

The Crime Cafe with Art Taylor

Presented By:



Debbi: Hi everyone. This is the Crime Cafe. Your podcasting source of great crime, suspense and thriller writing. I'm your host, Debbi Mack. Before I bring on my guest, I'll just remind you that the *Crime Cafe Nine Book Set* and *Crime Cafe Short Story Anthology* are available for sale on my website, debbimack.com. Go there and click on "Crime Cafe" and you'll find the buy links. So, now that that's been said, it's truly a pleasure to introduce my guest, the awesome Art Taylor. Art, it's really great to have you on the show today. Thanks for coming on.

Art: It's a pleasure to be here. Thanks for inviting me.

Debbi: I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed reading Del and Louise's adventures on the road. But the first thing I wanted to ask you before I got to that was, you've seemed to have made a career out of writing short stories. Now was that intentional, or are you just drawn to the short story format?

Art: Well, two things. Number one I think it's tough to make a career from short stories. There's a lot of great markets out there, both anthologies and mystery magazines and, of course, online. But, you know, in terms of actually making a career of it, I don't think you reach as wide a readership as you might with a novel. Which is one of the reasons why I was very pleased to have *On The Road with Del & Louise* come out—to have a book out there as well. But the short story form is one that I particularly appreciate. You know, I started reading *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* way back when I was in late elementary school and middle school. In fact it was one of these fundraising drives that the school did where you go door to door to sell magazine subscriptions to raise money for the school. I ended up, don't remember if I sold any magazine subscriptions, but I bought one myself to *Ellery Queen's* and that's where I first started reading, you know, short stories, mystery short stories at an adult level; building off of having read *Nancy Drew* and *The Three Investigators* and that sort of thing. So, the short story, I was always a big fan from the very beginning. And, of course, having been in writing classes both in high school and in college and then went on to graduate school, the short story is sort of the focus for a number of reasons of a workshop setting. Something that people can bring in, can be discussed in full, as opposed to like a novel portion, which I think is harder to workshop. And so, for a couple of reasons, both as a reader and as a writer, I have kind of both fallen in love with the form and then fallen into the form as a writer. I enjoy it. I admire it and then I admire people who can write book-length pieces as well.

Debbi: Well, I have to say that I admire anybody who can master the short story form because I think it is the toughest.

Art: It's a, you know, it can be a challenge. I've heard, in fact, one of my writing professors (speaking about grad school) who has published, gosh twenty novels, told me once, she said, "I've never been able to write a short story." It is too different for her. And so we hear short story writers like me who are saying that, you know, we wish we could write at the novel length more naturally. It's more of a chore for us. I hear it in the other direction. A good short story, it is a different approach. People think of it maybe sometimes as an apprenticeship. I'm going to start writing short stories as an apprenticeship toward writing a novel. But they really are two different things. You've got to write with great efficiency, have to streamline things, and every little detail not only has to count, but it also has to do a lot of work.

The right detail. The right line of dialogue. The right little bit of action. So, I think there is a different kind of challenge there than with a novel which in many cases works as an accumulation, you know, we're building more; building more wider cast of characters. Building more subplots; more conflicts. And so, it's two different directions entirely.

Debbi: There's an economy of words in the short story that reminds me actually of screenwriting. Have you ever thought about that?

Art: Oh, absolutely! And I think, you know, I've heard people compare a good short story to a poem, for example and to screenwriting as well. A good friend of mine who's a screenwriter, Adam Meyer, was giving a workshop just recently as part of our local chapter of Sisters in Crime, and he was talking about the economy of screenwriting, the way that it's not just pared down to its essentials, but everything has to earn its place in the larger workings of the full story that's being told. And so I do think that's very clearly the same.

Debbi: That's absolutely true. I can speak from experience. As I was telling you, I really am enjoying *On the Road with Del & Louise* and what made you decide to write a novel out of these short fiction pieces?

