

# The Crime Cafe with Willa C. Richards

Presented By:



**Debbi:** Hi everyone. My guest today is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she was a Truman Capote Fellow. Her work has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, and other publications. She's also the recipient of a 2019 PEN/Robert J. Dau Prize for Emerging Writers, and her novel is called [\*The Comfort of Monsters\*](#), and it's very good. I've read it and reviewed it and loved it. It's my pleasure to have with me Willa C. Richards. Hey Willa, how are you doing today?

**Willa:** Good. Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate the opportunity to be on.

**Debbi:** Excellent. Well, I'm glad you're here. I appreciate the opportunity to be able to talk to you, because I really did love your book. I thought it was great, and it touches on so many issues. I was listening to an old review I did of the book, trying to get back in touch with the issues that really stuck out for me. And it was like, wow! I'd forgotten just how complex and wonderful this book was.

**Willa:** Well, thank you for saying that.

**Debbi:** Oh, well, I mean it honestly. I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it. So, tell us about the book and what inspired you to write it.

**Willa:** Yeah, I started working on the book because of a project I was actually working on with my mother. My mom is a historic archeologist. Both my parents are archeologists, but my mother in particular is a historic archeologist. She works in mostly in cemeteries, and her sort of life's project is working in a cemetery in Milwaukee, a pauper cemetery that was run by the city and then sort of forgotten and then ran into all of these sort of issues with construction and new development where they had sort of forgotten that these people were buried there. So my mom was tasked with excavating these graves and removing them from an area where they were in danger of being destroyed, so that's sort of her life's project. She got a call from a family—I believe this was in 2018—asking if she would excavate an area of the cemetery for them because they believed that their loved one was buried there, a recent burial, not a historic burial. And the reason that they believed this was based on a tip from a psychic.

She did agree to work with them to excavate the area where they believed this woman—it was a young woman who had gone missing in the '80s—she agreed to work with this family and I volunteered on that project as well, and that was sort of the seed that really started the entire novel for me, just thinking about the space that that family was in, that they had been in and the work that they potentially did with a psychic to come to that place in the Milwaukee Poor Farm cemetery to try to find her.

**Debbi:** Wow. So much of that is reflected in your book and it's fascinating that your mother had that particular profession, and that you got involved through your mother's profession.

**Willa:** My whole family was really around my parents' work from a very young age. We grew up on archeological sites, so we were sort of always involved in their work in a very intimate way, I guess you would say. And then as we got older, some of us did field schools and we started learning how to do archeology as well, so we would work for them during the summers. As a writer, it was an amazing experience. All of the different projects I worked on were just amazing experiences, and I've written a lot about archeology. I have a couple other short stories that also feature archeologists as the protagonists.

**Debbi:** Fascinating. Let's see. Your story is set in Milwaukee in three different time periods, correct, as I recall?

**Willa:** Mostly two. Yeah.

**Debbi:** Mostly two. And there's a focus on the Dahmer summer and the...

**Willa:** Correct.

**Debbi:** So what were your reasons for choosing that location and those times?

**Willa:** I'm from Milwaukee. My whole family is from there. I have a pretty loving relationship with the city, and it's a city that I don't often see reflected in contemporary literature or anywhere else, even pop culture. There's a few things that showcase Wisconsin, but it's usually like North Woods stuff. So yeah, I knew I wanted to set my first book in Milwaukee since it was my hometown. The way that the Dahmer material entered the book was because I was really thinking a lot about cold cases and why some cases become so intractably unsolved. I was thinking about the different reasons for these, and one of the things that occurred to me was that you have resources, law enforcement resources, and sometimes "smaller" cases get subsumed by these larger ones. And when I was thinking about the history of Milwaukee, one of the biggest cases in the city's history was the Dahmer crimes, and this sort of completely subsumed law enforcement, media, political people, everyone. So I thought it would be really interesting to try to juxtapose a made-up crime with this very real crime and sort of see what kinds of sparks and connections sort of happened in that space.

**Debbi:** You do that very effectively. When you were writing each story time period, did you write them separately and then put them together, or did you write each part sequentially and keep track of it on separate ... whatever?

**Willa:** Whatever. It was a little bit of whatever. Yes, it was definitely a little bit of whatever. I did start by writing them separately, chronologically, so I did all of the early sections first. I started in '91 and just wrote that section through, and then I wrote the second part—the 2019 section—chronologically from beginning to end. The original shape of the book actually was a Part One, Part Two where those sections came one right after the other. I submitted that version to my agent and she just really wasn't sold on the structure, so we talked about different ways of creating more tension, especially in that 2019 section. It was her idea actually to try to weave the two together, which I was initially incredibly disappointed, and the task seemed very daunting to weave those two together. I mean, you're a writer. As you know, once you've written, there's so many small details that you then need to think about like have I introduced this person yet? What is the first detail? But once I sat down and did it, I realized that it was really strengthening both sections to match them up like that. And then from there, I sort of added in things that needed to be added in, and that's kind of where the whatever part came in.

