

# The Crime Cafe with

## A.C. Frieden

Presented By:



Debbi (00:14): Hi everyone. Today's guest has a most interesting background. A native of Switzerland, he's traveled widely. While living in the Southern US, he earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in molecular biology, two law degrees, and got his pilot's license and scuba instructor license. So I guess you could say he keeps busy, his fiction reflects much of his travel experience and his extensive research, both historical and journalistic. In addition to writing mysteries and thrillers, he's one of the country's preeminent technology lawyers. Interesting. It's a great pleasure to introduce my guest AC Frieden. Hi Andre. Thank you so much for being here.

AC (00:14): It's a pleasure to join your podcast. I'm delighted. And as a fellow lawyer, it's always a pleasure as well to, uh, to chat. I think all our legal experience ends up creeping into our books in one way or another.

Debbi (00:14): Isn't that the truth? I'm always amazed when practicing lawyers find the time and energy to write fiction. How do you balance your various obligations?

AC (03:08): I would say that I balance it well, although I think pretty much everyone around me and my family would probably disagree with me. But it is a, you know, a time management challenge you write when you can. Sometimes ideas come to your head and you have to write them down in some way quickly or they'll leave. So it's something that you, you learn to do it, it's never perfect. But at the end of the day, the drive is to get the book out. And I think that keeps you focused.

Debbi (03:45): Yeah. I think that's a lot of truth in that, in what you're saying. I think that's great thoughts there. I absolutely agree getting things down when you think about them or if they're important, they'll stay there and you get them down. You know what I mean? It's like sometimes you have all these ideas, but one will kind of fixate itself in your mind? Get it down and don't worry about it being perfect.

AC (04:14): And the thing is, you know, you can think of a schedule. You can think of, you can outline as much as you want, but you have to leave your mind open to things that pop up, you know, as you're writing your story. So things change no matter how much planning you do ahead of time, whether it's plot or character issues. Things will come up, you know, or your editor, the worst case is your editor find something wrong and you've got to do a lot of fixing, so that, that can happen, too.

Debbi (04:47): Yeah. I agree with you completely on all of that. How many hours would you estimate you spend on research for a book versus writing it?

AC (04:58): Well, I put research really into two buckets. So first there is you know, obviously the online part of the research to, you know, everything from looking at the history of a particular site that you're going to use or finding you know, details about a fictional character that you obviously want to be as real as possible. So the challenge is, you know, spending the hours online to do that research. And then for me, and I think one of the things that makes my research fun and exciting is the travel component. To actually see and feel and smell and experience you know, the surroundings of a place that I'm actually going to put it in the book. So that to me is very important. There are very few places in, in the settings, in my books that I haven't visited firsthand.

AC (05:59): So that, that is part of the excitement, whether I visited it a long time ago, or I traveled just to examine a particular site these things make it fun. And I try to combine it with meeting some locals. Now, whether it's a journalist or government official or something, I try to combine that as well. So that, that's how I look at my research is really these two buckets and together they come together to make it as realistic as possible. In many ways you can, you can travel with my books. I am a stickler for accuracy. If something is 15 meters away, it's going to be 15 meters away in my book. I don't bend, bend the facts on the ground to fit my story.

Debbi (06:50): Wow. That's pretty impressive. According to your bio, you started writing short stories, poems and diaries of your travels. Is that how you got started as a writer?

AC (07:04): Yeah, I mean, I didn't have a master plan other than, you know, finishing law school and starting work. But you know, during law school I traveled. I studied abroad. I studied in Moscow and, you know, given the, incredible history that Moscow offers as well as from a cold war setting I found it interesting just to do research while I was there. And you know, with no purpose in mind with no idea that I would eventually publish you know, espionage, thrillers, but, you know, I documented these travels, a lot of details. I had fun writing poems about them. So in time I had this, you know, stack of materials that ended up finding the right purpose and to write my novels,

Debbi (08:03): I was going to ask you if your traveling inspired your writing or your interest in current events and history inspired your travel, but it sounds to me like you simply take life experiences, take advantage of opportunities while you're in a place, and then it becomes part of your writing. Would that be about right?

