

# The Crime Cafe with Bill Duncan

Presented By:



Debbi: Hi, again, everyone. Today, I have as my guest, the author of a series of thrillers featuring a New York City detective, Lt. John Driscoll. His work has been translated for publication in at least six countries outside the US. He's also a native New Yorker, so that's a plus because so am I. I'm pleased to have with me today, Thomas O'Callaghan. Hi, Thomas.

Thomas: Hello, Debbi.

Debbi: I'm so glad you're here today.

Thomas: Yeah, nice to be here. Very nice to be here.

Debbi: Awesome. I love your bookshelf there in the background. It's so neat and beautiful.

Thomas: Thank you very much.

Debbi: I wish my shelves were so beautiful.

Thomas: Thank you.

Debbi: What prompted you to write this series?

Thomas: Interesting question. I never thought of writing. In college, I studied history and planned on perhaps going to law school. After that, I began working for an insurance company, Allstate Insurance Company, and I had a pretty good career with them, sales agent. Everything was going well and I figured I'd retire as a sales agent, only I didn't think I'd retire at the age of 49. They changed the way they paid us, and if I wanted to stay on, it meant I was no longer an employee, but I was a franchise agent and I had to pay for secretarial help and other support staff and whatnot. The option was to sell my book of business and leave or retire or stay on as a franchise, so I sold my book of business, and that carried me for about three years.

Thomas: But at age 49, I needed something to do. I spoke to a friend of mine who had a similar circumstance. She asked me what did I like to do. If you're going to have a second career, it might be something you might like doing. I said, "Well, I like to take photographs." This was before the advent of the old iPhone. I had an old 35-millimeter camera and I went out and I snapped some pictures. I lived near Prospect Park in Brooklyn at the time and I snapped some pictures and I enjoyed it.

Thomas: The enthusiasm waned after about a month and I said to her, I said, "Well, it's not a career choice." She said, "Well, what else do you like to do?" I said, "Well, to be honest with you, I always thought I'd be an actor." I wanted to be a thespian when I was in high school and in college and I performed in theater groups and I did some off-Broadway shows. I said, "That's what I'd like to do," so she recommended I go down and have some training because it had been a while and I went to HB Studios down in

Manhattan and that was fun, two months working with a group of other actors and some professional trainers.

Thomas: I enjoyed it very much, but again, it waned. I then went back to my faithful friend and said, "Well, where to now?" and she said, "Well, what else do you like to do in your spare time?" I said, "Well, I like to read," and she said, "Well, what do you read?" I said, "Well, I like to read murder mysteries, police procedurals, thrillers," and she said, "Well, why don't you write one?" I said, "Write one?" I wouldn't know how to write one," and she said, "Well, you've done a lot of reading. You probably picked up the knack somewhere. You maybe developed a voice. Why don't you try to write? I'll tell you what, I'll take a look at it."

Thomas: The last thing you want to hear when you're a new writer is that someone's going to actually see it. I learned something along the way that it's important to write like no one's ever going to read it because you don't need that critic that's inside your head as you type that says, "This isn't good. Someone's going to take issue with it," or, "Wow. What would my mom say?" that kind of stuff, so I just threw caution to the wind and I began to write like no one was ever going to read it, only this close friend.

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Thomas: I wrote an opening chapter of a book involving a crazed serial killer and the introduction of a police team that would be called in to capture this individual and she read it and she said, "I liked it. What's your next chapter about?" and I said, "Well, I hadn't planned on that." She said, "Well, write another chapter," and after writing about eight chapters, all typed out, and after her reviewing, she says, "I think you've got something here and I suggest you see a friend of mine who is a psychotherapist, but he also teaches the art of writing, or he taught the art of writing years ago in Paris." I said, "Okay."

Thomas: I set up appointments with this individual, a fellow by the name of Stephane Ohayon, who still is a psychotherapist in Manhattan. Between his patients, he would see me as a budding novelist and I would bring him a chapter and we would edit it. He would help me as a writing coach push it and get it better and better and better and that continued for an appreciable amount of time until I finished what would be eventually book one in this trilogy. Then we went onto book two. That was it. It was an introduction to get into something I enjoyed doing and I was hooked once I started writing and that's where I went after 20 years of sales.

Debbi: Wow. You were very fortunate to have a personal mentor helping you through the process of that first book.

Thomas: Absolutely, yes. Yeah, yeah. She pushed me and she's been a friend for years and she did some writing on her own. I felt comfortable. Then when I was introduced to Stephane, who as a psychotherapist understands the mindset of crazy people, it was kind of perfect because I was writing about serial killers and I was getting into their heads and whatnot, so it really was a wise decision for a second career, yeah.

