

The Crime Cafe with

Ann Aptaker

Presented By:



Debbi (01:44): Hi everyone. Today I have with me a crime fiction author who has actually worked for a private investigations firm. In one of my favorite places, San Rafael, California. Umm. Northern California. She is the author of the Cantor Gold mystery novels, which have won Lambda Literary and Goldie Awards. She's written short stories and flash fiction, which is cool, but that's not all. She's also been a curator, art writer, and exhibition designer for galleries and museums. Her most recent book is *Murder and Gold*. My guest today is Ann Aptaker. Hi, Ann. Thanks so much for being here today.

Ann (02:29): Hi, how are you?

Debbi (02:31): Okay. How are you doing with all this stuff going on?

Ann (02:35): I'm hanging in there, doing what we all do with nothing but time on our hands. Those of us who are authors. We write. So that's what I'm doing with myself.

Debbi (02:48): I know the feeling. Yeah.

Ann (02:49): I'm sure you do.

Debbi (02:53): I thought it was interesting that you worked in the art world as a writer and curator, and also have a great attention to architectural and other details in your writing and really put the reader in the place that you're writing about. Think there's a connection there?

Ann (03:00): There is, especially in crime fiction of the sort of my Cantor Gold books, where she is an art thief and a smuggler. She steals art. And of course, to be a good thief, you have to have a number of skills, but one of those skills is understanding architecture because you have to be able to understand how a building works so you can get in and out of it in an efficient manner without getting caught and without, you know, sending off alarms and so on. So my years as an art historian and a curator studying not only art, but also the history of architecture, my understanding at least at that level of buildings helps me understand my protagonist and how she's able to steal things.

Ann (04:07): And in the most recent of the books *Flesh and Gold*, she actually does use her architectural knowledge in, in two scenes where she has to be able to maneuver in one scene. She has to maneuver through a building and in another scene, she has to maneuver on the exterior of a building through a neighborhood. So she really has to understand how buildings work.

Debbi (04:32): That's fantastic. And it really gives a person a window into what things were like then, as opposed to now.

Ann (04:40): Absolutely. The books take place in the 1950s. So she didn't have a computer. She couldn't get her, you know, a floor plan of a place. She just had to understand how the organic world works. And in this case, it's the, the built environment, how it works.

Debbi (05:01): So what inspired you to create this particular protagonist set at the particular time in New York City?

Ann (05:11): She was on my mind as a character for many years. I really can't tell you where she came from. She, she just sort of emerged. She, you know, like Athena coming out of Zeus' head whole, she just emerged whole one day, literally a million years ago. And she went through a series of sorts, types, names, and so on. At first I had her as, as, as an investigator, but because I did work for a private investigator, I got to see the criminal justice system and the court system up close and personal. And I hate to say this, but I lost a lot of faith in it as a result. So I realized that she was not on the right side of the law.

Ann (06:00): She was on the dark side of the law. And that fit very well because she's gay. And in the 1950s, to be gay was illegal. So she was an illegal person, so to speak just by virtue of being alive. So her whole character then evolved into an art thief, as opposed to say an art investigator. She became an art thief and that opened up the whole series for me not only in the crime story, in the whodunnit and all of that, but her world became clearer. Her underworld, her relationship with the law became clearer. Her life became clearer and of course it actually became sexier and much more exciting. So there you have it. My, you know, my, my confession of why she's a criminal.

Debbi (06:52): Well, as an attorney who is now retired from practicing law, I totally understand your desire, your lack of faith.

Ann (07:04): Yeah, I guess we've both seen some things that we'd rather not have seen.

Debbi (07:09): Yeah, absolutely. I'm with you there. I was going to say as a lesbian detective, she would have some trouble difficulty, run into discrimination possibly. Does she get any benefit from being associated? There was that man she's associated with in the first book that I read *Criminal Gold*, I guess it was?

Ann (07:32): Yes. Yeah.

Debbi (07:34): Does that help her?

