

The Crime Cafe with

James H. Roby

Presented By:



Debbi (00:12): Hi everyone. Our guest today is the author of the UrbanKnights thriller series. He served as an Air Force officer on active duty and in the reserves for more than 10 years. He also does his share of cool traveling to places like London, Toronto, the Arctic Circle, and the Caribbean. He also hails from the Motor City, Detroit. My guest today is James Roby. Hi James.

James (01:23): Hello. How are you today?

Debbi (01:25): I'm fine. How are you?

James (01:27): I am outstanding. I'm happy to be here.

Debbi (01:30): Excellent. Excellent. Good. So how did you get involved in fiction writing? What got you started with that?

James (01:37): Well I mean, honestly, it's been almost like a lifelong thing. I remember my father liking, you know, oh, Humphrey Bogart-type movies and you know, the crime thrillers and noir and that kind of thing. And I, and I kinda picked that up from him. And then as I got older, I started looking at things like James Bond. And then later I started seeing like *Shaft* and all those things kind of molded together in my mind to this character I eventually created. But you know, I remember distinctly, and I'm dating myself, going to see *Superman* with Christopher Reeve and just being so moved by the, you know, I was a little kid, but it was like, this is a story that I wish I was in. So I started writing a character that was Superman, but it was my background.

James (02:30): And then from there I started writing some other things. I did a book for a friend of mine, who's big into *Star Trek*. So I did like the history of the Enterprise and he really liked that. And then finally I wrote a—I'm sorry, I have to admit it. A fan fiction for a TV show I was watching. And then from there, I just, I was watching this show, another show from my past, *Mike Hammer* with Stacy Keach, and I really liked that show, and all those things just kind of clicked together and I've been doing it ever since.

Debbi (03:02): Oh my gosh. I had no idea that you wrote fan fiction. That's so cool.

James (03:06): I did one. I did one.

Debbi (03:08): One. Okay. I think that's awesome. I think that's really awesome. So the UrbanKnights series has a protagonist. Who's a former operative of the Defense Intelligence Agency. That's a really interesting sort of background for private eye to come from.

James (03:28): He started off. He pretty much mirrored my background until I figured he's me except cooler. And Jordan Noble started off as a missile launch officer at Minot like I did, but he had an event in his life that changed his trajectory. And I started off with the OSI, which is the Office of Special Investigation for the Air Force. It's kind of like the Air Force is FEI, but I wanted to make it a little bit more jazzy, a little cooler, you know, not so commonplace. So I'm looking at our first place, obviously the CIA, but man everybody's either ex-CIA or CIA. And at the time when I thought of using the DIA, it wasn't quite as well known in fiction. I mean, there are some characters. Denzel Washington's portrayal of the Equalizers from the DIA, but this was before that. So I thought that that was interesting because it's still connected the military background of Jordan. And it was a real life agency that, you know, not too many people have heard of.

Debbi (04:25): I was going to say did you have to do research to find out about that or was that from experience with them?

James (04:32): No, that was, that was all research. It was like I said, I started off with the CIA, but then it's just so trope, you know, everyone just pulls the CIA in there. So I started looking at other agencies and then seeing how the DIA is, does have officers and enlisted members, but they do mostly use civilians. But I thought, yeah, we could still put Jordan in there as an officer, so that still works.

Debbi (04:56): I think that's really cool. I think it's cool that you're exploring a unique agency rather than going into the kind of almost cliché CIA at this point.

James (05:06): You get to that point where you go to the back of the book and you flip it over and either it says ex-CIA, you know, Joe Torres, or MI6 or ex-Navy Seal, you know, it's like, oh gosh, you know, let's make it a little different.

Debbi (05:20): Yeah. Yeah. I liked that a lot. How many books are there in the series so far?

James (05:26): So I'm working on the sixth book. But there are five books that are complete and the other ones that are going through the editing phase right now, and I'm already working on the seventh book, so that there are. It's an ongoing series, but they're individually, you can jump in at any point and not be lost. You don't necessarily have to read the previous one, but yeah, right now, I'm working on the seventh one and the sixth one is in pre-production as it were.

