

The Crime Cafe with

Amanda Lamb

Presented By:



Debbi: Hi everyone. My guest today has worked for more than 30 years as a television news reporter. She now has four podcasts, has authored three books of crime fiction and three of true crime. She's also written family and children's books. She owns a company called Stage Might Communications. I am very pleased to have with me today the multi-talented [Amanda Lamb](#). Hi Amanda. How are you doing?

Amanda: Good, Debbi. Thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

Debbi: Well, I really appreciate your being here, and I am just amazed with the work you're doing. I love that you create podcasts the way I create blogs. You seem to not be satisfied with just one.

Amanda: Yes, I developed an interest in podcasting when I was working for my television station a couple years ago, and I really didn't have any idea what it was about. I had done a little bit of listening to podcasts, but I hadn't really ever worked on a podcast, and writing a narrative podcast is like writing a book, or it's like writing multiple documentaries because of the length of a true crime podcast, for example. But I just really loved it and I really developed an interest in it, and now I'm doing more interview-based podcasts like yours, and I love that as well, because I'm curious about people. I'm interested in people, and it just really fits kind of where I am in my career.

Debbi: That is really cool, because I can really appreciate that, because I've often thought of doing other interview-type podcasts because actually I have a journalism background

Amanda: There you go. Well, you can try.

Debbi: It all started with that, you know. That's where really my writing in a sense, professionally started kind of.

Amanda: Yes

Debbi: It started with journalism school, let's say.

Amanda: Okay. Okay.

Debbi: And I didn't go quite the route you did. I went to law school instead.

Amanda: Well, you know, one of the things I'm learning - my podcast is called Ageless, and it's about women transforming personally and professionally - and I'm learning that nobody's life is linear. Everybody's life seems to kind of go in many different directions, sometimes to arrive at the same place, but there's nothing about life that's linear.

Debbi: Yes, I agree with you completely there. What was it that prompted you to start writing crime fiction and true crime?

Amanda: I became a focused crime reporter. Most people in TV don't specialize early on in their careers. You're a general assignment reporter, which means you cover a little bit of everything, but I was always interested, especially in the courtroom process and the criminal justice process. My parents were attorneys. My father was a district attorney, and so growing up, I actually went to several murder trials and I got an opportunity to see how the process worked. I always thought I'd be an attorney. That just seemed like the thing that I was going to do, given my family background.

I really loved writing, so in college I started to think more about how could I combine this love of writing with kind of this interest in criminal justice, specifically in the puzzles, because a case, a criminal case involves a puzzle, trying to put these different pieces together to try to understand how it happened, why it happened, who's involved, who's responsible. And so I really just became a crime reporter a couple years into my TV reporting career because by default, I was the one that was interested. I wanted to go to these trials that a lot of people thought were boring, and I just fell in love with it.

I think the thing that ended up keeping me involved in it was the fact that I could cover the incident, the crime, then the investigation, then the arrest, and then follow it all the way through to the trial, sometimes the retrial, and it really was fascinating to me. I was a crime reporter, so obviously writing true crime was a natural extension of that, and true crime books are tedious. I mean, you have to cross your t's and dot your i's. I enjoyed the process, but then at the same time, it felt like an extension of my work and not really something that was super creative to me. So I said, you know, I've got all these stories that I've never been able to tell.

I always say a TV reporter probably reveals five to ten percent of what they know in a story, and I had all these other stories that I wanted to share, but I had to do so in a way that was fiction. So that's how I started writing mysteries. I started taking a grain of something that really happened and then developing it into a story with my imagination.

Debbi: Totally. You get so much out of your own life experience in creating fiction.

Amanda: Absolutely.

Debbi: That's the funny part.

Amanda: I've got like ... a tickle in my throat. Excuse me.

Debbi: No worries. I was just thinking, it's fiction and yet so much of it can be inspired by real life.

