

The Crime Cafe with Mark S. Bacon

Presented By:



Debbi (01:44): Hi everyone. Our guest today started his writing career as a police reporter, and apparently one of his stories became an important part of a big lengthy murder trial. He's also done advertising and marketing and worked as a copywriter for Knott's Berry Farm. That's a familiar name to me cause I used to live in California. Not only has he written and published three mysteries and the book of flash crime fiction called *Cops Crooks and Other Stories in 100 Words*, but he's written business books, including *Do-it-Yourself Direct Marketing*, which was named Best Business Book of the Year by Library Journal and made the Book of the Month Club. His articles have appeared in major newspapers, including my own favorite, the *Washington Post*, and his latest novel is *The Marijuana Murders*. His name is Mark Bacon. Hi Mark. Thanks again for being so patient as to wait long enough for this interview.

Mark (03:17): Thanks for having me. Well, the last few months, I've just been hanging around like everybody else.

Debbi (03:17): Oh yeah, yeah. That's what we're all doing. We're all hanging around and zooming. A lot of the zooming going on. Um, let's see. I love your shirt by the way. That's great. Um, very, very festive looking. Um, and uh, you have three books out so far in the Nostalgia City Mysteries, is that correct?

Mark (03:17): That's right. I'm working on number four.

Debbi (03:20): And that's for the series also?

Mark (03:21): Correct.

Debbi (03:23): Awesome. Now you said the inspiration for the series came from working at Knott's Berry Farm. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Mark (03:31): Sure. Early in my career, I was a copywriter for Knott's Berry Farm and I wrote ads and commercials, but occasionally I would get a chance to go out into the park and work on special events. And I got to meet some of the costumed employees who entertain the guests, people who wore those giant heads and people who were gunslingers and so on. And so I got to know a little bit about what it's like behind the scenes at a theme park. And I always thought that it might be an interesting place to hold a murder mystery or to set a murder mystery because a theme park is great during the day. But at night when everybody's gone, when the rides are stopped, everything is silent. And the only motion is the shadows of the trees. It can be a little scary and I thought it'd make a great place to kill people.

Debbi (04:34): That's cool. I like that. Let's see. Have you ever seen the show *Playing God in Central Florida*, something like that. [It's *On Becoming God in Central Florida*.]

Mark (04:46): No, it doesn't, it doesn't ring a bell.

Debbi (04:49): It revolves around a woman who works at a theme park. That's the only reason I ask.

Mark (04:54): Oh, okay. Well there's lots of those in Florida.

Debbi (04:56): Yeah. it's, it's quite an interesting show. It was on Netflix, I think. [No, Debbi. It was Showtime. You idiot.] Anyway, hopefully it'll come back and more, well, I don't know if they canceled it or not, but anyway, be that as it may.

Mark (05:14): As I was working, I worked at the theme park years ago. And then when I finally got down to writing murder mysteries, I wanted to do a theme park, but what kind of theme park should I use? Disney has done so many different kinds, different variations. I didn't want to copy any of that. I wasn't interested in the the fast roller coaster kind of theme parks. And I live in Reno, Nevada, and the biggest event every year here is called Hot August Nights. And it's a celebration of rock and roll and old cars. And one day I'm driving down the street and I'm listening to rock and roll on the radio, and sitting next to me at a traffic light is like a 72 Mustang. And it just, all of a sudden occurred to me, why don't I do a theme park that is a recreation of a town from the 1970s. And so that's what it is. That's what Nostalgia City is. It's like taking a trip back in time.

Debbi (06:16): Very interesting. Now I'm trying to remember, were modern conveniences in this theme park. Like, did they have wifi and things like that? I can't remember now.

Mark (06:33): Well, no, because they tried to keep it as accurate to the Seventies as possible. Now guests coming in obviously have cell phones with them, but they're discouraged from using them and all park employees, cell phones, pagers, computers, anything that didn't exist in the Seventies is *verboten*.

Debbi (06:54): What an interesting experience that would be for most millennials, I think. Now as I understand it, each of your books was based on real life events. Can you talk about each of those events.

