

The Crime Cafe with Brian Lebeau

Presented By:



Debbi: Hi everyone. Today's guest is a native of Falls River, Massachusetts, home of Lizzie Borden, and a World War II history buff. His fiction explores the psychology of serial killers, and his first novel is called [A Disturbing Nature](#). I'm holding it up right now. Nice cover, I have to say. He's also, I take it, a big Red Sox fan. Love it. It's my pleasure to have with me my guest, [Brian Lebeau](#). Hi Brian. How are you doing today?

Brian: I'm doing excellent. How are you, Debbi? Thank you for having me on the show.

Debbi: I'm very happy to have you here, believe me. It's always nice to have another baseball fan on, although I have not followed baseball as religiously as I used to. I know there have been a lot of changes.

Brian: Now what team are you a fan of?

Debbi: Hmm?

Brian: What team are you a fan of?

Debbi: Well, actually I have two teams. I've got the New York Mets, because I'm originally from New York. Can't help it. Sorry about that. Really sorry about '86, but I was just so thrilled to see them win the Series, but anyway. I am located near Washington D.C. so now I'm a Nationals fan, too. Not to mention an Orioles fan when they're not playing the Nationals. It's very confusing being me. But I just wanted to thank you for being here, and also to mention that even in your bio, you talked about your longtime fascination with Lizzie Borden. What was it that drew you toward the topic of Lizzie Borden, other than living in the same area that she did?

Brian: Well, I was 11 years old, and it's actually Fall River. There's no 's' on Falls River, so it's Fall River, Massachusetts.

Debbi: Oh! Fall River!

Brian: Yes, Fall River. It's the first 30 years I was there. And when I was 11, my fifth grade class went to the Fall River Historical Society, and the Fall River Historical Society really has a heavy focus on Lizzie Borden. Has a lot of artifacts and so forth, also the Underground Railroad. But at 11 years old,

it just fascinated me because I had heard the song sung, the Lizzie Borden song sung, many times in the school yard. But now I actually could see something relative to it.

And around the same time, just a few months later, I watched the World at War narrated by Lawrence Olivier. Amazing World War II documentary! And so they both kind of converged because the thought of Lizzie Borden on a small scale potentially having killed her father and the stepmother, and then looking at Hitler on a grand scale, getting others to use their hands to kill was ... it just fascinated me at a young age, and so I just continued to accumulate knowledge on both World War II and at the time, mass murderers; later, serial killers.

Debbi: Interesting. So it kind of hit you at an impressionable age.

Brian: Yeah, it really did.

Debbi: Yeah. Yeah. What was it that led you to write [*A Disturbing Nature*](#)?

Brian: In 1989, I was in graduate school at Clark University, working on an economics doctorate, and I woke up in the middle of the night, about three in the morning, sweating, just sweating. I had this dream where a whole bunch of seminal events in my life kind of converged, and they had to do with my father and a neighbor that lived across the street a couple of houses down. It had to do with things that occurred while I was in undergraduate school at Marquette in Milwaukee. Just a series of things that when I looked at them all together were really kind of shocking.

But this whole story came to me in that dream. I woke up and I had to jot down like three pages of the story. And by the way, it's not a coincidence that the young man, Mo Lumen, who has the seizure at age 11 is in fact at an intellectual capacity of 11, because that was when I was remembering the story. I was 11 years old. So he was in a sense the youthful part of my life, whereas Francis Palmer is the most cynical, middle-aged part of my life.

Debbi: Yeah. That's interesting. I was going to ask you about 1975 and why you chose that particular year.

Brian: I was 11 years old.

Debbi: Very, very interesting. How much and what kind of research did you do while developing the story?

Brian: A ton. I'm a traveler. I love to travel. I live now in Southern California outside San Diego, and so I traveled back to Boston and Providence down to Virginia to where I was. Originally I taught ... When I was in graduate school, I was teaching at Bryant College, so that's how Bryant College enters as the scene, a major scene or the key scene in the book. I also lived in Fauquier County in Sumerduck where Mo Lumen is as a young man, before he moves to Rhode Island to become a groundskeeper at Bryant College. And so I had to go back to these places and really take a hard look at the layout, the geography, because I wanted to create a realistic version of what these locations looked like in 1975, and so I visited the Historical Societies.

