

The Crime Cafe with Troy Lambert

Presented By:



Debbi (00:02): Hi everyone. My guest today is a freelance writer, author and editor, who also happens to own his own small niche publishing company. I'm very pleased to have with me today Troy Lambert. Hi, Troy. Good to have you on.

Troy (02:02): Hi. It is fantastic to be here.

Debbi (02:05): Well, I'm glad you're here. What kind of freelance writing do you do?

Troy (02:11): So I do a variety of freelance writing. I actually started out by writing government contracts, writing research papers for the federal government, which ... The number one thing that taught me was that my words were valuable and I could get paid for writing. And so that translated into an incentive for me to expand my fiction writing career, as well as my freelance writing career. But I primarily write about business and tech, those type of things. I don't there's other little things I write about from time to time, but those were my mainstays.

Debbi (02:46): Huh. So you still keep up the freelance writing then?

Troy (02:50): I do. I don't do as much as I used to, but I do. And I still, I read a lot about of in-depth articles about like SEO and Google and things like that related to business, because now I use that in business. So it's, it's actually a subject I'm really familiar with. So.

Debbi (03:08): Kind of a natural fit then. Is that your paying work or do you also make a living off of your fiction?

Troy (03:17): Yes. So I make a living off my fiction. I make a living off of editing and I make a living off of freelance writing, primarily. I have, there's, right now, the publisher that, the niche publisher that I have that we started last year is not profitable like many small businesses. It's still in the point where almost every bit of money that's coming in is going out to build the business further.

Debbi (03:41): Interesting. I was going to ask you about that publishing company. What niche do you serve?

Troy (03:46): So we primarily publish what I would call minor celebrity nonfiction. So there are people that are not going to get a deal with the big book publisher, because they're going to sell, you know, 20,000 books over their lifetime, not, you know, a million, but they've still got a viable story. They've still got a viable book and they need a pathway to get it out there. But we are attempting to change the thinking about publishing to more of a print to order print-on-demand type model instead of big print runs because big print runs are wasteful financially for one thing. Those books go back to the publisher and get pulped half the time. And it's just environmentally irresponsible to print books that we're not gonna sell and then we're not going to use. And so we feel like that allows us to cut costs, be more author-centric, offer better author contracts to these guys that wouldn't necessarily get a bigger contract somewhere else, but also to just cut down on the wasteful habits and big spending, the big publishers have that are engaged in constantly.

Debbi (04:54): Yes. It's just baked into that industry. Isn't it? Good to see you doing things like this to change that. I couldn't agree with you more on all of those things you said. Where did you

come up with the idea of writing a series of 50 novellas that take place in 50 state capitals? And why did you choose to do that?

Troy (05:19): Well, so that's, it's, it's actually kind of a funny story. So the guy that was writing the series with me, so we've had some dramatic changes over the last year. But the guy who was writing this series with me, Stuart Gustafson is a travel writer, but he has written some fiction and he decided, I want to write this big, long fiction series of 50 novellas, but he was like, I can't do this alone. And he said, number one, I can't do it alone. Number two, I need to find somebody who has writing discipline. And for some reason he thought of me. So, so he presented me with this idea, you know, basically in a coffee shop and said, Hey, do you want to do this? And I said sure. Let's give it a try thinking who knows where this will end up going?

Troy (06:05): Well anyway, so from there he came up with the essential idea and then of course it has morphed since then, as far as we have alliteration in all the names of the places and the murders that happened there. So *Defenestration in Denver* is about guys that get pushed out of a window in Denver. And it's really fun because a lot of people are like what is defenestration? But it also gives us kind of those clever titles and things like that. Sowe started with some of those, but we have changed those as we went along, then Stewart dropped out of the series to focus on his family and take care of some health issues there. Of course, and then of course COVID hit. So you know, that kind of changed our pace of doing things with only me doing it within the middle of a pandemic. So we've gone through some changes, but the original idea was Stuart's. And even though it is evolved since then, it's still based on his original idea.

Debbi (07:05): Wow, that's really something. And you plan to release one per month for 50 months?

Troy (07:12): We did. And we have since slowed that down, obviously because of the pandemic, we have slowed that down because our original plan was to get ahead, to write a bunch of them ahead and have a bunch of them in the banks. We weren't writing once a month, one a month. We were writing several ahead of time and releasing them once a month. Well, because of various circumstances that didn't happen. So that pace was just simply not sustainable. Actually, I'm doing a talk at a writer's conference about writing series next week. And one of the things I talked about is having ambitions and goals that are ambitious, but not ridiculous. And ours were ridiculous, but we didn't know that at the time. So we had to scale those back. So now we're back to releasing more like one a quarter.

