

The Crime Cafe with Dwyer Murphy

Presented By:



Debbi (00:52): Hi everyone. My guest today is a writer and editor whose work has appeared in many publications, including *The Common*, *Rolling Stone*, *Guernica*, *The Paris Review Daily*, and *Electric Literature*. He's also editor-in-chief of CrimeReads a very popular site for crime and thriller readers, including myself. I read it. He is also the author of the recently released novel AN HONEST LIVING. What a great title for a novel about a lawyer. Thank you very much. <Laugh> And it's really a good book. I have to say that. It's my pleasure to introduce my guest Dwyer Murphy. Hi Dwyer. How you doing today? <Laugh>

Dwyer (01:41): Great. Thank you for having me. This is a real trip. I love, you know, I love to talk crime and noir with real aficionados. That's my favorite part.

Debbi (01:48): Oh yeah. And movies. Oh, you mentioned movies in your book and I'm like, I'm in. I love movies, especially those old noir movies. So your book I have to say really is like a love letter to New York City. <Laugh> I'm really enjoying it as a crime reader and as a native New Yorker. So what prompted you to write the book? What inspired you?

Dwyer (02:15): Well, it was something I had always wanted to do and had tried many times over the years for a long time, I was kind of writing, trying to write a very different type of book. I had a specific sort of very somber series, literary novel that I felt like needed to get out of me and nobody in the world needed to read that including me. And I sort of became disenchanted with the prospect at some point. And then at that point had already rediscovered my love of crime fiction and noir. And my wife was my wife was pregnant with our first child and we were realizing how dramatically our lives were about to change. And we had this sort of nervous habit that we would do. We'd stay up late watching old movies. And we were watching *Chinatown* one night and we had this strange habit where we kind of discuss different lawsuits the characters might bring against one another.

It's just how we like to watch movies. So my wife is a lawyer and I'm a retired lawyer and that's just how we, how we amuse ourselves, I guess. And so we were talking through the plot to *Chinatown* and what kind of suits Jake Gittes and Evelyn Mulwray and all these characters might bring against one another, talking about these old common law torts and things, and it suddenly occurred to me that like this could be the beginning of a, a very bizarre sort of crime novel. And the next morning I, I started the first chapter and it's more or less intact in the book as is. And that, that became the novel.

Debbi (03:48): Oh my gosh. That sounds like almost like the basis for a really cool podcast when you go down to it. Want to do one <laugh> I may be serious.

Dwyer (03:59): Exactly. I do. I, I like old movies in that way. It's like a very strange engaging way to watch a movie. And it's just this little hobby that we kind of came up with and, you know, *Chinatown* wasn't the, the only one, but that was one that we kind of kept returning to. For some reason it gave us comfort. I think that it's probably a bizarre thing to say that when you're, you know, expecting your first child and can't sleep and you're staying up late to watch *Chinatown* as a comfort, but for some reason it, it really was for us, there's something about the rhythms and the textures of that kind of movie, which you know, itself is, you know, it's a neo-noir. It's sort of looking back on another era trying to recapture something from a lost period.

Debbi (04:41): Exactly. Yeah. And there's a comfort in that, in, in kind of going to those familiar tropes.

Dwyer (04:48): Right. And I think, you know, it made some sense to me to be, you know, I wanted to write a, an actual private eye novel. I love private eye novels, but it didn't seem so obvious to me how you would write a relatively contemporary one. This is set in 2005, 2006, Brooklyn. How you would write a contemporary version of that, because I just don't know that many practicing PIs. There's a few out there and I've worked with a few when I was a lawyer, but you know, it's not the same kind of profession that maybe it once was, but it occurred to me that a, a washed out corporate lawyer or somebody who was kind of doing neighborhood jobs and piecing together cases could act sort of in the same way. Formalistically that a, a traditional private eye might act in a fiction.

Debbi (05:35): Yeah. Yeah. I, I, I also write about a lawyer who solves mysteries, so <laugh>, I know. Yeah, she's still practicing law.

Dwyer (05:47): It's just a useful thing, right? Well, because it's, you know, they, a lawyer can gain entry into rooms that a lot of people could not, and, you know, they're invited into dens of corruption in a way that most people aren't. So it gives this plausible excuse to have somebody walk in the door and be allowed into other people's confidences immediately.

Debbi (06:09): Exactly. Right. Yes. so when, why did you decide to give up practicing law and was that difficult for you? Was it a difficult decision?