AC (08:28): That's mostly true. There are very few times where I have traveled specifically for research on a given book. I have really gone, you know, to all corners of the world, mostly out of my own curiosity, to understand different cultures, different systems, to see the worst and the best that the rest of the world has to offer. So I think that's been the driver, but, you know, it all comes full circle in the way that I am able to embody those experiences into my novels. So, my goal isn't just to entertain with my books, it's also to inform, to see a different opinion. So, you know, whether I'm setting a scene for a Russian spy, I want to, I want the reader to really feel what that Russian spy is feeling, his history, the reason he is doing what he's doing. So I try not to stay with stereotypes because I think once you see this diverse landscape of opinions and motivations around the world, the stereotypes don't do that justice. So that's what I try to do is, is really show the different perspectives and teach people who read my books, you know, in addition to having fun, of course.

Debbi (09:59): Yes, that part is important, but all of that is great. And your impetus for traveling is just like mine. I wish I could do that kind of travel more often. That's fantastic. So let's talk about your books. Your first novel was called *Canvas Sunsets Never Fade*, correct?

AC (10:22): That's correct. It was a mystery standalone, not part of a series. It was really my first attempt at publishing a mystery, not so much a thriller. There are some thriller elements in there, but it's mostly a mystery and it's rooted in, you know, the everlasting debate about nuclear weapons in the Middle East and proliferation. It goes through a journalist as the protagonist and you know, also reflects some of the travel that I've done. A lot of it is set in Mexico in Washington DC. So that was my first book, my first publication and it, you know, it propelled me into the industry. It was still, I was not fully committed to being a crime fiction author at that time. But I

think spending all that time, really understanding you know, everything that goes into writing. And also at the time I was taking fiction writing courses at Columbia College here in Chicago with some amazing mentors. So many of whom have really excelled in their profession in their fiction writing. So I think all that motivated me to continue, and that's where I, I started with a clean slate with the Jonathan Brooks series of which the third one *The Pyongyang Option* came out recently. And the next one is coming out in May called *Letter from Istanbul*.

Debbi (12:09):

I have to say about that series. I thought it was interesting that you chose a "hot shot maritime lawyer" as your protagonist, cause I thought "hot shot maritime lawyer" doesn't seem, don't seem to go together or are somehow unusual, which of course, intrigues the hell out of me. I think it's wonderful that unique and, you know, arcane even.

AC (12:41): I mean, who ever dreams of becoming a maritime lawyer in the first place? Right.

Debbi (12:47): Exactly. So how did you choose?

AC (12:51): I never considered becoming a maritime lawyer either. But I met many maritime lawyers over the years, especially in New Orleans where, you know, that's a pretty established profession given the, the commercial port there. So I, I thought it was unusual. But I could make it work particularly because the home base of this protagonist is New Orleans, which frankly is one of the most fascinating cities I've ever visited. And I lived there three years through law school, so I really wanted to somehow, you know, pay back the gratitude that I feel for that city and how it changed my life by putting it in, you know, as the main setting of this series or at least the base for this series. So the character I think, fits very well with many of the lawyers I know in the worlds in personality and history and you know, in their love-hate relationship with the city. So it's a good anchor for, for the series. Of course, the stories take place in many other interesting locations, but but I've enjoyed keeping the keeping it rooted in New Orleans in some way.

Debbi (14:17): Well, it is a fascinating city and I've always wanted to visit it, not during Mardi Gras. So I can see the a real city, you know?

AC (14:27): In fact, many people during Mardi Gras leave New Orleans and they come back after it's cleaned up. So ...

Debbi (14:33): I wouldn't mind going during both just to get a sense of the contrast, but yeah, yeah, but it would be great to visit there because I've always been sort of fascinated by Louisiana and New Orleans, given the French connection, so to speak.

AC (14:52): And also the Spanish history. I think that's something that's often forgotten is the you know, the Spanish influence in New Orleans, you know, which in some ways exceeds the French influence in terms of architecture or at least the historical buildings that are left. Many, many of them are Spanish colonial rather than French.

Debbi (15:13): That's really interesting. I didn't realize that. And of course jazz, the birthplace of jazz. I love that. Let's see. Can you give us an idea of how the story arc develops over the course of that series? What happens to the protagonist?

AC (15:33): So in many ways, he's of course, a lawyer and wants to be successful, grow his practice. He's not part of a large firm, but has really built his own firm. And through the series you also experienced the ups and downs of your, of someone who has their own legal practice. There are days and months where it's very difficult. There are days where it's very successful and you know, those, those ups and downs and sort of the inner workings of a law firm it's kind of interesting for the non-lawyers. And then, of course, the stories all deal with you know very dangerous villains a mix of espionage and legal thrillers is really how the series progresses. So that sort of, the personal challenge of this character is important in the growth of this story. And there are some tragedies that he faces actually in, in starting from the very first book, huge tragedies, and those propel him to seek out justice, not just for his clients, not just for himself. But he finds that there's a bigger duty for him to to make wrongs right.