Art: Yeah, you know, it kind of came around in an interesting way. The first story, *Rearview Mirror*, was published several years ago in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. My wife and I actually had challenged one another to a little writing contest the *Washington Post* ran, where they show a picture and you write a story prompted by that picture. Each of us wrote one, and I drew on both what was in the picture, a picture of a young woman in a convertible with the desert landscape in the back and she's sort of leaning back against the driver from the passenger seat, and then on a trip that my wife and I took to the American Southwest, out to New Mexico as well, in some of the landmarks there. So, between those two, I wrote this story and really enjoyed writing it. I don't know where Louise's voice came from, but I think she was driving, say driving the story with that voice. But after I was finished with the story, it was kind of a standalone, and it was a year or so later before I started wondering myself what happened to those two; what happened to these characters that had been such a joy to be with. And I started percolating then on the idea of a second story. I hesitate to call it a sequel for a reason I'll explain, but a second story that picked up where the first one left off. And as I kept thinking about it, I envisioned a number of adventures they could have on this longer road trip. One of the things that helped me, again as the short story kind of being a form that I'm more comfortable with, is this allowed me to build that longer narrative of the novel out of a series of six shorter narratives that are each sort of their own piece, but that add up to a greater journey, a greater story line, a greater narrative arc, when they're put together. And it also allowed me (this is one of the things that I enjoyed) to play within the individual pieces with different tones. So, for example, there is a story in there that's more of a caper. It's kind of a humorous little caper story that's set in the wine county in Napa Valley. And then a little later, there's a story that's darker that I would classify as domestic suspense or even leaning toward noir, that's set in North Dakota. So each of these could sample a different sub-genre of the larger mystery genre, get that individual identity, but then overall tell this bigger story about two people (the title characters, Del & Louise) and their struggle, their journey to find what they mean to one another. So, part of this was just

aesthetically fun to play with and hopefully fun for the readers as well. I appreciate your saying that you enjoy it.

Debbi: Oh, I'm thoroughly enjoying it. That first story was just fantastic and I just finished it actually and I was like, wow!

Art: Thanks so much.

Debbi: I can see how you'd be intrigued by the characters. It's so essential for the characters to be interesting in the story.

Art: Yeah.

Debbi: And the fact that you were able to kind of spin out other stories from them, tells me that you know about those characters and care about them, so in the same way the reader will come to care about them as well.

Art: It's interesting you're talking about character, you know one of the questions we get, I'm sure you get as well is where do you start with a story that you're telling; a novel that you're writing. Is it a situation? Is it a character? Is it a plot? And for me, you know, I think it's inextricable one from the other, you know the character determines the plot as much as a situation might prompt a character in one direction or another. So, I appreciate that about the character because I do put a lot into trying to make them, you know, real, live folks somehow.

Debbi: Yes, absolutely. And you do a good job. There's a kind of Bonnie and Clyde feel to the characters. Was that at all an inspiration for you?

Art: You know, not directly. But it's interesting, you know I maybe one of the dimmest people on the planet when it comes to this, but it was only when the book started to...was almost ready to come out that somebody stopped me in the hallway at George Mason University where I teach and said, oh the, you know, Del & Louise that's sort of a nod toward Thelma & Louise.

Debbi: I was thinking about that too [laughs].

Art: Yep, so I've had the comparison to Bonnie & Clyde, which I hadn't really, you know there is a reference or two to Bonnie & Clyde in there, but they had not been really a direct inspiration. And the idea of Thelma & Louise, I was just slow on picking up that myself. Her name came well before I thought about that.

Debbi: Wow.

Art: But I do think the idea of people on the run, a couple on the run and trying to...to both work together and then work on their own individual goals; their own individual desires. You know as part of the tension that I think is interesting about the Bonnie & Clyde story, and of course about Thelma & Louise adds a whole different level to it.

Debbi: [Agrees]

Art: But these kind of road stories are, I think in general terrific. I'm glad that mine may have some small place in that tradition.

Debbi: Well, you must have been very, very proud to get the Agatha for this first novel. It's so unusual and such an unusual novel in its structure and to get an Agatha, that's just wonderful.

Art: That was a great surprise. I've been real fortunate in terms of the attention that my work has gotten in award recognition. But that floored me when I got it because it is such an odd, I say odd, it is an oddly structured book.

Debbi: Uniquely structured book.

Art: It's different and so to have ... [inaudible] warm to it was both a surprise and of course a very nice surprise there, but a real joy and the Agatha win helped to kind of underscore that; symbolize that, which was nice.