Ann (07:36): Yes. Because she has to learn to survive in a world that essentially hates her. She, she survives better in the criminal underworld because it doesn't hate her. Now the criminal underworld has its own dangers and so on. I mean, it's dog eat dog and all of that. However, it doesn't judge her and she's smart and she's slick and she's, you know, she's savvy. So she survives very well in that world. She makes a lot of money as an art thief and a smuggler. She's very successful at it. And of course the best protection, whether you're on the right or left side of the law, the best protection is money. And she has enough of it to protect her insofar as it can. She still has the dangers of the cops who want to arrest her and people who want to kill her and so on, but on the whole, she's more protected than the average person, because she makes so much money and money talks. It did then. It does now.

Debbi (08:48): That's so true. Since you knew a lot about architecture and so forth, was there other research you had to do to really understand the period that Cantor was working in?

Ann (09:03): Oh, sure. I had to do a lot of research and it was, you know, being an art historian, being a professor of art history research is something I love to do and I know how to do. So I would spend all kinds of days at the New York Public Library or online or at the New York City archives learning about that period, not only generally New York in the 1950s, but the criminal

history of New York in the 1950s, but also the 1950s is not all that terribly long ago. So there were still, there were, there are still people around, I mean, my parents and so on, you know, they've since gone. But at the time when I first started writing *Criminal Gold*, I was able to ask relatives and, you know, friends and neighbors who remember those years quite well.

Ann (09:59): And, most particularly, I was able to hear how they talked because the language hasn't changed that much, but there are some differences. The slang has changed. The vernacular has altered somewhat. I mean, we can watch a movie from the 1950s or read a book and still understand. It would still be English that we know, but there are subtle differences. And I was able to get those subtle differences and use them in my books. So that was wonderful. Being able to talk to people. And I remember my parents and, you know, neighbors talking who, you know, who had that, that New York vernacular of the 1950s and that's Cantor's world. That's how she, that's her dialogue with other people.

Debbi (10:48): That's really cool. Yeah, sometimes I think it would be interesting to start a blog where all you did is talk about expressions. Do they still use these now? That kind of thing. I tend to watch a lot of old movies.

Ann (11:00): Yeah. Yeah.

Debbi (11:07): I'll hear an expression and say, "Does anybody say that anymore?"

Ann (11:14): Yeah. And some we do, and some we don't. I mean, we don't say "twenty-three skidoo", anymore, since the 1920s. But some things we still, some we do. Yeah. But I have to be very careful because I'm writing in the 21st century and every so often I, you know, I can fall, I can give Cantor or her associates, a modern, a contemporary expression, and I have to catch it and say, "Nope, you know, that has to come out." so I have to be very careful not to lapse into contemporary jargon.

Debbi (11:43): It's tempting.

Ann (11:45): It's very tempting.

Debbi (11:48): How many books are there in the series?

Ann (11:51): At the moment, there are four. The fifth one, *Murder and Gold* is being released by Bywater Books in July of 2021. So there'll be a fifth in the Cantor Gold series. And then I have a novella completely different genre altogether. Well, it's still crime, but it's not part of the Cantor Gold series. A novella with the wonderfully delicious long title called *A Taco, a T-Bird, a Beretta, and One Furious Night*. And it's a contemporary piece. And it comes out in October from Down and Out Books.

Debbi (12:30): Wow. A taco, a T-Bird. And what was the rest?

Ann (12:34): A Beretta and one furious night. Yeah. It's part of the Guns and Tacos Series that Down and Out Books has been putting out since last year. And this year is the second season. And each year there are six authors who are invited to produce a novella for this series.

Ann (12:57): And I was very proud to be one of the six authors asked by Down and Out to do this. And Michael Bracken and Trey Barker extended the honor. And I was delighted, needless to say.

Debbi (13:09): Congratulations. That's fantastic. That's really wonderful. Let's see. Do you plan to have a certain number of books in the Cantor Gold series, or do you just keep writing them until you run out of ideas?

Ann (13:26): Well, I don't know exactly how many there will be, but I have a general story arc. The way I'm thinking now, the books will end. The series will end with a book that takes place in the early 1960s, probably 1963 with something that happened historically that I will not tell you that has a profound, something that happened in popular culture that had a profound influence or that will have a profound influence on Cantor.

Ann (14:01): And of course, by then, she's not getting any younger, you know, in 1963, she has to start thinking about hanging it up or what to do with her, you know, middle-age and senior approaching years and so on. And so there's something that happens in 1963 that that affects her deeply and will make an impact, becomes a decision maker for her. So that's how I see it, you know, arcing towards, but the exact number of books, I don't know.