Mark (07:12): Sure. I'd be glad to I don't know how I got onto the idea of basing it on real events, but I think it adds to the authenticity, the realism of a story, if there's some kernel of something from the news in it, and I've done that with all the books. The, the, the second book I did is called *Desert Kill Switch*, and it is based on something that's really amazing that I sort of stumbled on once reading a newspaper article. And I had a hard time believing that it was true. I did some more research and I found out it was true. And the situation is that a number of car dealers in the country when they finance a used car or a new car, particularly for people who are low income and they have to pay a high interest rate, the dealers install a GPS tracking device and a kill switch on the engine so that if they miss a payment, sometimes by as few, as a few days, depending on the dealer, they flip the switch and the car's dead.

Mark (08:26): You're not going anywhere until you make your payment. And if you don't make your payment, the dealer knows where you are because of the GPS. And he just comes down and takes your car. It bypasses the old repo man, don't even need the repo man. You know where the car is, and this is real. Now, certainly not all dealers do this. It's a percentage of them. But I did a lot of research on it. And it is in fact, what's going on in the industry. There have been some lawsuits on it. A woman in Las Vegas claimed that the dealer threw the switch, which she was on the freeway, and she narrowly avoided an accident. So I started reading all this and I thought, wow, is this a great idea to work into a murder mystery? And so I did. And that's where the name *Desert Kill Switch* came from.

Mark (09:24): My third book. The latest one is called *The Marijuana Murders*. And that is based in large part on two ballot campaigns that were conducted in Arizona to legalize marijuana. And there were two camps. One was the corporate camp that wanted to essentially set up corporate stores all over the state and sell marijuana in a very regimented way. The other camp wanted to make it more like mom and pop stores, like a mom and pop liquor store, only a mom and pop pot store. And so they both have propositions on the ballot and they were both competing with each other. And there was a good bit of animosity between the two camps. The one camp was more the sort of laid back people call them the Stoner Proposition. And then there was the corporate one that was all interested in the bottom line. And that sounded ready made to me, for a murder mystery. And so I did, and I drew a lot of information that I

put in the book directly from what the campaigns were saying about each other. Strangely enough, neither campaign was successful because they were um ...

Debbi ([10:47](#)): Working at cross-purposes.

Mark ([10:49](#)): Yeah. Of course I, I built in some murders that didn't really happen. But that's, that's really what it was all about. And I also went back a little bit into the history of, of marijuana prohibition and how it got started. And I talked about, well, I had one of my protagonists talk about the Federal Bureau of Narcotics or Drugs, I should say back in the 1930s, they put out these movies that scared people about marijuana. They told everybody that that marijuana made white women want to have sex with black men. It was a racial thing. It was, it was really a horrible mess. And I, I just barely touch on that. The main focus is, is the campaign that actually happened in Arizona and it's in Arizona because that's where my theme park is. Nostalgia City is located somewhere just North of Phoenix.

Debbi ([11:53](#)): It's like a good location for it somehow.

Mark ([11:56](#)): It is for several reasons. One I wanted a place where you'd have a lot of open inexpensive land because Nostalgia City is like the most elaborate theme park in the country. And it would have to have someplace that was open and you could build it. Number two, decent weather year round, and number three, I placed it near a portion or a recreated portion of Route 66 that traveled all the way across Northern Arizona. So it tied into the theme.

Debbi ([12:29](#)): That's great. That makes a lot of sense. Let's see your time as a reporter on the police beat, does that work its way into your, your writing as well in terms of your knowledge from that?

Mark ([12:47](#)): Yeah, it does. In, in several different ways. One is getting to know policemen and how they think. One is the routine of police work. I looked, I went to the police department every single day and went through the files and talked to the cops and, and a lot of it just becomes so routine and sort of soul numbing in a way, depending on the, the individual of course, but so much of it is just routine work that doesn't yield anything. A lot of time spent. And so I built that into my main ... One of my two main characters, I have two protagonists, one is Lyle Deming who is an ex-cop. The other one is Kate Sorensen, who is the public relations manager of the theme park. And they eventually get together in the first book because a lot of things happen that draw them both into it.

