

The Crime Cafe with Fabian Nicieza

Presented By:



[00:46] Debbi: Hi, everyone. Our guest this week is a comic book writer and editor who's best known as the co-creator of *Deadpool*, a movie I have yet to see, by the way.

[1:00] Fabian: Brace yourself.

[01:02] Debbi: So I've heard. He's also the author of some wickedly funny mysteries if the first one is anything to judge by, including the Edgar Award-nominated first novel, *Suburban Dicks*. I'm pleased to have with me today-- How do you pronounce it? Is it Fabian Nicieza?

[1:31] Fabian: Ah, that was almost perfect there, Debbi. I really congratulate you. You fall under the 0.01% of Americans who pronounce it properly. The way I say it is in Spanish. It's Fabian Nicieza. In English, it's Fabian Nicieza. And often in American, it's Fabian Niconza. But you did perfectly.

[1:55] Debbi: Nicieza.

[1:56] Fabian: Nicieza

[1:57] Debbi: Nicieza. I like the español pronunciation?

[2:02] Fabian: Español. Well, I'm from Argentina originally and it's a Spanish name from Spain. Yeah. So my grandparents emigrated from northern Spain to Argentina in the early 1900s.

[2:14] Debbi: Well, Fabian Nicieza, welcome to the show. And I'm glad to have you here.

[2:20] Fabian: Thank you, Debbi. It's a pleasure to be here.

[2:21] Debbi: Wonderful. When I started reading that first book, just based on the look inside feature, it didn't take long for me to start laughing out loud, literally. All I can say is, "God, what a first chapter!" You really know how to pull a person into the story.

[2:41] Fabian: I appreciate that. I had about 20 years to make sure that I had it right. That's how long it took me to write the book from my original-- I mean, I had the original idea for the book, based on things that were happening in my real life, and I just extrapolated it into fiction. It really extrapolated as an end result. But that opening chapter quite honestly, was something that I'd already conceived of in 1995. I had the book's beginning, middle and an end, and characters really well thought out back then. I just either never wrote it because I had other paying work I had to do, or I was never confident with my own prose. So I created excuses for myself why I didn't think it was good enough, and I should just focus on this paying work I have to do right now. And that's also understandable because, you know, professional writers have to earn a living and it's not always easy. So you got to pay the mortgage, and you got to pay the kids' college tuition and all that.

[3:34] Debbi: That's right.

[3:35] Fabian: By 2017, I felt that it was almost like a little bit of a tug, "If I don't do this now, I may never do it." And, so, I started in late 2017 and almost hunt and pecked a little bit of my way through because it never was my primary focus. It couldn't be because I had, you know, I had work to do, assignments to do. So it took me till early 2019 to finish it because it wasn't something I focused all day long on every day of the week, as far as my writing goes. And when I finished the manuscript, I'd had a few people reading things along the way, and they kept being

encouraging, which both confused me because I wasn't sure if they were just saying nice things to me, but also excited me because it made me think, "Wait a minute, this might be readable. This might be okay. My prose may not be bad because I finally wrote in my own voice rather than trying to write in another writer's voice, or write to genre, even write to what my expectations are of what genre is, or what an audience of that genre may want." Maybe it was good that it took me so long to write it because at the age I was at with the experience I had, I kind of just said, "The hell with it. Let's just go on, let's just write how I want to write it." And that's what I did.

[5:07] Debbi: I think when you reach a certain age, you realize, "Hey, I got to do it now or I may never do it."

[5:13] Fabian: Yeah, definitely, because it becomes much easier to create excuses not to, when you're getting older, and you don't have as many financial responsibilities if you're lucky, which I am, because, you know, the mortgage was paid off, and the kids were finishing, the second kid was finishing college, so that horrific tuition cost was gonna be gone. And I was like, "Alright, so if my financial expectations kind of are getting reduced a little bit now, what's my excuse gonna be?" You know, I better do it because I won't start at age 70, probably, you know. And I turned 60, the year it came out, which was kind of cool. It was kind of nice that, that was the year that was because it was also a year where an animated cartoon series for 4-6 year-old kids that I had developed a couple of years earlier also came out. So within a couple of months of the book coming out, I wrote something that was aimed at four-year-olds, and I wrote something that was aimed at 44-year-olds, you know, at the same exact time.

[6:18] Debbi: Fantastic. That's wonderful. What inspired you to create this particular protagonist, and write this particular book, in this particular way?

[6:29] Fabian: Well, the particular way was just my own sad, twisted brain.

[6:33] Debbi: Tell me your mom didn't work for the FBI.

