

# The Crime Cafe with Richard Helms

Presented By:



**Debbi:** Hi everybody. This is the Crime Cafe. Your podcasting source of great crime, suspense and thriller writing. I'm your host, Debbi Mack. Before I introduce my guest, I'd like to remind you to please check out the *Crime Cafe Nine Book Set* and the *Crime Cafe Short Story Anthology*. Both publications you can find on my website, debbimack.com when you click on the link Crime Cafe. You can also find the podcast subscription buttons there, as well as Crime Cafe merch. And with that, I would like to introduce my good friend and a great writer who also happens to be a multi-award winning author, a retired clinical forensic psychologist, and a retired college professor, Richard Helms. Do you go by Rick or Richard?

**Richard:** I go by Rick.

**Debbi:** Yes, I always call you Rick [laughs]. So, very cool, Rick. Thanks for being here. I'm so glad you could be here.

**Richard:** Well, I'm happy to be here. I appreciate you having me today.

**Debbi:** Well, it's my pleasure and at this point, you said you have 19 published novels?

**Richard:** Well, yeah. I have 19 that have been published. I think three of them are still in print. So, a bunch of them are available as ebooks, but most of my novels right now are out-of-print for any of a number of reasons. My own publishing company folded up back in 2011 and several of the books were on that, and Five Star (I'm one of the Five Star orphans). Some of you may not be familiar with Five Star. It was a division of Cengage Learning, which used to be Houghton Mifflin. It was Thomson-Shore and all these other, but anyway, they folded their mystery thriller line, I guess January of 2015 and I got the message on my birthday that my book publisher was going out of business.

Not only that, but my books were going to be going out of print. So, the books that I had with Five Star are largely out-of-print at this point, but I have had 19 published up to this point beginning all the way back in 1980, which is probably before a lot of people watching this were born, when I had my first couple of novels published by *World Karting Magazine*. I was a go-cart racer back then when I was in college and Anne Bazzoli-Kugler with *World Karting Magazine* talked me into writing a series of stories about a driver named Karl Geary and the two books, *Geary's Year* and *Geary's Gold* were serialized over the course of about four years in *World Karting Magazine*. I immediately got to work and started writing an adult style thriller. At the time I was really reading a lot of Robert Ludlum and Ken Follett and David Morrell and so I decided I was going to write a Ludlum-style thriller called, *The Valentine Profile* because obviously getting published was so incredibly easy that all I had to do was dash it out and send it off and people would pay to publish it. I didn't see another book in print for almost 20 years [laughs]. So...

**Debbi:** This is not a place to look for overnight success.

**Richard:** Well, most of the overnight successes I know have been doing this for about 20 years [laughs].

**Debbi:** Exactly! Exactly!

**Richard:** At one level or another. I mean [Robert] Crais was writing for TV for years; Lee Goldberg, too. You know people who've been slaving away in the salt mines of writing in the back rooms of the story-runner rooms, and a lot of them are now coming out as novelists and doing a really great job.

**Debbi:** That's correct. That's true. I was going to ask you about stock car racing and if you'd ever considered writing a NASCAR novel.

**Richard:** Well, I wrote a novella, which is currently...I have a book of short stories that's currently with my new book publisher. It's Clay Stafford Books out of Nashville, Tennessee. But I've sent them a short story compilation that includes an unpublished novella that's built around stock car racing.

**Debbi:** Ah-ha.

**Richard:** And in the book I'm working on right now, I've had requests from an agent to do a full read on it. In the book I'm doing right now, there's a section in which one of the characters does become a professional stock car racer and eventually a professional Indy car racer back in the 1950s and '60s. So, it peaks in from time to time, but I haven't actually written an entire book except for the Karting novels built around racing itself.

**Debbi:** Well, it would be intriguing to see more of that [laughs].

**Richard:** I think my good friend, Tammy Kaehler is going to kind of corner the market on that [laughs].

**Debbi:** Is that the woman who often teams up with Simon Wood?

**Richard:** Yes, yes they are good friends.

**Debbi:** I was going to say, you know they are both into racing.

**Richard:** Simon is a former racer and Tammy's done a little bit of I think autocrossing and a little bit of racing and, of course, I drove race cars for about 28 years and so when we get together at conferences we have something other than books to talk about [laughs].