Debbi (14:36): Very interesting.

Ann (14:37): The books did start, the first book *Criminal Gold* started in 1949. The most recent *Flesh and Gold* was 1952. And the next one, *Murder and Gold* leaps ahead two years to 1954. So I'll be taking people through the 1950s.

Debbi (14:56): The 1950s were a very interesting time, let's put it that way. A very conformist time.

Ann (15:05): They were, but right under it. Yeah. Right under it, of course, you had the beatniks and the best of film noir. There was a segment of the population, a segment of the American society that understood that just below that sort of golden age, where we had almost full employment and, you know, strong unions and so on, you know, America was a nice place to live for many people in the 1950s, but people also understood that just under that surface was rotten to the core with corruption and violence and oppression of all sorts. So that's what fascinates me about the 1950s and New York in the 1950s was golden, but right underneath, literally right underneath was this dark noir other life. And that's where Cantor lived, but she lives in the golden part, too. She's very snappy. She has custom made silk suits and she's, she's, you know, she can mix with society, people as well as criminals.

Debbi (16:11): She travels well between different classes.

Ann (16:12): Oh, she travels very well. Oh yeah.

Debbi (16:22): Let's see. You also write flash fiction, which I've often wanted to try. How do you decide what makes a good flash fiction versus short story versus longer fiction. It seems almost like poetry sometimes.

Ann (16:38): Yeah. That's, you know, that's actually a very good analogy. I hadn't thought of it before, but now that you mentioned it, you really nailed it because like poetry, you have to get to the emotional core with each word. You know, there's, you can't just meander around, like you can in a novel, in long form. So with flash fiction, which I love writing you, you write, you have to get to that emotional truth immediately and sustain it with each and every word so that you don't have to go into a long form. And of course, flash fiction can be anything from 10 words to anything under a thousand words. And the flash fiction I write tends to be around the 300-ish word anywhere, you know, I mean really short. And some of it is, you know, like 150 words. So you really, boom. You have to get there immediately. And for some reason or another, I really like doing that. They're like little poetic set pieces. Yeah. Plus they, you can finish them faster and you're done.

Debbi (17:47): You gotta love that. Yeah.

Ann (17:51): Yeah. Well, you're an author, you know, that, you know, the sweat in writing a long form novel, you know, but when it's done, when it's, when I finished writing a novel, it's kind of like, whew, okay. And then there's also the, you know, the day, it's just like the day after depression now, what do I do? You know, I feel as if I've walked out on my family, it's like, the world is suddenly empty. I, after living with these people for a year or two in the most intimate way, and then you start another one.

Debbi (18:23): Exactly. Yeah. It's a strange, is a good but strange feeling. Yeah. Then there's always that feeling of, can I do this again?

Ann (18:34): Yeah. Really? You know?

Debbi (18:35): Can I pull this off again?

Ann (18:38): Yeah. You're right. There's that feeling that you win an award and you feel like a fraud, you know, I don't know. It's inescapable.

Debbi (18:45): I think so. Yeah. We all have our doubts. Let's see. What authors do you find most inspiring?

Ann (18:55): Oh boy. Hmm. Well, in, in the crime and mystery world it would have to be the, the classics Raymond Chandler, James Cain, Woolcott. You know, people, you know, people of that era that really, that took, as Raymond Chandler said with his Philip Marlowe character, you know, took crime out of the salon, out of the drawing room and put it back in the streets where it belongs. So I suppose these people were my greatest influence. Today, though, I, you know, I would almost hate to start naming a whole bunch because a number of them are my friends and I would be leaving people out.

Ann (19:51): But there's ... I read a lot of crime fiction. I don't read as much when I'm writing. But there's, there's, quite a few. Gee, let's see, let me see if I can pull out you know, pull out somebody whose work I enjoy, who has recently has a book out, so it makes some sense. Oh, Oh, okay. Cheryl Head writes the Charlie Mack series and I just find her books so compelling. And the character of Charlie is just really absorbing and compelling. And Cheryl's books are beautifully written and they take place contemporary, contemporary times unlike, you know, I write historic, but she writes contemporary in Detroit which, you know, that itself leads to a lot

of texture and color and so on. And she also writes of the African-American experience in a most, in a most magnificent way.