Debbi: Well, that's a fantastic source of information, a psychotherapist who knows about writing can give you that insight.

Thomas: Yes, yeah.

Debbi: That's fantastic.

Thomas: Yeah. What are the odds?

Debbi: I was going to ask you about the research that you do, but it sounds as if some of your research was connected with your writing coaching, in a sense.

Thomas: Yes, in that end of it, yes, the writing coach would help me with the mindset of what a crazed killer was thinking and what a crazed killer would be doing. In terms of police procedural, I read all of Ed McBain's 87th Precinct novels. I thought Steve Carella was going to stop by for dinner. I mean, I got, I got to know him so well, him and his team. That gave me an outline for a police procedural format. Although he wrote back in the '50s and things have changed and there's a lot of new electronics that are used and cross-references with the FBI, but I had the basics. Then I reached out to a retired homicide commander who would read what I wrote and comment on it and say, "Well, you need to do this and you need to do that and you need to involve the FBI who are ViCAP." ViCAP, Violent... I forget the... Violent Crime... ViCAP? Boy, I'm stuck. I shouldn't even use the word.

Debbi: I know what you're talking about. I've heard of it.

Thomas: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it's the source that the FBI keeps track of violent criminals, so he led me in the right direction, so I had my writing coach helping with helping me with the crazed killer and I had a retired homicide commander helping me with the police procedural. The rest was the influence of so many years of reading Michael Connelly and Jeffery Deaver and all others, right, and Thomas Harris and Vincent Bugliosi who with another writer, he put together HELTER SKELTER.

Thomas: I think if I thought back to what was the one book that I ever read in my life that pulled me into writing, it was HELTER SKELTER. Although it was true crime, the attention to detail that these two writers made when they wrote this book... The adage is you pick a book up and you can't put it down. I couldn't, this thing I read probably back in the late '70s. I was hooked. I read this thing and it fascinated me. Over the years, I was influenced by writing like that and then the style of Jeffery Deaver, Dean Koontz, Thomas Harris, Michael Connelly. I guess it's safe to say I developed a voice of my own based on their voices and whatnot. That's how it worked. You mentioned research before.

Debbi: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Thomas: It's so important. I spent a lot of time doing research. If you get it wrong, your readers will call you out on it. Case in point, in the first book, BONE THIEF, I armed my homicide lieutenant, Lt. John Driscoll, with a gun. I think that the line in the manuscript said, "Driscoll released the safety on his Glock revolver." I had eight people write to me saying, "One, Glock doesn't make a revolver, they only make pistols, and two, there's no safety on a pistol." Okay, so that went through, my copy editor didn't catch it, my editor didn't catch it, and I was subject to someone telling me what to do. A few people sent me links to various gun manufacturers, Smith & Wesson, and the like.

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Thomas: It was banter for a very fun conversation I had one evening. I was attending ThrillerFest years ago at the Hyatt in Manhattan. ITW's get together every year in July. I was sitting at 11:00 at night and Lisa Gardner, a well-known multi-talented writer who's got a number of New York Times bestselling books out there, we're sitting and enjoying a cocktail and I was telling her the story of my mistake there and she said, "You only had eight people write? I had 32." She did the same thing. I said, "Well, what did you do for the second book?" She said, "I armed him with a semiautomatic and left it at that," and that's what I did. It's important to get the research right because they'll call you on it.

Debbi: Absolutely.

Thomas: They get very specific, those that have knowledge of certain things. For example, in BONE THIEF, again, the first book, I had a scene on a sailboat and it was, I believe, a 38-foot sailboat. It was a sizeable sailboat. The lieutenant was wrestling with the perpetrator toward the end of the book. Before he got there, though, he arrived by helicopter and he leapt from the helicopter and landed on the deck and rolled. This fellow took issue with it. He said, "You have a 38-foot sailboat, which means the keel on that boat is so many feet in the water, which means the mast on that boat is so many feet high, and for a helicopter to be safe above that mast, he has to be X amount up and there's no way he would've jumped without breaking his leg," so he did the math on it. You got to get it right. That was very important.

Debbi: Yeah, that is so true.

Thomas: Yep.

Debbi: It's so important to talk to actual people, too.

Thomas: Yeah.

Debbi: That's another thing you just were saying, you spoke to a person.

Thomas: Yes.

Debbi: A lot of times, I think some writers don't take that extra step and actually pick up the phone and just talk to a person, which is so important sometimes.

Thomas: Yeah.

Debbi: Yeah?

