

# The Crime Cafe with Chip Jacobs

Presented By:



Debbi (00:55): Hi, everyone. Today I'm pleased to have with me as my guest, a bestselling author and journalist. I love journalists, by the way, since I was a journalism major. Yes, I was <laugh>.

Chip (01:08): Me, too,

Debbi (01:09): All right. All right. His latest book is a true crime story. It is the latest, right? It's called *The Darkest Glare: A True Story of Murder, Blackmail, and Real Estate Greed in 1979 Los Angeles*. I've read it and it is quite the bizarre story. He has written several other books, including *Strange as It Seems: The Impossible Life of Gordon Zuhlar*, *The People's Republic of Chemicals*, the international bestseller, *Smogtown: The Lung-Burning History of Pollution in Los Angeles*. I love these titles. Anyway, more recently he released his debut novel *Arroyo*, a work of serialized, I'm sorry, a work of historical fiction set around the construction of Pasadena's mysterious Colorado Street Bridge, which really intrigued me. I had to look that up. He's also worked as a reporter and written opinion pieces for a variety of major newspapers, including the LA Times, the New York Times, CNN, and several others. It's my pleasure to introduce Chip Jacobs. Hey Chip, how are you doing today?

Chip (02:27): Hey. Hey, Debbi. Honored to be here. Thank you so much for having me on.

Debbi (02:31): Oh, well It's my pleasure, believe me. Very happy to have you on. And so tell me, talk about how you ended up writing *The Darkest Glare* which was written a bit like a thriller with this absolutely psychotic villain in there. How did you learn about the story and what interested you in writing it as a book?

Chip (02:58): Yeah, I mean, I will never be called a true crime author cuz I'm not a true crime author. When I went into journalism I always tried to avoid getting assigned a crime story or active murder case or whatever, because that just wasn't in my DNA. And nonetheless, stories will find you. And in the mid nineties I was working at a newspaper competitor to the LA Times, having a blast getting under people's skin. And I developed a relationship with a source who just gave me tip after tip after tip, and he just had the highest batting average and he was always getting me above the fold on front page stories. And it was fantastic. I left journalism to work my first book biography but I was still freelancing and one day, true story, late nineties walking down Hollywood Boulevard, which back then and still now kinda looks like a Star Wars bar in terms of characters, <laugh> and some moments in your life crystallize.

(04:07): We just passed a homeless guy carrying a banjo and Jerry Stasi on the sidewalk, this is the protagonist of the book, Jerry Schneiderman, and says, did I ever tell you--because we developed some trust--that I had a double murderer chasing me? And he goes, yeah, my ex-wife thinks it killed the old me. And I thought he was just trying to impress me. It was braggadocio maybe. Maybe there was a little something there, but almost yanking my chain. Turned out not only was he being accurate, he was understating how really evil and devastating the crime was that he got sucked into in 1979 Los Angeles, which was a very dark period in American history. I don't know if it's as dark as now, but murders were high. We were fighting with each other. America seemed on decline. We were, there's huge gas station lines and stagflation.

(05:07): The murder rate was so scary. It was fueling quote-unquote white flight, alarm sales, gun purchases. It was almost a battle. And my source back then was a brilliant space planner dealing with trying to grow the business too much because they had been talked into it by a very

debonnaire partner, and they were doing space planning, kind of interior architecture. They were doing really well. They were crushing it. They had a different way of approaching than stodgy older firms. But then Jerry's partner, a guy named Richard Kasparov said, I know a way to get rich even quicker. We're gonna go into construction and when you go into construction, you need two things. You need a contractors' license and you need experience, and boy did they hire the wrong person.

Debbi ([06:02](#)): <laugh>. Yeah. Yes, indeed. That came back to bite them in the ass, huh?

Chip ([06:09](#)): Oh yeah.

Debbi ([06:11](#)): In a big way. How many people did you interview and was it difficult to get people to talk to you about what happened?