Debbi ([13:49](#)): Right. Yeah. Now why did you decide to make him an ex-cop rather than a cop?

Mark ([13:57](#)): Because he got fed up with police work and he's a wounded individual stressed out completely. He has general anxiety disorder for which he takes medication and sometimes drinks, sometimes at the same time, which is not a good idea. And I made him an ex-cop because he escaped to Nostalgia City and became a cab driver thinking that this would be about as far removed from doing murders as you could get. Driving a cab in a theme park, he's driving a cab, you don't think of cannabis being in theme parks, but Nostalgia City is multiple square miles. And so they really have, it's really a recreation of a whole town. So they have cabs and they have buses and various forms of transportation. So Lyle got the cab to escape as much as possible and just to be laid back. Unfortunately, that's not exactly how it worked out for him.

Debbi ([15:09](#)): I love the fact that he's escaped to a place that takes him back in time, essentially. There's a kind of feeling, you know, of escaping back to the past in a way.

Mark (15:22): That's exactly it, and the music from the past and, and the food and the cars and everything about that time is, is an escape.

Debbi (15:33): Exactly. Yeah.

Mark (15:35): And he has to hide his cell phone.

Debbi (15:39): He hides his cell phone?

Mark (15:42): Cause he can't, he's not allowed to use it in the park.

Debbi (15:46): Exactly. But he does use it, I would assume secretly?

Mark (15:51): When he's outside of the park and sometimes secretly if he has to, but for the most part, he gets along without it. And from a mystery writer standpoint, that's kind of handy because so much of crime fiction these days is based on the ultra tech methods of, of investigation and, and catching criminals. And I kind of give Lyle a little more of the old fashioned shoe-leather and interviewing people rather than checking DNAs and looking at CCTV.

Debbi (16:24): I'm with you on that. I love the old-fashioned. People going out and actually confronting other people, actually talking to them face-to-face, that sort of thing. And I think technology can fall down in many ways. So that potential is there even today. But, I like that the, the female public relations person was also a college basketball star. What prompted you to make her a college basketball star?

Mark (16:55): What prompted me to make her that?

Debbi (16:57): Yeah. Why did you put that in her backstory?

Mark (17:00): Well, I got the inspiration from my younger daughter who was a college basketball star and I got to know all the girls on her team and saw the games and saw the pressure they were under. She was a Division One point guard. She's not tall like Kate Sorensen, she's only five, six, but she was an incredible shooter. And she ran the team as point guard. And it was very high pressure situation. When they're in tournaments and they're down by one point and she has the ball. And so I gave Kate that background so that she can deal with stress in a whole different way than Lyle deals with stress. He deals with it by sort of freaking out. Although he exercises, he never has gotten around to meditating, which Kate has told him he should do. But Kate deals with stress that she learned how to on the basketball court and that she turned the stress into a positive energy that she needed to deal with the other team, deal with scoring, and deal with the refs. So she uses that in a lot of the stressful situations in the novels where she can kind of be the calming influence. And I made her six feet, three because I thought it would be a cool idea.

Debbi (18:28): I think it's cool. Does any kind of romantic tension develop between them or do they remain just friends?

Mark (18:39): Slowly.

Debbi (18:41): Slowly.

Mark (18:41): Slowly. The first book was ... They just met and just kind of exploring relationships. The second book a little bit closer, the third book, and now I'm actually in the fourth book. They don't get to see much of each other because he's in Florida and she's in Arizona, but it is developing, yes.

Debbi (19:06): Hmm. That's very interesting. Cause you don't want to go too fast. Exactly. Keep that romantic tension in there. Let's see. Tell us about the one you're working on now that involves industrial espionage?