Amanda: Absolutely. And it's funny, it's to the point where my editors over the years of my fiction have said to me, some of their notes have been like, well, I don't think this could really happen, so maybe we need to change it. And I'm like, it kind of did happen. I'm very careful to take things out of the actual story that I was involved in, to change the characters so that we're talking about a compilation of a couple of different people, not necessarily one person in one case. I have that background, and so when I write crime fiction, I don't have to research. I don't have to ask police officers or medical examiners or lawyers or judges much at all. I mean, very occasionally I might reach out to somebody, but I've been doing it for 35 years, so I have a lot of experience. So I've enjoyed taking what I know and then putting it into fiction.

Debbi: That is awesome. That is really awesome. How would you categorize your crime fiction? Is it more mystery or thriller oriented?

Amanda: Oh, definitely more mystery. When I started writing the fiction a couple years ago - really before the pandemic but then kind of ramped it up during the pandemic - I knew as a TV reporter that I wanted to make my books clean because I had a reputation in the community and I had a responsibility to my company to make sure that whatever I did didn't reflect poorly on them, so I really decided I was going to write books that you

could read on the beach, you could read on an airplane. They're fun and yes, I get into a little bit of things that you might get into in a book like that, an autopsy or there's some violence or whatever, but overall, they're really just supposed to be entertaining. I spent so many years mired in the darkness that I really actually think it's important to have humor in your books, and so I put a lot of humor into my fiction.

Debbi: Yes, I think humor is essential, really in a sense to almost all fiction. Even the darkest needs a little bit of light touch to give a little relief.

Amanda: Yes, and no criticism of anybody that wants to be very dark and macabre. I mean, that's fine. It's just I've actually seen all that stuff, and I don't necessarily want that to be part of my fiction, so I try to just make a good story and I try to have some suspense. My first three mysteries are a series, so you can read them alone, but if you are able to read them from the beginning, which is [Dead Last](#), [Lies That Bind](#) and [No Wake Zone](#), there's a backstory.

The main character, she's a TV reporter, and she is the adult survivor of a murder in her family, and so I've always been curious about that because I've covered so many cases with children who have had one parent murdered, and the other parent goes to prison for that murder, and I always wondered what that was like for them growing up, especially now when they can Google everything and find out everything. So I just thought that that would be a really interesting premise. So you learn more about her background, Maddie's background throughout the three books. I do revisit a lot of things so that you can easily catch up if you don't read them in order.

I have a new book coming out in the fall, with a totally new cast of characters. It is not actually titled yet, so I can't really ... I have a title. My editor doesn't love it, the publisher doesn't love it, so we're still working on that, but I just decided I wanted to do something new. This book is from four different points of view, and it has my main character who is a newspaper reporter in this book. It has my investigator, it has the husband of a missing woman, and it has the manager of this hotel where everything takes place. So I just said I want to try that. I want to see what that's like, and then each character dovetails into the next, so one person interacts with the next person, and then their point of view takes over.

Debbi: Ooh. I like when books do that. I like when stories go that way.

Amanda: Yes. It's just interesting. It's a little bit more interesting to write, to be honest. I was kind of getting tired of just being in one character's head, and I think that's why I took a break. I will definitely go back to that series because I left a lot of things hanging, so I need to go back to that. But I just wanted to try it, and I'm really proud of it. It really worked out well, and I'm excited for people to read it.

Debbi: When's it going to come out?

Amanda: Right now I think we're looking around September, so that'll be great.

Debbi: That's great. I'll have to look for it.

Amanda: Yes. Hopefully I'll have a title by then.

Debbi: I would hope so.

Amanda: I named it ... well, it's funny ... I can tell you because it won't be the title. I was in the mountains when I wrote the book, and I love using the environment almost as another character. So *No Wake Zone*, which was my third mystery, I wrote that at the beach because I think that the ocean has so much beauty, but also so much kind of danger and the unknown, and I wanted to use that as the backdrop. So in the mountains during the pandemic, I was really inspired to use that as a backdrop, and I decided to call the book *Crag and Tail*, which is a rock formation on a mountain. But again, a little bit vague, doesn't really tell you what the book's about. So yes, it will be something a lot more approachable when it is finally published

Debbi: Cool. Something a little that says a little more mystery or suspense.