Chip ([06:19](#)): That's a great question. Without my journalism background, I could not have done this story. God is still trying to jackhammer patience into my soul. And this was something I learned in this story where you develop a source, and it might be years and years and years before they really tell you what you wanna know and you just can't come onto them a thousand miles an hour. So I probably interviewed 30 people or something like that. Some had passed away. There were three or four people that did not wanna talk to me. And one person I met one time at a Hamburger Hamlet in West Los Angeles. And this crime, this murderer, this monster who was a, I don't wanna be a spoiler, he haunted people even after he died. And I think there was some fear in these people. He's got associates, maybe he's gonna reincarnate and track me down.

([07:29](#)): I interviewed wives and girlfriends and things like that, and they'd be bawling when I'd interview them. And even though I tried to be diplomatic and empathic and all that, and sympathetic, they never got it out of their system. I would say my really big break came when I reached out to the assistant district attorney that prosecuted the case. He was retiring, he invited me over to his house and he opened up his garage door and there's all these files he brought home and he goes, take your pick. And I spent a beautiful, delicious and also very dark afternoon going through his stuff, because it was dark in that garage and the things I was learning with these files was pretty dark about humanity. Traditionally, as a reporter, you go after the documents. So I went to downtown LA, something called the Hall of Records, which is in this dungeon-like basement below this Sixties building.

([08:30](#)): And you feel like you are in a nuclear bunker going down there with kind of shady fluorescent lights. And it's serpentine. There's not a lot of humans, it smells. You finally enter this area and you expect there to be human moles working there. So finally, you know, have your case number. I go to the files, somebody has gone, or numerous people have gone through this box of files and taken stuff out. A massive amount. And I've faced this before in journalism where somebody doesn't want you to know what's going on. There's only one set of records before it's digitized and they just swipe 'em. Or they put her down their shirt and they walk out like Fawn Hall, during Iran --that's what happened here. There was people that did not want to have any fingerprints on this story because of guilt, because of terror, because there's something other shady happening.

(09:20): And so it was not easy filling in all the blanks of the story. And I felt a little bit like *Jurassic Park* where they had to add in DNA here and there, and that's what it required me to do. But Jerry Schneiderman, my anti-hero, I sat with him for interviews many, many times. So it wasn't always easy. I also not equivocated, but I vacillated about contacting the trigger man in the story cuz he was in prison. He'd been denied parole cuz he was considered so dangerous. He was like a brilliant kid who fell out of a car, hit his head and developed two things, epilepsy and psychopathy when he fell out of this car. And I didn't not want him to know I was necessarily alive because in California's parole system, you don't know. This guy gets out, the internet will make it easy to find me. Maybe he's this old bitter man. So I wavered and wavered and finally I got news that he died. And even though what he could have told me would've been invaluable, I also breathe a big sigh of relief. So did my family because they weren't that thrilled with me poking my nose into this.

Debbi (10:33): I can imagine. All of what you're saying is bringing up a question for me now. What psychological effect of all this did all this research have on you? Did you ever feel frightened or at risk or just any lingering effects almost like a PTSD afterward?

Chip (10:58): That's a good, not a lot. I mean, I'm an independent writer, I work from home and I have a big window looking onto me and in this case something really evil happens through a window. And it occurred to me, oh my God, the guy could do it once, he could do it twice. But I wasn't really concerned about that as much as trying to be a student of psychology to understand the effects of this murder spree on the people that were affected. That's what I saw. I saw PTSD across the board, whether it was somebody that could barely bring themselves to talk about it or mention a name or Jerry. I think Jerry was so deeply scarred by this. I think actually the second tragedy was he was infected by the two men in his life that sent him sideways. Cuz he was really a very brilliant guy. He should have been one of those stories of a nerdy kid that had the crap bullied out of him who became a billionaire, but he refused to get therapy after all this went down. And maybe he didn't wanna face the demons through the door. And that shortened his life. So that was really sad. And he never saw this book come out. He never enjoyed it. He never took his victory lap of survival. So that me made me melancholy. But I'm hoping that from above he's cheering me on.

Debbi (12:32): I'd like to think so. Yeah, yeah, definitely.

Chip (12:35): I hope so.

Debbi (12:35): Yeah. How much time did it take you to research and write the book from start to finish?