**Debbi:** Well, you do. It's really a fabulous job I thought, putting that all together. How much research did you do for the book and what was the process like?

**Willa:** I did a lot of research. I did a lot of very early research, and then I did a lot of research that was a little bit more targeted and specific to what I needed in the moment when I was writing. But the first part was definitely just kind of deep dive into the basics of the Dahmer case, and I really wanted to know beyond just sort of the pop culture narrative. We all have kind of the ideas of what's portrayed in various movies, journalism especially. But I was interested just to hear what the nuts and bolts of the case was, especially because I was one [year old] at the time, so I didn't really have any experience of it. So I went about that in two ways. I did go back to a lot of the journalism, both mainstream journalism, but then also some of the counterculture newspapers at the time. So mostly the gay newspapers that were reporting on it. And then I also just talked to a lot of family and friends and was like, okay, so what was your experience with this? And that part was really fun because in Milwaukee, even in Wisconsin in general, it feels like everyone has that one connection or one specific memory that they have about the Dahmer case, and that was really helpful. I think it added a lot of texture and specificity to the book to get those details from people that were there when it happened.

**Debbi:** Yeah, absolutely. It definitely lends it authenticity and makes you feel like you're part of that community for a moment in Milwaukee, and that's good. So, what was it like attending the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and what was the biggest benefit that you got from it?

**Willa:** I mean, it's definitely hard to say. Well first of all, what was it like? It was amazing. It was the best three years of my life, honestly. I had unlimited time. We had one class a week. You would just wake up and write and then at night, talk to other writers. So yeah, it was really amazing. I went there right out of undergrad, which was a little challenging I think because I hadn't really stabilized into my voice, my style, even what I was interested in, so I felt a little bit untethered and there were a lot of people there that were already published and had their books already, so it was intimidating, but it was also really inspiring and it made me really see, okay, you can do this, because I had all these examples of other young people that were doing it. I think for me, the biggest benefits were the lifelong readers and friends that I made, and people that I can still send my work to and that are also active writers in this time and space.

I also found my agent there, so that was huge. They fly in agents and editors pretty frequently. I met with almost all of them, and she was the only one that really bit on this particular project, and so we stayed in touch and we just kind of worked on it. She would check in. She'd be like, how's it going? And I'd be like, well, I'm in my PhD, so it's not going great, but we stayed in touch and then she basically helped me place a couple stories and then we went out with the book together.

**Debbi:** Wow. It sounds like it was an invaluable experience.

**Willa:** Yes, absolutely. I wouldn't have traded it for the world. I mean, I know a lot of other people ... there's a lot of trash talking of Iowa especially because it comes to the pretentiousness and you have the whole sort of MFA versus New York thing, and all of these arguments about whether or not it's worth it. For me, it was absolutely worth it. There's competitiveness everywhere. That is part of the Iowa spirit. I won't deny it, but I never felt like it was a burden to my writing or it inhibited me in any way.

**Debbi:** That's good. That's great. What drew you to crime fiction, number one, and do you think it is looked down on still in those quarters?

**Willa:** I mean, it's interesting. I guess I didn't set out to write a crime book, which is kind of a weird thing to say, given what it became, but as I dug into the Dahmer stuff, and I think I started just spending more time in that true crime space, and also learning about it as a genre. I don't know. It's hard because I think I did a lot

of that after I left Iowa, so I didn't really have the voices of that true crime genre-y stuff. You shouldn't be doing it; you should be. I worked on the book a lot after I had left and for the most part, the people I sent it to, my Iowa friends, were just like yes, you have got a book. Keep going. So I don't think it was looked down upon while I was writing. I don't know. How do you feel about sort of the general perception of crime fiction right now, or even of the true crime genre?

**Debbi:** I think it's being taken more seriously than it was in the past. I think there's definitely more of a trend toward crime writers trying to write up to a level, a certain level of complexity or I guess—what's the word—sophistication.

**Willa:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Debbi:** And that's good, I think. I think it's good to freshen up the genre, to just try different things, to do things that are unusual and maybe a little bit more literary.

**Willa:** Right, right, right.

**Debbi:** To me, that's all to the good. I mean, anything that makes a story readable and something you want to get into is good in my opinion.

**Willa:** Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, I think that's what drew me. To return to the original question, I think that's what drew me. The aspects of the genre I most enjoyed was just the readability, that page-turner quality. Those were my earliest reading experiences that I found so pleasurable, where you're drawn into the story and you stay up really late and you can't put the book down. I think I wanted, in the early stages of the book, I did want to replicate those aspects of the genre because they're just so pleasurable. I mean, that's the best reading experience you can have. So yeah, I definitely agree with you.