Ann (20:57): And I think right at the moment she would, she would have to sort of be right up front in my, in my thinking as far as authors who I gravitate to. Cheryl's newest books are her books are just terrific. So I ask all of your listeners and readers and fans to have a look at Cheryl Head. So there you go.

Debbi (21:24): Very good. Cool. let's see. When you were working for private investigators, what sort of work did you do? And did you have a case, like a most interesting case that you worked on?

Ann (21:40): Yeah. The answer to your first question. It was a general house. We sort of worked for insurance firms or attorneys, the courts from time to time. Municipalities we looked at at one case was corruption in a County Sheriff's department. You know, another was a break-in, you know, criminal theft sort of thing. So we really saw sort of a broad spectrum of crime, everything from white collar to, you know, nasty, miserable street crime. There was one case that I still think about from time to time because, and it wasn't the worst crime. It was really just a simple workers' comp fraud. But the thing that made it interesting for me was the person who committed the crime and I won't tell you her name. That would be, you know, in violation. But she came, you know, it was the typical thing, wrong side of the tracks, born and raised on the wrong side of the tracks, you know, poverty, blah, blah, working at a at a fast food joint slipped and fell.

Ann (22:52): But she, you know, she was fine, but she put in a workers' comp claim. And so we thought in, in which was then red-flagged cause the slip and fall wasn't severe enough for, you know, worker's comp she, you know, maybe a day or two off, but that was sort of it. But she put in a workers' comp claim saying she couldn't work. She hurt her back and blah, blah, blah. And of course we caught her doing heavy lifting and so on. But the thing that made it interesting was who she was. And it occurred to me. She was one of the reasons why I had to make Cantor on the wrong side of the law instead of on the top of the law. This woman who we followed, this young woman, it occurred to me that she lived in a world where if she did not, if she did not make the workers' comp claim in her world where economic opportunity is so restricted, in her world, if she did not make that claim, she would've been considered irresponsible.

Ann (24:03): In other words, this was an economic opportunity that came her way in a world where there's very little economic opportunity. So she didn't see it as a crime. She saw it and her, her whole world, her friends and neighbors or colleagues, the people in her life would not have considered it a crime. They would have considered it an opportunity that dropped in her lap. And if she did not take it, that would have been considered irresponsible. The same way that in our world, in this upper world, where we walk on these people's heads, in our more privileged world, if we turned down a job or, you know, we, we have things that are considered irresponsible. If we buy a house that's more expensive than we can afford and so on. But in her world breaking the law would be not thought of as a crime, would have been thought of as a way to earn a living.

Ann (25:08): And it was that sort of thing that I, you know, the more I saw her now, I didn't see that with everybody, but it was crystal clear with her. Everything in her life, what she, she was born into a life with everything stacked against her, including the really heartbreaking loss of her

dog by being run ... The dog was run over by a car, which is heartbreaking. And and it, and it was hit and miss the, her dog was run over by a car during the time that we were investigating her. You know, it's like, what else, what other heartbreaks could befall this young woman? So that case, even though I saw worst crimes, you know, blood curdling crimes and bigger thefts and so on, this particular case has stayed with me to this day. And she is, she's in many ways, the impetus for making Cantor a criminal, because Cantor, there was no way that Cantor was going to be taken seriously or given respect in the upper world.

Ann ([26:22](#)): She had to go into the underworld in order to gain respect. And she does.

Debbi ([26:28](#)): Wow, you're convincing me to start writing about criminals now. I'm just loving this. I love the way you think.

Ann ([26:36](#)): The thing of it is I, as a person, you know, Cantor does things I could not do. I can't steal something. You know, I can't live in that world. She's much more courageous than I am in many ways. She has much more honor than I am because she's unafraid. And you know, the rest of us are just, you know, why don't we commit crimes? Is it because of our moral sense? Well, yes, to some extent, I don't want to steal something from somebody else. I could never kill somebody. But you know rob a bank? The banks are insured. What the heck? Why don't we do it? Well, we're afraid we'd get caught.

Ann ([27:15](#)): It's, you know, morality sometimes has nothing to do with it. Sometimes it does, there are things we can't do, but sometimes it has nothing to do with it. So Cantor is able to have the freedom that the rest of us don't always have the courage to take.