Chip (12:43): Well, this book has come out in a couple different forms later. *The Darkest Glare*, this essence of it had been written in a previous book, but it was too biography-esque. And I wanted to turn it more true crime. But I would say overall probably took me a year and a half or so. I'd work on it, do an interview here or there, go back to something else like journalists do. So that the actual writing wasn't that hard. It was a more difficult story because it's a very psychological story and part of it, without being a spoiler alert, involved, I mean people have asked me to describe the story. And I would say it was kind of like 1979 version of *Fargo*, the great movie *Fargo*, one of my favorites ever. Coen Brothers. Brilliant, brilliant, brilliant. Where it's not so much about the gore, it's about the map to the gore and why people put themselves in situations where they're gonna be vulnerable to the gore.

(13:44): Greed, ambition, purposeful naivete. We have hapless killers and if this was ever turned into a series, I'd like to have one of those pinball ding, a first attempt, miss. Ding, second attempt. Happens for comical, absurd reasons, they're trying to kill. I mean they were working in a murder corporation that was targeting real estate executives in late seventies Los Angeles by a very angry, vengeful diabolically crafty guy. And yet they couldn't get the job done. And it may have taken them as many, I don't know, many as 10 times to achieve their goal of taking out a human being. And when they did, it created this panic, this ripple across a small ecosystem of families in Los Angeles where they wouldn't be anywhere close to a window. They were always looking over their shoulders and the psychological part was almost as bad as the actual physical loss of life. Of course nothing can compare, but I mean there was a lot of people doing extra drinking, locking their doors, asking for police protection cuz there was a monster out in Los Angeles that was really good at killing and then playing the victim. And that's the type of guy you don't wanna have know where you live.

Debbi (15:10): Absolutely. For sure. Let's see, you've also written a novel. What's your novel about and what's the strangeness around the Pasadena Bridge?

Chip (15:22): Okay, the Colorado Street Bridge in Pasadena, brooked two big valleys in the Los Angeles area, the progressive age, 1913, it connected the sort eastern part of the San Fernando Valley with the western part of the San Gabriel Valley. And this bridge was a talisman of the building automobile age. Things were changing from horse and buggies to cars to model Ts. Henry Ford assembly line. There was an enclave of rich people out in Pasadena actually tycoons that quote, wintered in Pasadena, and you're affluent when you can turn a noun into a verb. So this was gonna be the most daring, longest bridge of its kind in the world. And all this ambition and brilliant engineering went into it. But boy, a lot of clashing, egos, disputes, secrets, death surrounded it during the construction. And I believe in this idea, some inanimate objects radiate energy of their creators.

(16:32): And the Colorado Story Bridge is now a historic bridge. It's been around since over a hundred years but it also became known as a suicide magnet. And within a few years of its opening, people were coming to Pasadena in the Arroyo Seco, which means dry gulch or dry valley. But there's a beautiful area looking in the mountains and they considered it a gorgeous place to die. And Pasadena did not, my city where the bridge is didn't handle it well. They're very proud of their city and the cultural museums and Caltech and the Rose Parade, et cetera. They didn't wanna acknowledge it. And the suicides continued and continued and continued. So it's got this dual personality of the Colorado Street Bridge is this incredible monument to flying concrete. And its beautiful arches based on a lot of European and Roman and Italian designs. But it's the other side of it is people that are hopeless, that are having a bad stretch in their life kind of run here are attracted by it.

(17:46): There's lot tons of rumors about ghosts, spirits and things that, supernatural things there. And at first I kind of was skeptical, but I'm not so anymore. Anyway, I created a novel, historical novel around the construction of this bridge with a guy that is a Pasadena Yankee Doodle Dandy who thinks the city can do no wrong and he kind of has a transformation. And the part of the story, it's supposed to be entertaining. It was a dark time in the world when I wrote it, it came out in 2019. I was trying to tell myself an amusing story of heart and destiny. And I do believe if we don't achieve what we're supposed to in this life, we're gonna come back maybe a

lesser self and with those goals still to be claimed. And so my book has the same couple similar cast of characters in two different lives, 1913 and 1993. 1913 is when the bridge opened, despite all this turmoil and trauma, and 1993 is when they reopened it after a seismic retrofit.