Thomas: I reached out to a medical team. In the second book, *THE SCREAMING ROOM*, I had a set of twins. They were a boy/girl set of twins and I wanted to make them unique. I discovered that there is a one in 300 million chance of male/female twins having something at birth called the Turner syndrome. It has to do with their chromosomes. If they do have the Turner syndrome, and it's extremely rare, their DNA, even though they're male/female, their DNA would be identical. Perfect, because I set a scene where they discover DNA and it matches and they assume that it's one individual when, in fact, it isn't. I had to get that right. I mean, I did research online and got the details, but I remember calling someone that specialized in that and we had a conversation on the phone about it and she gave me mountains of information about it, so I got it right.

Debbi: Wow. That's very interesting. A very interesting issue, too.

Thomas: Yeah, thank you.

Debbi: Are you working on the fourth book now?

Thomas: I am. I'm not certain whether or not I want to bring Lt. Driscoll in this one. When you write a series, I find, I mean, Steve Carella lasted for 56 books, and in each one of them, there was a difference. You could tell that there was a difference. Every time I introduce Driscoll, well, when I did in the second book and the third book, I had to go back to the first book to see how I introduced him and then bring him in again with a similar introduction, but not identical. I'm not sure I want to at this point go with number four.

Thomas: The theme that's the basis of my fourth book has to do with a serial killer who wishes to confess to a writer and have a writer write his life story while he is still killing, with a threat, of course, that if he doesn't, some very bad things would happen to him, his wife, and-

Debbi: (low) Oh, my God.

Thomas: ... Yeah, so I've got pretty much a first draft of that written. He can't go to the police. He ends up going to a priest because he's hearing this confession, if you will, and it has to do with actual murder. The priest links him with the FBI. I went away from the NYPD because we got serial killing and it's on a mass scale, it's various states, so I brought in the FBI and we'll see how we can do with that one. I've got a friend who is active in the FBI, so I've got a link there.

Debbi: Boy, you have some contacts. Remind me to call you if I ever write something about serial killers or any of this.

Thomas: I will.

Debbi: Wow, this is incredible.

Thomas: Thank you.

Debbi: Yeah, so I was going to say, what is it that you think draws people to reading about this kind of thing? Because there's a lot of interest in true crime and serial killers.

Thomas: Yes. Yeah. It's controlled fright. You hear about a serial killer, you read about the, I think it's the Lido Beach. Not the Lido Beach, there's a beach on Long Island where they keep finding bodies and they still haven't discovered who the killer is, they have no idea, in Southern Long Island, Southern Nassau County. They think they know who it might be. He seems to have a penchant for women of the evening and women that he meets at clubs, but he or she, I'm assuming it's a he, he or she hasn't been revealed yet. That's a fascination.

Thomas: You take a look at Thomas Harris' wonderfully written book, *THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS*, which was made into an incredible movie with Denzel Washington. It's just fascinating. It captures the attention of people in a safe way. They get to sit either on their couch and watch it on television or they get to sit under the covers and read it in a book and that's close enough to being with a serial killer, but it's a fascination, I think, that people have.

**On the popularity of true crime and serial killer fiction: "It's just fascinating. It captures the attention of people in a safe way."**

Thomas: Murder has been the subject of writing. I mean, let's look at all of the murder that was in Shakespeare's works. It's something that happens that you hope never affects you personally, but it fascinates people. That's the drawer, I think. Yeah, so that's why I enjoy writing it because I know there's an audience for it and there's something about the pursuit and bringing that individual to justice that I like to do.

Thomas: I chose writing a thriller as opposed to writing a mystery. The genres are similar but different. Mystery, you've got a crime, whether it be a murder or a robbery or a kidnapping and you know who the victim is and you know where it happened and when it happened, but you have no idea who did it. Along the way, there's a lot of red herrings and the reader is kept interested because they're following these red herrings and they're getting an idea as to who it might be. At the end of the book, they may be surprised or they may say, "Ah, I knew it was so-and-so."

Thomas: That's one other way of writing, but with a thriller it's reverse. You open with the murder. You know who it is. The question is, "Will this person be caught? Will this person be brought to justice and how?" That's why I like the thriller as opposed to writing

a thriller, as opposed to writing a police procedural or mystery is because I like to grab the reader's attention in the first chapter. It's my way of inviting that reader on to a rollercoaster of sorts. Then the idea is to never let them off the rollercoaster, just keep that book going until the very end where they're catapulted, "Wow." That's why I like writing a thriller.

Debbi: The thriller is more like a rollercoaster, whereas the mystery is more like a fun-house, where you can't quite make out what the real truth is.