I actually walked some of the properties in Virginia so I could see where they laid out, the ages of the houses where they were. Where Mo Lumen's house is in Fauquier is actually the house that I lived in while I was a defense contractor in Northern Virginia, so I use that as the layout for his house. And the little store is the store that I could walk to a half a mile away that he goes to in the book. So everything is historically accurate down to the weather and the buildings that no longer exist in Providence, like the Fire and Police headquarters, is actually where it was located at that time. Some stuff is a little more difficult to collect, but I tried to be as accurate as possible, even down to the weather. So when you see the weather on a day, that was the weather of that day.

Debbi: Wow! That's being careful with your research, all right. Your story is told from multiple perspectives, which I thought was a really good way of drawing the reader in and making them guess who has the right perspective. How skewed is their perspective? Are they really seeing the truth or what are they really experiencing here? What was it like writing that? Did you write out each character and then intersperse their scenes, or did you do one scene after another after another?

Brian: Well, having lived a life of doing technical documentation largely for the government commercial clients, a lot of BCA economic analysis, it was a

really big shift to starting to do literature, or at least attempting to do literature. So the first cut of the novel was over 200,000 words, and it was entirely from Mo Lumen's perspective, the young man who's got the intellectual capacity of an 11-year-old, and it was long. It was a good story. I had some professional readers, bestselling authors—one very well known—take a look at it and they said, it's a good story but you can't write it this way. And in the evolution over the course of about a year and a half, I realized that the investigator needed to be a bigger character. In fact, the four-book series is centered around the investigator, a series of different mass murderers around the country. And so I made him an almost equal character to Mo in the first novel, and that took a while to write. So they were written very much separately. Most of the Mo chapters were rewritten at that time as well.

There were eight critical mistakes, as most people do when they start writing. There were eight critical mistakes that I was making. I had to correct those, but what I was really trying to accomplish was two very distinct voices in the book. I wanted a very simple Hemingway-esque voice for Lumen. A lot of dialogue that did not exceed more than two syllables, particularly if they were coming from him. And in Palmer's case, he's Harvard educated, very intellectual, very intelligent, and I wanted his to read more like you have read Ray Bradbury years ago, or Raymond Chandler. I apologize, Raymond Chandler. I got a different book in mind. Raymond Chandler.

Debbi: Both good Rays.

Brian: Yeah. I guess it wouldn't make much sense with Ray Bradbury, but Raymond Chandler. I had read almost all of Raymond Chandler's works, and I wanted something faster, because he has a tendency to draw out his scenery and then the people that you meet. I wanted something like a short Raymond Chandler, and that really resulted in the voice that I created for Palmer.

Debbi: Interesting. Real interesting, because I was reminded ... the relationship between the two men almost reminded me a little bit of the relationship of the two characters in [*Of Mice and Men*](#).

Brian: It's exactly what it's supposed to be.

Debbi: Yeah. It was very Steinbeck-esque, I guess you would say.

Brian: Yeah. Many of the themes in the story, the way that they're developed, not the themes themselves are using ... I did this series on my Instagram where I explained to readers what authors were major contributors in the way that I put the book together, and Steinbeck was one of those. Hemingway was one of those, Chandler was one of those, and I went down the list. F. Scott Fitzgerald for imagery and for symbolism and allegory, and then [To Kill a Mockingbird](#) overall for the overarching theme, but in a different period.

She looks at the Jim Crow law period. I look at the Post Jim Crow law period starting in 1965, and you see in the book that almost all the action taking a look at post-World War II America, but really comparing the pre through Lumen, the pre-Jim Crow law period with the Civil Rights legislation in '65, and then the post between Lumen and Palmer, and what they experienced after that date. And it really takes a look at racism in America, splitting between those. In a way, I mean, I'm not going to say it's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. That would be insane. But the attempt was to take the themes and the approach that she used and bring them to a more modern environment.