Dwyer (06:21): No, it was the easiest thing in the world to <laugh> to quit being a lawyer. I, the version of the law, I think I had probably like a lot of people been influenced by a lot of movies and books growing up and believed I was going to be, you know, peacocking around in a courtroom, convincing jurors, you know, fighting for the side of justice <laugh> and then you know, accumulated just a mountain of school debt going to a tremendously expensive law school. And the only job that could allow me to climb that mountain of debt was to work in corporate law and Midtown Manhattan, and to be working for, you know, insurance companies and doing a lot of presentations to boardrooms and private equity funds. And it was not the kind of law that was to me personally, emotionally satisfying in any way. And I'd always wanted to kind of lead a more literary life. And so as soon as I was able to get out of that debt and put a little money together, and with the support of my very understanding wife who encouraged me, I was able to, you know, very gleefully liberate myself from the profession.

Debbi (07:29): Yeah. Yeah. I hear you loud and clear as far as like the support of spouse part too, <laugh> I mean, it helps an awful lot.

Dwyer (07:41): It does, and there's always, you know, I, I sort of went through a period when I first left the law where I just, I wanted nothing to do with it. I couldn't stand the idea of it. And then, you know, a few years go by and you remember some of the things that you loved, and to be honest, you know, it's an extremely formative experience going through law school and practicing it, rewires your brain in a lot of ways. And I think I, it took some years for me to understand that there were parts of the profession that were indelible and had, you know, I, I can't escape and don't necessarily want to, and I tried to put some of that into the book as well, because my character, while acting as a private eye is sort of, you know, he is a lawyer and has approached his life in a, in a lawyerly way. At least I say that, but you know, his version of a lawyerly way is to just go out and walk the streets and smoke a joint and meet some friends in a bar. But, you know, always just kind of a telematic reasoning and sitting across from somebody at

a diner, working through problems, the, those are the things I enjoy the conversational aspects of the law.

Debbi (08:49): Yeah. And all the problem solving stuff. You're always thinking things through trying to be rational.

Dwyer (08:55): It's a very, you can't help it. I think like once you've had that training, you, you can never quite get rid of it, I suppose.

Debbi (09:02): That's, it, it, it molds your brain. Turns your gray matter, you know, what was it that Houseman said in that movie? Something about turning your, the mush in your head into a functioning legal brain or something. I don't know. *The Paper Chase*.

Dwyer (09:18): I do feel like sometimes I've been told that my conversational style is somewhat like a deposition because I really like long conversations. And I like asking probing questions in slightly different ways. And it sometimes can seem like I just don't want to talk about myself. That I just keep asking question after question.

Debbi (09:36): <Laugh>, I do the same thing,

Dwyer (09:38): It's just like, it's the way I like to have a conversation with somebody and yeah. You know, from, you know, you're a good interviewer and I think that that's something you get. So I've been accused from time to time of, you know, running a, a dinner party table, like a deposition. But I, I find it fun. I don't know if other people do

Debbi (09:56): That's funny. How did you get involved with CrimeReads?

Dwyer (10:01): Well, originally it was, I was writing a lot of sort of literary profiles and journalism and writing for the website LitHub. And we had this idea, we were looking to kind of expand LitHub, which had become at that time sort of surprisingly and wildly popular and just kind of reaching millions of people a month. And we were looking for new areas to branch out. I was hired originally as the sports editor. We had this idea that we were going to commission a lot of novelists to go off to like minor league baseball tryouts and write these sort of Plimpton-esque, you know, mid-century or *Sports Illustrated* style, 5,000 word pieces about like curiosities from the world of sports. Quickly realized that that was not, you know, that those, those magazines had quit doing that kind of literary journalism for a reason. And that maybe it wasn't so sustainable and decided that we instead were going to look to what our readers actually wanted rather than trying to spoon-feed them something else.

And there was a huge crossover between people reading literary fiction and crime fiction, obviously like the, those two areas, I think, bleed into one another and feed off of one another in a really interesting way. And, you know, I, like I mentioned before, I was trying to sort of write a different kind of literary fiction at the time, but I was writing it at this place called the Center for Fiction which is this amazing institution in New York. They're in Brooklyn now across from Grand Central for anybody who wants to check it out. They have a somewhat new building there, and it's really just, just beautiful, but for a long time, for hundreds of years, that they were on 47th street in this great townhouse that was kind of nestled amongst the skyscrapers in the diamond district. And they have this great library. I was writing there and kind of one day just couldn't stand what I was writing any longer.

