

# The Crime Cafe with

# John Gaspard

Presented By:



**Debbi:** Hi everyone. Our guest today is the author of the Eli Marks mystery series. He also writes the Como Lake Players mystery series under the pen name Bobbie Raymond. Bobbie Raymond. I believe I have that right. In addition to three standalone novels, he has written several books about low budget filmmaking. Now that's an interesting subject. Coming to us from Minnesota, my guest today is John Gaspard. Hi, John, did I pronounce that correctly?

**John:** You did. You pronounced it one of the two ways that is acceptable. My wife is more persistent about Ronnie Gaspard, but I've always had Gaspard so I answer to either one.

**Debbi:** Gaspard. Very French.

**John:** Yes. Oh yes. It's like Smith in the phone book over there.

**Debbi:** All right. Okay. By the way, I love the short story that you provided for your guest post.

**John:** Great! Thank you.

**Debbi:** I just want to say that if you out there have not read it, any listeners have not read it, I would highly recommend you go to my blog and take a look at it. It's fun and it even comes with an animated video, which I loved. It's on my blog on my website and it's a great way to sample John's writing and Eli Marks. What prompted you to write this particular series about this kind of protagonist?

**John:** Well, boy, that's a really good question. I had written a standalone suspense novel called [\*The Ripperologists\*](#) about people who are experts on Jack the Ripper who have to solve a current day recreation of the crimes, and I liked the process, but that particular story didn't have what I thought were a lot of legs. I was a big fan of the writer Lawrence Sanders and the different series that he had. His Matthew Scudder series, which is pretty hardboiled, and then his Bernie Rhodenbarr burglar series which is more lighthearted and a little goofier, and I really liked that. I'd liked something in that mold and was looking for a hero. In *The Ripperologists*, there had been a dynamic of a crotchety old expert and a younger whippersnapper guy, and I liked that so I created Eli Marks, the magician who's in his thirties and his uncle Harry, who had essentially raised him who's in his eighties. Harry is a master magician. He has worked in all forms of professional stage magic, close up magic, kids' magic, big

illusions. You name it, Harry's done it and his nephew, Eli is in his early thirties and is a working magician, making a living birthday parties and corporate events and trade shows and that sort of thing. Nowhere near as successful or knowledgeable as Harry was, but he always has Harry as a resource.

I fell into magicians because looking around I realized, because I was at the time in the meetings and events business in the corporate world, I knew more magicians than the average person knew and they were all pretty interesting. Very creative, very smart, a little quirky, and then I started investigating and found out the names of their tricks. Names that you might never hear cause a lot of times, a magician doesn't say this is such and such a trick. They just do the trick, but the names themselves lent themselves to I thought pretty good mystery titles, like [\*The Ambitious Card\*](#), [\*The Bullet Catch\*](#), [\*The Miser's Dream\*](#), that sort of thing. So, I sat down and started to study and learn how to write like a magician. I'm not a magician, but I can write like one and I'm pretty good at making it sound like Eli knows what he's talking about and Harry knows what they're talking about.

**Debbi:** How did you get to know so many magicians?

**John:** Well, I booked several of them in the corporate world. When I was doing meetings and events for companies, you'd have to have after-dinner entertainment and magicians are always good for that sort of thing. And then a couple actor friends were also magicians and I had about a half dozen people I knew who were professional magicians, which is a lot more than the average person would have in their life who isn't at all involved in magic, a whole lot more. I'm surprised if any of your listeners even know one professional magician personally. It just seemed like a really good, interesting field. There was a lot of history to it. There's a lot of depth and because he's a magician, Eli is in a lot of different environments. He runs a magic store with his uncle. He does corporate events. He does trade shows. He finds himself in a lot of different situations where murders or whatever happened, so he isn't homebound or anything like Nero Wolfe or something. He is out in the world and is able to really do things and explore things, and that's what I liked about the magician. It's not a normal kind of a job cause every time they do something, they're generally in a different environment.