**Debbi:** You've had a number of different protagonists over the years.

**Richard:** Yes.

**Debbi:** I was going ask, if somebody asked you what kind of books you write, can you think of a common thread or theme or type of protagonist that runs through your work?

**Richard:** I think they all probably embody (and this is almost like a stock answer), but really, I think they all kind of embody the idea that Raymond Chandler talked about that "down these mean streets walks a man who is not himself mean" and he goes into all of the other qualities of a private eye writer. As Robert B. Parker pointed out in his doctoral dissertation, however, even Chandler said that this hero doesn't really exist. This is not a person you would encounter in real life because in real life, most of us have way too much to lose. But, and that's where fiction gives us this outlet, this heroic Arthurian kind of figure or sometimes a quixotic kind of character who's tilting at windmills, who does the things that

nobody else can do. That would be the person that I write. I tend to write those individuals, the larger than life characters who embody values and ethics and morals that I believe in. But, at the same time, are able to take it one step further and become the knights-errant who can step in and save the day, when most of us might stand by saying what is there to do, you know?

**Debbi:** Yes, exactly.

**Richard:** I tend to write heroic, more heroic figures I think without labeling them as heroes. They would certainly say, "I'm no hero."

**Debbi:** [laughs].

**Richard:** I'd disagree.

**Debbi:** Yes, yes. Not surprisingly I've noticed a lot of your main characters are retired forensic pathologists.

**Richard:** Psychologists, psychologists.

**Debbi:** Well, I noticed the use of the term pathologist in some of your descriptions.

**Richard:** I use the term pathology a lot, yeah. But Pat Gallagher is probably my marquee character. He's the one that's gotten me the most stuff over the years; most recognition. And, in fact, there's a new Pat Gallagher novel coming out this summer from Clay Stafford Books in Nashville. It's called *Paid in Spades* and I'm real excited about it. But Pat Gallagher is a retired forensic psychologist and a disgraced college professor.

**Debbi:** [agrees].

**Richard:** What's really interesting is that when I wrote Pat Gallagher originally back in the 1980s (I wrote the first stories around 1984 somewhere in there), I was neither a forensic psychologist nor had I ever been a college professor [laughs], so it's almost like in this case life imitated art. A couple of years after I wrote the first Gallagher stories, I went to work as the supervising psychologist in Charlotte for a facility, a 24-bed locked facility for the most violent and aggressive teenagers in the state. And I walked in the first day, and I had been hired as a behavior analyst, which is what I was trained to do. Almost all of my work up to that point had been behavior analysis rather than kind of touchy feely counseling kind of stuff.

So, I walked into the first day working for this center and I walked into the director's office and he looked up and he said, "Ah, our forensic psychologist has arrived" and I said, "Whoa, time out, I'm a behavior analyst. I'm not trained to be a forensic psychologist. I don't claim to be and there is nothing on my resume that said forensic psychologist." He said, "No worry, we're going to get you trained." And they did. They did get me trained, but I was very taken aback by the idea that I might actually be doing this stuff that Gallagher had been doing in my stories before. Later that day, I had my first therapy session. It was a group therapy session for adolescent sex offenders, and I walked in and it was being

conducted by the assistant director of the facility; a wonderful woman named Juliet Orridge who later went back to England. She was from England, she went back to England and she was awarded the MBE, not the OBE (Order of the British Empire) for the work she did with child rehabilitation there. But anyway, she was running the group that day and I walked in and she looked up and said, "Oh, our new sex offender therapist has arrived." And I said, "Whoa, time out. I'm a forensic psychologist." [laughs].