Troy (07:58): And we're also bringing in more writers on the series, as it goes forward. We're allowing other people to come in and write within the same universe. And there's some spinoffs being developed that tell more of the photographer, who's our main character, tell more of his story and those spinoffs will come out at various times as well. So that was helpful. And that also allowed us to create audiobooks as we go. Slowing down the pace meant that we have more time to produce more stuff and to do a better job of it. So.

Debbi (08:30): When you do the audiobooks, who do you use for narration?

Troy (08:34): So I use Larson Sound Studios, and she uses, there's a guy named Joseph Stevenson. He's a local voice actor and school teacher. So he had some extra time in March, too, to record some audiobooks while they were figuring out what was going to happen with school.

So though I use those two, Larson Sound Studios is exceptionally good. She's fantastic at what she does. And she books out way in advance for creating audiobooks. So I'm lucky to have her.

Debbi ([09:10](#)): And I assume all of the interaction you have with your narrators is virtual.

Troy ([09:14](#)): Yes. It's all virtual at the moment. I mean, he's local, so I could meet up with him if we could meet up, you know, at some point, but for the most part, all of our interaction is virtual. And I actually, another one of my books *Harvested* came out in audio this year, too, in the middle of the pandemic. Not really when I wanted to be creating it. And I interacted with that narrator virtually as well. Both of the narrators, I've actually never met them. I've only heard their voice. So.

Debbi ([09:47](#)): Yeah. I mean, it's just, there's so much a person can do without even necessarily leaving the house.

Troy ([09:55](#)): Yes, true. I will say about audiobooks though that they are more work than people think because you're, you know, you're the final quality assurance person. Nobody else can really, you can't hire an assistant to do it or anything like that because you're the person who wrote the books, so you know what it's supposed to sound like, you know, what the tone feels like and things like that. So every book you usually listen to two or three times by the time it's been recorded. So generally speaking, I'm pretty tired of them by the time we're done with the audio recording. I'm like, I don't want to hear that book again. Buy it, but I don't want to hear it. So.

Debbi ([10:31](#)): Yeah, I know how you feel. So how do you find ways for a travel photographer to get involved in investigating murder?

Troy ([10:43](#)): So we we've used a variety of ways. The initial way is Nick's our main character. Nick O'Flannigan. His focus, focus, see what I did there? Anyway, he is on macro photography. So like small details. So he noticed the small details in photographs or video that give him clues. And then he becomes involved either through the local media, through the local police, through local families. We'd done that a variety of different ways. And we've had to kind of expand our ideas of exactly how to do that. In one case he actually witnesses the murder. In other cases, you know, the family approaches him whatever the case may be. So we we've had to come up with a variety of ways for him to become involved with local police when he's a traveling photographer. I mean, why would they let him in the investigation? But in some of the smaller towns, it's a little easier, cause we just say, Oh, they didn't have a police photographer. And hey, here happens to be Nick, you know, things like that.

Debbi ([11:41](#)): That's pretty good. Yeah. And I was going to say the idea of the clues stuck in the photograph made me think of an old movie. I think it's *Blow Up*?

Troy ([11:52](#)): Ooh.

Debbi ([11:54](#)): Where a photographer accidentally takes a picture or maybe film footage of something that turns out to--

Troy ([12:01](#)): I think that is the title. I don't remember. I think that is the title though. I remember that movie and it is, it's very similar in that sometimes, you know, the details are in a photograph

that he took, sometimes it's in a photograph or a video that the news released or whatever the case may be. But it's all similar to that. You know, you're blowing up details, looking at smaller things that people wouldn't necessarily notice and that might've escaped the notice of the local police or whoever he's working with. So.

Debbi ([12:34](#)): Have you planned out the story arc for each of the stories at this point?

Troy ([12:40](#)): Yes. So just before the pandemic, another part of the story, we were pitching the series to Netflix as a series. And to do that, the agent we were talking to basically said, you need to have the first three seasons. So 30 books outlined because, basically the studio wants to see them. They're not all written. That you have a plan. So this isn't going to be George RR Martin, and we're going to be waiting for 17 years for the last book in the series. So even though we do kill people off every book anyway, I don't know there's some similarities, but so we actually, I went and planned out the first 30 books and then I just finished them. So I use a software called Plottr and I basically created a Capital City Murders mystery template that has all the same timelines and all the same outline elements and copied it into 50 different books and then went through and basically put in at least a framework of each story. So that even if, as I write it or somebody else writes it, it varies a little bit. It stays enough within it that it satisfies the plot. So.