**Debbi:** That's great. It's so esoteric. Did you do a lot of research to get to know the magician trade?

**John:** I did. I had to do a ton of research to get up to speed. I had to. I understood that I was like that old joke about the two guys who were being chased by the bear, and one guy says to the other one, we will never outrun that bear. And the other guy says, I don't have to outrun the bear. I just have to outrun you. And that's what it is with me and magic. I don't know as much as a magician, but I know more than the average person and that's really all I need to know, but it's been a constant learning thing. I have to just keep learning stuff and filling the hopper for if Harry makes an offhand comment about a magician in the 20s, I need to know a magician in the 20s and I need to know something about him, so I did do a lot of reading. I went to some conventions. There was a really good podcast at the time called the Magic News Wire that had a lot of good interviews, and then I was very lucky that a world class magician happens to live about 10 minutes away from me. Her name is Suzanne. She's performed all around the world. You can see her at the Magic Castle in Los Angeles a couple times a year, and she's been doing it for 20 years and she really knows her stuff and she gives occasional lessons. And so, I took about a dozen lessons from her, ostensibly to learn how to do the trick that is the title trick in the first book, *The Ambitious Card*, which is a card trick where the card that the volunteer has chosen keeps being buried in the deck of cards and then pops to the top on its own magically.

So not only did she teach me the moves to do that, but I also was able to learn what it's like to be a full-time magician, cause that's her job. What are her concerns? What keeps her up at night? What annoys her? What excites her? And so even though I was writing a male character, the job was the same, whether it's male or female. I learned a lot from Suzanne and we've become good friends since then, and that really gave me the footing that I needed. But like I say, I still listen to magic podcasts. I still read books. I still get magazines. I still have to keep learning stuff in order to keep everything accurate, because although the average reader wouldn't know whether I got something right or wrong, a magician reading it would and they would reach out I'm sure and let me know that I have described an effect wrong or have a slight wrong or something like that.

But just the opposite has happened. In fact, I was very fortunate a couple years ago, I got an email from Teller of Penn and Teller. He doesn't speak,

but he does write emails. He had read one of the books and he wrote me the nicest note, saying mostly mysteries that involve magicians get the magic wrong. You did not. Yours was accurate and true to life, and I really enjoyed that. So, I figure if one of the top five magicians in the world has read the books and said the magic is correct, then I'm doing the right kind of research.

**Debbi:** Oh, my God. That is the highest form of compliment right there. That is amazing!

**John:** I could have retired at that point. We're not going to get any better than that.

**Debbi:** Yeah. Yeah. There are seven Eli Marks novels published so far. Correct?

**John:** There are seven. There's an eighth one coming out after the first of the year.

**Debbi:** A-ha! I was going to ask about that. What's the latest one about, and is there kind of like a plan for the series in terms of how many books and where you are going with it?

**John:** No, the word plan doesn't even enter my mind or anything like that. No, I wasn't even sure I was going to do one after the first one, but it's sort of kept evolving and there was stuff for Eli to do. The series is fun in that you can really jump in anywhere cause they're all free standing, but if you do start at the beginning, you see an evolution between Harry and his uncle, and Harry and his girlfriend, and the stuff that goes on in Harry's life and in Eli's life. In fact, one of the books, the sixth book, which is called [The Zombie Ball](#) is a flashback book, which takes place before all of them and sort of explains some tropes that have happened in all the books and why they've ended it up that way.

But for the eighth book, which is called [The Self-Working Trick](#), it's a collection of Eli Marks short stories. One of the things that is mentioned a lot in many of the books is that Eli has helped the police out on a number of cases in the past, but they sort of refer to them obliquely and I thought it might be kind of fun to see what some of those cases were. So, it's a dozen stories that just show Eli at different stages in his life, being involved in either the murders or hostage situations or robberies, and just showing the things he knows how to do as a magician can sometimes help him solve crimes that the police can't figure out.

**Debbi:** Interesting. Do you find it hard to come up with situations in which an amateur sleuth like a magician would have to deal with solving a murder?