Mark (19:24): It does. I don't know if I'm like a lot of authors, but I don't like to talk too much about work in progress. Part of the reason that I'm a writer is I get things in my head and I get rid of them by sitting at the computer and writing it all down. But I will tell you a little bit about my research for this book. Again, it's based on some real, real news events, real facts. The Chinese government has for many years been stealing our secrets. And if you read the FBI files, and they're voluminous, you find out how many things have been stolen and what their techniques are. And their techniques are really kind of intriguing. They would like to steal things of course and sometimes pay for them and risk getting arrested and they have been but they have a huge infrastructure.

Mark (20:30): The People's Republic of China does, to absorb American technology without stealing it by essentially just asking for it. A couple of things, one, there are over 300,000 Chinese students in the United States right now, most of them in technological fields, getting masters and doctorate and they learn all this information and they go home and they use it. One of the other ways they use it is they set up symposiums and conferences and all types of meetings in China. They invite American professors and scientists who are leading edge technology to come over and they give them awards and they talk to them about what great work they're doing and the professors and the scientists are so proud of what they're doing. They give talks on it and they explain everything that their technology is. And that's exactly what, what the Chinese would like to do.

Mark (21:36): So that's, that's part of this book. It's dealing with people stealing theme park secrets, and China is the largest theme park market in the world. More so than the United States. There are literally hundreds of theme parks in China, some very small, some gigantic and a lot of theme park ride manufacturers sell to the United States. They also sell to China. They also sell around the world, Europe, Asia, Africa, everywhere. It's a huge market. It's billions and billions of dollars. So every theme park wants to have the latest technology. So when you take a ride, it really just takes you away from it. All. It just is much more so than seeing a fantastic movie. It's just a complete experience. And the technology is advancing rapidly with things like extended reality, artificial intelligence. And so that's what the book's all about.

Debbi (22:48): That sounds mindblowing. Let's see. Oh, I also, I wanted to say I love the concept of the 100-word story. How long did it take you to put that book together? Did you just write them individually and then just put them all together or did you do it deliberately?

Mark (23:08): It started with a friend of mine who was teaching a writing class and he told me that he had this exercise for students that they had to write a complete story in only 100 words. Not 99 words, not 101 words, but 100 words. So I thought, Whoa, okay, I'll give it a try. So I just played around with it and I had no idea there was actually a flash fiction genre at the time. I just thought this was kind of a fun thing to do. So I started doing it. I wrote a few that I liked. And then I started doing more, and I submitted some to some literary magazines. It got published, I got more interested in it. And finally I realized I had enough to put them in a book. So I did. It took me about a day for each story. It seems like a lot of time for just a hundred words.

Debbi (24:07): Not really. For a good story?

Mark (24:09): My stories usually are like 250 words. And then it's a matter of getting them down. They're all exactly 100 words. And most of them are crime stories. And they have a beginning, a middle and an end. They have a protagonist, they have a challenge. I try to pack that all in a hundred words and it's, it's a huge challenge. And I really loved that. And I did this before I started doing the mystery novels. Well sort of, I had done some practice novels before, but I learned a lot doing flash fiction. I learned how to say a lot in a few words. I learned how to say things that make the reader think without telling them something right out. And I think it's a great discipline. And it's a whole genre. There are books, there are many, many, many publications. And many people have their own definition of what flash fiction is, too. Hemingway wrote flash fiction. Margaret Atwood writes flash fiction and there's hundred word flash fiction. There's 200 word flash fiction. There was 500 word flash fiction. And one of the shortest flash fictions is attributed to Hemingway. It's a six-word one. Do you know that?

Debbi (25:36): Baby shoes? Yeah.

Mark (25:36): Right. Exactly. Yeah.

Debbi (25:39): Yeah. Yeah. Now I have to read this book. I am really intrigued. I want to see this. Now I want to try to take it up. Yeah. What an interesting challenge.

Mark (25:56): The way I did it is every morning I take my dog for a walk, usually takes about an hour. And by the time I got home, I had an idea for a story. So I sat down and worked on it.

Debbi (26:09): That's fantastic. I love it. What writers are you most inspired by? Who most inspires and informs your writing?