Debbi: That's fantastic. A lot has been written these days about our shortening attention spans.

Art: Sure.

Debbi: Do you think that the short story is going to make a comeback as a result?

Art: There's been a lot of talk about that and you see it from a couple different sides. Short attention span is true I think, and yet you'll also look at some of the novels that are best sellers that are really just huge. I mean we think back for example about Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*, which is a monstro of a book and caught a lot of attention. And so I hesitate to say that I think that's going to happen. One thing that I do think has contributed to the rise in the short story is the fact of online publication and online journals where things can be shared on social media and on your phone or on your computer at work, when you should be working but are doing something else. But I think that some of that has made it easier for the short story to find readers. I think it's still a little tough for traditional print magazines or even anthologies to find that wide readership when folks a lot of times would prefer to just pick up a novel. So, I go back and forth about it. I'm very pleased to be part of the short story community and watching the work that they do, I think there's great work being done today; fascinating structures, fascinating characters with a series of characters or individual stories. So I think there's great work being done and I just hope it continues to find the readership that it deserves.

Debbi: Absolutely! Have you ever thought of publishing on Medium or Wattpad?

Art: You know I haven't. I've heard from folks who have done that, but I have not pursued it yet. There's a great, couple of great venues out there. Great Jones Street, for example, is publishing and re-publishing some stories; interesting way on an app and so I do know that and have had a couple of stories appear there, but that's about as far as I've gone.

Debbi: So have you ever even considered writing a more traditional novel or novella?

Art: I have. I've got a novella that I've worked on and that I'm marketing right now. The rise of the novella I think is something that very much has happened now; shorter novel, not just a longer short story but a shorter novel that can be packaged independently and put out there. I think that is something that is very interesting and I've got one that I'm marketing now. Or trying to find a place to publish now I should say. In terms of traditional novel, the work I did *On the Road with Del & Louise*, I think gave me some greater confidence in terms of trying to navigate a longer story line for me which was a big step. So, I'm working now on a manuscript that will be a more traditional length novel and still trying to kind of work my way through that. Not because necessary of the troubles of writing it, but just of the troubles of trying to navigate time these days. I teach, as I mentioned, at George Mason University, and finding the time to write in the middle of the semester is sometimes a challenge. But, I am working on it and looking toward it.

Debbi: Excellent. Good to hear. Which writers have most inspired your own work?

Art: Oh, that's a good question and a hard question. You know, I read pretty widely, everything from I mentioned about the range of sub-genres out there. I'll read sort of the darkest noir that you can find and also love, you know a more traditional mystery, what some people have called a cozy, and I can sell into both of them. So, it's hard to say, you know for example if you look at that. James Elroy was a favorite of mine and Margaret Maron is a favorite and both have had an influence in some way. I don't know which I would say is more of an influence. In terms of short story writers, I always go back to Stanley Ellin, who published a story a year for gosh, 50 years or so in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, at about that rate, so very, very meticulous craftsman. And I admired so much what he did, that seems to be the kind of model that I aspire toward. The level of prose that he has, the pace of the plotting that he does and the depth of kind of the moral, not moral in a sense of here's a lesson, but the moral dimensions of it; the moral dilemmas that he puts through his characters or something that certainly motivate me to up the depth of the stories that I write. So, I would always point to him I think as a model, as well as an inspiration.

Debbi: Wow! Yeah, I'm always interested in stories that explore moral complexity.

Art: Yeah.

Debbi: Have you ever read the stories of Raymond Carver?

Art: I do. And Raymond Carver is a, you know if I think back to some of the stories I read like in high school, some of the things I was reading when I was first really trying to be a writer. You know, Carver was one of them; Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor. I'm from the south, and so a lot of the southern writers were important. But, Carver is, I think, fascinating. I think his influence on so many writers is inescapable; that attention to the nuances of relationships, to the small ways in which characters reveal themselves. So, yeah he's a good one as well.

Debbi: Yes!

Art: And Joyce Carol Oates, another writer who is, we think of her as a literary writer, but she has had such a track record in genre writing and the stuff that she does is amazing I think in the same way.

Debbi: Yeah. I think about Stephen King for instance who got started in horror, but who has written in other genres and written beautifully.

Art: Sure.