(18:53): But all those years later, we know about the suicides, we know about the buried history, we know about things cities don't want you to know. And it is about the idea of history is written by the victors. So I'm very interested in that. What is history? And that was the first fiction I ever wrote. I was delighted by how well it did. I think it did bring some chuckles and a few tears. And I love the idea of going back in history, finding some famous people and some anonymous people and having them interact. And a lot of historical novels, their characters are around these fascinating individuals, but they never meet. So in my book, my characters interact with Teddy Roosevelt, Upton Sinclair, who is a massive hero of mine that inspired me to go into journalism. What a guy. All this is true. They were all on this area. And then the wife of Adolphus Busch, who was really the modern day founder of Budweiser Corporation. They have these magical gardens out here in Pasadena called Busch Gardens. All those things. It just appeared to me, this is a story waiting to be plucked from a tree.

Debbi (20:03): Upton Sinclair, you mentioned his name. Wow, that's quite a writer there.

Chip (20:08): Yeah.

Debbi (20:09): I'm familiar with his work though. I don't know that they've actually read any of it. And I should.

Chip (20:15): His breakthrough book was *The Jungle*, about Chicago's meat packing industry. And it's sort of about the industrialization of food. And he would come out to, and he was a massive celebrity and the publishing industry just really wanted a piece of him. And he eventually burned out, was an ill health and he would come to Pasadena to recuperate. But he always had an eye on how the rich control things. And so, I have him get into a little argument with my main character about the soul of Pasadena. So I'm a Pasadena kid, but I think only a Pasadena kid can skewer a city. And these people were there to be written about. And so it was a dream come true.

Debbi (20:58): And they say there are no California natives, not true <laugh>.

Chip (21:03): Well, yeah--

Debbi (21:05): I'm thinking of an old movie,

Chip (21:06): The original ones were Native Americans and then the Spanish came and then Mexico. And then of course us

Debbi (21:13): Then there was you.

Chip (21:15): Yeah. So I, I just, I love the Colorado Street Bridge. I've been fascinated about it since I was a teenager. I had a car accident under it. We didn't even know the name of it was the Colorado Street Bridge. Growing up in Pasadena, we thought it was Suicide Bridge, you know? We'd say in a very cavalier way.

(21:33): But if you look at this bridge, it is hard to avert your eyes because it curves. It's the only really curved bridge of its kind or was back in the day. It looks like it was an alien put it down there. And half the art galleries in Pasadena survive by selling different versions of this bridge. So do a lot of organizations. It's fun, it's been exploited and over-commercialized. And U2 the band plays "Helter Skelter" and they say they're taking it back from Charles Manson to put it back where the Beatles, where it belonged. And I agree, as a massive Beatles fan, I wanted to give the past, I wanted to reclaim Suicide Bridge that name and give the bridge back to its original name, like a mother, the Colorado Street Bridge. And I felt a connection to that bridge. I also feel a connection to the three men that died during its construction that never get acknowledged, like they didn't exist. And that pisses me off when I walk that bridge and I see the name of the contractor and the name of the city council that were there. It's kind of funny how history just brushes aside those that are most important. That pissed me off.

Debbi (22:45): Yes, yes it is. Well, other than Upton Sinclair, who are your favorite writers?

Chip (22:54): John Irving, Philip Roth, Mark Twain, TC Boyle, Jess Walter, those types of people. Yeah, I'm also a very big fan of Gillian Flynn. I think she is just astoundingly good. So those are kind of my favorite writers. When I was a kid, I read *Rolling Stone* cover to cover. And so that meant me worshiping Hunter S. Thompson or I like that kind of sarcastic new journalism and it definitely inspired me. So as my brothers and others will tell you, I'm a natural smartass and I can't get that out of my writing if I had five people standing over me. So I believe in being funny. And I believe what makes us somewhat different than animals is you've never heard a dog crack a really funny joke, <laugh>. And I believe in the magic of dogs, as you'll see when I send you a copy of *Arroyo*.

Debbi (23:59): All right. Oh, well that's very kind of you. Thank you. Yeah. Let's see.

