

The Crime Cafe with Michael Farris Smith

Presented By:



Debbi: Hi everyone. I have with me today an author who's enjoying a rather extraordinary year. Along with releasing a new novel in April, two of his previous novels have been adapted for film and been released this year. It's a pleasure to have with me today author and screenwriter, Michael Farris Smith. Hi, Michael. How are you doing?

Michael: Debbi, I'm doing fine. Thank you for that introduction.

Debbi: Oh, it's my pleasure, believe me. Let's talk about screenplays and movies. I see that you were credited as a producer as well as the screenwriter on IMDB Pro, so congratulations for that and congratulations for what you've done. It is simply amazing. This is not typical of most authors, I have to say.

Michael: Yeah. You know, I keep hearing that over and over and I believe it because I know now how much it takes just to get one across the finish line, but to be able to get two, I feel pretty fortunate.

Debbi: Yeah, yeah, for sure. I saw a recent interview where the writer had described you as celebrating in a low-key way, and I thought, well, when you think of the sheer amount of work that goes into making a movie, creating the package, finding the money, making the deal, all of those things, I had to wonder how else would you celebrate except to say, phew! That's done.

Michael: Yes, I don't know there's a whole lot of energy left to have a big celebration. You have used it all up. I don't know how most people are. I get the impression that a lot of creative people are the same way, that when they get to the end of a project or when they get to the finish line, it's more a sense of relief than anything. Certainly there's excitement and there's reward, but whether it's a novel or a script or anything really, the sense of relief, the accomplishment of it, to me is always the overriding emotion versus wanting to go out and have a party. I want to sit down and kick my feet up and have a beverage and just really kind of revel in that it's over and that it's done, and hopefully in the way that you wanted it to be done too. Hopefully it's a product you're happy with.

Debbi: Yes. Amen to that. I hear you. I thought it was interesting that they approached you about writing the screenplay, which is not typical for

most authors. Most of the time they'll hire somebody who's in the business to write the screenplay. They approached you. You said, yeah, sure and then you had to learn about screenwriting. Was that a learning experience?

Michael: It was very much a learning experience, and the way you describe it is exactly what happened. When I was asked if I wanted to be attached to write the screenplays, I said, yes, absolutely. And then the next question was, well, do you know how to do that? And I said, yeah, sure. Of course I do, and I hung up the phone. That was kind of a group call, and I hung up from that group call and immediately picked up the phone and called my manager, and I said, look, man. I need you to tell me two books about screenplay right now that I can order and start trying to figure out how to do this. He just laughed because he goes, I knew you didn't know how to do it, but that was the absolute correct answer, because I think you can do it. I believe you can do it, or we wouldn't have tried to. And he goes, you don't need to let anybody know what you can or can't do in this business. Just raise your hand and keep going. I mean, I didn't know how to write a novel either. I had no idea how to write a novel. I ended up learning how to do that, so I figured I could learn how to write a screenplay.

Debbi: That's right. That's exactly right. What books did they recommend, just out of curiosity?

Michael: One is called *Save the Cat*. I think it's pretty popular, and then the other one is really more technical, I feel. It's called *The Hollywood*. It's like just a guidebook. It's sitting in here somewhere, but it really gets the nuts and bolts of doing things technically right, and how to do flashbacks and how to superimpose. I mean, it really gets into that, which I really needed because the screenwriting programs now that you can just giddy up and go and move along. You don't have to think about the indentions and all this and margins. They kind of do it for you, so you're really free to get into going and exploring. But to do it correctly too, I wanted to look like a pro.

As far as *Save the Cat*, I think I did look at one or two other kinds of guidebooks about how to write screenplays. I did get into them, but I was also careful not to dig too far into them because I was afraid it might mess

me up a little bit and it might slow the creative process or just get in the way somehow of me thinking too much. So I did read those books about what a screenplay is, what works, how it's supposed to do this and that and the other, and then I kind of let it go and just tried to be a storyteller telling it in a different medium. I do think that served me well to not try to think too hard about it.