[6:36] Fabian: No, it did not. No. The genesis of the book came first, then the characters came second. And the genesis of the book, like I said, was based on real-life circumstances. We had a gun club on the other side of a pond behind my house that we had moved into in 1993. And we tried to get them to stop outdoor shooting because they had the propensity to once in a while feel like lobbing bullets in our general direction. And, we lost that town council battle five to four, to ban outdoor shooting. We didn't want to stop them from indoor shooting, the gun club had been there for 50 years. But it was like six residents of the town I lived in West Windsor and the rest of the members of the club were from other towns. And it just felt ludicrous that this new neighborhood was built on the other side of the pond that was in the same general direction as their pistol berms were.

So when we lost five-four, my first inclination as a writer is, "I need to come up with a story that gets revenge on them." And that's what it was. I thought, "What if we found out something that makes the gun club look so bad, that it forces them to shut down?" And I thought, "What if members of the gun club had killed someone years ago, and the body starts turning up now, that would really put them in trouble, right?" And as you can tell, if you read the book, it really did. And it used parts of that in theory, but it really extrapolated itself into something different. And that was born of the time that it took me to write. And all of the characters really are kind of

amalgams and mishmashes of different people and personality traits that were in my life around that time. Friends, many of whom are still friends to this day, we all were of the same age, we were all around the same time period. You start getting married, you get your first condo, your first townhouse, your first house, then you start having your first kids. And all of us were around that same, you know, early 30s age where we were all starting to have our first kids, and we'd all gotten our first homes.

So the character of Andrea came born of the idea of, "What if this woman who should have been this can't be this now because she is pregnant with her fifth kid?" I think that was just exaggeratedly burdensome on purpose for the sake of parody and heightened drama. And Kenny was really a riff on myself at that time. I had the idea when I was around 34. And I'd already accomplished so much of what I wanted to accomplish when I was a kid, writing comics. And at that point, selling tremendous amounts of comics at a time when comics were selling a lot and writing the number one title for Marvel for a few years, the *X-Men* and I thought to myself, "What's next? What do I do next? What if this is the biggest? What if this is it? What if this is the most I'm going get to do or the biggest thing I'm going to get to do?"

So that inherent creative insecurity, and I know it's claiming a small violin, it's "cry me a river" because you know, I was selling a million comics a month, writing multiple titles for Marvel Comics, that it's not a sad tale of woe by any means. But you do ask yourself, "What do I do next? What's next?" So I thought of Kenny, as a character, "What if he reached the peak when he was in college? What if the fact that he's the youngest person to ever get a Pulitzer Prize in journalism because he dug the story up that ended up destroying a governor's administration?" What if 10 years later, he's a complete screw-up, you know, he just, he peed away all of that opportunity that he had, right? And I thought that made for interesting protagonists because they're not perfect characters, by any means. I don't want them to be. They're intelligent, but they say and do very stupid things. They have skill, but they're also incredibly unskilled in other ways and really socially awkward.

So I just thought that they made for interesting characters that were in an interesting time in their life. Of course, if you had told me that I'd be writing about 29-year-olds and 33-year-olds when I was 59, I wouldn't have been able to conceive that. So the writing of the actual book was interesting because I'm writing younger characters, through the prism of the experiences I've already had. You know, I've already had the kids, I've already had the mortgages, I've already had the commute into Manhattan, all of that stuff. So I'm writing almost-- my omniscient narrator has that snark to it because it knows better than the characters what their own lives are like because it's already lived those lives, you know, but which I hoped would bring an interesting tone to it.

[11:52] Debbi: I think that's the way most of us go about it. You know, it's kind of, all of it comes from the content of our lives. We take that content and kind of shape it and exaggerate it and people it with characters that we come across. Do you have a plan as far as like a series based on this book? And the one you just came out with?

[12:18] Fabian: Well, you could always have a plan, but it depends on whether the publisher wants to do that plan.

[12:18] Debbi: Do you think that's gonna happen?

[12:25] Fabian: I have no idea, to tell you the truth, honestly.

[12:27] Debbi: Do you want it to happen?