**Debbi:** [laughs].

**Richard:** And that's how that came to be. But yeah, Gallagher's a retired forensic psychologist. Ben Long in, *The Unresolved Seventh*, is retired but he's dragged back into practice in that particular book. Hollis Dayton, who is the female heroine of *The Daedalus Deception*, which is a book that's only come out as an ebook so far. But she also is a retired social worker as I recall. But beyond that, I'm not sure if there are any others. I'd have to think and look at some of them to find out, maybe some of the short stories. I know Eamon Gold isn't and obviously Judd Wheeler isn't and the new character. I just finished a book this past December featuring a new private detective from Charleston, South Carolina named Whitlock and he obviously, he's definitely not a retired psychologist. But yeah, Gallagher and Ben Long, absolutely. They do have that history

**Debbi:** And for anybody who doesn't happen to know, what does a forensic psychologist do?

**Richard:** Ninety-five percent of the time they test people and write reports and testify in court. That's about it.

**Debbi:** [agrees].

**Richard:** Every once in a while, you know, we tend to internalize this television image of a forensic psychologist from what we see on *Criminal Minds* with Joe Mantegna or what we see in other TV shows; *CSI* and things like that. In reality, the life of a forensic psychologist is largely built around working with people who have already been caught and convicted.

Now, there's a small select group of us who have had the opportunity from time to time to work active cases; working with what we call unsubs or unknown subjects, during an investigation that's ongoing. But that's really rare. The people who do that the most would be individuals who are working with the FBI at the investigative support unit in Quantico, which is what *Criminal Minds* is supposed to be about. It's basically the investigative support unit. I think if you want a really good picture of it, you might instead want to take a look at the series on Netflix about John Douglas, the *Mindhunter* series. That's probably a lot more, if you want to take a look at what happens in forensic work during an active investigation, that's a much better picture than what you're going to find than *Criminal Minds*.

But really for most people who call themselves forensic psychologists, they're doing one of several things. They're either doing a pre-sentencing evaluation to assist the court in determining what would be an appropriate sentence for the individual who's already been convicted. They might be called in before or during the trial phase in order to conduct an evaluation to determine whether the individual is either competent to stand trial or if there's going to be an insanity plea; they might want to go and

check that. Competency would involve anything from the presence of intellectual handicap to emotional disability to autism to a cognitive difficulty to effects of strokes or other kinds of damage to the brain.

But the idea is that you want to determine whether or not that individual can understand the process that's going on in court and to substantially participate in his or her own defense; that would be competency. If there's some question as to whether or not the individual at the time of the crime itself was capable of understanding the nature of what they were doing, then that would be an insanity evaluation. Insanity evaluations are much more difficult than competency evaluations because you basically have to go back in time and try to figure out what was happening at a point that may have been two or three years ago in the mind of a person who committed the crime; extremely difficult to do.

It's one of the reasons, by the way, that the average insanity plea (the insanity plea is attempted in like one in every 100 cases or more) and it works about one percent of the time.

**Debbi:** [agrees].

**Richard:** So it won't work about one time in 1,000 that you try it.

**Debbi:** [agrees].

**Richard:** So it's just not a very popular approach by most defense attorneys. But when it does happen, somebody has to evaluate the individual to determine if they were insane and that also would be something that a forensic psychologist would be more likely to do.

Some forensic psychologists are also involved in incident events, such as hostage takings where they would not be the person doing the actual negotiating with the hostage takers, but they may advise the trained individual who is doing hostage negotiations on what they're seeing from the suspects; anxiety, depression, loss of hope, things like that. There are things that the negotiator genuinely needs to know in order to do their job correctly and a forensic psychologist might be involved in that in some cases.

It's a wide range of activities, but like I say, 95% of the time it's testing people, writing reports and testifying in court.

**Debbi:** Yeah, and television gives you lots of misimpressions about what people do in their jobs, and I always like to hear what people are actually doing.

**Richard:** Oh, yeah.

**Debbi:** Yeah. The latest book that you're coming out with is, *Older Than Goodbye*, is that correct?

**Richard:** That came out in 2014.

**Debbi:** Oh, okay I'm...

**Richard:** That was a Five Star novel. It was the third book in the Judd Wheeler series. Beginning, I guess, probably right around the time I wrote the *Unresolved Seventh*. No, even earlier than that, probably the end of the first decade of the century, I started writing more about North Carolina where I live.