Debbi: Absolutely. I agree 100%. That's one of the things that I think hangs people up when it comes to the screenplay. They get too focused on I have to get something here by page 10. I have to get something here by page 20, instead of thinking about the story, how it can unfold. You'll find that it naturally unfolds at certain points, in my opinion.

Michael: That was one thing that kind of frightened me a little bit about it, was I would open up these books, and you're right. It would tell you this needs to happen on page 10, that needs to happen on page 25, this needs to happen on page 50. This is horrible advice. I know there's a formula to it. Anybody can watch a movie and kind of feel those moments in that time, but I really wanted to back away from it because I think you have to trust yourself as a storyteller, whatever the medium is. And as a storyteller, I think you have an innate sense of when it's time to shift gears or when it is time to make something new happen, or when it's time to go down a different road, or when it's time to cause more trouble, so I tried to rely on that a little bit too.

Debbi: I love that. When it's time to make more trouble. It's like the old saying 'put your protagonist in a tree and throw rocks at him.'

Michael: I love that. Absolutely.

Debbi: So what did you do to prepare for writing the screenplay to adapt your work? How did you go through the process of adaptation? What was that like, and what did you do specifically?

Michael: That's a good question. The one thing I did have to learn to do in screenwriting, which I don't do as a novelist, is outline. Now, one of the early things I learned about writing scripts is you write a 40 scene outline first that everybody kind of agrees upon, and then you sit down and you start writing the screenplay. And for me, at the beginning, I was like I

don't want to do that because when I'm writing fiction, I never look too far ahead. It's kind of like working in the morning, making a note to walk in the next day. But this really served me as learning how to do a script, because you're taking a 300-page novel and you're putting it into a hundred pages, so what are the things that have to be in there to tell the story? And you also find out too, this might work in the novel, but they can't be this way in a film.

So the very first step was taking out a notepad is how I did it the first time, and just starting to go through the novel and come up with that 40 scene outline where I could see it as a whole. Then I could talk to the directors as a whole and you begin to get the feedback from others about, well, we can't do it this way. We can't do it this way because this, that, and the other. And so you figure out how to get the story on the page through the outline first. And for me, that was a great benefit, and I definitely see the advantages of doing that in a screenplay, because that's the starting point. When I actually sat down to do it, we were talking earlier about taking the anxiety off things as much as you can, and trying not to think too much.

I would get on page 4, 5, 12, 15 of the script, and I would be sitting there and just like, naturally thinking, okay, now what's next? Because that's how I do a novel. And then it would hit me like, you know what's next. Just look over here on your outline. And I would look and I'd go, okay, so there's the next two or three scenes. And that really helped ease me through the process of the actual script writing was that outline, that breaking down of the story.

Debbi: Yeah. Beating out the story as they say. You have these story beats that you rely on. Yes, it's great for that. You can write faster that way too.

Michael: Absolutely. It really adds to the economy of it too, when you sit down to do it. I mean, it can really kind of thumpity thump by when you have ...

Debbi: Yes, for sure. Can you give us the logline for each of your movies?

Michael: Off the top of my head?

Debbi: Oh, dear. I asked about a logline. Shame on me.

Michael: *Desperation Road* is whiskey, guns and the desire for revenge violently intersect at the crossroads of salvation and regret in a rough-and-tumble Mississippi town.

Debbi: Ooh.

Michael: Yeah. That's *Desperation Road*, and then *The Rumble Through the Dark*, which is based on [The Fighter](#), is a bare knuckle cage fighter seeks to repay his debts to save the home of his dying foster mother in the dark Mississippi Delta landscape.

Debbi: They sound very interesting, very dark.

Michael: Yeah. They are dark. There's no doubt about that. I think that's just kind of the places I've lived as a writer, and the movies didn't shy away from that either, which I'm very happy about.

Debbi: That's good. Excellent. So you feel that the product, the movie is a good representation of your story in the book, then?

Michael: Yeah, I'm actually very happy with both of them. I think they're very faithful adaptations, about as well as you can do, I think, in breaking down something like that and putting it into a smaller place, and I think from the response from people who have seen the movies and are familiar with the books too. Very faithful.