Debbi (05:54): That's cool. I was going to say you used the term pre-production. I like that because there is almost a cinematic quality to the, the writing itself.

James (06:03): Yes. I think one of the things, and this is one of the challenges I found or one of the things that I had to adapt my approach to was that the writing part is ... I think everyone has a story in them, whether it's a fictional story or something about their life, but translating that to page is a skill and then taking that product and then making it presentable to the public. That's an entirely different skill. And that's been a challenge for me. You know, getting those eyes on page as it were. It's getting people to acknowledge your work or just be aware of it. That is, that's quite a challenge. And there's a lot of agencies out there and a lot of individuals out there who have ... I'm helping other writers, you know. There's other, there's lots of programs out there that I've taken part of ... there's organizations on Facebook where people are helping each other.

James (06:56): So yeah, there is, it's not just, okay, the end. I'm done. I mean, there is that kind of like, okay, now we gotta go into, I guess we'll be like the publication or the marketing part of your book. And then from there, you, you know, you actually get some sales, so that's where I am now. And, you know, to that end, I'm talking to people like you, Debbi, to get, you know, get your readers involved, get your readers, get their eyeballs on my product, and possibly, you know, expand from there.

Debbi (07:27): Yeah. It's tough now. It's very hard to get visibility at all these days because there are so many books out there and there's so much to struggle with in terms of getting that visibility. But do you have a plan in terms of how many you would ultimately like to write for the series? Or are you just taking it book by book?

James ([07:52](#)): You know, yes. I mean, it's one of those kinds of things where it's like, the character will eventually hit a point where it's like, okay, she's doing the same thing over and over again. And right now Jordan Noah and his team have gone through some changes, there's some new characters being added. He's had some personal life change in his life. So that opens the opportunity for another chapter, but then it's like, okay, what happens after that? And then, I don't want to be where it's just endless books. A lot of it's going to have to depend on, you know, how successful the marketing is or how successfully people respond to it and what there's demand. And I mean, you know, they even killed off Sherlock Holmes and the demand for him to come back was so great that they, "Oh, I didn't really die off that cliff. It was, I just tricked you, Watson." So, you know, at this point in the career, it's just like, I have some stories in mind and, you know, if there was still demand then, you know, we would press on.

Debbi ([08:56](#)): How would you describe your books in terms of genre? Thriller? Action-adventure?

James ([09:03](#)): Thriller, action eventually. Yes. All that stuff. I mean, basically this is a detective type of novel. You know, something along the lines of, you know, movies like I already mentioned *Shaft*. There's some James Bond element given his former spy background. I'm thinking of stuff like *21 Bridges*, the recent movie It's an action movie with an action book with a thriller aspect of it is that ticking clock that, you know, things that what's going to happen next. So, yeah, but it would definitely be that kind of feel to it, if it was a movie. So Hollywood, if you're listening, you know, that's what I'm going for. You know, Michael B. Jordan, maybe we can talk and we can get a, get a contract on.

Debbi ([09:53](#)): Excellent. Let's see. Have you ever thought about writing another series or a standalone?

James ([09:59](#)): I have There's a story in my head and sometimes, you know, and that's kind of how it happens. I have a story of about a guardian angel who's on earth and instead of having flowing wings and a flaming sword, you know, he's more of a normal kind of person. And then it's got more of a supernatural feel to it. I've been thinking about doing a children's book now that I'm a father. But as of right now, I mean, Jordan Noble and the UrbanKnights are like, you know, books are like your children and they are, they're my babies. And I'm really just trying to get to a position where I can get the eyeballs on the page, that notoriety, that people know who I am, but I can branch out. I mean, this was, this would be something that if, if it didn't work, that would really crush me as opposed to, if I send out, if I wrote these other books that didn't work, I'd be like, "Oh yeah, at least I tried." I mean, Jordan Noble and his UrbanKnights are what got me into writing.

Debbi ([11:03](#)): Yeah. What kind of a person is Jordan Noble?

