The Crime Cafe with Peter Eichstaedt

Presented By:

Debbi: [00:00:13] 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 has two e-books for sale: the nine-book box set and the short story anthology. You can find the buy links for both on my website DebbiMack.com, under the Crime Cafe link. You can also get a free copy of either book if you've become a Patreon supporter. You'll get that and much more if you support the podcast on Patreon, along with our eternal gratitude for doing so.

Debbi: [00:01:01] Hi, everyone. My guest this week has extensive experience as a journalist. He's also written two award-winning non-fiction books. In addition, he's the author of the Kyle Dawson series, one of which he's giving away to a lucky reader. I'm pleased to have with me today author Peter Eichstaedt. Hi, Peter. How are you doing today?

Peter: [00:01:26] Good. How are you?

Debbi: [00:01:28] Fine, thanks. Thanks for being with us.

Peter: [00:01:32] My pleasure.

Debbi: [00:01:34] Okay. Well, first, I have to say that I absolutely loved your guest post. And those of you who are listening, if you haven't read his guest post, just go to my blog for the Wednesday before this podcast when up on video and take a look. It's well-done. Would you describe your fiction as being---what sort of genre? Political thriller?

Peter: [00:02:00] That's a good question. Yeah, I like the thriller designation, but I also like mysteries and I would think I've tried to blend the two. I don't know how successful I've been at that. But I don't really feel like I write genre fiction, but I guess I do if you need to put it into a category, it would be, you know, like mystery, mystery-thriller. But I think a lot of people, a lot of writers kind of blend genres, so, I guess that's probably a good description of it. Usually what I've done is, you know, I feel compelled to have a story, to tell a story. And so the way I look at it is, I use the devices I need to use to tell that story. And I'm less ... I'm really more focused on that than anything else, than trying to fit into a genre. I know a lot of times, you know, when you're sending a book out and trying to find an agent or something like that, they just want to know what category. And

they have all these admonitions on their website, you know, we don't represent this, we don't represent that, but we do represent this and that. So I don't know. Sometimes it's hard to make things fit.

Debbi: [00:03:43] I'm just thinking from a reader's perspective, say, who would you compare yourself to?

Peter: [00:03:49] Well, I like, I've always liked ... I'm not going to compare myself to anybody in particular. But I like the Raymond Chandler mysteries. I really like those a lot. And that's kind of been my inspiration. And, on the other hand, too, though, I like, you know, my favorite literary writer is Hemingway, although I've written it, I mean, I've read and I've followed a lot of other more traditional literary works. But I like, the reason I like Hemingway is because ... the exotic locations and there's lots of action and there's lots of tension. And I don't mean action like shoot 'em up, you know, cowboys kind of thing. But there's, I don't know, activity, action in the story. So that's what I kind of shoot for. That's my goal.

Debbi: [00:04:55] So sort of mystery-thriller.

Peter: [00:04:57] Right. Right.

Debbi: [00:04:58] With a hardboiled sensibility, let's say.

Peter: [00:05:01] That's a good way to describe it.

Debbi: [00:05:05] Great.

Peter: [00:05:05] Through everything I've said.

Debbi: [00:05:10] Let's see. Tell us about Kyle Dawson and what inspired you to write the series.

Peter: [00:05:16] Well, I wanted to ... I've always thought that journalists would make good main characters and stories. And the reason is that, as I said, I've read a lot of detective fiction. And I've been a reporter for my entire life. You know, until I retired.

And, you know, I started off as a reporter at the age of 16. And with my own personal experience and then looking at it and then reading a lot of private eye fiction, I realized that journalists do a lot of the same work. And we have a, you know, we're not motivated by finding out something for a high-paying or secret client. But what we are interested in is finding the same information and verifiable so that we can print a story. And there's a lot of similarities, especially if you're an investigative reporter.

[00:06:33] So that's my reason for using journalists as a main character. I thought we do so much of the same work and we have a lot of the same risks, you know? I've been threatened and I know other journalists have, and they'll be reluctant sometimes to write a story, because you know what's going to happen or the people that are the subject of your story, you know what's going to happen. And they don't want this information to be made public. So you're taking a risk. Anyway, between those two comparisons, that's why I always thought a journalist ... I said, well, they're just as exciting and in the same kind of dangerous work as a private eye would be and kind of maybe like a public eye, I guess I would say.

