everything else I've ever written, they begin as a disassociated image of some kind and I don't really know anything about the image. In this case, I had this image of a young woman, very young and very innocent, and I only knew that by her facial expression, I guess. But I had this image of this young woman in a very dark room. I didn't know what kind of room. Whether it was an apartment house, a factory, all I knew is there were a lot of shadows, she was there, she was backing away, looking terrified, and there were ominous figures around. I couldn't see any of them. I didn't know who they were. I knew nothing about them. I just knew they were ominous and threatening. And she was saying, "I don't know, I don't know, I don't know anything about it. I don't know what you're talking about", and that's all she was—that's it, that's it, I didn't know anything else.

But there's something about her innocence and her truth—I knew she was telling the truth—there was something so intriguing about that that it got its hooks into me and I kept thinking about it and working it. And as ideas began to come to me about her situation and who she was, I knew then that Joe had to be the main character. It was almost like Isabel demanded it. And I knew that if Joe was the main character in this novel, I could show, I could delve into his depths more than I ordinarily could in an Elvis Cole novel. So, in a way, Isabel gave me Joe as the main character in this book, and I think it's perfect for him to show aspects of him that we don't normally see. And I find that endlessly fascinating and interesting and hopefully, readers will too.

Debbi [00:08:33]: I was going to say that *A Dangerous Man* definitely shows a side of Joe we haven't really seen before in a sense.

Robert [00:08:42]: Well, that's the goal. I mean, you know, Joe is—

Debbi [00:08:46]: But kind of a personal side.

Robert [00:08:49]: Yeah, on a very personal level, and who he is and what his life is actually like. You know, Joe is a very—I think Joe is a lonely person. I mean, he's made choices in his life. Some were forced on him, others were just the product of decisions that he made, that have led to a lonely and sometimes sad existence.

I mean, I think, listen, in many ways, Joe would like what any other guy would like. I mean, you know, he would like a special person in his life. He would like a family. He made choices along the way when he became a private military contractor and started traveling the world at a moment's notice and having to keep secrets that he could never share, that would be wrong to ask a woman to share in that, in that unpredictable, potentially dangerous lifestyle. So, he made the conscious decision to not impose that on anyone and not ask anyone to share that. And I think he sometimes regrets that. And in fact, I know he sometimes regrets that.

But Joe being Joe, he's always moving forward and he's always trying to just move ahead and keep going. And by his nature, he's hardwired to save and defend and to protect weak against strong, and that makes him the perfect hero to find out what's going on with Isabel Roland and find out who the bad guys are who are trying to harm her, and to totally commit himself to saving her, no matter what he has to do. And that's really what happens in the book, I mean that's Joe's essence in this novel, is that ... listen, if you and I were somewhere and a bunch of bad guys jumped us and were mugging us or doing harm to us, we would hope that Joe Pike would be nearby because he's the guy you want there.

Debbi [00:11:07]: Mm-hmm, exactly. I've always loved the red arrows. Where did that idea come from? On his shoulders?

Robert [00:11:17]: Yeah. Joe has a red arrow tattooed on the outside of each deltoid and they point forward. And at some point, along the way, he might have said, well, they keep him moving in the right direction, you know, they remind him which way is to the front. That's Joe's philosophy. You know, Joe comes from a childhood that was not pleasant. His father was a violent alcoholic. His father abused Joe and Joe's mother, and there was great violence and anger throughout Joe's childhood. And eventually, he was able to move beyond that. He in a way created himself. You know, he admired the Marines because the Marines were tough and ready to fight, so he became a Marine and he trained himself in the martial arts and physical fitness. And all of these things, which was in a way Joe Pike's way of making sure no one would ever be able to abuse him again as his father had abused him. So, Joe is a product of self-creation, and that philosophy I think was embodied when he got those tattoos. They point forward. You can't go back. You can't change the past. So, you have to move ahead into the future, and that's what Joe has been doing his entire life.

Debbi [00:12:54]: Mm-hmm. And speaking of which, how do you handle the passage of time over such a long series? Are they aging slowly or do you just stick to a particular decade or what?

Robert [00:13:10]: When I started writing these books—

Debbi [00:13:14]: It was a while ago.

Robert [00:13:17]: It was a long time ago, and the guys were a few years older than me at that time. And now I can tell you and I am the world's expert; they are substantially younger than me. Because look, I mean in the first few books, I established that the guys had been in Vietnam and so one would think, well, that anchors them in a certain time and hence, they must be aging as we all age and that would put them what, damn near 70 years old.

Well, you know, my guys are action guys and the characters, there's a lot of physical action in the book. My readers enjoy it, I enjoy writing it and I didn't want to create this cartoon, you know what, like you know, geriatric fist fights, and I didn't want to create this cartoon reality where old guys are doing all these physical things that Joe Pike and Elvis Cole do. I like that midterm version. So, the fact is that they don't age the same way I age or that we age. They're in this kind of time lock that puts them, I would guess, somewhere right now in their early to mid-40s. That seems like a good age for them.