James ([11:06](#)): Well, he's what I would call a typical hero where he is a normal guy who's in extraordinary circumstances. I mean, from his beginning, he's just doing his job. He's like I said, he's a missile launch officer at Minot, North Dakota, and something incredible happens and it pulls him in. So he's, he leaves the service to return home because his, his focus is on home and friends and, you know, that kind of service. And he looks at himself as I can do something about some of the problems that are facing Detroit. Most people don't, but I'm in a position to do that. And he surrounds himself with his personal friends that all the UrbanKnights are friends he grew

up with. They don't have the same skill sets as he does. They bring other things to the mix and together they, it's more like many hands make light work. And that's the kind of person Jordan is. He's not, he's not a glory hound. He's just really, I want to help people. And I have this kind of skill set. He doesn't take himself too seriously, but in hindsight, he's a pretty dangerous person. He has unique capabilities, and abilities that most people don't have. And he's aware of that, but he doesn't let it go to his head.

Debbi ([12:27](#)): Always a good thing.

James ([12:30](#)): He's a regular guy, he's a regular guy.

Debbi ([12:32](#)): A regular guy doing extraordinary things.

James ([12:35](#)): During extraordinary circumstances. Exactly. And I think that's really the definition of a hero. He's not looking for these things, but he's really in a position. Like, if I can help, I will.

Debbi ([12:47](#)): That's so funny. It reminds me just a little bit of Walter Mosley and Easy Rawlins, the reluctant detective.

James ([12:54](#)): Yeah. And he's not so much a reluctant detective. Easy's more like I gotta eat, you know? I gotta, I gotta do this thing. But Jordan goes into it knowing that, you know, it's probably going to be dangerous, but I have the capability of dealing with that. But he doesn't sing his own praises. He works, he worked with people, you know. If there's a Mouse in his life, kind of like Easy's in his earlier books, there's a, it's a joint cooperation that, you know, we're going to do something better for people who can't help themselves.

Debbi ([13:34](#)): So there are, in a sense, social issues addressed in your books, as well as the action.

James ([13:41](#)): Yeah. To, to a degree. And I've tried to stay away from any kind of politics or anything. It is taking place in the City of Detroit, which has a depressed economy for quite a long time, it's still to this day an overwhelmingly African-American population. So some of those issues do come into play, but it's not a, and then you can see my dog's head popping up.

Debbi ([14:06](#)): [Laughter] Aww.

James ([14:07](#)): It is not a social media, social awareness kind of platform. There is a moment in one of the books, *Pale Horse*, where there is a terrorist attack going on in the city. And Jordan has a team at one of his own old friends, and they have very different backgrounds and they have a moment of, "Why is this so important? You know, why what's this, what's the issues with Detroit?"

James ([14:36](#)): "Why do you feel like these things are happening?" And Jordan gets heated and they go back and forth. But in a few minutes, since they're all buddies, they, you know, they're laughing and joking there, and that's as deep as I get with it. You know, there is some, there is a touch of gentrification that's going on in Detroit right now that I address in the book, but for the most part it's criminals and crimes at a high enough level that anybody can look and say, Oh yeah, that's a bad guy. You know?

Debbi ([15:03](#)): Mmm-Hmm. So it's layered in there. But it's not too thick.

James ([15:09](#)): Jordan doesn't live in a bubble where everything is ... He's not a superhero where it's a four-color world and there's good guys and bad guys, you know, there's, there's ways, there's this strata in between. There is some political thing, but again, he's just, he's a regular Joe, you know, he just happens to be in a situation. So he doesn't get too immersed into that world.

Debbi ([15:32](#)): Yeah. Yeah. Let's see. Being that you're from the Motor City, what's your favorite band? I just have to ask, cause I love music. I'm a musician.