**John:** Yes and no. It's a Jessica Fletcher kind of situation. I did set it up that Eli's ex-wife is the Assistant District Attorney and she's now married to a detective in homicide, so there is sort of a connection why he keeps stumbling into things, and the fact that he has in the past helped them solve unsolvable crimes does make sense that they would come and ask him questions about particular cases. So yeah, the bigger problem I have is writing mysteries is hard as anyone who's ever done it will tell you, particularly if you want to write a really fair mystery and I don't mean fair in the sense of just barely good. I mean fair where you get to the end you go, oh, that is both surprising and inevitable. I know there are some people who can do it in their sleep. For me it's really difficult. It's hard to. I don't have that kind of puzzle mind.

And so, putting those things together are the hardest parts of the books and what I wanted to do with [\*The Self-Working Trick\*](#), book number eight was do the hard part a dozen times. Do 12 mysteries and not worry about an entire novel around them. These are 3,000-to-6,000-word short stories in which the key is the mystery and the key is solving it, just to give myself some more practice in getting out there and figuring out a mystery, as opposed to the normal novel, which takes me like a year and a half to do and it's mostly spent trying to figure out I know who did it, but how is Eli going to figure it out and how is he going to be fair? I just sort of put that into hyperdrive and did it a dozen times for this book, just to try to get better at it.

**Debbi:** Wow. Well, that's a really great approach, actually. A great writing tip right there, to work on short fiction.

**John:** Well, you're supposed to do the stuff that scares you and so that's what I did

**Debbi:** I'm with you there. Short stories are hard.

**John:** They are so hard and they make it ... Debbi, people just think, oh, you just knock off a short story. It's actually, I think, harder to write a good short story than to write a novel, because with a novel you've got a lot of places to play and goof around and it's like taking a very long road trip and you can stop wherever you want. A short story is a trip to the store

and back, and it has got to be really tight, and unfortunately people have gotten in the habit of reading really, really great short stories where everything falls into place and it just makes them so hard to do, so it was a good challenge to put myself up for.

**Debbi:** Well, that's cool. Also, you've written another series under a pseudonym. What inspired you to write that series and why use the pseudonym?

**John:** The simple answer is back when before I was self-publishing, I did have a traditional publisher and I was told repeatedly that one of the reasons they were having trouble with the Eli Marks books was because it was a male protagonist written by a male author and that most cozy mysteries are female protagonists written by a female author. So I thought I'd test that out and just see does it really make any difference and I don't think it really does. I had an idea to do a series in a community theater because I've directed a bunch of community theater plays and have a better knowledge of that actually than of being a magician, and it lends itself to a series very nicely because although some of the main people at the theater stay the same, that cast and crew tends to change for every play so you have a asked every time. I thought it'd be sort of a challenge to try to write a female character. I made the choice to write it in third person because I really didn't think I'd be very good at getting into her head. She's the executive director of the theater, but from a third person point of view, I can represent her pretty well and it's a fun milieu. I mean, plays are fun and they can be dark and mysterious. You got a lot of crazy characters. It's a fun place to play.

**Debbi:** Kind of a nice collaborative sort of setting too, in terms of having a lot of different characters, I assume?

**John:** Yes, it is so nice. For all those writers out there who are writing mysteries and who get halfway through their book and realize that they've killed off all their suspects—which I have done—and you have to go back and add more people. if you've got the cast of *A Christmas Carol*, which is what the third book will be about, I've got a dozen people there. Got a lot of great suspects, a lot of people to kill and it just makes it so much easier. The second book was all about *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which is a cast of, I think, six or eight. Just ideal, and they were all people who weren't in the first book, so any one of them could have been the killer, cause once you've established a character in a book, moving from book to book, the odds of them being the killer in the second book are kind of

slim so you need a bunch of new faces, and having a new play each book has been really helpful.

**Debbi:** That's brilliant, actually. That's great. How did you get involved in low-budget filmmaking?

**John:** I've been doing that forever since about age 13. I was given a wind-up movie camera by an uncle who was done using it and started doing shorts and then was lucky enough while in high school, there was a film program here in the Twin Cities, Minneapolis-St. Paul High School film program, where you do your normal schoolwork in the morning and then go off to a film program in the afternoon. So, I did that for three years and made a couple features in Super 8, which is kind of at the time. Even now it is pretty unheard of to do a 90-minute feature on a really wonky technology. And then I just kept doing it. In college, I took some film courses and had access to a lot of video equipment. Made some features there and then got out of college and a friend approached me and said he had a script that he'd written and he had \$30,000 and he wanted to shoot it. Would I direct it? And I said, yes, I will direct your movie if you produce one with me afterwards. So, we did two features on 16-millimeter, each costing about \$30,000. The first one, I don't think it's made any money back. The second one is maybe almost made money back.

