

The Crime Cafe with

Jason Kapcala

Presented By:



Debbi: Hi, everyone. Today I have with me the author of two novels and numerous short stories that have been published in many magazines and literary journals. His latest book is [Hungry Town](#). It's my pleasure to have with me, Jason Kapcala. Did I say that right?

Jason: Kapcala

Debbi: Kapcala. Jason Kapcala. Well, hello Jason. Thanks for being here. Thanks for spending time with me.

Jason: Thanks for having me, Debbi.

Debbi: It's my pleasure. Now, you have two novels, but you have many short stories. Did you start off writing short stories?

Jason: Yeah, I did. I kind of went the academic track. Went through an MFA program, and when I was there, started out learning to write stories, short stories, and actually my first book was a short story collection, but it was a linked collection so they all kind of tie in with one another, and it was all based around the town where I grew up, that area in Northern Pennsylvania where I was from. And then after that, I started moving into writing longer things, working on novels, and wrote my first novel, [Hungry Town](#), and kind of got into that mode of writing about crime and police.

Debbi: Does your work tend to focus on small towns?

Jason: It does, yeah. I always write about a fictional place, but there's always elements of real life places that influence those towns. I just do that because I think I like the freedom of being able to put things where I need them, as the story demands it. So if I need to have a river here, I can put a river here, nobody's going to say, Hey, I'm from that town. There's no river there, but I'll go ahead and really base these towns on places where.... The first one was the place where I was from, but in other cases, places I know. So the town of Lodi in the novel [Hungry Town](#), it's kind of an amalgamation of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, which was very close to where I grew up, and it was a steel town, of course, and had a large steel mill there.

Jason: It was really non-functional by the time that I was old enough to pay attention to it, but I still passed the ruins of it a lot. So it's sort of part

that, and then part Athens, Ohio, where I did my Masters which was also formerly an industrial town turned college town. It had a brick factory and brick streets and everything. I don't know that there's really a town in existence that's quite like the one in my novel that would have a mill the size of the mill in the novel, but also a town as small as Athens. But I kind of went with that and ended up naming it Lodi, but it doesn't have any connection to the actual Lodi, Ohio. If anybody's from there, it's not your Lodi. It's a fictional one.

Debbi: That's interesting, because I kept thinking of Lodi, California.

Jason: Well, that's why I picked that name. Someone had said to me once they think there must be a Lodi in every state of the country. And so I was like, yeah, that does seem like a kind of an every town name, and so that's why I ended up going with it. Plus I like the Creedence Clearwater Revival song.

Debbi: Gotta love the Creedence. Do you have a preference for writing short versus long?

Jason: Oh, definitely long. I enjoyed writing short stories when I first started it, but I definitely liked the space to branch out and work longer forms and really tell my story, kind of, and take my time.

Debbi: It really allows you to set the scene, too.

Jason: Yeah, absolutely.

Debbi: Yes. So what is your latest novel about?

Jason: The one I just released, you mean?

Debbi: Yes, the one you just released.

Jason: It's actually a year now, but ...

Debbi: Well, yeah, the one that I know of.

Jason: Right, right, right, because I'm working on one, so I didn't ... So [Hungry Town](#), it's really about ... well, there's sort of two storylines that go

through it. One is the story of two police officers Rieux and Mulqueen, and it sort of starts out with an accident that happens when they're investigating a silent alarm that goes off at the local abandoned steel mill. And they find some kids inside up to things they shouldn't be. They're joined by another police officer who gets a little too rough with the kids, kind of unnecessarily for no reason at all. He overreacts to the situation, and as a result one of the kids is hurt. I won't say too much more plot-wise, but it ends up having ramifications for the two characters, Rieux and Mulqueen, who weren't directly involved in that, but who were present and forces them to really question law enforcement, their jobs in law enforcement and what they're doing. They both end up taking different paths as they deal with the fallout of this.

And then running parallel to that is a story about a young woman named Darla who is on the run from her abusive ex-boyfriend. He has hired a couple of local guys to track her down, and those two stories, eventually by the end of the novel, they intersect with one another.

Debbi: Yeah. How would you describe your writing in terms of sub-genre? Is it more police procedural? Is it more noir-ish?

Jason: Yeah, I kind of would call it like country noir or I've heard people say Southern gothic. I don't really think it's southern per se, but it's the same notion, that sort of Rust Belt gothic or Rust Belt noir, sort of my interest. Appalachian noir or something along those lines—small towns, economically depressed, industrial towns, and taking a look at the darker aspects of that.

Debbi: Yeah. Yeah. Elmore Leonard, that's the name that comes to mind.

Jason: Yes, that's a perfect example.

