

The Crime Cafe with Anne Laughlin

Presented By:



Debbi: Hi everyone. My guest today has authored six crime novels, including her latest book, *Money Creek*, which she's offered as a giveaway. The first two commenters on her website on the contact page will each get a copy. She is a four-time Goldie Award winner and been shortlisted for a Lammy Award three times. She also reviews contemporary LGBTQ literature at the Lambda Literary Review. A resident of Chicago, it's my great pleasure to have with me, Anne Laughlin. Hi, Anne, how are you doing?

Anne: Hi, Debbi. I'm doing great. How are you?

Debbi: Good. Thank you. Let's see. I want to thank you, first of all, for being here today.

Anne: Oh, it's a pleasure to be here.

Debbi: And taking the time to talk with me.

Anne: Yeah.

Debbi: To all of us. And your books, they're all standalones, correct?

Anne: That's right. I have yet to start a series, though I keep thinking I will. Maybe—

Debbi: I was going to ask you.

Anne: Yeah. The book I'm writing now would work out for a series character. But you know what, when you write a series, you really should be more mindful than I'm being and have in mind kind of an overall arc for that character.

Debbi: Exactly.

Anne: Be thinking ahead several books. Yeah.

Debbi: Yes, exactly.

Anne: I don't think I can think ahead several. I don't know if I have that capacity.

Debbi: You might be surprised.

Anne: Yeah. Yeah. So yes, all standalones and kind of a combination of traditional mystery, suspense novels, police procedural, the private investigator.

Debbi: That's really cool that you have that kind of mix there.

Anne: Yeah.

Debbi: I notice that in a few of your books, quite a few it seems, you either have legal issues or a lawyer involved. And I wondered if you had a legal background.

Anne: Yes. I, for many years, worked in large law firms as a trial assistant, and that... I burned out from that eventually and had to leave the business. But while I was there, I learned so much about lawyering, and what I learned, I was able to take in with me as I was writing books. So, because it was a comfortable milieu, I used it more than once. And also, lawyers are good topic or good subjects for crime novels.

Debbi: Yes, they are, very much so. I have to agree with you there. Let's see.

Anne: In fact, the last book, *Money Creek*, that has a lawyer from a large law firm, and I don't paint the law firm in very pretty colors. [Laughing] She was an evacuee from a large law firm.

Debbi: Yeah. It can be a bit rough working at a law firm.

Anne: Oh, I was working 90 hours a week sometimes. So it was terrible.

Debbi: It's really amazing how much work lawyers put into their jobs. How much time and how much effort. And one of the things I've actually done is I've recently interviewed a local lawyer about criminal issues, and I'm kind of examining them one at a time. And I'm sort of interested in getting feedback from authors about whether they would be interested in hearing various legal issues and how they might use them or get them right or wrong in their work.

Anne: I think that would be a great service. I don't think I've seen that elsewhere.

Debbi: Wow.

Anne: I mean, and because there were certain... just simple procedural things that authors could learn would be very helpful in kind of grounding a legal issue in your book.

Debbi: I agree.

Anne: Yeah.

Debbi: I think it's great that you have that awareness. That's fantastic.

Anne: It's actually proven to be very helpful. And then the last 20 years of my career, working career, was in real estate, and I haven't used that as much, but I have plunked it in there a few times.

Debbi: Real estate. Now there was a subject I could never quite get into, real estate.

Anne: Yeah. Yeah.

Debbi: It's complex. Let's see. How do you choose your protagonist for each of your stories? What is it that inspires a particular story in you?

Anne: What is it that inspires a particular story? I usually come up with a plot idea before I come up with a character idea. And I know everyone does that differently. I try to come up with a subject that I'm going to want to write 300 pages about or a story that I think is going to be rich enough to sustain 300 pages. And then I think about what character would be interesting in

grappling with the problems that come with that plot. And there's definitely a similarity in my books and with a lot of crime... with mystery books, which is the strong female detective private investigator slash, slash. Who is brave, who doesn't take any gruff from people, and is determined beyond belief. Also, who has some big flaw or another that adds to the plots. And it provides a way for that character to grow during the course of the book.

Debbi: Absolutely.

Anne: Yeah. So one protagonist, in particular, that was different for me was a book I wrote called *The Acquittal*, and that was a private investigator protagonist. And she had bipolar disorder, and I was trying to think up what kind of flaw do I want for this protagonist? And it just occurred to me that a mental health issue is not one that had been dealt with all that much with protagonists. There's a famous Monk TV show, of course, the anxiety. Bipolar disorder is a serious disease. And I have her mostly under control through medication throughout the book because I didn't want it to be just her having one episode after another. But the tension came in as the stress grew on Josie throughout the course of the book. So did the danger that she would have another manic episode. So it provided another area of tension for the novel.