I really didn't like it. And I decided I was gonna pick up a crime novel and just enjoy myself. And I ended up picking up Walter Mosley's DEVIL IN A BLUE DRESS and spending just eight hours gripped by it and decided to give myself an education in crime fiction and was able to do that. So when it came time at LitHub, when we decided that we were going to spin it off into this sort of crime fiction vertical, I was the crime fiction hand. And along with a couple of my colleagues in <inaudible>, we were able to launch this new website. It was a nice, you know, piece of fortune for me. I get to spend all day reading crime novels. People don't quite believe that that's a job, but that's essentially it. It's great.

Debbi ([12:34](#)): Yeah. Yeah. It's great. It's really great. Do you plan to write a sequel to your book?

Dwyer ([12:40](#)): I do. Yeah. so next summer there will be another novel out that is not a sequel to this one, a standalone heist novel set in Massachusetts on a beach town in the summer. That's called stolen coast and that'll be out next summer. And then hopefully if everything goes, you know, according to plan the summer after that, there will be a sequel to AN HONEST LIVING where a couple of the characters go down to Miami and I get to really indulge my Elmore Leonard fascination fully. Elmore Leonard to me is just, you know, the, the perfect crime writer and somebody I come back to all the time. And so the, the prospect of sending a couple of characters down to Miami to act out sort of bizarre literary mystery was, was too good to, to give up.

Debbi ([13:28](#)): Elmore Leonard is like a God to me. <Laugh> Yeah. And Kenneth Millar, you know, Ross Macdonald.

Dwyer ([13:38](#)): Yeah. Well, Ross Macdonald was probably the person I was reading the most when I started AN HONEST LIVING. I was reading a lot of Ross Macdonald and Margaret Millar actually. So, a married couple of course, you know, writing very different types of mysteries, but both really refined and elegant and interesting in their own ways. And actually I think the fact that they were married to authors writing in the same space in such dramatically different ways, kind of influenced a little bit of the plot of AN HONEST LIVING as well, and worked its way into some of what the characters get up to in the relationships there as well. But the Lou Archer novels to me, I mean, I love Chandler and Hammett, but I, I think when I come back to the sort of perfect private eye novel, I usually come back to a Ross Macdonald, Lou Archer novel, and that, that sort of center today. So stuff that, it just really hits me where I live.

Debbi ([14:31](#)): Yeah, me too. Ross Macdonald seems to me, has always struck me as a person who could write like Chandler, but make real sense of it as opposed to Chandler who just didn't really care about plot that much, so much as the style.

Dwyer ([14:46](#)): <Laugh>Which I really respect. I gotta, and with Macdonald, I think Macdonald's is just Ross Macdonald's is just as stylized, but it's a really refined you know, poured over, boiled down. However you want to characterize its style that you get the impression that he maybe has some of those same, you know, wild uproarious metaphors and poetry in him that Chandler lets out, but that he has kind of packed it down into a more condensed form or denied it to himself. It's, it's a really interesting style, but I think sometimes he gets the rap is being like, you know, Chandler, but without the poetry. And I would say that, you know, if anything, he maybe has more of that poetry in his work. And I, I, I love it for that reason.

Debbi (15:39): I would agree with you there. I, I think he was every bit the stylist with your interest in movies, have you ever considered writing screenplays?

Dwyer (15:51): I think that probably that's in the near future, but nothing I can discuss as of the moment, but I, I do love movies and obviously wanted to work them into this novel because to me like the, the version of New York that I moved to in my early twenties was a city full of movie theaters. And like, that's a large part of why I wanted to go. I think people forget that if you wanted to see good movies, you know, art house, independent foreign films, or just interesting repertoires, you needed to be in a place that was showing them all the time. And there was no place like it, but New York, you know, there was a movie theater on every couple of blocks. You could find a great old movie theater showing a different repertory and then go to the diner afterwards and talk about it with your friends.

So that was a version of New York that was still around in the time that I set the novel in 2005. And we took a lot of pains in working through the plot and the timing, my editor, and I making sure that, for example, in 2006, the characters could go see a particular screening of a Melville movie that was showing at the film forum. We wanted to get that stuff right, because it might seem like, you know, detail or slightly beside the point. But I think it does capture the atmosphere of that city in that time and the people who were living there for, you know, for reasons of deep appreciation for movies.

Debbi (17:16): Mm-Hmm <affirmative>. And so I would assume then you did quite a bit of research on that time period.

Dwyer (17:25): Yeah, it was fun. I mean, I was around in New York during that time, but it was fun to go back and read all of like, you know, go find archival stuff from the Village Voice or Time Out New York and find out exactly what was going on as opposed to just my sort of nostalgic version of what my life was like when I was in my early, mid-twenties kind of going around New York. The character is a little bit older than I was at that time, but otherwise shares a lot of my, my background and, you know, my name and attributes and professional experiences. But I wanted to, you know, go to the record and make sure that that stuff, what was happening was kind of captured on the page. And also there's a large plot that involves the trade in rare books, a specific type of rare book, a true crime what's called trial pamphlets.