My previous series had been set in places like New Orleans and San Francisco and places like that. Beginning with the Judd Wheeler series, *Six Mile Creek* (the first book of that series), I decided I wanted to narrow my range a little bit and focus on an area of the country that I know very, very well. In fact, Prosperity, North Carolina, the setting for the Judd Wheeler novels and for a number of other stories that I've written also involving other protagonists, looked very much like a town where I lived in North Carolina about 17 miles outside Charlotte, because I was very familiar with that area.

So, I used the topography and the demographics of the town that I lived in and just renamed it Prosperity. I renamed the county. I was in Union County, North Carolina and I renamed it Bliss County. I renamed the county seat from Monroe to Morgan and everybody who lives in this area (I do a lot of book clubs in the area), they'll ask me, you know what is Prosperity? Is Prosperity Waxhaw? Is it Middle Springs? Is it Marvin? Where is Prosperity? And I'll say, no Prosperity is Weddington. Morgan is Monroe, you know Tulip Springs and Michael Wells are this and this and they say, oh and I can see it now because I drive these highways and streets all the time.

So, I've really focused much more on North Carolina and like I said narrowed my geographic focus so that it's almost as if Bliss County after a number of short stories and novels and all that is becoming kind of my Yoknapatawpha County, you know that Faulkner had based all of his stories in. And I like that, I'm enjoying that. I'm enjoying writing about the area of the country that I grew up that I know best.

**Debbi:** And I was going to say, you chose a sheriff this time as opposed to a private eye.

**Richard:** Police chief.

**Debbi:** Police chief, yeah that's it. Police chief. Why the choice of that protagonist?

**Richard:** The police chief in a small town, he has an English teacher girlfriend; he has a skinny patrol officer that works with him. This is sounding very familiar [laughs]. It's like Andy of Mayberry.

**Debbi:** I was going to say.

**Richard:** ...going very badly. So imagine a Mayberry where you've got Russian drug dealers and Internet prostitutes and murderers and everything else and you've pretty much got the Judd Wheeler series.

**Debbi:** I love it [laughs].

**Richard:** I didn't realize it until after I'd done the first book and I went back and I was reading it and I said this all seems very familiar somehow. Of course, the skinny patrol officer, Slim Tackett is anything but Barney Fife. He's probably the best cop in the county and very, very dangerous if left to his own devices. And Wheeler is supposed to be the sagacious, the well-read, the college-educated, but down homey kind of police chief. And in fact, he's a very, very damaged human being. So there's a lot different than Andy of Mayberry but the feel is there and the zeitgeist of Mayberry, at least the bizzaro world kind of Mayberry exists in these Judd Wheeler novels.

So yeah, and as a matter of fact the book that I'm working on right now that is going to an agent in California (she recently requested a full read) but the book that I'm working on right now is a prequel to the Judd Wheeler series. It takes place in Prosperity and in Bliss County between 1954 and 1989 and one of the characters in there is, in fact, Judd Wheeler's father. It's built much more around the Civil Rights movement and the Women's Right's movement and all the social changes that took place between the 50s and the 80s. But it uses the characters in the setting from my modern day Judd Wheeler series.

**Debbi:** That sounds very interesting.

**Richard:** Yeah, the working title is, *A Kind and Savage Place*, and I think we see both sides of this very, very small town in the course of the story.

**Debbi:** Interesting and I've been reading your book, *The Mojito Coast* which was I believe a Shamus winner or nominee?

**Richard:** Nominated for best novel in 2014.

**Debbi:** That's awesome!

**Richard:** Brad Parks won that year.

**Debbi:** That takes place in Cuba in the 1950s. That's a fascinating, interesting time.

**Richard:** It takes place right on the...

**Debbi:** And place...

**Richard:** ...Eve of the Cuban Revolution. As a matter of fact, during the Cuban Revolution itself, the climax of the book takes place after Castro and his buddies march into Havana and all hell is breaking loose and there's panic in the streets and the protagonist, a fellow named Cormac Loame, a private eye from Miami has to get the woman he went to go find in Havana, he has to get her out of the country, but also at the same time he has to get his girlfriend out of the country. So, it's a fascinating time and the research on that book was almost as long as the book. I think the book itself ran about...it was a short novel. I think it ran about 70,000 words and I think the research that went along with it ran to over 150,000 words. Just stuff I pulled down off the Internet and newspaper articles from the 50s, talking about what life was like in Havana during the Batista Regime and shortly after the Revolution itself.