Debbi: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Anne: And it was really interesting to research.

Debbi: I can imagine.

Anne: Yeah. I talked to quite a few psychiatrists and one person who has the disorder.

Debbi: My goodness. I can imagine the research that went into that. I was going to ask you about how much research you do before you write a book and during time you write a book.

Anne: Yeah. A lot of that research comes as I'm going along in the book. For instance, right now I'm writing a book that involves a sober living house owned by a larger recovery company. And my research was into the abuse in that industry. And I wanted to find, what are certain things that ultimately are done to the residents of those homes that are corrupt basically? And it was very interesting. I mean, Florida is famous for houses like this, where they advertise these really nice houses and people come and there are three people to a room and people are using drugs in the house and all of that. This is not going to be that story, but I do introduce some well-known ways that these homes are scammed and the residents in them.

Debbi: Wow.

Anne: So that was interesting research. And I was going to write a book, and may still, about the French Resistance. I wanted to maybe set a mystery within that setting. And that research, I mean, I got really elbow deep in that research, which is fascinating. And I would like to use that.

Debbi: That is so interesting because I've always been fascinated by that aspect of the war.

Anne: I know. I mean, to me, it's extraordinary the role that women played in the Resistance. It was a phenomenal role. And the question I always ask myself is if I were put in the same situation where I was asked to parachute into enemy territory and likely be shot and killed, what

would I do? And I think that's a question that, in our relatively pampered lives, we've never had to ask ourselves.

Debbi: Yes.

Anne: And it's really an interesting question. I think particularly for women who aren't socialized to be brave, to face physical danger. And yet, these women were so brave. It was really amazing.

Debbi: Yes. Yes. There's a book actually that I read that deals with two women who were in the French resistance. I wish I could remember the name offhand.

Anne: Yeah. I probably read it.

Debbi: Something like *Nightingale* or *Nightshade*.

Anne: Oh, it's by Kristin Hannah. It's *Nightingale* and—

Debbi: *Nightingale*?

Anne: Yeah. It's fiction.

Debbi: Right.

Anne: Yeah. That was Kristin Hannah. That was a very good... Yeah.

Debbi: Yeah.

Anne: That was a very good book. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Debbi: Oh my gosh. The ending on that one.

Anne: Yeah.

Debbi: Killer. Just killer.

Anne: I also recommend in terms of fiction, a book called *Jackdaws*, J-A-C-K-D A-W-S, by Ken Follett. That might've been the most exciting book I read on the topic.

Debbi: Interesting. I'll have to check that one out. Definitely.

Anne: Yeah. Do.

Debbi: Wow. Tell us a little about your latest book *Money Creek*.

Anne: Sure. *Money Creek* is the story of Clare Lehane, who is a lawyer. Just graduated from law school probably two years before the setting of the book. And while she was in law school, she acquired a bit of a problem with amphetamines and really had an addiction to them by the time she entered the work world. And like most addicts, I mean, her problem just got worse with time. She was able to function pretty highly. But as the book goes on, that is less and less true.

And her inability to make good decisions drives the plot in many ways. I mean, she gets involved with a rural organized crime organization that is very dangerous, and there's murders and false accusations and all kinds of stuff that she ultimately... almost buries her. And so, seeing what she does to get out of that and repair herself as a person is also one of the main themes of the book.

Debbi: That's a great—

Anne:

Yeah. I've gotten lots of great comments about *Money Creek*. One interesting thing about it. I happen to like Clare quite a bit. Clare is not the most popular of my protagonists, and I think it's simply a function of the fact that she's an addict. And so she's making some dumb choices. And I think that asked a little bit more of the reader than maybe some other books. You had to kind of stick with Clare. Though I tried to make her interesting and somebody you could relate to. I, personally, have been in recovery for 32 years. So, to me, Clare's story follows a very predictable path. And one that I wanted to just... I wanted to write about it.

Debbi: I can understand that. Definitely.

Anne: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Debbi: I think any character, really, even a character that makes dumb choices can be made to be understandable and empathetic to readers if there's enough there for them to relate to and be able to say, "Okay, I can understand why in this situation she would maybe think that."

Anne: Yeah, well, I hope that I accomplish that. And I think I did. But that's the difficulty, is keeping somebody in that much trouble relatable. And addiction is its own specific thing. It's hard for non-addicts to understand the thinking of a bottoming-out addict or alcoholic. The thinking is not clear.

