

The Crime Cafe with

F.R. Jameson

Presented By:



Debbi: Hi everyone. My guest today is the author of two book series. One is the Screen Siren Noir series featuring British film stars that get caught up in noir tales of blackmail, obsession, scandal, and death. Ooh! His latest release, [Vivian Fontaine](#) is the fourth in that series, and he's working on a fifth. He also writes a horror series under the moniker Ghostly Shadows Anthology. I'd be interested in hearing more about that, too. There are six volumes in that series.

Originally from Wales, he now lives with his wife and daughter in London. It's my pleasure to introduce my guest F. R. Jameson. Hi, F. R. How are you doing today?

F. R.: Hello Debbi. How are you? I'm fine, thanks.

Debbi: Oh, wonderful. And what a wonderful backdrop you've got there. Just delightful! Regal Theater. Ooh. It's just ...

F. R.: I think it looks more American than it does British, but I might be wrong.

Debbi: That's very interesting. Yeah, it looks very Broadway-ish or something like that. Grand! It is nice to finally see you after getting your newsletters where you talk about movies a lot. I love that. I really do enjoy your newsletters more than most authors because of that, I think. You talk about television shows, you talk about movies, you talk about things other than your books, but you do talk about your books, too.

F. R.: I do. I do talk about my books. I feel like you could do, but then I send it out every fortnight, and to send it out every fortnight only talking about that, I would be bored, because you know what it's like when you are writing a book, it's great when it's finished, but the actual incremental stages of it, it's not that fascinating.

Debbi: Yes.

F. R.: Another two weeks, I've done another 60 pages. They seem quite good.

Debbi: Yes, yes. I can't wait for you to see them. I've been sitting here at my desk and it is so exciting writing these 60 pages.

F. R.: You want things like you're reflecting that kind of accidental, existential dread when you're about two thirds through when you're thinking, "Is any of this good? Is this just terrible?" I don't know anymore.

Debbi: I have had those thoughts, believe me.

F. R.: I think all authors have those thoughts where you do get to the point where you think you have other ideas in your head and you just think I'll just write one of those, because that compared to this is brilliant. You are experienced enough to know you get two-thirds into that, you would be thinking, I want to do something else now, and you'll never, ever finish anything.

Debbi: Yes, you really have to kind of hone in on those things that really interest you and really excite you, I think, and go with those and set aside other things for other times, so to speak. What inspired you to write about British film stars?

F. R.: Well, I'm sort of a massive noir fan as I've read earlier some Megan Abbott novels, which is very much in that milieu in Los Angeles, and also read James Ellroy, Raymond Chandler, James Cain and Dashiell Hammett and Jim Thompson. I'd love to do a book like that, but not being American and not knowing the locales, I felt it would be starting out with imposter syndrome. I didn't want to be in the situation where I'm sweating over Hollywood's geography. Would you really go to that club? Would you really turn left at that place, or would you keep going? In essence, just made it all up which feels wrong as it's grounded in a place.

And then it occurred to me, Britain does have a film industry, which is a much smaller affair, but it is there. You did have things like big studios in the 1950s. You had Rank, you had Ealing, you had Hammer. You had these places in the 1950s and '60s, and you could set it around there, but then they become by necessity, smaller and more parochial tales because it's not the massive star system, big glamour machine that Hollywood is. There is a smaller strip, but that works I think in that kind of genre's favor.

One of my favorite authors writing this stuff is Jim Thompson, who can write these books set in nowhere little towns where characters wind up in, where things start happening or cities kind of just exist in kind of

dreams almost. They don't seem to have any geographic basis to them, but they are small places. So I'm sort of leaning into the smallness of them, as opposed to the big glamour of Hollywood, which would be fake if I tried to write it.

Debbi: Well, I think focusing on the small stuff makes it far more interesting, I've always found. It's interesting how many of these movies are set in L.A. or New York, but some of the most interesting stories take place outside of those places. This is again something like British cinema, which itself is smaller compared to say Hollywood. I mean, that in itself interests me, but you guys had Alfred Hitchcock first.