**Debbi:** And I loved that Ernest Hemingway makes a short appearance in the novel.

**Richard:** Oh, he's a big part of it. He's a character and he shows up off and on all the way through it. Hemingway's always been one of my favorite literary characters, and I really wanted to include him. If I was going to write about Havana during the Revolution, Hemingway was a natural.

**Debbi:** [laughs].

**Richard:** He had to play a part in it. I'll tell you a secret about that book, interesting story about that book. For years I dreamed that I had written a private eye novel set in Cuba during the Revolution, but I



couldn't find it, I had misplaced it somewhere. I had written it and I had printed out the manuscript and I had hidden it somewhere and, in my dreams, I was going through closets and going through cabinets and going through suitcases looking anywhere I could, trying to find this manuscript for this novel I had written and never could find it.

Until one night I dreamed that I found the manuscript finally and I started reading it and of course, you know what happens when you try to read in your dream, you know the words start rolling off the page and dissolving into goo and dripping onto the floor and all that. But, I was very fortunate that in my dream I started living the story that was in the novel that I had supposedly written and then misplaced and it was that dream that provided...the dream I had didn't look a great deal like the book that was finally written, but it gave me the bare bones for the story.

**Debbi:** Wow!

**Richard:** This really, this story (I joke about this a lot) but this story really was the stuff that dreams are made of.

**Debbi:** [laughs] Oh, my gosh. Or was the story made out of dreams? Something like that. Well, I'm going to have to wrap up pretty soon, but is there anything else you'd like to talk about before we finish?

**Richard:** Very much. I have here, we're doing a little giveaway here as part of this presentation today.

**Debbi:** Yes.

**Richard:** I was the guest of honor at Murder At Magic City in Birmingham, Alabama a couple of weeks ago and in order to ensure...because so many of my books are out of print, I was very concerned that I would be guest of honor at a conference where there were no books to be signed. But I did go ahead and take three of my short stories. These are all three short stories, each one of them has won either the Derringer or the Thriller Award. *The Gospel According to Gordon Black* won the Derringer Award in 2008 as did *Paper Walls/Glass Houses* for quite a while until John Floyd did something and by the way, John Floyd is a wonderful writer. I'm very pleased to be in a very small club with him, but up until he did it a couple of years ago, for years I was the only person who'd ever won Derringer Awards in two different categories in the same year and it was for these two, *The Gospel According to Gordon Black* and *Paper Walls/Glass Houses*. And then in 2011 I was very privileged to win the ITW Thriller Award for best short story for *The Gods for Vengeance Cry*. Well, we have all three of these now and they are glossy bound and they will be signed and we're having a little raffle here. Not a raffle, it's more like a drawing. Send me an e-mail to my author address, which is [writerrickhelms@aol.com](mailto:writerrickhelms@aol.com) and just put "contest entry" in the top line and I think it's February the 9<sup>th</sup> I think, I'm sorry March the 9<sup>th</sup>...

**Debbi:** 6<sup>th</sup> I think. I think it was March 6<sup>th</sup>.

**Richard:** Okay, I'll draw a name at random from the group of people who send entries and I will send that individual all three short stories signed. It's almost 30,000 words of pleasurable reading that you'll get.

**Debbi:** Cool!

**Richard:** For sending an e-mail.

**Debbi:** Alright. Well, Rick it was really great having you on today. Thank you so much.

**Richard:** Well, I'm very happy to be here and I appreciate you having me. People can very quickly actually read part of the new book in progress, so I'll hide that. I don't want to give away the thrilling ending of the book. But, thank you very much for having me today, Debbi.

**Debbi:** It was my pleasure.

**Richard:** I look forward to seeing you again at one of the cons down the road.

**Debbi:** Yeah, hopefully soon. To everyone out there, thank you so much for listening. Don't forget to check out the Crime Cafe publications as well on my website, [debbimack.com](http://debbimack.com) and I will talk to you in two weeks. Happy reading until then.