They started in their late 30s, I think, somewhere in there so probably, early to mid-40s is where they're time-locked. Though I reference things in popular culture, I tend to stay away from dates and that's just where they're gonna stay because I think they're the most interesting right now. I don't want to write ... Listen, I have bad knees, I have achy ankles, I have all that stuff that comes from sitting on a chair for a million years. I don't want to write scenes where Elvis and Joe are complaining of the same things I'm complaining. I'm tired of me complaining about this stuff, I don't want my guys to do it too.

Debbi [00:15:32]: I know where you're coming from. You don't want them sitting there talking about their gallbladder operation or anything like that.

Robert [00:15:39]: No. None of that. I don't want them sitting around talking about the old days: "Remember when we..." No, I don't want that.

Debbi [00:15:48]: Let's see. Your work is clearly influenced by the likes of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. Are there other authors who you find most inspiring?

Robert [00:15:59]: Oh, my gosh, sure. Chandler was my gateway drug. I discovered crime fiction in a secondhand bookstore when I was a teenager and pulled a copy of *The Little Sister*. It was like a fifteenth-hand, beat-up used paperback, but that's where I discovered crime fiction and then read voraciously. So, certainly, Chandler was my first love in the crime universe, crime fiction universe. He started it all. His work started it all. Hammett for sure. And then all the classics, Ross Macdonald and John D. MacDonald. Then, all Don Westlake's work and you know, everybody all the way through. You know, including the current people. You know, I don't read nearly as much fiction as I used to read. I'm not sure why that is, most of my reading is nonfiction these days, but I still have my favorites and I still try to read the work from new people. And then the ongoing writers, of course; huge Mike Connelly fan, Lee Child's work, James Lee Burke, you know, newer writers like Greg Hurwitz and on and on, the list goes on. But I didn't read it, I wouldn't read it if I didn't love it and find enjoyment from it. And I find that all of their work, all the people I read now in some

way also inspires me and energizes me. You know Robert B. Parker was a big influence, but there were a scad of people writing, from Jonathan Valin to Lia Matera. A lot of people who don't write crime fiction anymore, private eye fiction anymore; Art Lyons, Jerry Petievich, Gerald Petievich, on and on, all of their work has in some way inspired me and speaks to my love of the genre, I think and still does today with the new work coming out now.

Debbi [00:18:06]: Mm-hmm, that's excellent. What's the best advice you can offer for anyone who would like to write books for a living?

Robert [00:18:15]: Wow. This will sound simplistic when I say it but this is the number one thing that I would advise. Write what you're passionate about. You already know what you're passionate about, whatever it is. If you're a reader, if you're considering being a writer or trying to write, then by virtue of that, I know you're a reader because all writers are readers first. I was and I mean, we wouldn't be interested in telling stories if we weren't enjoying stories that other people tell. I speak to and meet a lot of writers who are newer writers, writers who are trying to write, trying to learn to write. And one thing I see way too often is that beginning writers often try to—they're so focused on selling something, that all they really want to talk about, sometimes ask me is, "What's hot? What are the publishers buying now?" And I think pursuing this art in that way is a big mistake. And listen, I'm sure there are plenty of established bestselling writers out there who started that way. I can't speak to that experience but I believe this; if something is hot now, it won't be hot three years from now. If something is hot now, then a whole army of people are trying to write that hot thing and it's a herd, and how are you going to stand out from that herd? The thing, the subject, the situations that energize you, that you're passionate about, that's what you should be writing. Whether it's private investigator, or a cozy type thing, or a former spy, or whatever world inspires you, that's where you should focus your energies, that's where you'll stand out, that's where your voice will stand out from all the others because you're bringing that passion to it and that passion will be in the work. And even if you don't get it right the first time, I certainly didn't. I mean, I wrote two manuscripts that are dead in the drawer, I mean they're just garbage. Before I wrote *The Monkey's Raincoat*, the first book that sold, this was after a lengthy and successful television career. So, it may take you multiple times at bat, but I think the truest thing you can do is pursue your passion, put that passion on the page and that's going to give you the best shot at a successful career.

Debbi [00:21:33]: That's excellent advice, I couldn't agree with you more. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?

Robert [00:21:42]: Well, gee, Debbi, I don't know other than please buy my book?

Debbi [00:21:49]: Your website?

Robert [00:21:50]: Oh, there we go. See, I needed that prop, because I never think of these things. Yeah, if people want to find out more about me, there's my website which is my name – www.RobertCrais.com. I'm also on Facebook at 'The Real Robert Crais'. And on Instagram @RobertCrais. So, people can find out more and see nifty photographs I take at most of those sites.

Debbi [00:22:13]: Very cool. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me today, Robert.

Robert [00:22:19]: I appreciate it, Debbi. It's been fun.

Debbi [00:22:21]: Sure thing. And to everyone listening, please remember to leave a review on the podcast channel of your choice. Also, check out the podcast's Patreon page. It's on my website at www.DebbiMack.com. Thanks again for listening. Our next guest will be Bill Briar. Until next time, happy reading.