Then filmmaking kind of broke open when the digital realm came and cameras were cheap and you didn't have to pay for film. Everything was digital—zeros and ones—so you could shoot a lot. I made three features and a short that way. It's very collaborative. It's really fun. It's exhausting and not for the faint of heart or the young, or I mean the old. As I've gotten older, it's just a harder thing to do cause there's a lot of gear. If you've spent a year writing a novel, imagine doing the same thing, but you have to organize a dozen or 20 people every time you want to work on the next part of it, you get a sense of just what a huge task it is. But the upside is that I learned a whole lot about storytelling and how to start a scene and how to end a scene and how to bury exposition and introduce characters, and all that, which comes in very handy in novel writing.

**Debbi:** Very much so. I do screenwriting and have taken a course on indie producing and it just opened my eyes to just how complex and amazing the filmmaking process is.

**John:** They make it look easy. Having done corporate events and done video production in the corporate side for 30 years, the average person looking at a video would go, oh, well, you just shot that, right? No, even today with equipment making things much easier, you still are setting up sound and setting up lights and doing different takes, different angles. It isn't as simple as it looks.

**Debbi:** That's right. Yeah. And there's so much. There's a whole team involved in making a movie. That's the thing.

**John:** Yeah.

**Debbi:** It depends on your budget too. I mean, sometimes people can do more even one thing. Sometimes they do all of it and it's really amazing what gets done.

**John:** You know, having done the last couple digital features I did, we did one of those actually shot in the theater that is the basis for the Bobbie Raymond series, which is a little community theater in Minneapolis. I worked with a screenwriter and we looked at the building and went there. There are 42 different rooms in this building. There's a lot of spaces in this building. This building is used Friday, Saturday night, Sunday afternoon. It's empty the rest of the time, except the rehearsal hall. Everything else is empty for the rest of the week. What a great place to make a movie. And so, we wrote the movie to fit that space and those rooms. And for that, I was co-screenwriter and I was the director and I was also the cinematographer, and that's a lot of jobs for one person to take on. I was lucky to have a couple crew people who would help with the lights and one guy who did the sound, but even then, it was a crew of maybe four people. It certainly can be done. It just is pretty exhausting.

**Debbi:** And then there's pre-production, there's postproduction. People really just don't appreciate how much goes into it.

**John:** No, they don't. They don't, and that's why I wrote a couple books on film production, just because after we did our two 16-millimeter features, my producing partner and I, we learned a lot of stuff in the first one, and then we forgot about half of it and had to relearn it on the second one and we kept reinventing the wheel. And so, I did one book on just general production and one on screenwriting, as much for myself as for anyone else, just to remind myself here's a smart way to do things. You don't have

to reinvent the wheel every time. Someone else has already solved this problem for you.

**Debbi:** Yeah, I'll definitely have to check out your books on filmmaking. Definitely. What do you like to read and what authors inspire you?

**John:** Well, I mentioned Lawrence Block with his Matthew Scudder books and his Bernie Rhodenbarr and his Keller, the very charming Hitman series. He makes it look easy, particularly in his short stories. He really makes it look easy, and so I learned a lot from reading him. When I started the series, I went back and reread a bunch of Agatha Christies, as much to see what I didn't want to do as what I did want to do, to see how she buried things and hid things and set up things, and I wasn't always happy with her solutions, particularly having directed a couple of her plays where you just go, that makes no sense at all. Ma'am, that makes no sense at all that you can do that. But anyway, I learned a lot from that. As for actual casual reading, since I started in the series, I am spending so much time reading about magic that I don't have as much time for that sort of pleasure reading as I would like. Not that my reading about magic isn't pleasurable, some of it really, really is cause there's a lot of very smart people coming up with very clever ideas. but yeah, it was Lawrence Block that really inspired me at the beginning.