[12:28] Fabian: I tend to be bluntly honest in my interviews. It was a two-book contract, which I was very pleased about because there were multiple publishers interested in the first manuscript. And as a way to try to sweeten that deal during the course of the publishers bidding on it, it turned into a two-book contract. So, I knew all along that I was going to get a chance to tell the sequel. Would I like to tell more stories with Andie and Kenny? Yes, I absolutely would. I know that I have, over the course of 20 years, I've developed six to eight different books that I would want them to be in. I don't think I'd want to write them forever, but I come from comic books where you write sequential monthly books, and often you write them for years. So you could write 50 issues, 75 issues, 100 issues of a comic book. And that's the equivalent of, you know, 10 years of your life, right? So my mindset is such that I can extrapolate the lives of the characters and their children all the way through high school into college for the kids. I know where I would like to see them go. If you read the second book, there's a major life change happening for one of the characters, and a major life lesson for another character. And that's all in order to be prepared to write a third book if I get that chance. And I hope I do get the chance. I hope Putnam wants to do more. And quite frankly, if not Putnam, maybe somebody else. I think that the characters have resonated with an audience already. And I'd like the opportunity to continue providing stories for that audience.

[14:10] Debbi: It seems to me that the Jersey suburbs of New York provide a really great breeding ground for stories. I mean, I've seen it in like Janet Evanovich books, I've seen it in *Clerks*, I've seen it in all sorts of media. What are your thoughts on that?

[14:29] Fabian: I think I have a lot to compare it to because I've been fortunate enough to visit a lot of this country and a lot of cities in this country and other countries as well. But I've been in 45 states in this country, and I've seen a lot of it and there is a certain uniqueness to the Tristate Area. And certainly the region I'm in which is really kind of trapped between Philadelphia and New York City and they're very different cities in a lot of ways. I'm a New York City guy. That's where we emigrated to. When we immigrated here, we lived in Queens in New York for a few years before moving out to Jersey. But I've been in New Jersey since 1968. So I've been here for the vast majority of my life. And, I find it a very interesting place, because it's incredibly brash, bold, quick and smart, but also incredibly insecure. And incredibly tentative and incredibly defensive. And I think that that makes for an interesting conflict. It's not all one or the other, the two things don't actually work together, the two things seem to butt into each other. And that creates interesting people and interesting conversation.

The suburbs where I live is a combination of people who have to commute into Manhattan to the train station. I wrote so much about it because it's a prevalent part of my life for years because I worked full-time in Manhattan for years. And then I continued to go into the city a couple of times a week, working on different things, that it's an ingrained part of my life. The current house I live in is even close enough to the train station where you can hear the whistle, every time a train comes down. And I find that there's a certain nobility to that exhaustion, you know, there's a certain strength in enduring that grind. And it is a grind, you know, non-pandemic years, you know, taken into account, I described it in the book as "train face". And to me, I coined that phrase 20 years ago, when I saw someone at the train station I hadn't seen for

like five years because I stopped going in full time into the city. And he hadn't stopped going in full time. And just in five years, he looked 10 years older than me, I was like, "Wow, time works very differently when you're stuck on New Jersey Transit."

So I just find New Jersey to be, it's a very interesting place. And when you have to endure that kind of daily grind, there's a certain nobility to it. It's a sad nobility, but it can also be a very funny one as well. And the people who have to do that on a daily basis, they don't make up the totality of the population where I live, but they infuse a big part of it because the train station here is the second largest in the state, and it feeds a lot of people into Manhattan. There's plenty of other people who have to commute down to Philly, they got car face, but the people who take New Jersey Transit, they got train face. And I think that there should be a sense of hope and joy when you're looking at it, but you shouldn't sugarcoat it, there should also be a sense of frustration and exhaustion, that is part and parcel of our daily lives, especially in the suburbs, more so than city living, which tends to be both incredibly crowded and incredibly lonely at the same time. You know, that's city living. You know, and I know city living.

I know plenty of people who still live in the city, contemporaries and peers of mine since I was in my 20s who still live in the city. And absolutely, there's a sense of people everywhere and you're alone anywhere. And that's an interesting thing to write about too which I think I tried to get into a little bit in the second book. There's a group of characters that Kenny's now a part of in the second book, *The Self-Made Widow*, that are city-ites, and there is a certain community among them, but each of them have their own certain level of loneliness as well. In the second book, I tried to offset the suburban setting with a little bit of the city and I wanted to bring a little bit of my experiences and my thinking about city life and urban people to the book as well and hopefully put the same kind of lens on it that I did to West Windsor, Plainsboro, and New Jersey.

[19:19] Debbi: Yeah, yeah. I guess you're about to commute boys, to do that into DC, no more. [crosstalk] Oh my gosh! Let's see, what authors do you like to read? What inspires you?