Debbi: [00:07:37] That's a good term. I like that. Did you intend from the start to write a series about this character?

Peter: [00:07:45] Well, that's been my idea, initially. I thought I could take this character and put him in a lot of different situations and a lot of different places and, having traveled as much as I have, you know. I started off with ... I didn't start off with, but my book, *Enemy of the People*, is set in northern New Mexico.

[00:08:24] And the title was, you know, inspired by our president, who called journalists "enemy of the people", because they were digging up dirt, not necessarily digging up dirt, but they weren't writing down or saying what he said verbatim. And they were also questioning it and checking on the facts and seeing that our president kind of lives … you know, it's gone on so much now, it's kind of obvious that he lives in his own fantasy world. And a lot of what he says doesn't relate to reality. And it's not something that's very hard to dig up. And so, that the whole notion of calling journalists "enemy of the people" just rankled me so badly. You know, we are the representatives of the people. Because of our president calling journalists the enemy of the people, I felt compelled to

write a story that showed that they were, in fact, not enemies, but they were representatives or upholders and protectors of the people.

Debbi: [00:09:41] I like that. I like that a lot. Right now, you have two or three books in that series?

Peter: [00:09:50] Right now, I have two. I've just finished up a third, which is actually a prequel. It takes my character, Kyle Dawson, and puts him in Afghanistan, and it takes place sequentially before these other two novels. So, I don't know. I'm not selling it as a ... Well, it's with an agent right now. So I don't know if they're gonna want to sell it as a prequel, but just as another part of the series. But it takes place in advance. In advance of the other two. And the reason I set it in Afghanistan was I really wanted dearly to write a book about Afghanistan, in a fictional way. I have a nonfiction book about Afghanistan, and it's called *Above the Din of War*. And I spent two years as a consultant working in Afghanistan. I really like the country and the people, of course. But I just, I always, like I said, I wrote a nonfiction book about it. Well, I wanted to set a fictional book there. So that's how that came about.

Debbi: [00:11:20] I was gonna say your fiction does seem to be informed to a great extent by your nonfiction. Do you require much additional research when you're writing fiction?

Peter: [00:11:33] You know, I really don't. I pretty much draw on my experiences and they shape, you know, or provide a good backdrop for what I want to write. And, you know, I was looking at other works of fiction that are set in foreign locations and, depending on the writer, you know, it varies a lot, but generally, the way fiction is structured, the focus is on the characters and their interactions. And there's less of an emphasis on, you know, detailed descriptions about the location. You know, that's not always true. I know one can come up with many exceptions to that. But the focus of the story is always the characters and secondarily is the backdrop. You know, I know a lot of times, too, somebody like Hemingway setting his story in Pamplona, Spain, or for the running of the bulls, of course, that's really exotic. But even so, you still have the focus on the main characters and what they're doing. And that's the real story.

Debbi: [00:12:57] It always comes down to the characters, I think. I mean, setting can make a book as well. But good characters are essential to fiction. So I noticed that Dawson has a kind of a sidekick in somebody named Raoul Garcia? Is Garcia kind of like your tough guy sidekick in the same vein as, say, Hawk to Spenser in the Spenser novels?

Peter: [00:13:25] Yeah, that's exactly a good way to put it. You know, I wanted to have somebody, somebody in there, like you said, like the tough guy. Somebody who can carry a gun, is authorized to carry a gun. Although I've ... I can't say I've ... generally speaking, you know, journalists don't arm themselves, but I'm sure we can find exceptions. But like, from my own personal experiences working in Afghanistan, depending on ... well, if we were going out into Taliban country, I always went with armed guards. And I went with a translator. Fortunately, I had some really good Afghan people who work for me as translators, and they're the ones that made the arrangements. They arranged for the transportation. They arrange for security. And, you know, we would have discussions about what, you know, how safe it is to go someplace or how unsafe it is. And luckily with telephone service being, you know, relatively good, we could call into the villages ahead and see how it was doing, you know? Was the Taliban near or had they been there recently? And the locals knew. You know, when it was safe or when it wasn't safe and they knew what routes to come in. So we would take precautions. You know, common sense precautions and, anyway, I used all that, you know, as this backdrop for my books.