Debbi: Fantastic.

Michael: Yeah. Things have to change, of course, but I think in general, I'm really happy that when you watch *Desperation Road* or a *Rumble Through the Dark*, you recognize the novels in them. If you've read the novel, you know this is that story.

Debbi: That's great. One of the toughest things for me when I started writing screenplays was thinking more visually. That's something I struggled with at first, but then suddenly you get it. It's kind of like ... bang! It's almost second nature. It becomes almost like muscle memory. You just know that you have to do this thing visually. It's weird.

Michael: That was one of the challenges for me out of the gate where I could spend half a page writing this lovely landscape in a novel. I have like two sentences to do it in a script, and I had to break that habit because I love setting in place and it's one of my favorite things to create in a novel and you just don't have time. The other part is you have to learn to trust the directors, too. They trust you to give them the image, and then you have to trust them to take that image and portray it in a very special way.

Debbi: That's the thing. It's a very collaborative process, the whole thing. You were also credited as a producer. What was your role as producer?

Michael: Well, in *Desperation Road* ... I guess actually both of them were much the same. I helped locations because I know the places very well, know what they look like, know what they feel like, so I was part of finding the right places to shoot these things. I was also part of talking about actors and who we wanted to try to get and for whatever reasons. And then I was on set and part of that process too, of just being there to support the director in whatever was going on, and also collaborating and talking with the actors a lot, too. You know, they're very curious people. I love being around the actors, and I love when they want to talk about a scene, or they want to even ask about a very simple line of dialogue because they hear it one way or see it one way in the script and maybe they think, well, what if we wanted to do it this way? What if I changed this word to that? I'm always so open to that because it's so interesting. So it was kind of a culmination of things. I would say, a lot of the processes, a lot of the creative processes, I was very fortunate to be on the side of as a producer, which kind of I guess, blended in my role as the writer too.

Debbi: That's fantastic. I know I love talking to actors because they'll look at a line or several lines of dialogue and say, you can cut this part out and this part out, and I could just nod or whatever, and it's like, yeah, yeah. Now I get it. More is not necessarily better here.

Michael: You know, as the screenwriter, I've only heard those characters' voices in my head. I've never heard anybody else say those lines until the actors show up, and then you hear it. And it's really interesting to me to hear when you do a scene and you're like, oh, that sounds different than it does to me, because they're interpreting it their own way, and I really do love that process. The actors too know when there should be silence. I

think they have a great sense of when the nonverbal will do in place of ... what if I didn't say these four words and I just turned or looked or thought or whatever, and I really enjoyed watching that part of it.

Debbi: Yes. Has writing screenplays had an effect on the way you write novels?

Michael: You know, that's a good question and it really came up when *Salvage This World* came out in April. That was the first novel I had written in its entirety with the screen stuff going on at the same time. I wrote the first half of *Salvage This World*, and then we went and filmed *Rumble Through the Dark*. That was the fall of '21, and then when I came back from that, I wrote the second half of *Salvage This World*, and then went and did *Desperation Road* later. So I was full in the thick of doing very serious script stuff, and truly when the book came out, those were some of the first questions about it too. I think it would be naïve to say it hasn't affected it. I just don't see how it couldn't. In what ways, I'm not sure. I know that some of the people said they felt like it had some of an impact concerning *Salvage*. Really noticed the economy and really the stripped down dialogue and language, which I think I've been pretty economical, stripped down writer in my career up to this point. But to even have people recognize that maybe this is even leaner than you were before, I think that's certainly an impact of doing the script work. It's nothing I really consciously think about while I've got it going on, but like I said, it would be naïve to think one thing is not having some impact on the other. It's very hard. Your creative body is your creative body and things kind of bleed together, and certainly they do, hopefully in a good way. You know what I mean? I think there's a lot of really good things to be learned from script writing and economy is one of them, and quite frankly, we could all probably use a lot more of that

Debbi: I think you're right. What is your latest novel *Salvage This World* about?