James ([15:43](#)): You know what if you come to Detroit, you're going to hear Motown. And if you come to Detroit, you got to go to Motown. They, they've recently renovated and it's gorgeous. They have a very great movie at the beginning and they've redone the whole house to make it look like the way it did back in the Sixties. So, that Motown sound is very much alive there. You go outside, there's a DJ playing and it's little kids and people dancing the Motown sound. It's great. It's beautiful. That's my plug for Detroit, but as far as band, I mean, really, I have I've gotten to a point where all of my bands are behind me. There was I'm a really big jazz fan. And my favorite jazz artists would be, probably be either Miles Davis or Ronnie Jordan. He's a jazz guitarist from England. He died a few years ago, but I really liked his stuff. From Detroit, there was an era called the techno-music era. And my favorite band from that era would probably be Inner City. But you know, my music is here where one of my favorite artists is Frankie Beverly & Maze. So, yeah. But I'm a jazz guy at heart.

Debbi ([17:05](#)): Very cool. I've always liked Charlie Parker, actually.

James ([17:08](#)): Oh, Charlie Parker. Yeah. Yeah. I could just, I go on YouTube. I just put, type in Charlie Parker and I'm ready to go. And then that whole bebop era is just, it's just really kind of, it's good for music when you're playing, cause it's not very jarring and everything. It's just very smooth and you can listen to it. And I just, I just play it all the time.

James ([17:30](#)): I think it's really accessible too, for people who don't, who are not familiar with jazz. It kind of slowly introduces you to what comes next, if you know what I mean?

James ([17:42](#)): And it lends itself to like movie soundtracks. There's a lot of jazz artists. What's his name? Stanley Clarke used to do a lot of movie soundtracks. So it kind of just lends itself into that music. It's in the background, you hear it, but it's not overpowering.

Debbi ([17:59](#)): What writers do you find most inspiring?

James ([18:04](#)): I used to, and it was almost a law, that you had to read Tom Clancy when I was in the service. I mean, when I was in, when I was at Minot, we went out to the launch control facility there, there underground, and I could tell you about it, but I'd have to kill you. But anyway, in every one, somewhere in the racks, there was a *Hunt for Red October*, a *Clear and Present Danger* or something like that. I really, really enjoyed those. And that's what I use for some of them. I mean, his level of detail, and he's famously known for this. It's just incredible for someone who's never actually served. And so that was really good. Some of the people who

follow him, I like Mark Greaney. He's writing the Gray Man series and which is recently becoming a movie.

James ([18:53](#)): So that's, that's been really great. Great. You mentioned Walter Mosley. I definitely enjoy some of his earlier stuff. I kind of drifted away from it as some of his other stuff came up, but as far as the kind of stuff that's influenced me, and of course you can't say anything about mentioning Ian Fleming. I mean, his work is very different from the Bond on the screen. And a lot of people, you know, make that distinction very well. And it's the kind of thing that his, his Bond was very much a product of 1950 England. You know, hard-drinking, womanizing, even slightly racist, but you know, at that time it was very like, "Oh my gosh, you know, I can't believe he's saying anything. He's doing these things." But it's different from modern writing, but I like to go back to it. And then the guy who replaced him Raymond Benson. He's, he was my James Bond writer. He was, he started writing Bond about the same time I came into the service. His Bond always appeared in my mind as Pierce Brosnan. So those were the kind of guys who kind of dipped and dabbed into my writing stuff.

Debbi ([20:07](#)): Interesting. What advice would you give to anyone who is interested in writing and publishing today?

James ([20:13](#)): Oh my gosh. Well, first of all, don't do what I did and I say that tongue-in-cheek, but I look back on my career, as it were, and said, I could have did things better. And the first thing I got to say, and this is going to sound cheesy, but it's very true is that you have got to believe wholeheartedly that the world needs your book. You know, there is a certain amount of, of labor and, and unrewarded labor that goes into writing a book. You can be writing literally for months, for years and never see anything. And you've got to feel like this book is important. And if it's, if it's not perfect, if you have grammatical errors, that can be fixed, but you're, but you, you have to believe that your book is important.