Debbi: [00:15:20] My gosh, your real life experiences sound more fascinating than fiction.

Peter: [00:15:27] Yeah, it's been ... I know a lot of people thought it was crazy when I went back for a second year in Afghanistan, but I wanted to. I'd been there the first year and then the opportunity came up six or seven years later to go back. And I thought, you know, I want to write a book about this so I'm going to go back. And I set up my schedule in my work so that I was able to travel around the country. And I would travel with local journalists, most of whom spoke English, and we had drivers and that kind of thing, so I could. You know, we knew what was going on, where we could go, when we could go, how long we could stay. That kind of thing. They were the ones that set up the interviews. If we had to, like, interview a villager or village chieftain or something outside

of his village, we could set that up. And we would make arrangements to do that so that everybody was, you know, comfortable with the situation.

Debbi: [00:16:42] Yeah, that's interesting. I've been reading a lot about female Marines and their role as ... not interpreters, but as ...

Peter: [00:16:51] Security?

Debbi: [00:16:55] Security and liaison in a way. And information gatherers. So ... very interesting.

Peter: [00:17:04] Quite often they're the eyes and ears that are out there, out on the front, so to speak. But in the more remote areas where you're more likely to find Taliban than you are in the more ... larger population areas.

Debbi: [00:17:26] This is a fascinating topic. I got to tell you. And the idea of making it the backdrop for your fiction is very intriguing. What's the latest thing you're working on now?

Peter: [00:17:39] Well, I just finished up a book and that's, like I said, it's a prequel and it's called *The Correspondent*. And it's set, like I said, ahead of these other ones. And I'm kind of looking for right at the moment. Like I said, it's sitting with an agent. So I'm waiting to hear back and, if I can't get it with the people I'd like to get it with in New York. I always ... there's a mid-sized publisher here in Denver that really likes my work. And so I can always go with them, but I'd prefer to go with as big, the biggest publishing house possible.

Debbi: [00:18:41] That's understandable. And can you give us a brief description of what your latest one ... when I say the latest, I mean *Enemy of the People*, what that one is about? What's the story about?

Peter: [00:18:57] Well, *Enemy of the People*, like I said, was inspired by our president calling journalists the enemy of the people. And so I set it in a place I know well. I lived in New Mexico for a long time. And so I set it in a resort area in northern New Mexico, which is fictitious, but Taos is, of course, a ski area. But then there's another ski area up

there called Angel Fire. And it's a really beautiful summer resort as well as winter resort. And so I decided to set it up there, because I thought it would be a perfect place to have a semi-secret meeting between the president and, say, his high-ranking opposition, which would be the President pro tem of the Senate and then Speaker of the House. If you're in a situation which I was, what I had in mind was a situation where President Obama was a liberal president, and he was faced with Republican majorities or at least significant Republican conservatives in both houses. So it requires a delicate balance of, you know, political give and take.