Debbi: You do that really well in the book, too.

Brian: That also explains the cover, just in case you're wondering. The entire cover with the pastels and that old finish was to be very much ... I was on an alternate podcast about a year ago, and he actually said, did you model this? We had not talked about *To Kill a Mockingbird*. He says, I look at this book cover and I see *To Kill a Mockingbird*. And I said, wow, that's exactly what I was going for.

Debbi: Yeah, definitely. I can see that. Totally. I mean, it's kind of like Faulkner, Steinbeck.

Brian: All the ...

Debbi: All of those things rolled into it. It's like, whoa, this is really something. I think in my review, I even said, if you don't think crime fiction can be good

literature, you have to read this book, because that's what this book is. It's good literature.

Brian: Yeah. I have to tell you, that is one of probably the five nicest, best remarks that I got overall. I took that one and I took it to heart. Some people said things that I really took to heart. One recognized right away that this was an alternate look at World War II, post-World War II, or post World War II America, and picked up right away that the intent was not to be like any other, and that a lot of books try to do that, but this one actually did it well. That meant a lot to me in the same way as your comment did, because that's really what I was going for here. So, again, novice writer trying to get better as I go. We'll see how the second book does with it.

Debbi: We're all novices so don't feel bad about that.

Brian: I don't, I don't. It's a learning process.

Debbi: You're doing great as far as I'm concerned. I think you're doing great with this book, and I can't wait to see what you do with the sequel. What are your plans for the series?

Brian: Well, it's a four-book series. The second novel goes to depths. Because this is very introspective, because I really am Mo, trying to always retain that youthful innocence which we know that we can't, but we try to. The real world kind of creeps in like it does to Mo, the serial killer, the mass murderer. The investigation is all getting closer and closer to Mo. He cannot ignore it. Even though he just wants to enjoy baseball and the Red Sox marching to the '75 World Series, he can't. And then the other side of that is Palmer, and that is me aging, as a middle-aged man who has a very different perspective, and he sees the monsters all around, and he has this thing inside him that we deem the beast that actually can communicate with the monsters.

And what we find out in the second book is not only does he communicate with the monsters and has, we get the backstory of how that happened. How it is that he first communicated with the monsters and didn't know as a young man, but that he retains a piece of each of those monsters that he hunts down. And the beast is growing stronger

because the beast is Palmer's internal monster. And so we watch Palmer descend after so many years of going after these monsters.

The second book is very clearly focused on Palmer, from the perspective of the man in the middle who's introduced in the third paragraph. And the man in the middle, people will not know who that is. They won't until the very last line of the book. But that is the perspective of the novel, the one that is watching everything take place, and you're going to be guessing through the book who that is as he solves multiple mysteries, and then things really do fall apart for him. And so watching him climb back from that is really, it's our life, right? We have to fall and then we have to recover from the fall. And so the second novel is that.

The third novel is very, very intense. Serial killer is on the loose or mass murderer is on the loose. In this case, Palmer is back. He's hunting down this mass murderer, but he doesn't know who he's up against. He does not know how severe the monster is that he's up against in this case, and so this becomes really tense. And then the fourth one is courtroom drama, where it all circles back around and they've got the monster in the courtroom, and we're trying to figure out why he's the monster, and we're getting the perspective of a new narrator in this case. So the man in the middle takes over in books three and four. It becomes a third person instead of an omniscient narrator.

Debbi: Interesting.

Brian: But we don't know who that is. What I'm really trying to do when you read the first book, I'm not sure I got it exactly. I think it was close, and I think some people really picked up on it. In each scene, I'm trying to put the reader in the center of the dialogue, so they're seeing all of the action, hearing all of the dialogue, and they feel like they're a part of it. Some reviewers did see that. Some major reviewers actually saw that. Now, whether or not I've got that skill quite down, I think the second book is the next step in that evolution so that you are placed in the center of the scenes.

Debbi: I think you do that well, because I was just going to note that as I was reading it, I could really feel a kind of sympathy or empathy or something with Mo and you want to root for him, and yet you're not quite sure if

you should. It's like, okay, he's blacking out here. He is getting convenient amnesia here. What's going on?