Amanda: Yes, exactly. A little more about what the book is about. Exactly.

Debbi: Exactly. Yes. You said that you haven't worked on the series, but you want to. Do you have any idea where you'd like to go with the series ultimately?

Amanda: Yes, I think I'd like to bring her story to a conclusion. I've alluded to what's happening, and it's funny because I've taken notes from my readers. They really wanted her to have a love interest, so she got a love interest in Book 3, and they really wanted to know more about her background and whether this case was going to be solved. So she's solving a case in real time, but then she has her personal backstory that she's also kind of working through and trying to figure out. So yes, I'd like to bring that to a conclusion, because I know where it ends, but the readers don't and so I want to get there.

Debbi: Yes. Indeed. So how much research do you do when you're writing fiction? There's a lot that you know.

Amanda: I research just the things I don't know. So for example, if I am in the mountains and there's something about the topography or how you would go about searching for a missing person, I will look that up. And again, a lot of what I do is ripped from the headlines, so it's easy to find articles and things about that. I'm a water person, I'm a beach person, I'm a paddle boarder, so in my third book, I do a lot, and I'm a boater, so I do a lot about paddle boarding and boating, and I know a lot about those topics. But of course, I had to look things up. Things about the tide and things about the weather, and things that I wanted to make sure I got right. I teach journalism, introduction to journalism at a local college, and I just tell my students when I see careless errors in their stories, that could have been solved by Googling. All you have to do is look something up.

Back in the day, we had *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and you had to physically look it up, and if you didn't have it at home, you had to go to the library. Now it's all at our fingertips. Obviously, you have to make sure you have a credible source, but it really is all at our fingertips. So, really I don't have to do a whole lot of research when I write my fiction, unless I'm setting it in a place I'm unfamiliar with, but I don't think I would do that. The first two books that I wrote were set in the city where I live, which is Raleigh, North Carolina, hence my backdrop .

Debbi: I love it. Great backdrop.

Amanda: So I really don't have to do too much, which is nice. Now, when I have done the true crime nonfiction, I have to really do a lot of research because even though those are my stories, I have to make sure every, every single fact is vetted, and that's what I do on our true crime podcast. Every single fact has to be vetted so it has to be connected. You know, think of a research paper when you were a kid or in college or high school, you have to put footnotes for every single fact, and that is exactly what we do in a podcast.

Debbi: Yes. It's almost like a legal brief. Everything you allege has to have a footnote or a reference to a transcript

Amanda: Something to prove that it's credible. My last podcast that I did, my last true crime for my company, was called *The Killing Month: August 1978*, and it was about a band of brothers who were outlaws in Pennsylvania back in late 1970s. They were eventually arrested. They stole big farm equipment, so they would go into farms in the middle of the night, back a truck up and roll the farm equipment onto the truck. Then some of the younger members of the gang - nephews, sons, relatives - started getting caught, and when they got caught, they started talking to police. And when they started talking to police, they started dying because the head of the gang was putting them in the ground, literally in the ground. They were killed and some of them were buried alive, and it was very, very dramatic.

My connection to that story was that my father was the district attorney who prosecuted them, so I remember the case, and then I remember going to the trial when I was 13 and 14. He was downsizing, and he had all of this memorabilia from the trial, including some of his personal notes, but more importantly, every single article that was ever written about it in the local newspapers, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Daily Local News*, and I had those. He gave them to me and that's where I got the idea for the podcast, because there had already been a book, there had already been a movie, and I said, you know what? I'm going to try to do a podcast on this.

So talk about research. I spent about three months at my dining room table collating everything, and then going through every single article, typing out the facts I wanted, and then referencing it from the date and the

year and everything that it was written and the publication. So it was a tremendous amount of research.

Debbi: Wow. And what an archive of information your dad gave you!