Debbi: Yes, yes. That is absolutely true. Your books are mostly set around Chicago, correct?

Anne: Correct.

Debbi: How much of a character is the town itself?

Anne: I think I try to keep Chicago in sight during most of the books. So I will describe where my character is going by giving street names, neighborhood descriptions. Chicago's so much more than downtown. It's a city of neighborhoods, and each of those neighborhoods has its own character. So I try to do some of that along with its more famous attributes. Like, its winter, like the beauty of Lake Michigan, like its miraculous downtown skyline, which is famous for a reason. It's really spectacular.

Debbi: So do you ever run into Sara Paretsky just walking down the street? I had to ask.

Anne: Yeah. I have six degrees of separation with Sara Paretsky—

Debbi: Oh, wow.

Anne: ... with about five people. I'd love to meet her sometime.

Debbi: Oh my gosh. Yes.

Anne: She actually lives in Hyde Park, which is down on the South Side. I'm on the North Side.

Debbi: Ahh.

Anne: Yeah. It's very North Side, South Side.

Debbi: Well, I'm a big fan of Sarah Paretsky. I got to tell you.

Anne: Yeah. Yeah.

Debbi: She was one of my early inspirations there—

Anne: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Debbi: ... in terms of before I really got into this. And what was it you're working on now? What's...

Anne: It's going to be called Olive Street House, and that's the name of this sober living house. And my character is a former cop. So I'm still dealing with the same theme of addiction, but this is more in the way of a setting as opposed to the disease. So the setting of a sober living home just seem to me to be unique, filled with opportunity to... You can populate it with all kinds of characters. And you can generate all kinds of drama based on the residents alone. So in this story, Nikki is the name of my character.

Anne: She lost her job as a homicide detective five years earlier when she crashed out of the department because of her drinking. And then she became the resident manager of this... of Olive Street House. So she's responsible for the 18 women living there. And one of these women is accused of stealing and kicked out of the house. And I don't want to say too much more, but that starts the train of the mystery. Somebody's murdered from the house. Nikki investigates. And actually, I don't know what because I'm only about a third of the way through writing it. So I'm still working out that final third of the book.

Debbi: So I take it you're more of a pantsier than a plotter?

Anne: Well, it's interesting because I've always been, I call it like a planster. It's kind of a little bit of both.

Anne: Yeah. Traditionally I plot maybe five or six scenes in advance, so I know where I'm going in the near future. I don't always have those headlights on the end of the book. So I just kind of nudge it forward. With this book, I did something a little different, and I approached it with the... There's something called a beat sheet, which is—

Debbi: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Anne: ... there are 15 points on the beat sheet that you use to kind of time the progress of your plot. And I wanted to see what it was like to be a complete plotter as opposed to a pantsier. And

so far, I'm finding it really interesting to work with. But I'm kind of at that same space where I've done outline. I've done the beats, but you still have to fill in all the details, and those come as I'm writing.

Debbi: That's a screenwriter trick too, you know.

Anne: Exactly.

Anne: And in fact, this beat sheet comes from *Save the Cat*, which—

Debbi: Oh, yeah.

Anne: Yeah. *Save the Cat* was-

Debbi: I'm familiar.

Anne: Yeah. It was originally a screenwriting method that they've just written a book and applied it to novel writing.

Debbi: Yeah, absolutely. It applies to any kind of storytelling, really, when you come down to it.

Anne: And like any kind of method, you can't adhere to it slavishly at all. So I'm finding that I'm not exactly on those 15 beats.

Debbi: There are no rules. There are only guidelines.

Anne: No rules in writing. That's right.

Debbi: Or, as somebody once said, "There are three rules to writing the novel. Unfortunately, nobody knows what they are." I think it was Somerset Maugham, but I'm not sure about that.

Anne: Oh, that is a great quote. I like that.

Debbi: It's one of the first things I ever heard, and I thought, "That is perfect."

Anne: Yeah.

Debbi: Oh my gosh. So I have to ask, are you a baseball fan?

Anne: Ah. Well, I'm historically a Cubs fan. But I was sorry to see the White Sox lose the [crosstalk 00:22:14]-

Debbi: Yeah. Yeah.

Anne: But it is so bifurcated in the city between Cubs and White Sox that I was barely aware that the White Sox were in the playoffs.

Debbi: Isn't it interesting?

Anne: Yeah, Yeah.

Debbi: Isn't that interesting?

Anne: Yeah. But I do like baseball, though the Cubs gave away all their players this year. So it's a little hard to like them right now.

Debbi: I know the feeling.