Debbi: Yes, absolutely. He was great. How much research did you need to do before you started writing your novels?

Jason: I did quite a bit of research. I don't have a law enforcement background or anything like that, so I did do some research into that. I try not to do so much research where fidelity to detail and things like that become so persnickety and stuff that it gets in the way of the story. Where it feels

like every page, you're just reading a laundry list of factoids that you knew the author researched or something, and it felt like they had to get in there. But I did do a lot of research into that. In a strange way, I did a lot of research into horse training, because Darla, the character of Darla, who I had mentioned is a horse trainer, and so kind of had to learn some things about that profession.

And then also, one of the characters, Mulqueen, he owns a hotdog stand, a hotdog shop, and so I always joke I did a lot of research into hot dogs. Ate at a lot of hotdog stands in the name of research, and that is something that was part of going to Bethlehem, Pa. They have a big food culture there, kind of a unique food culture there, and I used to go there with my dad and my brother, and we would go to some of our favorite hot dog stands—Yocco's, Potts' and other places like that. And so that kind of found its way into the book in an unusual way too.

Debbi: Cool. Very nice. I love when local color works its way into writing. What authors have most inspired you?

Jason: Well, it is a laundry list of authors probably who I could say have inspired me, but in terms of this book in particular, probably the most inspiration came actually not a crime writer, but a writer by the name of Kent Haruf who wrote the book *Plainsong*, which was, I think, a National Book Award finalist maybe. I couldn't say I remember the year, but it's a book about ordinary people really who live in a fictional town of Holt, Colorado. They are school teachers, they are farmers, they are elementary school kids. They are women who work as waitresses in diners, and just sort of a novel about their lives and how they intersect with each other. Each chapter starts with a different character name and follows that character in that kind of William Faulkner style. That was a book that was really influential on me when I was writing this.

There was another book called *Anything You Say Can and Will Be Used Against You* by Laurie Lynn Drummond, and it was a collection of short stories actually. She was a police officer in Louisiana, I believe, and wrote a collection of short stories. That was one where, I think probably the idea to write this book and to write it from the perspective of the police officers, I probably owe a bit of that to reading that book. If I were gonna say one more, I guess I would say at the time, I probably had written a

draft of the book already by the time this came out, but there was a book *American Rust* by Philipp Meyer. I know he's written some other books. I know he has written *The Son*, which was turned into ... I want to say a television series, but I don't know what station.

American Rust kind of got a lot of attention. It came out, it was doing very similar in the sense that it's a book that also opens with an accident in an abandoned steel mill, so when it came out that was one where I was like, oh, I have to read this book. This is kind of similar plot-wise to what I'm doing, and he writes very differently than I do. But it was a book that I loved. I think I felt connected to, and in whatever way that has influenced my writing, I'm sure it's only for the better.

Debbi: They all sound interesting. What are you working on now?

Jason: I'm working on a completely different kind of project now. My goal was to kind of not do the same thing twice, although I do think I will. I'm toying with the idea of returning to, particularly the character of Rieux in this book [Hungry Town](#), potentially visiting her some years down the road again in another book to see where she ends up and things. But right now what I'm working on is kind of a long novel, sort of a novel in stories.

It's sort of self-contained chapters, but really is a novel about a small town rock band, and it's set again in a fictional town, and that town's based on Centralia, Pennsylvania. The backstory of centrality is really interesting. There's a trash fire that was set there, I want to say sometime in the 80s maybe, and it seeped into an underground coal vein, and now there's a fire that burns underneath this town of Centralia. It's, of course, a condemned town now. Not many people live there, if anybody, but this fire has been burning underneath this town for many years and will continue to burn for many years more. I thought that was kind of a neat setting to explore. I've always been kind of fascinated with the story of that town, and so, I have this town of Stillwater in this book that I'm working on, and I have this small town rock band. This novel really sort of follows the lead singer of that band who, right when they were on the verge of their first break, he took their kind of golden ticket and took off for California to make it solo.

And, now it's eight years later, and he's coming back home for the funeral of one of his old bandmates, and he has to face these people he hasn't seen in quite some time. The drummer, who was his girlfriend at the time, she has a daughter, who is the right age that she could be his daughter, so he's not sure about that. He's kind of now being put back in the orbit of these individuals who he's wronged, and has to figure out how to make things right. It all sounds kind of serious the way I describe it, but it's actually a comic book, a comedy book. It's basically following him as he gets himself into one ridiculous, stupid situation after another and does dumb things.

Debbi: That sounds pretty cool.

Jason: I'm still working on it. Hopefully, it'll be successful, but if not ... I mean, there's multiple ways it could be successful, I suppose, and it's been really helpful to me to be working on it and to be writing something a little less grim and a little less hardboiled than the last book.