Debbi ([27:32](#)): Exactly. Yeah. And you're doing a giveaway also as part of this.

Ann ([27:39](#)): Yes. two of the spots have already been taken, but we can, sort of expand on that. If people go on Facebook to my Ann Aptaker, Author page, you know, Ann Aptaker comma Author and, you know, read those, like, you know, mention the blog post that you graciously allowed me to post. And it also says, if you leave a comment on my page, on that Ann Aptaker, Author page I will send you, or I will have Bold Strokes Books, the publisher, send you an ebook in the format that you require of *Flesh and Gold*, of the most current Cantor Gold book.

Ann ([28:22](#)): So I originally said, you know, the first five, two people have already done it. So since this is going to be on in another time, let's say from this point on five more. So if five people from this point on, beyond the first two make a comment on the Ann Aptaker, Author page I will see to it that they get an ebook of *Flesh and Gold*.

Debbi ([28:50](#)): That is darn gracious. There you go, everybody. Isn't that wonderful? Aren't you something?

Ann ([28:58](#)): Yes.

Debbi ([28:59](#)): You are something.

Ann ([28:59](#)): I mean, everybody should share in the wonderful adventures of Cantor Gold. I mean, really. And in that one, this one is the only one that doesn't take place in New York. She's actually in Havana, in pre-Castro Havana, which is, it's very exotic and exciting and luscious and

tropical and all of that. So if you really need to sink your teeth into a good tropical, juicy adventure, I think people will enjoy this one. Yeah.

Debbi ([29:28](#)): Does Hemingway make an appearance?

Ann ([29:31](#)): He makes a mention, but you know, who does make an appearance for those of you, those of your listeners who enjoy crime fiction or just the history of crime? Meyer Lansky is a major figure in this book. Absolutely, because the mob, the American mob in 1952 was making strides in Havana at the time.

Debbi ([29:53](#)): This is wonderful.

Ann ([29:56](#)): Yeah. She has a real working relationship with Meyer Lansky and, and the, the American mob as well as Cuban outlaws, she deals a lot with, with Cuban criminals as well. So it's a pretty sexy book.

Debbi ([30:11](#)): My head, my head is suddenly filled with terrible puns about how much gold is in your books. I mean, literally there's gold in there. I mean, historical gold.

Ann ([30:18](#)): There's plenty of gold in there.

Debbi ([30:25](#)): Is there anything else? Is there anything else you'd like to say before we finish up?

Ann ([30:28](#)): Well, again, you know, thank you for having me on, on the show. I, I really hope that readers will have a look at my work. You know, the, the novella that's coming out is a rather different. It's, well, it's different in that it is not specifically an LGBT book. But it's also from the criminal's point of view, the protagonist, Maureen Eckles is an assassin and she has, she has issues ... Internal emotional issues that can only be satisfied through her assassin work. So she was interesting to write about. Other than that, just, hi, everyone. The opportunity to let me introduce everyone to to Cantor Gold and my other works and just Google me and there I'll be, or Amazon me and there I'll be, and enjoy the books.

Debbi ([31:41](#)): All right. Well, I can tell you that I enjoyed the book I read that you authored, so I will add my recommendation to that.

Ann ([31:50](#)): Oh thank you very much.

Debbi ([31:52](#)): Sure thing.

Ann ([31:52](#)): Thank you indeed.

Debbi ([31:53](#)): It's my pleasure. And thank you so much for being here today. And I will also just mention here that you can get a shout-out if you become a Patreon, a patron of the podcast on Patreon. Yes. We have a Pattern page, and I'm doing a special offer where you can get a shout-out if you contribute. Let's see, I'll include a link to it with this recording. And if you'd like to sample my own fiction, actually, I am posting chapters online in serial format, and you can have them delivered right to your inbox.

Ann ([32:31](#)): Excellent. Everybody should sample your superb fiction, Debbi. Absolutely.

Debbi ([32:39](#)): Oh, thank you very much, Ann. That means a lot coming from you. With that, I'll just say, thank you so much for listening, and don't forget to leave a review, and I'll see you in two weeks when my guest will be Karen Neary. In the meantime, happy reading.