[00:20:41] And so I wanted ... I thought, well, what if I put these three people, three key individuals in a resort? And the reason they're there, of course, is to work out some kind of secret deal where they can each accomplish pieces of their agenda. You know, it's not completely secret, but like, semi-secret. They got a small coterie of the press there, they're having meetings. And I thought it had the political legitimacy that was necessary. And I wanted to put it in a relatively remote location. And so I put it in like a resort in northern New Mexico. And and I also ... being in New Mexico, it also gave it access to what I would call the terrorist groups who I ... in my story, they come up through Mexico and then, you know, they're very focused on what they're going to do and taking the president or at least holding him hostage. And the other thing is also one of my nonfiction books is about the U.S. situation along the U.S.-Mexico border called *The Dangerous Divide*. And I spent, you know, many months. Well, besides living in New Mexico, I spent a lot of time traveling up along the border, going to, you know, in Tucson and then in New Mexico, to get a sense of it. The reality is, despite what President Trump says about border security, there's a lot of open areas that are just open. Open desert. And in some instances is nothing but a barbed wire fence. It's fallen down and rusted. So, you know, like President Trump is very concerned about what he calls an open border, but it's been like that for, I don't know, probably a hundred years. And it's not, it's not as much of a problem as he would like it to be, partly because there are vast stretches of desert there where it's just dangerous to cross. You know, you need to have provisions, you need to have transportation, etc., etc. So I'm sure, you know, that's where, as you can imagine, that's where a lot of the illegal drugs come across and that kind of thing. But the fact of the matter is that it's not like having an open door where you have millions of people pouring through into this country. And the reality is just ... that's just not the reality of what's going on. And, anyway, with my familiarity with the border, I just wanted to use that as a backdrop.

Debbi: [00:23:58] Well, your fiction really does sound intriguing as well as your nonfiction. Is there anything else that you'd like to say before we finish up?

Peter: [00:24:10] No, I continue to, you know, to work on fiction that's based on either my personal experiences or my travels. And one of the ideas I've always had with my fiction is to bring some of these foreign locations where I've lived, you know, bring them to life, you know, bring them into people's lives by setting my fictional stories there. My ideal is to not only transport people into another world via the characters, but also to transport them to places, exotic places where they've never been via the backdrops and the settings.

Debbi: [00:24:58] Well, that's fantastic. I think that's a great thing. It's nice to see somebody using travel in that way. I mean, I know other authors who do that, but using travel in that manner. To express a place and people in it. You know, it's really good. And having a journalism background, I think, helps a lot.

Peter: [00:25:25] Yeah, I know. It really informed ... I mean, it influences my fiction a lot. I had somebody, without going over time, but I had someone comment. They were looking at my fiction and said, well, you're your paragraphs are very short. And I looked back and I said, Yeah, that's gotta ... you know? Definitely. It's got to be my journalism background. But then I'm sure you're familiar with the mystery writer Tony Hillerman? Yeah. Well, his daughter and I were really good friends. We worked together and she's now writing fiction and she's picked up the thread of her father and she's writing mystery novels that use the same characters and she's added a female Navajo detective to the ... Anyway, so she and I are good friends, but she also writes with short paragraphs. I'm reading one of her books right now. I think, I don't know, I think that's kind of a trend, especially in popular fiction nowadays. A lot of short paragraphs, lots of dialogue.

Debbi: [00:26:49] I agree, and I'm totally into that.

Peter: [00:26:52] I think it makes for good fast reads, you know? And I think it's good because one, people are like right now, we're on the Internet and people spend a tremendous amount of time on the Internet reading. And so, you know, you need to

have something that's fast-paced that grabs people's attention. You know, these long, ponderous novels are a thing of the past, I think.

Debbi: [00:27:21] I agree. I agree with you there. A lot of people are writing shorter now.

Peter: [00:27:26] Yeah, yeah, I know. Seventy to eighty thousand word novels is not unusual at all.

Debbi: [00:27:34] Yeah. And not that bad a thing really. Or even shorter. Lots of novellas are coming out now. Well, Peter, I just want to thank you for being here. It was great to have you on.

Peter: [00:27:49] Well, I've enjoyed it very much. And I appreciate the call. I'm sorry, we had that clunky, clunkiness to get connected.

Debbi: [00:27:59] No problem. Hey, we've managed to muscle through it. So I'll just say let's hear it for the Fourth Estate and for journalists. It's only the First Amendment, right folks?

Peter: [00:28:14] That's right.

Debbi: [00:28:15] And on that note, I'll just add that you can find the Crime Cafe nine-book set and short story anthology on all major retailers or you can get a copy when you become a patron on Patreon of the podcast. In fact, I'm thinking of further expanding the content I'm going to provide to patrons of the podcast there. In the meantime, look for the podcast and the books on my website DebbiMack.com. Thanks so much for listening. I'll see you in two weeks when our guest will be Richard Cahill, Jr. And in the meantime, happy reading.