Debbi: So, you know when people talk about crossing genre as if this is kind of unusual or weird thing. I think, why [laughs]?

Art: I know. Well, that's an interesting question. I taught a course at Mason a couple of semesters ago called Crossing Genres, where we looked at this idea, first of all the breakdown between literary fiction, supposedly literary fiction and genre fiction and the fact that those walls are crumbling. You know we look at Cormac McCarthy for example who is as ultra-literary a writer as we have, but who's writing westerns and crime stories. So that's one example there and we look at the folks who are shelved in crime fiction, mystery fiction that are certainly writing levels of prose that are contenders on a very literary scale. I think about Megan Abbott, for example, or Dennis Lehane. And so I think those are breaking down. But, there's also the idea that, you know science fiction in mystery those are crossing genres, too. The problem I think is in terms of like publishers and marketing who think we have to establish a brand for this author, and once an author has a brand, breaking away from that can be a challenge. But I think that the writers that I admire most are the ones who are pushing those boundaries who are trying new things and who are mixing it up, and I think that's where a lot of the most exciting literature is happening today in those places that you're talking about. Whether it's Stephen King at that level who can afford to do whatever he wants, or gosh I'm trying to think of a writer right now, Chris Urban for example, Christopher Urban, who is challenging this idea of what it means to have been branded as a mystery writer or a noir writer and saying look, I can expand beyond this. I have many different kinds of stories to tell.

Debbi: I think that's great, you know. I think you're right that especially now with indie publishing.

Art: Yes.

Debbi: People are able to experiment in ways that publishers might not have allowed them to do in the past.

Art: Absolutely. And I think that part of this is giving people freedom to do things and I think, I personally think readers will follow, readers will go and explore a lot of different things from the same author without feeling like oh, this person has betrayed me. So, it's independent market, small press, independent market I think both of those are challenging some of the rules that have been passed down, the things you can't do so to speak.

Debbi: Exactly! I agree. If somebody adapted *Del & Louise* for the screen, who would you imagine playing them; the characters.

Art: Oh, gosh! You know I got this question one time on a blog post and I struggled with it so much, because I didn't know who exactly to pick. Laura Dean would kind of stand out as Louise to me, though I picture Louise as being younger. Not Laura Dean, Laura Dern, I'm sorry.

Debbi: I was going to say.

Art: Yeah, I picture Louise as a little younger than Laura Dern, but she matches kind of what I think about. And oh, I'm not good on my actors and what is his name ... Zach Galifianakis is the one that I can see as Del. I think he would be a great Del. But it took me a while to come up with that. I know some writers who picture, you know, characters or actors as they're writing. It never crossed my mind until somebody had asked me about that. So, it was a real struggle.

Debbi: It's funny; he's probably a little too old. I was thinking Nicholas Cage.

Art: Oh, interesting! Yeah. That could be fun.

Debbi: I remember him from like *Raising Arizona*.

Art: Yes, yeah.

Debbi: He has a kind of edge to him where you're not quite sure [laughs].

Art: And that's another film that somebody mentioned that this has a *Raising Arizona* feel to it. Never crossed my mind entirely, you know.

Debbi: Wow, interesting!

Art: Until later. Takes me awhile, I'm slow.

Debbi: Well, if it gets made into any kind of movie or TV show, I hope the Coen's pick it up [laughs].

Art: That would be fun. Wouldn't that be great?

Debbi: That would be awesome. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we conclude?

Art: No, I mean I just appreciate being here. It's always fun to talk craft and talk writing and hope people, you know, enjoy what's here. I'd love them to, you know, check out the book itself of course and any of my work.

Debbi: Yes, well I highly recommend it.

Art: Thank you.

Debbi: Short stories and Art Taylor both. So, thank you so much, Art. And before we go, if you're watching this as you can see, I'm a disembodied head right now because my chair is black and I'm wearing a black shirt, so apparently this is a post-Halloween thing I'm doing.

Art: We still have our decorations up so...

Debbi: But before we go, I'll just say, please check out the Crime Cafe eBooks, which are on my website, debbimack.com under "Crime Cafe" where you can also subscribe to the podcast and, if you would, please leave a comment or a like or something. And until next time, thanks for listening and I'll see you in two weeks.