Anne: Yeah.

Debbi: The Nats did their share of giving away, and well...

Anne: Yeah.

Debbi: I'm also a big Mets fan because I'm from New York. So what can I say?

Anne: Sure. Yeah.

Debbi: And they were the underdogs when I was growing up.

Anne: Yes.

Debbi: They were the worst...

Anne: Yep. Yep.

Debbi: ... when I was growing up.

Anne: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Debbi: But we've come a long way, and I'd love to see the Cubs win the Series actually.

Anne: Again. That would be phenomenal.

Debbi: Yeah.

Anne: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Debbi: And I would love to actually experience these things again. I would love to go to Wrigley. Oh my gosh.

Anne: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

Debbi: So historic.

Anne: I grew up in the bleachers there.

Debbi: Oh, That's awesome.

Anne: A dollar for a bleacher seat.

Debbi: I grew up in the bleachers of Shea. Not quite as cool, but at the time, it was what I had.

Anne: That's right.

Debbi: What writers inspire you most?

Anne: The writers who inspire me most, I really think of that in terms of a lifetime of reading. I mean, I can name certain mystery writers that I particularly love, like Val McDermid, who's a Scottish writer, but she publishes here in the States. Sara Paretsky would be one. Of the classics, Ruth Rendell, and some people who do psychological mysteries. One influence or one writer that I particularly admire is a woman named Katherine Forrest. And she probably was one of the original writers of lesbian mysteries, which is really basically the area I've been writing in for the last 15 years.

Anne: And we can talk about that a little bit about how that's kind of ghettoized. But Katherine really broke a lot of boundaries in writing her series. And to me, as a young woman in the '70s, I go way back when coming out was extremely difficult. Her books were instrumental to me. Not only did they give me a sense of community. They also gave me a sense of justice being obtained, which is not something, at that time, in the LGBT world that we got very much of. And I think it's still an issue. So those works were phenomenal to me.

Debbi: Well, that's very interesting. You see, I've heard of the others, but I've never heard of Katherine Forrest.

Debbi: So for the benefit of listeners, how would you spell her name? Is it with a C? Catherine?

Anne: It's Katherine with a K.

Debbi: Katherine with a K.

Anne: And it's F-O-R-R-E-S-T.

Debbi: I'd be very interested in checking her work out.

Anne: Yeah. They're a little dated now. They come from quite a long time ago. And it's interesting because you really see the difference in what gay crime writers wrote in those years, as opposed to what's being written now.

Debbi: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Anne: Because then there were real issues that every gay person had to grapple with. Now in times are a little easier. You don't do the coming out story as much, or the oppression at work story much, or the bullying story as much. All of those things still happen, but they're more the exception than the rule. So the gay character has just been plopped right into regular old life. And you just proceed with them as a character who happens to be gay. They might happen to be tall as well, but it's really not much more of an issue than that.

Debbi: Right.

Anne: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Debbi: Right. It's very interesting how differently this whole issue is being treated now in the media. Books, television, and movies.

Anne: Oh, now people are kind of hungry for gay characters. There are literary agents who, of course, are the gatekeepers of the publishing world. And I've been reading things from them where they're seeking LGBTQ authors, which, believe me, was not the case before. Before it was, it's all a matter of numbers. And publishers just felt that only gay people read gay books.

Debbi: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Anne: And to the extent that that opinion is being changed, they're opening up their acceptance of books more. But I think it will really... I mean, and I believe that straight people read gay content a lot. It's not a big issue to most people.

Debbi: They certainly watch it on TV.

Anne: And yeah. And it's certainly translatable to the page, and I would love to see books, my books particularly. Now I'd love to see them move from the LGBTQ shelf in your local bookstore into the mystery shelving of the local bookstore.

Debbi: Absolutely. Yeah.

Anne: On the other hand, it's complicated because you want gay people to find your book.

Debbi: Absolutely.

Anne: Yeah. So the marketing is tricky but possible.

Debbi: I was going to ask you about the marketing. How do you handle book marketing?

Anne: Well, my publisher is a small publisher, so they don't do all that much. I think I do not enough, that's clear. I don't Twitter a lot. I do Facebook, and I try to put everything that I do up on Facebook. And I try to get booked for podcasts and panels. I appear on quite a few panels. I'm currently working with a group of other lesbian mystery writers to try to advance our visibility. So we're working on panels and presentations and things like that. But the marketing is hard. And the best thing to do, of course, is to hire a publicist. I just haven't been able to put out that kind of money yet.

Debbi: Yeah.