Michael: Oh man! What is it about? I think at the heart of it, it's about—and I did not really expect this when I started writing it—it's about a father and a daughter, which scared the hell out of me because I have two daughters and I had never written about a father-daughter relationship before. My very first novel *Rivers* is about a kind of a dystopian South Mississippi landscape where one hurricane after another has decimated the region, and I always kind of thought I might return to that landscape a little bit.

And when I had the idea for *Salvage This World*, which was basically a young woman standing with a kid on her hip, staring at an approaching storm, and you get the sense she's in a lot of trouble, I realized this is not kind of sequel to *Rivers*, but what if this was like six or eight years before the storms got really bad and the region's already beginning to empty out, and she's alone?

There's a real sense of maybe even anarchy kind of in the air, this real unsettling thing. Fifteen, 20 pages into that novel, she picks up the phone and calls, just picks up a payphone and starts dialing. I wasn't really sure who she was calling. She had nowhere else to turn. And when the phone picked up, I remember you heard the click and the word that came out of her mouth was "Daddy," and I stopped right then. I'm like, oh, so this is what this is going to be about. It frightened me, but I've learned that those things that scare you about a novel or about a story, those things you should probably latch onto. So it really became about a father and a daughter, and the fractured relationship and life they've had, but then the necessity of trying to save each other, I think through a very difficult time. I think that's probably what that novel means most to me.

Debbi: I like the way you described that and the feeling of writing about things that scare you. I think that's very true. What authors have most inspired your work?

Michael: Things that have most inspired my work?

Debbi: Yes.

Michael: Well, I could sit here and name a bunch of writers and a bunch of things like that, but I would say the thing that inspires my work most is my intense desire to kind of relate to the world and maybe grapple with the world creatively. And then the other thing would be the intense fear of failure. I think I've worked the way I have because I'm trying to prove things to both myself and other people, and I'm trying to belong. I feel like that can be a very powerful thing creatively because it has forced me to sit down and work and try and risk failure. It has made me take chances that I probably wouldn't have otherwise taken, and I'm very happy that I've had some success doing that.

I think I'm also happy that taking those chances and being kind of so fearful of one, not making it, and then two, not being able to stay has pushed me to probably reach for things thematically, emotionally that I may not have, and I want to always keep doing that. I feel like if I'm not really pushing myself emotionally, if I'm not kind of halfway scared of what I'm doing, if I'm willing to shake off convention and just do it the way I want to do it, then that's the right thing. If I ever feel like I'm bowing to anything, then I'll probably need to just quit.

Debbi: Wow. I love what you just said. That's fantastic. What advice would you give to anyone who would like to write for a living?

Michael: I would probably repeat everything ...

Debbi: That you just said.

Michael: I think you have to do it for yourself first, and that means taking responsibility for doing the things you have to do to get better, which is read a lot and write a lot and buy the books that are going to help you, and not being afraid to fail and telling the story that you want to tell, and understanding that I may not be good at this right now, but I'm going to be better at it if I stay with it. And even if I am really good at it right now, I can still get better. I think that's one of the things in my career that I've noticed is that I can still get better and I notice it from one thing to the next. I think if you kind of put it on your own shoulders and decide, well, I'm going to carry the weight and whatever's going to happen is out of my control anyway, then you'll be the best you can be, and that's really the only thing you can offer the world is the best version of your work and nobody can keep you from doing that.

Debbi: Amen to all of that. That is just so true. All of it. It's fantastic. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?

Michael: No, not really. Other than that, I hope we'll talk again sometime. I hope everybody that's listening who's working on something will see it through and do it with confidence. We're all working toward the same thing, which is to get to the end of a project and be happy with it. At least that's what I'm doing.

Debbi: I'm with you there. That's fantastic. I just want to thank you so much for being here and talking with us today. Thank you.

Michael: Of course. Thank you for the invitation.

Debbi: It's my pleasure, believe me. I love to talk about movies and screenwriting as well as books, so this is just fantastic. I just also want to say, I want to thank everybody who supports my work on Patreon - either one of them; I have two. And if you would hit the like button on YouTube or leave a review for this podcast, that would be great. Until next time, take care and happy reading and watching.