Brian: In the second novel, which I finished, and now I'm in the process of getting ready to publish it. I haven't picked a date yet, and it's much shorter. This book is more around a hundred thousand words, not the hundred and forty-seven thousand than the first one was. So this one stays at high tension, like the second half of the first book because all the characters come back. I like the way a lot of people wrote, well, he introduces characters. We don't know where they go, like the five friends at Professor Langford's house. He never does anything else with them. They come back in the second book and they play a major role. Even the pirate who drove him to the Smithfield Inn right at the beginning of the book comes back and has a chapter in the second novel. So everyone comes back and they...

Debbi: That's great.

Brian: You don't have to have read the first book either, because you're brought in. One of the two, if you recall at the end of the book, one of the two survived, or at least appeared to survive; there was a pulse. I don't tell you until almost 70% of the way through the second book, who is alive and who is dead. I don't tell the reader, and the new reader doesn't understand necessarily why. All they know is that the FBI chief investigator has been to the hospital. He knows which one's alive. Everyone else knows, but the reader does not and I do not give it away.

You will not guess. 50% will guess one; 50% will guess the other. It doesn't matter. You're just going to be guessing because you don't know until I tell you specifically HE died. That means this one's alive. Now, whether or not they're alive and just a vegetable, we don't know. But the point is, we get a whole new character's perspective in the second book. So it's Palmer and another person's perspective of the events, their background and their perspective of the events leading up to that night at Cook Pond, where the shooting took place.

Debbi: Well, it sounds as though you're a plotter rather than a pantsner for sure.

Brian: Oh, God, no. Totally plotter. All four books were laid out over the course of 15 years. Remember, it took 30 years to write the first novel. So it's definitely all plotting and now they're faster. The second one took about seven months, but I want to take some time away because I descended with Palmer and got to a point where I was just ready to go, Hey, God, take me, I'm done. I can't do any more of this. So I'm going to take a couple of years off from doing the third book. I've got a couple others that I'm working on. They're much lighter, and I'll do that for a while and then we'll go back to three and four.

Debbi: Cool. If your books were made into a TV show or a movie, who would you want to play the leads?

Brian: Wow, that's a good question. Lots of people ask me. I know who I'd want Palmer to be, but it's not an actor that could do it today. You ever seen the movie [Blade Runner](#)?

Debbi: Yes.

Brian: When Harrison Ford played Rick whatever-his-last-name-was in *Blade Runner*, that's kind of what I picture, or even in *Witness* around that time period. So today, I would say the equivalent is—and I never remember his name but I love him. He's a great actor. Played in *Newsies*. It was his first movie as a kid. You know who I'm talking about, but I can't remember his name. But the ladies that worked for me all say he'd be perfect for it. Gosh, what is his name? He played in *The Pale Blue Eye*. If you haven't seen it, it's wonderful. He's playing in so many movies now. I'm blocking out, but most of you probably know exactly who I'm talking about at this point. I'll think of it in a second, and then I'll say it. I would see him as Palmer. Mo would have to be a new actor and a hard part because he's six foot eight. And so almost think like *The Green Mile* with Michael Clark Duncan. That's almost like the Mo character that you have to play in this. And so I would say him for the two main characters. For the others, I don't know. Like I said, my employees play around with it to try and figure out who they would want. Christian Bale! Christian Bale!

Debbi: Christian Bale.

Brian: Christian Bale today, I would see as Palmer.

Debbi: Cool. Awesome. Let's see. What advice would you give to anyone interested in having a writing career?

Brian: Think real hard about it before you do, I think would be the first one. Know that you're going to write from experience and from digging deep inside. I think that's the most surprising thing about writing, is that you can write stories that have nothing to do with you. I can write stories about serial killers and not be a serial killer. And yet in doing that, I am really going deep into myself trying to explore that inner monster that we all have. One of the times that I was filled with hate or prejudice or anger, and how did that come out and what did I do to control that, that someone who is not as fortunate could not control what's inside them. I think in doing that, you really start to ... I don't want to say "feel" for the bad people, but you do get this level of empathy for what they have to deal with operating with a thought process that is non-traditional and at times really scary, and so trying to touch that. I think that'll be true for anyone.