**Debbi:** Well, that's cool cause he's a great writer. I love his work.

**John:** He is a fantastic writer.

**Debbi:** What advice would you give to someone starting out as a writer?

**John:** Well, it's same advice I give to people starting out making movies, which is you have to decide early on if this needs to be a money-making operation or not. I learned that a lot in filmmaking, that toward the end there with digital filmmaking, you can do it so cheaply. I mean, for example, when we did our 16-millimeter features I mentioned, they cost \$30,000 each, which may not seem like a lot in Hollywood terms, but that's a lot in human terms, regular people. And that went primarily for the gear and the film stock and processing the film stock and all that. Nowadays with the digital system set up the way they are and the digital recording for audio and the low budget editing gear, one of the last features I did, the one we did in the theater, which was called *Ghost Light*, the cost really, cause I already owned the camera and the lights, the costs

were making sure that there was lunch every Saturday for the crew and I actually spent more money entering the film into film festivals than I did making the film, cause each film festival cost like 50 to 80 bucks to enter it. You can rack that up pretty quickly. So my advice is with writing or with filmmaking, decide early on if you want economics to be a part of this or not. If you want economics to be a part of it, then you've got to create with that in mind. What do people want to read? How am I going to get it to them? How will I get money out of it? If you don't care about the economics and you just want to have an enjoyable time doing it, but still would like people to read stuff, it makes it a whole lot easier because as with filmmaking, getting a book out there now is really cheap.

You obviously need a computer probably to write it on. It would be helpful if you had Vellum or something like that to format it. You need to buy a really good cover from a really good graphic artist—don't make your own—and have a good editor go through it. But if you're spending more than a thousand dollars, you don't have to do what I'm saying. And if that's all it costs, then you don't need to make more than a thousand dollars if you don't care about making money. The problem is as with anything else, it becomes a competition and you start reading about what other people are doing. And it's like, oh, this person is selling this amount of books per day and why am I not doing that? Well, I'm not doing that because I don't care to do that. I love it when someone buys. I'll look online and say, oh look! Somebody clearly bought all seven books in the Eli Marks series today. Someone went cause all seven of them all sold at the same time, so clearly someone bought all of them. That's fantastic. I'm very happy about that. But I don't think I've ever looked at ranking on Amazon, except once when I had a free thing on BookBub and whatever I was giving away for free surpassed Louise Penny, which I thought was kind of funny. It's like, oh wow. For 30 seconds, this book was above Louise Penny. It's really hard in this competitive world to not want to do that, but if you can just get that out of the way, it can be a really fun thing to do.

Of course, there are people who need to make money at it and that's a whole different thing, a whole different track. So, you just need to decide early on which track are you on, and that'll make the whole process a lot more fun if you kind of know ahead of time which track you need to be on.

**Debbi:** I completely agree with you. I think that's an extremely healthy attitude you have of not checking your rank all the time, that sort of thing. I mean, it's ridiculous.

**John:** It is, but it's also quite hard to not fall into it, particularly because as an independent publisher, which is what I am. Just like I'm listening to magic podcasts and reading up on stuff, I'm also following writing podcasts such as yours, and you can get into this, Oh my goodness. I need to have a huge backlist. The thing that just floored me when I first heard about it was, oh no, I need to rapidly release three books and I need to be writing four books a year. And I thought, wow. If I tried to write four books a year, I would be dead and I wouldn't enjoy it. And having spent 30-some years in the corporate world where I had to sit down and write something, I had to churn it out, whatever it was that we were doing, I had to do it. This is a case where I don't have to do it and so I don't have to do a certain amount of writing every day. I don't have to put out a number of books every year. I realize and I hear from Eli Marks fans, they always love having a new book and I always love sending them a new book, but I didn't sign up for being the guy who has to give them a brand new book every year. That's just not what I signed up for.