**Debbi:** Yeah, for sure. Thanks. Who are your favorite authors and what writing inspires you most?

**Willa:** A lot of the people I worked with at Iowa are really inspired by Marilynne Robinson. She was a teacher of mine while I was there, and I thought her work was just so much about honoring individual consciousness and just recognizing that every human being is so complicated and has these multitudes of motivations. I think that really, really improved me as a writer to begin to think about every person like there's not just one reason behind every action. There's a whole complicated, messy mind behind all of these different actions. And I think if you can try to imbue that.

I mean, her rule was sort of have seven reasons for a character to do any one thing, which is really hard. Not realistic unless you're Marilynne Robinson. But I think the point stands that if you're considering that and working in that space, I think you're going to make really complicated, interesting, compelling fiction. So yeah, I really love [Housekeeping](#). It's probably my favorite.

I also really love Joy Williams. I love her short fiction. I think she's just so irreverent on the page and I love that. I think I'm drawn to her work too because she has a lot of protagonists that people are like, why are they so sad and depressing, and I feel like a lot of people said that about my narrator too, but they're just so inscrutable. They're always doing these things. I don't understand them, so I definitely am really drawn to her work. I find myself definitely ... especially leaving Iowa where I was just reading very widely, but I find myself reading mostly women these days. I don't even mean to, but it just feels like that's what I end up doing. I just finished Claire Keegan's little novella [Foster](#) and was just blown away by that. So I don't know. I read a lot of women, I would say, with messy female protagonists.

**Debbi:** I love messy female protagonists.

**Willa:** Yes, me too.

**Debbi:** In any kind of setting, I love them. What advice would you give to someone who would like to write for a living?

**Willa:** Ooh, it's a tough one. I think it helps to have—I know this is sort of counter—but I think it helps to have something else in your life. It doesn't have to be a traditional day job type of thing, but I think to have something else in your life, even as a hobby that gets you outside of the writing sphere and outside of your head is so helpful. Honestly when I was—it sounds counterintuitive—but when I was working serving jobs and in wine shops and stuff, I felt like that was when I was most creative, because I was really physically active during the day and then at night and any other time I had, I felt like my mind was just ready to go.

Sometimes in grad school and stuff, you feel like your mind is always on the thing, and so then when you sit down to write, it just doesn't flow as much as I think it does when you are sort of unconsciously working out problems in another area of your life. So I feel like that's my biggest advice would just be to have some ... for some people, it's physical activity like running or walking. These things that you can be moving and maybe working out problems in your head without just sitting there and looking at the screen or staring out the window, which is fine to do too. I've done plenty of those things too. What's yours? I'm curious.

**Debbi:** Oh, walking is definitely a favorite of mine. Oh yeah, definitely. I get lots of ideas for plot twists or just ideas in general just walking or flipping through the paper. I get the Sunday paper, so I'm one of the few remaining people who gets it.

**Willa:** Yes. I think you are.

**Debbi:** Yes, I'm an old-fashioned weirdo. I don't mind being an old fashioned weirdo. I was going to ask what are you working on now?

**Willa:** Well, I've been in the throes of first-time, full-time moming, so it's been a big transition figuring out how to write after that. I was thinking I would be like, oh, I'll finish a project once he's six months and it kind of just keeps getting pushed back. I have three different projects that I'm just dipping my toes into and sort of exploring. Still in the very exploratory stages. One is a historical fiction, which is also set in Wisconsin, but it's further north, and then I have another one that's also in the true crime, sort of true crime podcast-y, documentary space. It's a book, but it's about that genre, and then the third one is a very autobiographical piece about a specific time in my life. So, those are the three that I'm sort of throwing things at the wall and seeing which one is going to be the winner for the next project.

**Debbi:** Wow. Well, very cool. Glad to hear you're working on some interesting stuff there. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?

**Willa:** I don't think so. I guess I would just like to say I really appreciate you reading the book and taking the time to think about it so closely and carefully. The most rewarding part about putting the book out is always hearing from people that enjoyed it, which I guess is obvious, but worth saying.

**Debbi:** Yeah. That feeling is just undeniable when somebody says I really loved your book. It's just such a wonderful feeling. Truly.

**Willa:** Absolutely.

**Debbi:** Well, I want to thank you for being here today with us. Thank you so much.

**Willa:** Yeah, of course. It was lovely.

**Debbi:** It was great to meet you. And to everybody out there listening, remember to leave a review if you enjoyed the episode, and you can get bonus episodes and ad-free content and more if you become a Patreon supporter. So check out our Patreon page. Coming up in two weeks, we'll have Saralyn Richard as my guest. In the meantime, take care and happy reading.