F. R.: Yeah, but he had gone by about 1940, and it was much more done on a shoestring operation version of the '50s and '60s. I have in my head one set in the '70s, and by that point, it's terrible. Sex comedies is the main thrust to the British film industry. It's a whole other business. It's not the new Hollywood. It's just these awful films that are the main focus of it. Awful films, ridiculously good cast because that's the only work they can get.

Debbi: Wow. Well, I see what you're talking about there. I think I know the films you're talking about, too. So are the main characters based on actual actresses?

F. R.: I've read a lot of biographies of directors and actors and actresses, so I haven't specifically taken an actress and tried to weave her life story in a fictional form. But I have, through a lot of reading and occasionally watching a documentary on them, little nuggets are pulled out and kept in mind of things that really happened to people that I can then use to happen to my fictional protagonists.

Debbi: So there is a good deal of research in terms of reading that went into preparing ...

F. R.: There's a good deal of very pleasurable research. I greatly enjoy reading that stuff. I don't find it onerous and a lot of watching old films which again, it's all research I enjoy.

Debbi: Exactly, especially watching those old films.

F. R.: Yes.

Debbi: Very much. What are your plans for the series? Do you have a certain number of books you'd like to write?

F. R.: Well, I also write as well the Ghostly Shadows series you so very kindly mentioned, I've got another series, which is the Ludo Carstairs Supernatural Thrillers, which kind of straddles both the thrillers and the horror, but I think the supernatural elements takes them for a lot of thriller fans far more into the horror arena, which a lot thriller fans are very much focused on real world stuff and see it as a natural thing elsewhere, which is fine.

So, that at the moment is my main focus. But I certainly want to keep writing the noir novels as I get a great deal of pleasure from them. I've got another one already typed up and on my computer, so I now have to at some point rewrite it and edit it. I've got ideas for others, I have starts for others, so it's just when I can get the focus to get the attention down. I don't know, maybe I'm just finishing.

I start my process. I start off writing a book in longhand on notepads, and I've nearly finished writing one Ludo Carstairs Supernatural Thriller for next year, and thinking from January, maybe I will write a short noir novel. For myself, it's such a change of pace from thinking of scares or terrifying things, which in the Ludo Carstairs books also, you're trying to think of a kind of a Sherlock Holmes-esque relationship and Doctor Who stuff as well, so a lot of things fed into that.

But it is quite nice to then go to ... I'll try to do a Richard Stark novel or a James M. Cain or Jim Thompson stuff and just add fire to that, or just think of a story from British history that I can weave in. I've got an idea for one which kind of leans into the war stuff in the early '70s, which would be a slight difference to it, but a change of pace, it would very much fit into that world. So the answer to the question is yes, I do want to write more and I will write more when I carve time, which is always the thing.

Debbi: Yes, time is always the thing. When do you generally write? What kind of writing schedule do you keep?

F. R.: In the mornings and evenings. I have the habit of writing everything first draft by hand in notebooks, which is just a good exercise in getting it all down. I was writing a chapter earlier and how it is in my notepad now is not very good. It's got the salient things I want to have in that chapter there, so it's done. And then gradually, I'll type them all up, type up the books quite quickly. Type them all up, make changes and improve things along the way, and then I have my sort of work-through version, which is when I go through that document and rewrite and edit and change things round and it becomes this all-consuming thing of when I have ... when I'm going through that process, 20 things in my mind of plot arcs and changes and have to go back and sort of foreshadow that instead of ticking off a lot of stuff on a list all the time.

But I get through it and get it all done and get to the other side and hopefully have a book I'm really happy with then. It's one of those moments—I'm sure you appreciate as well—you get to the point where you are happy with it, but you have to draw a line in it because you could keep going seeking perfection. You could just keep going and another couple of drafts of that, then it's five years later and you're still working on that one book and at that point you're thinking, has it got better now or was it better three years ago?

Debbi: I tend to be that way more with screenplays than I do with books actually. Screenplays are like a continual work-in-progress all the time.

F. R.: The thing with the screenplay more than the book is your screenplay, you are handing it to other people, so you are giving it across and then there's lots of notes from the director and the actors and things change.