**Debbi:** Well, to me, that's a very healthy attitude. I'm glad to hear it because ...

**John:** But it's hard to keep that when ...

**Debbi:** Comparisonitis is something I try to avoid.

**John:** When you hear someone else talk and you hear about... I was just listening to the—and I probably shouldn't cause it's not helping really, I suppose but—the Six Figure Author podcast. They're very nice people and they have very good advice on there, but they're talking about the amount of money you're supposed to spend every day on advertising. One person was talking about spending a thousand dollars a day on advertising. I thought I'm not doing that. There's no way I'm doing that.

**Debbi:** That's insane.

**John:** It is insane and you go, well, you'd make a million a year. Yeah, I'd also not be able to sleep at night. So, I would rather keep doing what I'm doing and I know there are people who are far better at doing what I'm doing than I am. I've learned a lot and I've made mistakes, but the fact is that every day I sell a handful of books and that's fantastic.

- Debbi:** Is there anything else you'd like to say before we finish up?
- John:** Thanks for having me on. I enjoy the podcast. Yeah, this has been fun.
- Debbi:** Well, I've had fun and I just love what you have to say. I think that's fantastic.
- John:** Have you been using the screenwriting stuff you learned to help just in your normal writing?
- Debbi:** Definitely. Screenwriting has helped me with my usual writing. I mean, my novel writing. It's given me also a great deal of appreciation for IP in general. The whole concept of intellectual property and the importance of copyright, all that kind of thing.
- John:** I wish more people would just look into screenwriting just because it teaches you so many great things. You don't really even need to be reading books on it. Just kind of pay attention as you're watching a movie. At what point do they get into the scene? At what point do they leave the scene? I was talking to someone recently who said, oh boy, screenplay writing must be fun cause you get to write more dialogue than you'd have in a novel. And I said, well, it's actually just the opposite. There's probably 1/10 the amount of dialogue in a movie than there is in a novel. You don't have time in a movie for the kind of talking you can do in a novel. And he said, no, are you sure? I said, yeah. I mean, a screenplay is 120 pages and just look at the amount of words in it compared to a novel, and you learn from writing screenplays how to compress and say less and do less and make each line have more impact.

You mentioned the short story, "The Last Customer" that I'm giving away via your blog. And that's a 5,000, 6,000-word short story, maybe something like that, and I turned it into an animated piece as you can see from the link. Originally that started because I wanted to do it as a comic book, which means figuring out all the frames and what's going to be said in each one, and that is an active compression that anybody who's writing a short story should try to do. To take a 6,000-word short story and compress down just the dialogue cause everything else has to be visualized by your artist. I'd be surprised if 15% of the dialogue made it into the comic book. I had to really, really, really compress it because there just isn't the time or the space, and it helps you be a better writer cause you figure out exactly what needs to be said and what doesn't.

**Debbi:** Absolutely. I couldn't agree with you more. That is so true. And yeah, people do have that misimpression about screenwriting. It's not about dialogue. The less dialogue, the better.

**John:** It isn't. And because of being in lockdown, my wife and I ended up watching a lot more mystery series from around the world. Netflix has a lot of really good ones. And you can learn from watching those how to bury things in a mystery, how to bury clues, because it's very hard to really bury a clue in a miniseries or particularly in a movie, if you have 90 minutes. If someone is sharpening a knife in the beginning of the movie, you know that knife is going to turn up as an element later on in the movie. You can bury stuff a whole lot easier in a novel, because you can have so many different kind of red herring things out there. In a movie as you're watching it, once you've written a few mystery novels, and I'm sure you do the same thing, you see those red flags as they pop up and you go, oh yeah. Okay. No, it's the sister. Obviously, it's the sister because she just said that thing, and you realize the luxury you have in writing a novel of being able to bury stuff a whole lot easier.

**Debbi:** Absolutely. Definitely. Well, I want to thank you for being here, John. Thanks.

**John:** Oh, thank you, Debbi. It's been fun.

**Debbi:** I had a great time talking to you and remember everyone who's listening, that the Crime Café has two eBooks featuring multiple authors who have appeared on the show. You can buy them from all major retailers. You can also get a copy of each if you become a Patreon supporter, so check out the Patreon page. All you have to do is click on the Patreon button at the bottom of this podcast and check it out. Our next guest on the show will be David Kushner. In the meantime, take care and happy reading.