Lawyers are typically familiar with them, but I don't know how familiar other people are. You know, like sort of salacious accounts, mostly from the 19th century, cheaply printed, widely distributed salacious accounts of crimes, confessions of murderers, and like people with, you know, reporters would go around and try to capture the full story of an arrest, trial, conviction, execution of a notorious criminal, and then put out their version of it. It was usually wildly inaccurate, but had kind of a certain magic of its own and things mostly fell apart and were lost the time because that's what they were designed to do. But in New York you can go to some of the law libraries, but especially the New York Historical Society up on Central Park West has in a, a really beautiful building that feels like you're stepping out of Edith Wharton's New York. You can go in there and into the reading room in the really, these really informed, incredibly helpful librarians will bring you these, these little pamphlets. And it feels like holding onto time. It feels like a walk through history. It's a really invigorating, inspiring experience. So if anybody's able to get to the New York Historical Society to check these out, I really recommend it. Especially crime lovers. It's an, it's a, you know, it's a memorable experience.

Debbi (19:28): It sounds awesome. Let's see. What would be your favorite film noir or neo-noir movie?

Dwyer (19:39): Probably *The Long Goodbye*. Altman's adaptation of Chandler with Elliott Gould. I think I've just been thinking and writing about it recently, so maybe it's just at the very front of my mind, but I think that that probably captures everything I love about crime fiction in one movie where it's, you know, it's, Chandler's best book, his best story. I think in my opinion, and it has, you know, Leigh Brackett's screenplay, she's working with Chandler again after decades away. And she worked with John Huston or Howard Hawks earlier. I'm thinking of John Huston cuz of *Chinatown*. And it's just got this great ambient storytelling because that's all of Altman, right. Everybody's talking all the time. There's conversations swirling everywhere and Marlowe is kind of lost in it. And also muttering to himself about cat food. It's this is really like, you know, beautiful story that just has all this ambient conversation. Like I said, I like, I like conversation the most probably when it comes to literature, crime fiction, anything. So I guess to me, an ultimate version of any type of crime novel is perfect. I like if I could somehow, you know, I don't Altman never did an Elmore Leonard adaptation. Right. But that, that to me would be the sort of perfect meeting of material and adapter.

Debbi (20:59): Yeah. I like Altman's style, the way he has people cross-talking and stuff going on at the same time. It is, it, it is a very unique style for him and just

Dwyer (21:11): I think it works well with crime fiction too. I that's why I mentioned Elmore Leonard, cause I I've got this story in my head that Leonard tells about how he writes his characters and he writes a character and then decides finds out whether they can talk, whether they can tell a good story. And if they can, if they can hold up their end of a conversation, he gives them some more story and more things to do. And if they can't, he just kills them. They're off the page they're done. So you have to be able to talk, to keep, to earn your keep in, in an Elmore Leonard novel. And I think that that works really well with, I mean, in a Robert Altman film, you better be able to talk if you're gonna, if you're gonna be on screen, you know, <laugh>, camera's gonna be passing by quickly, but you've got 10 seconds to, to say your piece.

Debbi (21:53): <Laugh> So I have to ask, because I always ask this of lawyers. Do you ever find yourself cringing at the depiction of lawyers on TV and saying, oh, that would never happen or, oh geez, that's awful.

Dwyer (22:09): Yeah. You to <inaudible> right.

Debbi (22:10): Really? Really? Yeah. That kind of thing.

Dwyer (22:12): So that people can tolerate watching things with you. I suppose it's easier because my wife is a lawyer as well, although she was trained originally in Venezuela and that's, you know, not the common law, but a civil law system. And so it's quite different. So it's kind of fun to watch legal things with her and we can discuss you know, how they would be treated differently in those different structures of jurisprudence. But yeah, I, I probably am that obnoxious lawyer watching things, especially I, you know, with my very limited, I did five or six years as a litigator and I was, I clerked in federal court in the SD N Y downtown. And that was probably my most day to day exposure to being in the courtroom. And so as a result, I have this smug ignorance about how everything in a courtroom works and the back end of things. Right?

And so, yeah, I'm probably that insufferable prick who, who keeps calling out the, the legal inconsistencies, something, you know, just revealing my own ignorance, really.