Thomas: Yeah. Yes. Yes, yes, yes. But I like to grab the reader, keep that reader's attention and never let that attention go.

Debbi: That's cool. Let's see. Your protagonist, the lieutenant there, John Driscoll, has some baggage of his own.

Thomas: Right. He does. He's an Irish cop. I'm an Irishman and I remember when I decided to create him, and with all of the characters that I create, I think about an actor or a movie star, if you will, that I know that people know who would recognize that would emulate my character. At the time, Brian Dennehy was a big name and he was a homicide commander in many TV shows and movies. He was Driscoll. In my mind, he was Driscoll, so the attributes I gave him were attributes that I thought would fit Brian Dennehy. In fact, I met Brian Dennehy after a Broadway show he did. He did a show many years ago set in Ireland. At the stage door, I got to meet him and I told him that I was working on a manuscript that I'd like him to be the star and he said, "Well, have your people speak to my people." It never happened, but that's how I decide the character.

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Thomas: In Driscoll's circumstance, I wanted to give him a sadness in his life. I wanted to have the reader feel sorry for this guy, so I opened with the scene first time I introduced him, he's at the cemetery and he's bidding farewell to his 14-year-old daughter who he lost in an automobile accident. A drunk driver driving a tractor-trailer hit the van that his wife and daughter were in and catapulted his wife into a coma which she never recovered from and it takes away his daughter. Now, he's conflicted. He's got a wife who's in a coma who's at home that he has a nurse taking care of by day but he comes and has dinner with in the evening. You really feel sorry for him and you get to like him a lot and now he's got this challenge to go out and chase down the bad guys. That's the basis for John Driscoll.

Thomas: The name itself, I remember when I was a kid that was 15, 16, I was working at a butcher shop in Park Slope, Brooklyn, and we had a number of customers who would come in and this one fellow came. His name was Driscoll. I don't remember his first name, but he was a retired detective, and he just looked the part. He had the raincoat, he was big and strong, he was the guy, so the name, Driscoll, stuck with me for many years. Then when I saw Brian Dennehy as Driscoll, it just all gelled.

Debbi: Wow. That is really cool.

Thomas: Thank you.

Debbi: Very, very interesting.

Thomas: Thank you.

Debbi: Where can people find your work online and where are you online?

Thomas: My website is [thomasocallaghan.com](http://thomasocallaghan.com). My books are on Amazon. The first two books, *BONE THIEF* and *THE SCREAMING ROOM* were published by Kensington Books in New York in 2006 and 2007. I took a break from my writing and came out with the third book, *NO ONE WILL HEAR YOUR SCREAMS*, which was released last year by WildBlue Press and they then put out the second edition of *BONE THIEF* and *THE SCREAMING ROOM*. If you googled any of those titles or if you went online through [thomasocallaghan.com](http://thomasocallaghan.com), you'd have my website and you'd find the books. The third book is actually now out as an Audible. I've listened to it. I wanted to proof it. I listened to it and the guy does a good job. I would've liked to have done it, but I don't know if I've got the voice for it, but he certainly does, and he did a good job, so if someone was looking to purchase my books, one, two, three, or the package, that's where they'd go. Of course, they're on Amazon and Kindle.

Debbi: Well, you used to do acting, so you could always try voice acting.

Thomas: This is true, yeah.

Debbi: Just a thought.

Thomas: I don't think I've ever stopped acting. I mean, to some degree, life calls for me to perform in some sense, so it's never left me, my acting.

Debbi: I can appreciate that.

Thomas: Thank you.

Debbi: I used to think about going into acting also.

Thomas: I decided not to when I realized that there's no money in it at all, unless you're one in a 100,000 shot at latching onto something, there was really no money, so I left college and went into insurance industry.

Debbi: Hmm. Interesting. I ended up going to law school, which you didn't do.

Thomas: No, I didn't.

Debbi: But it helped me in various ways, so that's cool.

Thomas: Very good.

Debbi: Probably your background in insurance did, too, for that matter.

Thomas: You know why my background in insurance did? Because it took me 12 years to get my first and second book published. There's a lot of rejection and a lot of time spent on submitting manuscripts to literary agents who then submit it to publishers and you're dealing with a lot of people saying, "No, thank you. It's not right for me. It won't fit my list." When I was in sales, I realized and I learned that every time I heard someone saying, "No, thank you," I was closer to a "Yes, please," so my sales career gave me the initiative and the gumption to just keep going. Any time I got a manuscript back and it was, "I read it. It needs some work," or, "No, thank you," or, "I think you need a professional editor to look at this."