[19:32] Fabian: You know, I got to be honest, I didn't read prose fiction for many years. I think subconsciously it's because I wasn't writing it and I really wanted to be, but ironically enough, once I sold the manuscript, I started reading like crazy again. I read a lot of [inaudible] start a series book. I tend to keep going with the series books. So I read all the Michael Connelly Bosch books and most of *The Lincoln Lawyer* so far. I read Louise Penny's books, which my wife is an enormous fan of and I'm a little less of a fan of them but I still like them and I read them. So I've read three of her books. I've read Janet Evanovich, I read Sue Grafton because I really like their professionalism and their skill and their ability to craft those quick, incredibly entertaining and easy-to-access stories that they do. And it's a real skill to be able to do that and they do. I've read several books, including the latest one by a friend of mine, Alex Segura, who just wrote a book called *Secret Identity*, which is out, which is a murder mystery set in the comic book industry of the 1970s, and it's really fun. And I read it as a comic book guy, and try to say, "Oh, who's this character based on and who's that character based on?" because we both know the real people involved. And I've also really gotten into Sean Cosby as well as *Razorblade Tears* and *Blacktop Wasteland*. He's won several awards for his first few novels and he's an excellent writer.

[20:23] Debbi: Yes, he is. Let's see, what was it like adjusting from writing comics to writing a book? Did it help you in any way?

[21:29] Fabian: Tremendously, yeah. I think, ultimately, it helped me a lot. It helped me with my sense of pacing, my sense of structure, understanding that each chapter has to be kind of a self-contained thought unit. And, within that, you have to tell your own mini-story within a chapter, no different than a single issue of a comic book that is part of a continued run, like *Spider-Man* or *X-Men*. It taught me to try my best to end each chapter with a little bit of a kick that makes you want to go, "I'm gonna read one more chapter tonight before I close the book." And I think *Suburban Dicks* did that pretty well. I was happy when I read the book, like myself, as a book reading experience in bed. I liked the fact that there were a few times I actually said, "Oh, I'm going to read one more chapter", and I knew what I wrote. And I feel, although it's up to other people to tell me that, whether they agree with me, whether I'm an idiot or not, that it really helped me with my dialogue. I am a little coy about the fact that I'm comfortable handling dialogue of different people and different characters. And I've been coy about it because it was one of the first and best compliments I got from a contemporary of mine 30 years ago. He said that, "If someone's reading your comics out loud, like a teen book of characters, like *The Avengers*, let's say, you can close your eyes and if someone reads the dialogue out loud, you know who each character is." And that was a tremendous compliment I got from a mentor and a good friend of mine who said that early on in my career.

So I try not to waste dialogue and I try to make everything they say resonate. Especially in a book because it's not a screenplay, it's not constant dialogue, so it's got a narrative voice and a narrative point of view, sometimes which may be in conflict to what the characters are saying because the characters might have their own perception of something that isn't necessarily the reality that the narrator is trying to present to you. Which is why I don't think I want to write first-person narration books because I prefer that snarky omniscient narrator, that distinct understanding and awareness of the story that's being told because my characters can be sometimes a little self-delusional, shall we say, may not always be on the right path. Like in the second book, Andrea Stern, the main character of the book is investigating a murder that may not be a murder. And I wanted other characters to question whether she's really investigating a murder or whether she's inventing a murder for the sake of having something to do because she needs to do it. And even to the point where the character has to question herself a couple of times, which is not her nature to question herself. She's pretty certain she's always right all the time, so I did that on purpose because I wanted, in the second book, for Andrea's infallibility as a sleuth to be called into question.

[24:46] Debbi: That's great. Characters like that are great when they're self-delusional. I mean, you can play with them so much.

[24:52] Fabian: Yeah, yeah. And she has a lot of rationalizations to her and she's made a lot of mistakes in her life. One of the main criticisms the first book received from readers who were a little on the fence about it, which I will add, was an incredible minority of the readers. But the ones who are on the fence with that, one of their main problems there is, "Why is she pregnant for a fifth time? If she hates her kids, why is she having a fifth kid?" And I'm like, that's a little black and white, and life isn't that black and white. She doesn't hate her kids at all, she hates her life. There's a different reality to that, you know? As a result, I like a character who knows enough about herself to know that she's not living the life she should be but often lacks the courage, lacks the ability, lacks the fortitude, even, to make the choices that would have to be made in order to live the life that she knows she should be living. The first book is her

discovering the life she should be living because it's a rediscovery of her talents and abilities as a detective, as a sleuth, right? And in the second book, it's about moving past the impediments, that in many ways she has put in front of herself, to do what needs to be done. And by the end of the second book, she's closer to being who she should be. And if there's a third book, knock on wood, that she will be at a different place again in the third book, the way she is in the second book.