Chip (24:04): So I was gonna say on *The Darkest Glare*, I've made a lot of friends in true crime. Some of the true crime writing is very supermarket, pulp. Procedurals. Others are more narrative. I have a good buddy named Ron Franscell, who's a terrific true crime writer. He's also done novels. And when you read his book, it does feel more fiction. It doesn't feel like, and now on this date, the judge said this, and then on that date, the prosecuting attorney recommended ... it's filled with, it's driven by people. And I really try to approach this book like that. And I wanted folks to be upset or moved when sharp events happen to them. You know, have to make your readers invest in your characters <affirmative>. So that, I did work very hard on that. And I don't try to judge and I don't try to label. I just try to put myself in their shoes and I try to paint pictures the best I can with my words.

Debbi (25:12): That's what we do. Okay. We have five minutes left before we get cut off by Zoom <laugh>. Okay. What advice quick would you give? What's the best advice for you would give for somebody who's interested in writing for a living?

Chip (25:31): Consider law school.

Debbi (25:32): <laugh> Oh, dear.

Chip (25:34): No it, as you know, it's very, very hard to make a living as a writer. I mean, as if you're a journalist, you know, work for a publication and you get a paycheck so that, you know,

have that stability. If you wanna write for a living, you just have to start very early. And journalism today is unfortunately sort of spiraling downwards. I mean, there's like a third less journalists now than there was 10 years ago or something really eye-popping. So you have to ask, where are you gonna make your living writing? And you may need to take a job doing types of writing you don't like, whether it's technical writing or even PR or whatever. But stay true to what you want to do, and write on the side. Get up at five o'clock in the morning, do it on weekends. Have your notepad with you or your laptop with you on the train.

(26:28): That type of thing. Keep at it. Write. And when you first write, write just for the joy of it, invest in the process, not the outcome. And write the book. This is the best piece of advice somebody gave. Write the book you'd wanna read. Don't worry about the noise, don't worry about anything else. That is a big problem today for writers because the internet is a click away. Self insecurity is a click of way. Self-doubt is a click away. Stay off, I mean, I wish I could disable all my social media. I really think it's a net negative on the world and it's definitely a net negative on me because it takes me away from reading, takes me away from writing, takes me away from trying to sculpt something good out of a gorgeous mess. That's what a first draft of a book is.

(27:22): So you have to be focused. But in the end, I wouldn't say do it to make a living, I'd say doing it because you can't not write. We're all pathological. I can't stop writing. I hope in my next life I'm a writer. When I wrote that fiction, I felt like it pulled up a firewall in my brain. And now I have more fiction ideas than I could write in 500 lives. And that's where I get my joy. We all have our good voice in life. This and my guitar are the best voice because I got a nasal voice. That's why I just love writing. I loved it since I was a little kid. And you know, just find the joy in that. And don't worry about what anybody else thinks. If you get an agent, you get a big contract, great. But you know what? It's not gonna make your life better because you've signed with Simon and Schuster necessarily.

(28:13): If you're not happy or you're not confident or you don't have self-confidence, it doesn't matter. I've read books that are self-published that are so damn good. And I've read books from big publishers that are just so trite and I'm just, you know, you can't make sense of the commercialism. But you just have to stay true to what's in here. Write from your heart and be committed to writing a really messy, beautiful first draft that is the beginning of your baby that you will put up to the world. So I mean just, I'm doing that now. I'm writing a follow. I'm writing two books, including a follow up to *Arroyo*, and I'm making a big mess. But I'm gonna go back, after I take a break. I'm gonna go back and clean it up and I know there's something great there and you have to know that in your heart. And I'm telling a story only I can tell.

Debbi (29:03): There you go. That is a wonderful note to end on and thank you. I'm gonna have to cut it short here because we are gonna get kicked off of Zoom, but I did want to thank you so much, chip, for being here. I would like to thank everyone who's listening and please encourage you to check out our Patreon page where we have perks for Patreon supporters. Right now today my book is coming out, it's called *Fatal Connections*. It's out in print and in e. Our next guest will be Barry Finlay. Until then, take care and happy reading.