Mark (26:19): I knew you'd ask me that. Well, I am equally a fan of contemporary mystery crime writers and possibly more of a fan of the classics, the classic noir writers people like Cornell Woolrich, Dorothy B. Hughes. Ross Macdonald is one of my favorites. Obviously Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. And there's a bunch of others in that period. I've read a lot of that period. I kind of go back and forth between contemporary stuff and the classic period. And I find that a little bit of that classic stuff has gotten into my writing unintentionally. I'm in a critique group and we exchange chapters and critique each other. And one of the critique group members said, this sounds just like an old-fashioned gumshoe story. And I didn't intend to do it that way. So now I have to figure out exactly what to do with it.

Debbi (27:34): Hmm. Well, I don't think it sounds so bad. I mean, if I were going to read it, I think I'd enjoy it, but that's just me. I like that kind of style. Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about before we finish up?

Mark (27:55): Let's see. Oh, did you want to talk about *Detour*?

Debbi (28:00): Oh, sure. Yeah. My gosh, *Detour*. The movie that I couldn't stand the first time I saw it, but came to appreciate better the next time I saw it. Uh Basically the guy just strikes me as a loser who is sort of sleepwalking through life and things happen. He doesn't think about the results of his actions at all and kind of drifts from one situation to the next, until he finds finally ends up screwed. That's kind of the way it seemed to me. How about you?

Mark ([28:39](#)): Very depressing, very dark. And this is now 1945, 46?

Debbi ([28:47](#)): Yeah. It could have been right about in there. Yeah. 45, 46.

Mark ([28:52](#)): And exceptionally low budget to the point that they had a scene that was supposed to be in New York City, but it was filmed in Hollywood with a fog machine and a very tight camera, so you couldn't see where they were.

Debbi ([29:06](#)): Pretty obvious, too. Clever, though.

Mark ([29:11](#)): No name actors at all in the movie. It's become a cult film for reasons that sort of escape me. It's about a guy who makes every possible decision wrong. You and I were talking about this before we got started here. And one of the other crazy things about it is the last scene with the telephone?

Debbi ([29:35](#)): Huh. Yeah.

Mark ([29:37](#)): I won't spoil it for anybody that hasn't seen the movie, but it's an unusual way of killing someone.

Debbi ([29:42](#)): Yeah. Very much so. Yeah. It's kind of like, Oh, well, Oh my gosh. That's not good.

Mark ([29:54](#)): I must say though, in the middle of that movie, there's a twist that caught me completely by surprise because the movie was kind of ho-hum up until that time and all of a sudden, wow. What a great idea, right in the middle.

Debbi ([30:07](#)): Was it the thing with the father?

Mark ([30:10](#)): The hitchhiker.

Debbi ([30:11](#)): The hitchhiker.

Mark ([30:13](#)): Because she knew who he was.

Debbi ([30:16](#)): Just, just the hitchhiker herself. Okay.

Mark ([30:18](#)): Well, the fact that he picked up somebody who was tied into the whole, to the whole murder and that was really a genius twist, and it went downhill from there.

Debbi ([30:30](#)): Yes, certainly did. Things went downhill fast from there. I think her name was, the actress's name was Ann Savage. Is that correct?

Mark ([30:40](#)): Right. Yes.

Debbi ([30:42](#)): Savage was such an appropriate name for that, for a person who would play that character. Tom Neal. Yeah. He had a sad life. Anyway. Wow. Yeah. *Detour*. That's quite a movie.

Mark ([30:49](#)): And it's available on YouTube for free. I think.

Debbi ([31:04](#)): Yes it is. It's a public domain movie for anybody who's interested. Yeah. So, well, all I can say is thanks for being on today, Mark.

Mark ([31:13](#)): Thanks for having me, Debbi.

Debbi ([31:14](#)): And for talking movies as well as books, because I love both. And to everyone who's listening, you can get a copy of the transcript of this interview when I put it on my blog, at least I hope so because transcripts cost money and I'm short on money all the time. So, anyway, we'll see. In any case in two weeks, our next guest will be Andrew Allan. And until then I hope you have a great two weeks and happy reading.