Debbi ([13:52](#)): That's very much like screenwriting, what you're talking about,

Troy ([13:56](#)): Very similar.

Debbi ([13:58](#)): And I assume that each book ends with kind of a suggestion of what might come next?

Troy ([14:04](#)): Yes. So each of them ends with kind of a suggestion of what comes next, like where Nick is. So he has a certain route, obviously he's taken around the country, he's driving and he's taking a certain route around the country. And so it hints at obviously what city is next because that's the city he's headed to. And then in the end of each book, we put the prologue from the next book and the prologue generally is the murder, how the murder happened. And sometimes the reader knows who the killer is and just has to discover how Nick is going to find them. And sometimes they have no idea who the killer is, then they don't find out until the end of the book. So.

Debbi ([14:42](#)): That's great. I mean, that's very much in the Netflix model, you know, very, as they say, bingeable.

Troy ([14:50](#)): Yes.

Debbi ([14:54](#)): Let's see, you do a good bit of research, I assume on the locations that you're writing about. How much research do you do online, and have you visited any of the places?

Troy ([15:07](#)): So I have visited probably about half of the places and the rest of it I do online. And then sometimes I know people in those cities, so I'll send them something and say, Hey, does this, does this make sense? Does this look right? You know, that type of thing. Is this what, where things actually are? But Google Maps and the street view is a fantastic tool for doing that type of thing for the places I haven't been to, or like some of them I hadn't been to in a really long time. So I'm like, I'm sure that it's changed since I was there last. So I need to look at what,

you know, what restaurants are actually there, things like that. And that has been part of the challenge as we move forward in the series, as part of what we wanted to do is highlight like things in the actual city. Restaurants, places where Nick could go, things like that.

Troy (16:01): And as we've gone along, some of the restaurants we mentioned in the early book, books are no longer there, because 2020 and COVID. And so, you know, we've just left them with the hope that somebody will just say, okay, yeah. Or, you know, assume it's a fictional place at some point down the road. But it has been challenging because we're in a time when, you know, normally you would look up the hours of the restaurant, make sure that when Nick says he's going there, he can actually go there. But because all that has changed with COVID, we don't know that that's true necessarily, or we don't know that that's their normal operating hours. So it has created some challenges not unwelcome ones, but just challenges on the research side of things, of knowing the city itself.

Debbi (16:48): Hmm. I would think knowing people who live in those cities would give you some insight into places that are special to anyone who lives there.

Troy (17:00): Right. Exactly. And so we've used places like that, you know places in Austin. I used to live in Texas when I was in the military. So I went to Austin several times. And so places in Austin that are really special to some of the locals are not necessarily the ones you hear about on Yelp or on the news or things like that. So it's also important to include that local flair as much as possible. In fact, I tell people I've only gotten one email from a reader that noticed a mistake in one of the books. And what was really funny about it was the mistake was in *Helena*. I had Nick go into one of the breweries and order a beer, a huckleberry beer. And I said the wrong kind of beer. I said a stout and they actually have a Pilsner or something. And one of the readers actually emailed me and said, Hey, by the way, you've got this particular beer wrong at this brewery. They don't have a Huckleberry Stout. They have a Pilsner. So it is really important to try to get those details right.

Debbi (18:02): Absolutely true. Especially if you're going to talk about locations like that, because people who live there will notice Where do you focus your marketing efforts and how do you find the time to do all these things?

Troy (18:19): Oh my goodness. So, so marketing efforts So I use Amazon ads a lot for marketing efforts because Amazon ads are less, Amazon buyers are less price sensitive, so you don't always have to have a bargain to entice them. But I do use BookBub when we have things on sale. And I did use Facebook ads to an extent, but Facebook ads right now are a little problematic for authors. If people haven't heard Facebook is, you know, they've shut people's ad accounts down for no apparent reason with all the political stuff that was going on. Sometimes your ad would get mixed into some of the wrong places and some of the wrong keywords, and it was for a lot of people that really depend upon Facebook ads, it was a real disaster. So I was glad that we had options elsewhere, where I was focusing marketing. And one of those was using BookBub ads to point to actually series pages instead of the individual books on Amazon. And so a lot of times people will buy the whole series. I had several times when people just bought the whole series at one time, you can see suddenly you sold 14 books, you sold 14 books, you sold 14 books. So that's a, that's a bonus thing that does work.

Debbi (19:41): That's interesting. I never thought about using BookBub ads to point to a series as opposed to a book.