I won't lie, I actually cry writing some of the scenes because some of the things that Palmer goes through, some of the things that Mo goes through, I can remember going through similar experiences—not the same—or writing similar letters or having similar relationships with my children that are now being explored through this character. And so I think what people have to understand today, it's a heavily saturated market. You go back 25 years ago, you had 300,000 books a year written. Today, you have 10 times that, plus most of which are not really looking for a broad audience. There may be that hope, but really the writer is doing it to explore themselves with the hope that maybe something will happen.

I think if a writer looks at it from that perspective, that I'm going to get far more out of this than the lucrative side of it. Maybe that comes, but write it because it's an exploration and it's something most of us don't really do. We don't look hard enough in the mirror to see what makes us, and then therefore how we reflect our characters to others.

Debbi: That's a really great point. Thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?

Brian: Other than thanks again for being on the show, because I always love being on the shows, not a lot. What I would say is this. We've got to figure out in the independent publishing world how to better promote what we do and distinguish that, and I think that's where independent authors have to kind of band together. Work together, read each other's work and leave reviews to help authors out. These are really key things. I find sometimes on social media, and I'm sure you do as well—all of us do—a lot of times the people that are following us and that we follow, we're doing so just to have a number rather than to have people that meaningfully can impact our career or we can impact theirs.

I think that was something about traditional business that I really appreciated, that whether I was competing against firms for work on contract or I was working with my employees or sales team, it always felt like we were all in the same boat, rowing in the same direction. I'm not so sure that's true. The level of competition is so intimate and so closely tied together that sometimes it feels like people might believe in the industry that their success is dependent on others' failure. When in fact, I think all of our success is dependent on all of our ability to work together to generate an understanding of just the difficulty of doing this work, and how much we need to promote each other and that bodes well for us.

Those are things that I reflect on as I think now about heading back into the business world. How do I take what I've learned there? Because I can't afford to. This is not a job like being a CEO of a corporation where you're making really good money. So taking seven years off to do that has been fun, and I've written the books I wanted to, and I now know how to write them faster. But by the same token, I still have to go back and now go back into the business world and do some of that stuff. It's a money issue, but I want to kind of bridge those two gaps because the independent publishing world needs maybe a little more structure and a little better understanding of the interrelationship between authors.

Debbi: Oh, it definitely needs something. We need to do a lot better job of supporting each other and just working collaboratively to get heard, in a sense. That's my feeling about it. I'm in agreement with you 100%. I think a rising tide lifts us all.

Brian: Yeah. I've gone onto your website many times. I've looked at a number of your interviews. You're busy! Like wow! You're doing all of these things that are promoting authors and reviewing books and so forth. And I sit and I go, wow, that is really, really impressive. I mean, I say this honestly.

Debbi: Well, thank you.

Brian: I say this honestly, you are among ... and I've been on a lot of podcasts now ... you are among the busiest working folks that I've seen. I've read some of your work and I have to say I'm impressed because you must never stop. And I'm a guy who works a lot, but it's impressive. I mean that honestly.

Debbi: Well, thank you very much. I really appreciate that, and coming from you, somebody who writes so beautifully. I really do appreciate that. So thank you very much for being here today, Brian, and spending time with us.

Brian: Oh, thank you.

Debbi: It was good talking to you.

Brian: Thank you, Debbi. And you have yourself a nice weekend.

Debbi: You too. Hang on while I switch us over because I'm going to do a little bonus after this for my [Patreon](#) supporters. I'll just finish up by asking everyone listening to please give us a like or a review, depending on what medium you're consuming this in—YouTube or podcast. And please subscribe. Every bit helps the algorithms. Also, please check us out on [Patreon](#) where you can also find my shop. I hope to offer more eBooks there as well as other digital products. We'll see. I'm playing it by ear at this point. Meanwhile, I'll be seeing you next time when our guest will be [Kristen Bird](#). Till then, take care and happy reading.