Debbi (17:14): That's fantastic. I like that. I have to say that I started reading your first one in that series, and you do a great job in describing the courtroom scenes. And I really admire anybody who can do that because I'm terrible at that sort of thing. I don't do courtroom in my books. I do lawyer, but not courtroom.

AC (17:37): I got to tell you it's terrifying for me too, because I'm not a litigator. So my entire legal career has been as a transactional deals lawyer and a regulatory lawyer and a technology lawyer. So, for me, I require a lot more research and a lot more vetting from my litigator friends to make sure that these scenes are correct. Just like I was never a maritime lawyer. So it really took me almost a year and a half of extensive reading in maritime law and a lot of conversations with maritime lawyers to to feel comfortable that I could get it right.

Debbi (18:27): Hmm. Yeah. I was not a day-to-day litigator at all. I mean, I handled a few things in court, but not very much. So I think that's part of my discomfort, but I'm as picky as any lawyer when it comes to depiction of courtroom scenes and you did a great job, you nailed it. Brought back some memories, some bad memories.

AC (18:52): True. I mean, at the end of the day, you know, before the ARCs are produced, you know, I do send the manuscripts to probably six or seven of my close legal friends. You know, and the critiques are important to me, because I want to get it right. So I think, you know, perhaps that's one of the flaws of a lawyer writing, writing fiction in this market is that you are you know, a stickler for accuracy and detail. And I would say that that's probably why my books take longer you know, to reach the bookshelf than other authors, because we're cursed as lawyers to to want to be accurate and sometimes an overkill of accuracy. So perhaps that's a good thing, perhaps not. But it's certainly an affliction I can't get rid of.

Debbi (19:58): I understand the feeling and what I had to do was learn not to overwrite, not to explain things the way I would in a brief. It's like, no, you're writing fiction, Debbi. Keep it a little, you know, dumb it down just a bit. You're not trying to explain this to a judge. This is a story you're telling.

AC (20:20): Absolutely. You have to, you have to keep the flow, you have to keep it interesting. And you know, short sentences tend to work much better than the long ones that we put in briefs you know, or in contracts. God forbid we put any contract words in fiction.

Debbi (20:43): That's another thing.

AC (20:45): It will be a cure for insomnia, for sure.

Debbi (20:48): Yeah. If you have trouble getting to sleep, just read my book. It's full of all sorts of jargon. Yeah. Yeah. That's a great pitch. No, it isn't, and it just the way you depict the scenes without getting jargony, but create that feeling of tension when he's waiting for a piece of evidence to come in at the last moment—that was good, you know, it's like, that's the way it should be done, you know, and you can do it without being unrealistic. That's the thing that gets me. So that's why I get picky sometimes with these things, you know, it's like, I know you're trying to create tension here, but you could do it better or more realistically this way.

AC (21:34): I think that one of the challenges for lawyers is that, you know, you have to keep it entertaining, but at the same time, I don't want another lawyer to read my novel and say, that's not true. Impossible. Like you see in episodes of *Law and Order*, right? I mean, I think any lawyer watching the, these shows are, you know, will hit their head on the wall because these things just don't happen right. In reality. So that's, what I try to do is, is you know, keep as much of reality aligned with the entertainment factor without, you know, going overboard in either direction.

Debbi (22:20): Good thinking. Let's see, you also have a new series coming out that has a former JAG attorney protagonist. Can you tell us about this protagonist and what you plan to do with that series?

AC (22:32): Yeah, it's still very much in a development stage. But it will likely be, just be a trilogy and it could be a trilogy of just novellas rather than full length novels. But it's something that I've wanted to do for a long time have, have not had the time yet to invest fully in it. But it is in development.

Debbi (22:56): That's great. I think novellas, are growing in popularity at this point.

AC (23:02): Yeah. I mean, people have less time right. Less time. And what do you do with that time for entertainment when there are so many different venues from social media to all kinds of video and gaming and I mean, we're so distracted and there's so little time to invest that I think novellas are the right approach for the extremely busy individuals. So that's, that's something that I'm targeting as well. In addition to, you know, the full length novels that I have in this series, I think I want to diversify and have a novella option for my readers.

Debbi (23:46): I think that's a smart move. Do you have any time management or organizing tips you'd like to share, because seriously, you must be meticulous and organized to be able to do all that you do.