Debbi: Exactly. Exactly. Even before then, just to reach a reader, it's a lot of work. That's all I'll say about that. I'm interested in the fact that you seem to blend genres and kind of shift among them very easily. What made you decide to be horror? Are you more horror or thriller or crime? How do you like to describe your writing?

F. R.: When asked about the books I write, I say I write supernatural thrillers and historical thrillers, my Screen Sirens Noir. I'm not entirely sure how

you would do the noir novel right now with mobile phones and technology. There are obviously ways you can do that with thrillers, but I don't want to tackle that stuff. I see myself as someone who writes thrillers, but it just depends on what kind they get blended with.

A lot of it is me writing stuff that entertains me, and hopefully other people come along. My supernatural thriller series Ludo Carstairs I wrote, one of the Ghostly Shadows books first introduced those characters, and I wrote that one Call of the Mandrake, and I was thinking very much the central relationship is Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. My wife who was reading it goes, it's very Doctor Who this. It's very Doctor Who and companion. That hadn't occurred to me, given how much Doctor Who I see that doesn't surprise me. I do now in my head, whenever I'm writing one of these go, there has to be like a Doctor Who scene, just for the central character, that's to be brilliant. Just that kind of you can try and solve this by being brilliant.

So that's in my head all the time. It's something I like, but then when I'm doing one of the noir novels, it is a fine line when you're doing one of those books. You want to do all the tough guy stuff and you want to sort of lean into your Chandler and so on, but it's very easy to tip into parody, particularly Chandler. If you're trying to write, it's very, very easy to go, yes, this is some kind of joke then, isn't it, the way you are writing now, rather than going ...

Debbi: It would be like me trying to take one of my novels and turn my characters into British characters. I don't think it would work.

F. R.: No, no, no.

Debbi: Although I will say that the main character I write about now likes Marmite. She encountered it while overseas and decided she liked it. She's on the Love Party. Let's see. What authors have most inspired your work? I think you've named quite a few.

F. R.: Yeah, I have named a few. When I was young, Chandler was massive. I've read a huge amount of Stephen King over time. He writes well when he's on form, but he writes too many books and they're often quite too long. To someone out of that genre, P. G. Wodehouse would be someone who I

very much enjoy in that kind of very Wodehousian thing of avoiding the cliché and going out of their way to avoid the cliché in the most entertaining fashion possible. I always think that in my head, I'm not P. G. Wodehouse, I wouldn't try some of his tricks, but it's always there of trying to go round the cliché rather than simply use it. And sometimes you fail to do that. Sometimes it's just the moment in the text being so fraught that going through some roundabout way just feels absolutely wrong and it makes more sense to just use it. But I always do have it. I'm always thinking of that. Is there a fresher way to say this?

Debbi: That's a great approach. Taking those tropes and then kind of subverting them a little bit is something that appeals to me very much.

F. R.: I mean, you have to think of your reader. If you're reading stuff about footsteps echoing and doors creaking and all that stuff, all the stuff they have read a thousand times before, then I know I would say, this is fine, but is there anything new here? But I think you should try and aim the stuff that is interesting in its own way. Obviously, not every book is going to be for everybody. In fact, most books aren't going to be for everybody, but if you can find your readers and they can get on with your style and enjoy it, then all the better.

Debbi: Exactly. Exactly right. What advice would you give to anyone interested in writing for a living?

F. R.: It's just a case of doing it. I remember a friend of mine, he had saved up the money and he left his job to become a screenwriter, and then he spent the next three years researching how to be a screenwriter. He read books about narrative and books about script and just went on, and every time I spoke to him, it was, I've done this. I've broken down narratives about this, I've broken down conversations about this. Have you written anything? A script? Well, not yet, no. It just stopped being this inspiring tale and became this cautionary tale of if you leave your job to follow your dream of writing, you do actually have to write some stuff.

Debbi: Absolutely, yes.