Debbi ([23:21](#)): I have just enough experience with it to cringe at some of it and just go, no, I know I didn't do a lot of litigation, but no. Are you ever gonna ask a question? Are you making a speech? That kind of thing.

Dwyer ([23:40](#)): It's true that you can't help it once you've had, once you've had that professional experience, we do it too. Like we're raising objections as we're watching. <Laugh> <inaudible> than doing that, but you can't help it.

Debbi ([23:55](#)): It's, it's a thing. Yeah. It's just a habit, I guess. What would, what advice would you give to someone who's interested in writing for a living?

Dwyer ([24:07](#)): I think to be patient maybe at the beginning that I've been thinking about this, I guess recently, just because it took me a long time to get to the point where I had a novel, that I felt was worth, a story that was worth telling and a novel that was worth writing. And it took a lot of practice and training and just writing and writing and writing. And during that time, I probably felt constantly impatient to simply be an author and have something published and out in the world. And now, you know, I've done it and I guess that that's good, but it doesn't actually, when you get to that point, it doesn't really feel like anything significantly different. And yet it was something I was tremendously impatient for and beat myself up about for years that I hadn't done it yet. So I think maybe I would just urge patience on people out there and to give themselves as much time as it takes for the, the right story to come along.

Debbi ([25:08](#)): That's excellent advice actually. And I wish more people followed it. <Laugh>,

Dwyer ([25:15](#)): It's hard when you're in the middle of it. You just wanna get going and you, you, you dreamt to be an author and you want it to, just to happen, but it takes some time and, you know, make sure that the story's worth it.

Debbi ([25:25](#)): Yes, absolutely.

Dwyer ([25:26](#)): Big commitment. Yeah.

Debbi ([25:28](#)): Absolutely. Be respectful of your reader. Give them your best. So is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?

Dwyer ([25:39](#)): Hmm. Is, is, so when you're reading the, the lawyerly stuff in this book, does it hold up? Okay. There's not much courtroom stuff. So now I wanna know.

Debbi ([25:51](#)): Which is a relief to me, frankly. Yeah. no, this guy thinks like a lawyer, acts like a lawyer. I related with it anyway.

Dwyer ([26:01](#)): Terrible <inaudible> that's what I'm afraid of. I haven't had the heart to ask some of my lawyer friends, whether it just seems too preposterous. Although most of my, you know, most of his brush brushes with the law are just sort of passing the associates, smoking outside of their corporate gravestones in Midtown at 4:00 PM. Looking ahead to the long night ahead. He's just, that's, you know, he's not in a courtroom too often, so I suppose I didn't go through those

pitfalls, but I, I just wanna make sure that it feels like, you know, the special disillusionment that a lawyer has.

Debbi ([26:34](#)): Oh, I understand completely because I'm always fearful of getting details like that wrong. Cause I had, like I said, very limited experience in terms of trials. I had more appellate experience than trial experience, but in any case yeah, though you have to sweat those details cuz they'll call you on it.

Dwyer ([26:53](#)): I know.

Debbi ([26:54](#)): Yeah. So.

Dwyer ([26:55](#)): I'm sure I got some lawyers out there ready to write me carefully worded. No, because if there's one thing we're good at as lawyers to write those careful notes afterwards, so I'm sure I'll be.

Debbi ([27:04](#)): Oh God, yes. I have had to bite my tongue more times than I can count <laugh> I really try to rein it in. Yeah. I think New Yorkers and lawyers are naturally sarcastic people. That's all there is to it. <Laugh>

Dwyer ([27:20](#)): Exactly. So I'm

Debbi ([27:22](#)): And when we see something that we think is BS, we're, we're crying bullshit on it. <Laugh>

Dwyer ([27:28](#)): Exactly

<cross-talk>

Debbi ([27:35](#)): But there's too much wrong out there to try to correct. So I've, you know, it's like exactly, no way am I gonna, you know, take that on anyway. I'm just so glad that we had the chance to talk and that you were here today. Thank you so much for being here and telling us about your book.

Dwyer ([27:51](#)): Thank you for having me. This is a real treat.

Debbi ([27:53](#)): It was wonderful. And on that note, I will just say thank you for listening. Don't forget that you can leave a review and I would appreciate it if you did, if you enjoyed this episode. Also tell your friends, your family, everybody you know about it. In addition, we have a Patreon page. If you would like to support us on Patreon, we offer bonus episodes ad-free episodes and more if you join us on Patreon be a supporter. So again, thanks for listening. And our next guest will be Lee Matthew Goldberg, an author and screenwriter with other irons in the fire. So it's gonna be interesting. So that should be interesting, like I said, and in the meantime, take care, stay cool and happy reading.