AC (24:00): I think when I chat with other crime fiction authors we, we really have, you know such a variety of different techniques. And some of us frankly, are not so organized and some are very organized. We also write differently. We, we, you know I tend to write the first four or five chapters, and then I write the ending and then I fill in the middle. I've only met a few authors who will do it that way. Some write linearly, some are completely haphazard and then have to do a lot of work at the end, try to put it all together. So, you know, writing techniques and how you build a story is a reflection of, you know, how you manage your time as well. So, you know, do you, do you force yourself to write you know, the next chapter that you're supposed to write, or do you use your gut where your idea fits and you jump into that part of the book where there's

no preceding chapter, there's no chapter afterwards and you just write it down and later on, you'll find a way to make it match.

AC (25:23): So, you know, everyone has a different style and everyone has a different time management you know, philosophy I think I've found the balance that works for me. Obviously my goal would be to have at least one book a year. But it's, you know, that that is so far impossible for me to do as a full-time lawyer. So I try to stick to an 18-month target for each book.

Debbi (25:56): That's, that's really good, actually. I think, especially given the amount of research you do and amount of detail there is in, in your work, how meticulous you are. If you can stick to that schedule, that's excellent. I was going to ask you something else. Oh, who are your favorite writers?

AC (26:18): As a as a teenager and in my twenties, Hemingway was quite influential for me. And what happened was unfortunately a curse with with my life before law school, which was as a molecular biologist. I ended really consuming all my time with scientific journals and other publications. So it stifled a lot of my ability to to read fiction. And I think that was the curse also through law school is I ended up spending almost no time reading fiction. So a lot of my happy fiction reading years were really in my teens and early twenties. And then in recent years I have caught up again in part because you know, I've met so many talented fiction writers that I try to read some of their works.

AC (27:29): It's, it's difficult to find the time. But in some ways it's, it has two purposes. One obviously it's entertaining and you can chat with your colleague fellow authors about their stories and help them out as well with blurbs. And then the other thing is also to understand your competition, which I think is vital for any author, you know. Read what's out there you know, educate yourself in the styles that others are using the plots, the character development all this is important. Not that it should necessarily influence your work. But I think it's important to do this, this competitive intelligence as an exercise to improve your writing, you know, to make yours more competitive as well.

Debbi (28:28): I agree. I learned so much by reading other people's work. I think that was probably about it. Is there anything else that you would like to say before we finish up?

AC (28:40): No, I one thing about *The Pyongyang Option* here. So the cover actually is a picture I took while I was in, in Pyongyang and this is a huge marble statue sorry, not marble copper statue of the first leader Kim Il-sung, the first leader of North Korea. And and I think what I tried to do, and this is the third book in the series, is again, I drive towards both educating the reader about really weird places. So Pyongyang is a weird place, and I was there for six days to research for this book. It is surreal. It is, in many ways you will never experience that kind of surveillance around you, that kind of limitation of activity, but you're still able to, to visit the city and tour places and see both the things that the government wants to show you and the things that they want to hide from you.

AC (29:59): They can't hide everything. So it was you know, a surreal experience. And these are the kinds of experiences that I enjoy putting in the book because not many people will travel to North Korea. Not many people will travel to the Chernobyl nuclear complex. So I visited that and the abandoned city of Pripyat. So in many ways, that's what my books try to do is to portray the

reality of these really strange places and fit them in the plot add some real interesting characters you know, to drive the story forward.

Debbi (30:41): That's wonderful. And that's the book you're giving away, right?

AC (30:45): That's correct. So I've got two to give away, a hundred dollars Starbucks card to help with the caffeine addiction and also a mouse pad featuring pictures that I took on my research trip to North Korea.

Debbi (31:02): Fantastic. Well, just look for the guest blog post on my blog, where he gives you the giveaway details and enter his contest for that. It's fantastic. Thank you very much, Andre. Thanks for being here today. I really, really appreciate it.

AC (31:20): It's a pleasure. Thanks again for inviting me.

Debbi (31:22): Sure thing. It was fun talking. And I'm enjoying your book. I just wanted to add for all you listeners and watchers on YouTube thanks so much for being here and for listening and watching, depending on what you're doing. If you enjoyed this episode, please leave a review on whatever channel you listen to it on and check out our Patreon page, which is on my website, [DebbiMack.com](http://DebbiMack.com). So with that, I'll just say, thank you very much for listening again. And in two weeks, we will have, as my guest, Sandra Woffington. In the meantime, take care and happy reading.