[25:05] Debbi: Well, all I can say is, I hope you have a third book because that sounds like a powerful story. What advice would you give to anyone who's interested in a career as a writer, comics or otherwise?

[26:45] Fabian: Make sure you have a career first, then try to get a career as a writer. A very small percentage of people who either claim or want to be professional writers actually earn enough income to be professional writers, so it's a really difficult thing to do. It doesn't mean that the people who do it are necessarily better or the best by any means at all, it just means that in many cases, they got themselves into a position which gave them the opportunity to write. And then they capitalize on that opportunity by producing work that either the people buying the material, editors, publishers wanted, and the people reading the material, an audience, was interested in. So I'm the latter. I got lucky in that I got a job at Marvel Comics and I was on staff there and I started selling my stories while I was on staff. But before I got that job, I was writing. I was writing all the time. My biggest piece of advice is to always be writing. Something, anything, everything all the time. Set yourself up for different challenges. Write a poem, write a song lyric. It doesn't matter if you're not a poet, it doesn't matter if you're not a lyricist. It's a different kind of writing, which requires a different kind of tool set, and it's good to master different toolsets.

And I have written a wide variety of material across multiple platforms over 35 years. I'm predominantly known as a comic book writer, but I've done advertising writing, I've done academic writing, I've done narrative development for video games and feature films, and franchise bibles for toy properties and movies for video game companies. I've done a chief creative officer of a virtual world startup company that was kind of like Club Penguin for kids. I mentioned earlier, I developed an animated series for Stan Lee, and a company called Genius Brand in California and it went live on a streaming platform last year with Arnold Schwarzenegger as the voice of the main character. And I'm not an animation writer per se, and I'm certainly not someone that well versed in writing for 4-6 year-olds, but I was able to develop the entire story world as the animated series is set it. So because I had such a diversity of experience and interests, I want to try new things and different things. I think it makes me a much better writer and anytime I focus back on whatever platform I'm working on, I feel any other experience helps me on that platform just like other experiences helped me to write a prose novel for the first time when I was 59 years old.

So part of the process is to write, always write. The second step is, find the means to get eyeballs on your material. The only way that you can know if it's good or if it entertains people, or if it moves people, or if it angers people, whatever your goal is as a writer, you need to have people read it and respond to it. And you need to have a thick skin to their response because, boy, if you don't have a thick skin to the audience's response, you're going to crumble and you're going to

just not be able to do it. And you have to be able to take excessive feedback. It's what it amounts to, especially nowadays in the age of the internet, where it's instantaneous, you know?

[30:25] Debbi: Yes, Yes.

[30:26] Fabian: I come from a world where in comics there used to be letters pages in every issue, so people actually had to make the effort to write a letter and mail it to the company. And you had to read through all those letters, and you had to understand there's gonna be critical ones in there. But at least back then they took the effort to write and paid the money for a stamp. Nowadays, yelling is easy. You can just yell on the internet in seconds.

[30:50] Debbi: Yeah. Or put up a terrible review on Amazon or whatever.

[30:53] Fabian: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, yeah.

[30:55] Debbi: Well, I'm running out of time here. So I just want to say, is there anything else you want to say before we go?

[31:02] Fabian: What I want to say is that I hope your audience gives *Suburban Dicks* a try. And I hope they give the new book coming out in just a couple of weeks, *The Self-Made Widow*, a try. They're each independent mysteries featuring continuing characters. You don't need to read the first one to read the second one, although it probably helps. But I've tried very hard to make the second book self-contained. And the information you need to know about the characters' previous experiences are in the book. And I hope readers give it a try because the readers who have read them have been pretty positive about them and it's really rewarding and validating to hear that. So, I'm enjoying it and I hope I get to do more.

[31:46] Debbi: That's fantastic. And thank you so much for being here.

[31:50] Fabian: My pleasure.

[31:51] Debbi: It's been an honor, Fabian.

[31:54] Fabian: Either one.

[31:55] Debbi: Either one, either one.

[31:58] Fabian: Thank you very much, Debbi.

[31:59] Debbi: It was my pleasure. Thank you. And for all of you out there listening, I just would like to remind you that we have bonus episodes, chapters from one of my novels in audio and text forms and other perks for supporters on Patreon. So, check the Patreon page and click follow to get a sense of what's on there. Also, please subscribe to the podcast and leave a review if you would. I hope you enjoyed the show and you will leave a review. And on that note I'll just say, see you in a few, and until then, happy reading.