Anne: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Debbi: To the extent that you can do things for free, like coordinating with other authors and promoting each other. That's a great thing.

Anne: Yes. Yes. I think being in a community of writers is really important because not only do you learn a lot from them, but you get a lot of word of mouth from other writers that you know. If they've read your book, they will recommend it to other people or on their blog or in whatever. And not only that, it's just fun to be with other writers.

Debbi: Absolutely. I agree with you there, boy. What advice would you give to people who aspire to get published?

Anne: Well, quality is the thing you need to keep in mind all the time. It's when you finished writing your first draft of a book, it's not done. And to keep that in mind, because now comes the painful part of having to analyze your book, or have other... ideally get help from others with feedback about your book and making adjustments. Because getting a literary agent to look at your book, you have to be extremely polished. There's just no question. They won't go past page one, really, if you... So writing, rewriting, rewriting is the biggest advice I can give. Taking classes is huge. There just are craft issues that you're not going to be able to intuit. And just taking one or two classes will give you language and some tools that are invaluable.

Anne: And another one would be to grow a thick skin because you are going to... I am a member of a writing group. And when I get the feedback back from them, it can be extensive and kind of tough to take. But you just have to take it and review it. And take what makes sense and leave the rest, but know that it's given in your best interest. It's not given—

Debbi: That's right.

Anne:

It's not given because somebody wants something over you. And the other way skin gets thickened is just reading reviews.

Debbi: Yes.

Anne: Yeah. And—

Debbi: ... learn to take that criticism because the readers aren't going to be holding back.

Anne: No, no, they don't. And luckily, I don't have too much experience with really bad reviews, but you read them. And 15 years ago, it hurt. It hurt a lot. But now, I barely give it a thought.

Debbi: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Anne: And that's something that's just good for living your life anyway. To be able to have things like that roll off your back a bit more.

Debbi: I agree completely. I couldn't agree more. Let's see. Where can readers find you and your books online other than Facebook?

Anne: Yes. My website is annelaughlinwriter.com. And I'd love to hear from you there. There's a comments function, and also you can buy my books from the website. I try to keep the events on

there. I don't have anything coming up. I don't think. But you can also find me, where else? Maybe not enough places.

Debbi: Oh. As long as they know your website and as long as you're connecting with your readers somehow that...

Anne: Yeah.

Debbi: That's what you got to do.

Anne: Yeah. Right, right.

Debbi: Absolutely.

Anne: And my publisher's website as well, of course.

Debbi: And your publisher's also. You can buy them directly from your publisher as well.

Anne: Right. Right.

Debbi: And is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?

Anne: Well, I guess I would just add that I'm right now very excited about writing, and that hasn't been the case over the last year. I had to actually scuttle a book that I had completed two drafts on, and it was just a... I don't know. I know this happens to other writers, so I'm going to try not to think of it as wasted time. But the book didn't work, and it wasn't going to work. And so I had to put it in the drawer, which is painful.

Debbi: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Anne: But as soon as I did, I felt so free and started this new book and just having fun. So I think for all writers, the experience of writing is just such a rollercoaster. There are times when your fingers are flying on the keyboard, and you have no conception of time, and it's just magical. And other times when you question your very validity as a person, I mean—

Debbi: You start to wonder why you chose this profession.

Anne: Oh yeah. Yeah. Because clearly, I'm not good enough to do it. I mean, we're our own worst critics for sure.

Debbi: Absolutely. That's so true.

Anne: Yeah. And sometimes that voice is very loud, and it's good to talk to other writers about that. It's kind of the support other writers can give you.

Debbi: That's a great point. Thank you.

Anne: You're welcome.

Debbi: So I just want to thank you so much for spending time with us today, and I really appreciate your being here, Anne. Thanks so much.

Anne: It was really fun. I'm so glad you asked me. I appreciate that. And it was a pleasure to be here.

Debbi: Excellent. Well, I'd love to having you here and if I can get this to change over. There we go. Here I am. Voila. Here I am. Everywhere you go there you are.

Anne: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Debbi: And as of now, I just wanted to say that my own new release, *Fatal Connections*, the second Erica Jensen novel, will be coming out, hopefully, November 11th. That's the planned release date in honor of my Marine veteran protagonist. And just in time for the holidays--hint, hint! Anyhow, please consider leaving a review of the podcast and becoming a patron on Patreon. Let's see. It costs less than a Starbucks coffee to become a patron on Patreon. Patron on Patreon. I'm tongue-tied. In any case, I hope you'll consider it. And thanks again for listening. In two weeks, I'll be back and be interviewing Paul D. Marks. In the meantime, take care and happy reading.