F. R.: It is a case of just getting down and writing. If you get it down, there's that kind of Malcolm Gladwell 10,000 hours thing and there probably is

something in that. You just need to write a lot, and have written a lot and start understanding narratives and how they work and how it functions. You know, when you're watching films, you kind of look at what they're doing, look at what comes up again and again. My wife and I are very fond of looking out for a Chekov's gun or a Chekov's whatever it's going to be, something that's suddenly being introduced early in the story, because that's going to come back up later.

Debbi: Right.

F. R.: The fact you've labeled this thing means we are getting this back then, doesn't it? It's looking for how these things work.

Debbi: You'll never read a book the same way and you'll never watch a movie the same way after doing this kind of writing .

F. R.: Yes.

Debbi: Kind of what it comes down to, and with screenwriting, it's all very visual too. In addition to the fact that other people will read it and have ideas about how to do it, you have to constantly think about what is the viewer seeing?

F. R.: But how far do you go with kind of the descriptions for that? Because there must be a temptation to go, I will describe everything in this room now.

Debbi: Well, there might be on the part of some people, not on my part. My tendency is to be too short now, and it has come across in my writing books, too. I have to focus, to really say, okay, what does this place look like? And even maybe draw it out so that I can actually write in the details and give the people the impression of being there, which is just not the same with screenplays. It's more like you want to give people a feeling of being there. It's like feeling, feeling, feeling. It's all about the feeling you give the reader. Kind of weird, it's hard to describe.

F. R.: Well, I've read your book *Damaged Goods* and that does have the feel of a screenplay to it. Obviously very quick, snappy scenes and the feel makes someone who knows their way round a film script. You are going very

quickly from one thing to the next and nothing has overstayed its welcome.

Debbi: Oh, good. Oh good. As long as it doesn't feel like you've been shortchanged or anything.

F. R.: Not at all.

Debbi: Excellent. Good. And do you write all your stuff out, like a complete outline of your work before you start writing?

F. R.: To a certain extent, in that I tend to write in like three acts, I think. I sort of have a first bit and the second, the middle bit, and then the end bit. I have at the start an idea of what's going to be in the middle bit, an idea of what's going to be in the end bit, but they can change as I go along. You get more into it and think, actually it would work better this way rather than my original plan. I remember once before an unfinished Screen Siren Noir, I did actually do the thing to write chapter summaries for every chapter for 40 chapters, and then by the time I got to write it, I just felt kind of bored with it.

Debbi: That's why I can't really write everything out. It has to come. There has to be some surprise in there. I generally plot to some extent, but then I allow myself to deviate from it. Do you kind of do the same?

F. R.: Oh yes, absolutely. Just look at it and go... Well, when you are writing, the bit of your brain that gives you ideas is obviously not switched off when you're writing, so you are not really trying to coin those senses, but you are thinking, oh, that would be better. And sometimes you'll create a character and midway through you think it's going to be a small part and you think, actually, this would be a good character to have this part of the plot, rather than someone who appears and then is going to be discarded. This is a good character to keep moving forward with.

Debbi: And that way you make sure all your characters are actually part of the plot as opposed to just there for no reason.

F. R.: Yes, yes. But anyhow, there are some characters who are more present than others.

Debbi: Absolutely.

F.R.: They are your kind of main protagonists, but some of those smaller characters you need for a bit, you think, no, that's actually a really good one that I have to keep going with because it would make the book more fun, and that's in the end what you want to do. You want to write as entertaining a book as you possibly can.

Debbi: Absolutely. For sure.

F. R.: Yeah.

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

F. R.: No, just to say that if you want to hear you and I chat about old films at some point, please just watch this space.

Debbi: Yeah, yeah. Getting ready to put together some film discussion, and put that up on my film review channel. So, cool. This is excellent. It's going to be fun.

F. R.: It's going to be fun. Yeah.

Debbi: It'll be great. It'll be awesome. Thank you so much for being here, by the way, and sharing some time and your advice and so forth with us.

F. R.: No problem at all. Thank you very much for having me.

Debbi: It was my pleasure. And again, I would like to thank everyone who's listening and thanks to my Patreon supporters as well for supporting me. If you enjoyed the podcast, please leave a review. They help. Until next time when our guest will be Kim Hayes, happy holidays and happy reading. Take care. Be seeing you.