James ([21:05](#)): That somebody out there will read your book, there's nothing better than the first time somebody who you don't know tells you, "Hey, this was really good." And this is like, wow, that would be the first to me. And, and I say that because without that, everything else is just going to be like, yeah, I'll get to it. But there you, you've got to kinda commit to the fact that you're going to have to spend some money. You're going to have to either spend money or time and more likely got to spend both. If you've got a lot of money and you can, you can, you can hire people to do all these things for you. If you don't have a lot of money, you're gonna have to do some of this stuff yourself, but you're going to have to spend money. You're going to have to edit.

James ([21:39](#)): You're going to have to, you're going to have to get a professionally made cover. You're going to have to, you know, go onto Facebook or go onto Amazon, whatever media you choose to use as your advertising platform. And, ah, I don't like that. That's not me. You've got to do it. I mean, you could have the greatest book in the world, but if no one knows about it, you know, it doesn't make any difference. You're going to have to, I know a lot of writers tend to be what do they call it? Introverts. You got to get out of that. You gotta talk in front of people. Any chance you get to talk about your book, shake somebody's hand and talk about the book. You gotta take it. I think that's the most important thing. And you gotta read, you gotta, you gotta keep, keep up with your genre, keep up with other people, right?

James (22:23): Because things change. And things change, you know, it could change with a book, with a book. You know, the Harry Potter series has really changed the way how people approached it. Not everybody wants to write about these teen wizards and everything, but you know, you've got to stay with it. You can't be locked in your book. I've had to go back and rewrite every one of my books to some degree, and it's not fun, but you know, you gotta do it. This is, this is kinda like a job. And you know, you work for yourself and you gotta kind of be in the position of would I fire me? And, if I would, you know, but you need to work harder. So it's definitely a labor of love, and it's great.

James (23:01): It's fun. I mean, the creation process for me, I love it, but there's this marketing stuff, man. I, I hate it like taxes, but I got to do it, you know? And if you're out there on that fence and it's like *ugghh* you gotta, you gotta embrace the suck, man. I mean, you've got to work in that space to get your book notice.

Debbi (23:20): Your book is a product.

James (23:23): Exactly. It's a product. And I think of it as a three-stage product. There's process, there's product, perfection, and presentation. The product is the book. And, you know, you finished the book, you write the end, and then you go back and rewrite, you edit it, you hire people. Then the next part is the perfection and that's some of that editing, but also, you know, hiring that, that guy to make your new cover for, you know, maybe you got to change your format internally and finally it's presentation. That's what people have to see. Are you on Amazon? Are you on some of these other platforms? If you're not, you know, you're probably not going to get the looks you are. Can you survive without being on Amazon? Absolutely. But it's the big dog and you're going to have to deal with that one way or the other.

Debbi (24:07): Yes, it is. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us before we finish up?

James (24:13): Just that, you know, I hope this has tickled your fancy and your interest and I hope your viewers jump onto the blog there that I have on your website and take a look at the first chapter. And if that does interest you go ahead and check out jameshroby.com and join my mailing list and find out what's going on in the next adventures of the UrbanKnights.

Debbi (24:39): Sounds good. Sounds like a plan.

James (24:42): Sounds like a plan.

Debbi (24:44): Excellent. Well, thank you so much, James, for being here.

James (24:48): And Debbi, thank you so much for the opportunity. It's always a pleasure to talk to people in the literary world and people who are helping independent writers get out there and get their voices heard.

Debbi (24:57): Well, thank you. And it was great talking to you and great meeting you. Keep on keeping on. And I'll also throw in a quick plug for my own latest book. It's called *Damaged Goods*, and it kicks off a new series with a female Marine veteran protagonist, Erica Jensen. I'm in the midst of wrapping up the first clean draft of my second novel in that series. So that's good. And anyway, you can buy the book at any online retailer or directly for me. Just go to my website, debbimack.com, where you can find my books as well as my Patreon page for this

podcast. Just look for the Patreon button that says, support me on Patreon or support us on Patreon, and get the perks available for patrons for as little as a dollar a month. Thank you for listening everyone. Our next guest in two weeks will be Troy Lambert. And until then, happy reading!