Debbi: I can thoroughly appreciate that. When you work on this stuff after a while, it's kind of like, I really need to lighten up.

Jason: Yeah. I just wanted to do something different.

Debbi: I can appreciate that. What advice would you give to anyone who would like to have a writing career?

Jason: Oh, boy. Yeah, that's a good question. Well, I have some of the old cliché ones I can give, which is to read a lot. That is of course, it's cliché, but it's still really good advice, I think. Read a lot and read not just whatever it is that you want to write. Don't just limit yourself to reading. If you want to write crime novels, don't just limit yourself to reading crime novels. Read broadly, read everything you can get your hands on, and you'll be surprised how things can kind of make their way into what you're doing. And then I think the thing that's always worked well for me as a practice, and I don't know if it works for everybody, but pass it along anyway.

I always just try to write. Sit down, write, be dedicated to it, be serious about it, commit yourself to it, put forth the effort and time. Writing I think is something that I've never been able to think my way through. I

just have to write and let all of the associations and things that are within me come out and come out onto the page, at least in that first drafting session of things. I think if you write with blinders on, if you know exactly where you're going all the time and exactly what's going to happen, you've got it all figured out, and then you sit down to do it, then you run the risk of missing out on some pretty unexpected, better ideas that may come along through the act of doing the writing.

And sometimes that's the most enjoyable part, I think for me is like where did this idea come from? This is great, and the story starts writing itself, and you're just sort of there trying to keep up. Then I think when I go to revision, I take the opposite approach. I try to figure out what it's about or what I thought it was going to be about, and then try to make it about anything else. I just try to write against the grain of my intentions, again, in order to just view it fresh, and to not get trapped into just seeing it one way. I think sometimes you're so close to things. This is probably true for people working in a lot of different areas. You become so close to something that you can't really see it for what it is, and so one of the ways I try to do that is just try to make it about something else, and again, sometimes you go in some really interesting directions that you didn't expect.

Debbi: Yeah.

Jason: Just try not to be too precious about it. I mean, it's a living thing and it's okay to kind of mess with it.

Debbi: I don't know if you're in a writer's group or anything, but I've always found that helpful, getting comments from other people.

Jason: It is. I'm not in a writer's group currently. I was in the past. Now I'm in a book group. We sort of have transitioned into, just based on need and time and things like that, a reading group. We read books and discuss them. But I do have one very good friend, Renée K. Nicholson, who's also a writer. She's actually a nonfiction writer, a memoirist, but we had met during graduate school and we were readers for one another, and I can always trust her to give me honest feedback and good feedback and helpful feedback and feedback that comes from a good place. I try to do

the same for her. So having your reader or readers I do think is really important.

Debbi: Yeah. Absolutely. Is there anything else you would like to add before we finish up?

Jason: No. Just really happy to have had the opportunity to share a little bit about the book. Really proud to see it out there on West Virginia University Press, and I am hosting a giveaway, which I think the information will be on your blog shortly. So if folks are interested in reading it or putting in for a copy, the information on that will be there. Otherwise, I hope that folks read it and enjoy it. They'll drop a line, and if you read it and you don't enjoy it, I suppose you could drop a line too. That's okay, but maybe not, I don't know, but hopefully it finds its readership out there.

Debbi: I'm sure it will. Well, I just want to thank you for being here. I appreciate your time and also I have to ask you. You're from northern Pennsylvania. Anywhere close to Pittsburgh?

Jason: Interestingly enough, I'm from Northeast Pa. originally, up in the Poconos, but not very far from the Allentown/Bethlehem area. I now live in northern West Virginia, so I'm really only an hour south of Pittsburgh now, so it's not hard for me to get to Pittsburgh. I get to Pittsburgh quite a bit.

Debbi: Yeah. I used to live in Monroeville actually, for a very short period.

Jason: Very cool.

Debbi: There are so many fond memories I have of Monroeville. We can talk about that later.

Jason: Yeah, well, it's a nice area. I mean, honestly, both sides of Pa. are nice areas.

Debbi: Yeah, they are. I like Pennsylvania.

Jason: They are historic areas, yeah.

Debbi:

Oh yeah. Lots of history there. Indeed. Well, thank you so much again. I appreciate your being here, and with that, I will just say thank you to all my listeners. Thank you. If you enjoyed this episode, please leave a review. They help. Also check out our Patreon page. You'll see I've been adding lots of bonus episodes, if you take a look there. So my patrons will have plenty to enjoy, plenty of content. So until next time, when my guest will be Lori Buchanan, I would like to wish you happy reading, happy New Year, and just take care and have a nice time. Be seeing you.