Troy ([19:48](#)): Right. I had a friend of mine tell me about it. And it was because you can point them to any URL. It's just that everybody typically points them to whatever retailers you have. But instead you just point it to the Amazon series page and your series page has some big advantages, obviously over your individual book pages. There are fewer distractions because there's not "also boughts" and things like that on there. And then there's a button at the top that will actually allow the person to buy the entire series with one click. And if they already own some books in the series, Amazon will just throw those out and say, you don't need those. We'll just sell you the ones that you need. And it gives you a price right there. And so if you have that price for the whole series, low enough, people will just click on that button, buy the whole series in one shot. And it's a nice boost. It's a really nice boost as far as your sales are concerned, but it also is really convenient for the reader. You know, all the books are in one single place.

Debbi ([20:44](#)): Yeah. So it's good for everybody. I mean, good for the writers, good for the readers.

Troy ([20:49](#)): Right.

Debbi ([20:49](#)): How would you advise people who would want, who want to become professional writers on how to start?

Troy ([21:01](#)): Well, okay. So there's, there's two aspects to being a professional writer that not everybody thinks about. The first one is you've got to know your craft. You have to write well, right? And so I would say yes, go to conferences and stuff and learn your craft. But you also need to balance that with learning the business side of writing, you need to learn about publishing, whether you're going to publish traditionally or self-publish, you need to learn about the industry, learn how, if you're going to traditionally publish, you need to learn how contracts and agents and editors and all that stuff work. And I've been published on both sides, self-published and traditionally published. So you have to learn all of those things because you have to know, is your agent doing a good job for you? And how do you know if they're doing a good job for you? And then, but you also have to learn the craft side. If you're on the self-publishing side, you have to learn marketing and all those different things and learn how to discipline your time to handle all those different things. But you also need to learn your craft. So you have to balance both at the same time, craft and business. If you don't learn, ever learn the business side of things, you can publish some great books that will never go anywhere. They'll just never sell.

Debbi ([22:09](#)): That's absolutely true. Let's see. Who are your favorite authors?

Troy ([22:19](#)): Oh man. It's such a long list, but so in my genre I have a couple of guys and some of them might known for a while and it's like Vincent Zandri, David Baldacci guys like that, that I've known for a while and that I really like their stuff. But I'm also, I am a huge John Irving fan. Probably my top 10 books would include two or three of his books. Just because they're very transformational and, you know, I feel like he handles some delicate subjects in an amazing way. But I've also read some really great books over the last year that are just, you know, been eye opening, fiction and non-fiction as well. So there's such a list. I mean, I could give probably a hundred authors, but I would say, you know, John Irving, Vincent Zandri Alain Lebrun, David Baldacci Lee Child, too. I mean, I'm a big Reacher fan. And I'm a big fan, actually the series Finding Reacher by Diane Capri. It's like she follows around these FBI agents who follow Reacher around trying to catch him. It's actually a pretty fascinating series.

Debbi ([23:33](#)): Yeah. I haven't actually read that, but it sounds interesting because he's great. I mean Lee Child. Let's see. Is there anything else you'd like to say before we finish up?

Troy ([23:50](#)): What I will say about it is first of all, I love reading. Part of the reason I became an author is I love reading. I have, since I was like a little kid I wrote, I actually wrote my first book when I was six years old. And I knew from the time I was about 14, that I've wanted to be a writer, but I listened to all the experts who told me it couldn't be done. And so it took me an extensive amount of time to do that, but I love reading. And the one thing I love about fiction, especially like in a time like this is, I feel like the reason we need fiction is we need hope. We get kind of this escape from our everyday lives. Even if it's into a murder mystery where bad things happen at the end of the day, the bad guy gets caught. And it proves to us that people that are like us, that are just like us, can catch bad guys and bad guys can be caught. It doesn't, it's not about the murders and the groups or anything like that. And I think it's about hope. And I think that most fiction is about hope and as a reader and a writer, those are the things that I really appreciate. So what I hope at the end of the day is that my books actually give people that sense of hope and that sense of escape.

Debbi ([25:05](#)): Well, that's a really great thought and thank you for that. So on that note, I'll just say thank you so much for being with us. You gave us a lot of great tips and also did a nice job telling us about your series. I wish you the best of luck with that, by the way. And speaking of collaborations, which I did about 10 or 15 minutes ago, you can get a free copy of the Crime Cafe 9-Book set, and the short story anthology, if you become a patron on Patreon. Just check out the Patreon link on my website. It's at debbimack.com. And you can find the link in my show notes to the podcast as well. My next guest in two weeks will be Frank Zafiro or Frank Scalise, depending on which book you read. One of them will be here. Both of them possibly. Yes, Frank, I did say that. So I'll see you in two weeks and in the meantime, happy reading!