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Thomas: When I started looking for a publisher, I knew I needed to go through a literary agent because in fiction publishing companies, the small press maybe, but the major companies, they wanted to go through literary agents, so they filter it that way. This was back in like '98, I guess. The way to do it certainly wasn't online like you can now, it was by mail. I went down to Barnes & Nobles and I bought this thick book, a list of literary agents in the United States, and I went through the book and found out which ones liked to read thrillers and I mailed a query letter with sample chapters to what amounted to about 200 agents after the two-or-three-year process. A few of them said, "I like it, but I think it needs work. You may want to consider a professional." Of course, I was swallowing my pride and saying, "Well, I'm just going to ask somebody else."

Thomas: But after I ran out of agents and I said, "Oh, I can't start over again," I took the advice of those individuals that said I needed a book doctor, a professional to read my work and to help me. I went online and I searched for individual editors that would review and work with me on a thriller. I saw a series of names. I didn't know them, but one name popped out because he had a pretty good background. His name is Dick Merrick. The reason he popped out as "Wow, yeah, this is the guy that talked to," is he was the editor who helped Thomas Harris put together *The Silence of the Lambs*. Dick Merrick edited nine of Robert Ludlum's books, so I said, "This is the guy," but I said, "He's never going to read my work."

Thomas: I called him. He lived in Connecticut. We lost him about a year-and-a-half ago, sadly. He became a good friend of mine. I called him because his phone number was there, it wasn't an email. He answered and I explained who I was and what I had and could he help me. Interestingly, I figured he was going to ask me all about the book, and

he didn't. He said, "Who did you submit it to and what did they say?" He was going to screen my work. I'm savvy enough to know some of the bigger names of big agents, so I use those names and I said, "This is what so-and-so said. He reps Jeff Deaver." I picked out the bigger names who I had written to who gave me some pointers and I said, "This is what was told to me by these individuals."

Thomas: He said, "Well, I think we could work on it and work together," and I submitted a 400-page typed manuscript. About three or four months later, he sent it back to me with a slew of edits, a lot of big Xs on several pages. I mean, he watched every comma and pronunciation and just syntax. He was just masterful. He said, "It's probably going to take you about a year to do these edits." I thought, "A year? I'll knock it off in three months." It took me 14 months to do exactly what he called for and once I did, I sent it back to him, he read it. He said, "I think we're ready," and he gave me the name of an agent, Matt Biala in Manhattan here, a literary agent. I sent it to Matt with Dick Merrick's incentive and he sent it out to 12 publishers and 11 said no, but one said, yes, Kensington Books.

Debbi: It only takes one.

Thomas: All it takes is one, yeah. They published those two books and that's how it worked.

Debbi: Wow, that is absolutely fantastic.

Thomas: Yep.

Debbi: I know what it's like to get those rejections.

Thomas: Yeah.

Debbi: Although I've never got the comments, it's great that they were commenting.

Thomas: Yeah.

Debbi: Usually, it was just a scribbled "No, thank you," or, "Not for us."

Thomas: Yeah, "No, thank you." Yeah, right, or no reply at all.

Debbi: I was at the point where they were so busy that they couldn't really give you a personal response. They were so overwhelmed with manuscripts, I think.

Thomas: Yeah, yeah. True, yep. Yep, yep.

Debbi: I never held that against them, actually, although it felt kind of bad, but still, even so.

Thomas: Yeah. I can remember getting a manuscript back and once you get the box back, you knew it was a no. It came back on a Friday and my wife hid it because she didn't

want my weekend to be ruined. She hid the box and gave it to me on Monday. I remember that.

Debbi: Oh, my gosh.

Thomas: But I persevered.

Debbi: Yeah, persevere. I'm going to have to wrap up here.

Thomas: Okay.

Debbi: Is there anything you'd like to add before we finish?

Thomas: No, I appreciate the time spent with you. I like your vitality, I like your personality. This was a very nice exchange. I enjoyed it very much.

Debbi: Cool. Well, I enjoyed it, too.

Thomas: Thank you.

Debbi: It was fascinating to talk to you and I really do appreciate your being here and talking to us today.

Thomas: Thank you very much.

Debbi: Sure thing. I just want to add to, just in closing, that we are [Patreon-supported](#). I will include a link to [Patreon](#) below this video and on the blog posts where the podcast is being run. I will also include a link to my fundraising team. I'm raising funds for research on dystonia. You can read more about that on my blog. I'll just say thank you to everyone who's listening. I'll be back in two weeks with another author. In the meantime, take care and happy reading.