Amanda: Oh, absolutely. Although, it's funny ... Well, first of all, it was 45 years later, and I did interview many, many other people that he connected me with - FBI agents, local police, state police, witnesses, victims' family members, all sorts of people. But I really needed that foundation, and I would call him or email him and say, well, what about this or what about this? He's like, it was 45 years ago, and he was a big picture guy. He was the head, the lead District Attorney, and his second chair, who happened to be a woman, which was really unusual at that time in 1978, she was the one who did the yeoman's job of pulling so much of the facts together. So it was important for me to have the facts from the media, but then also get them from different people involved in the case, and then continually double check when there was a conflict with those facts.

So it was important for me to have the facts from the media, but then also get them from different people involved in the case, and then continually double check when there was a conflict with those facts.

Debbi: Wow. I can just imagine the work you put into that. It must have been fascinating too.

Amanda: Oh, it really was, because I'd always been fascinated by the case since I was ... I mean, I knew about it. I was 12 when it happened. I heard my dad and my mom talking about it. Back in the day, district attorneys actually went out to crime scenes. We were in a kind of a rural suburban area in Pennsylvania, outside of Philadelphia, so my dad would go in the middle of the night to a crime scene, and then I would overhear him talking about it, and he was pretty straightforward with me when I asked him questions. So even at that young age, I knew that people had been shot, they had been buried alive. These guys were dangerous. The youngest victim was actually a 15-year-old girl, and I was not that much younger. I was 12, so there was a lot of intrigue for me at a very young age about this case.

Debbi: I can imagine. I'm picturing Atticus Finch and Scout at this point, but in Pennsylvania.

Amanda: I remember my dad in the courtroom. He had a booming voice, and I remember him pointing at the defendant, like something out of a Perry Mason moment where he's pointing at the defendant and says, 'in God we trust. This man must be convicted of murder in the first degree. Thank you, your Honor' and sat down. And so it made a big impression on me. I didn't realize how much of an impression until I started researching it and remembering a lot of the moments.

Debbi: Yes. Wow. What authors have most inspired your writing?

Amanda: That's a really great question. I read a lot when I was younger, and then as most people do, they get busy with life and they have children and have jobs, and they don't have as much time to do reading. So I would say early on, I read a lot of Patricia Cornwell, I read a lot of James Patterson. I never read true crime. I watched true crime, and I listen to it, but I don't read it. So most of my fiction experiences were really the bestsellers. I will say in recent years, I'm really, really into British authors. I find that British crime authors, thriller mysteries are so just ... I don't know what it is about their voice. It's just so interesting, and I wish I could look at or recite the names. I would have to go to my book list. I am in a book club now, and actually I'm in two, and so we mix it up a lot, but my favorite genre would be really any British female author who writes thrillers.

Debbi: I'm with you on that. I mean, I've been reading some lately that are just so good.

Amanda: They are.

Debbi: Those protagonists are so dark and yet they're so funny.

Amanda: I think what I really like about what they do is just how they spin the story, that there's so much implied. They're not necessarily showing you something really scary; they're just implying it, and I think the scariest things in life are things that you think could actually happen. I just recently read one - and I think a lot of them are like this - where they rent the country house for the weekend and then something bad happens. But I

really like those because I think, well, how many of us rent the Airbnb and always wonder is somebody watching you, and who has stayed in this house and who lives here? And so I think there's a lot of intrigue in things that are scary that could actually happen.

Debbi: Indeed. I was going to ask you, was it difficult to switch from journalism to fiction writing? Did you find any difficulty adjusting, to letting yourself go, kind of?

Amanda: Yes. I think if I'm being 100 percent honest, I am a nonfiction writer. I write a blog. It used to be about parenting. I write it for the TV station I just retired from, WRAL and for years it was called Go Ask Mom. They've just changed it to WRAL Family. And so for 14 years, I wrote about my kids and being a mom, and I really think that's probably some of the best writing I've ever done. I've written several memoirs about my kids and about parenting and working and all that. I do think that's probably some of my best writing. So it's interesting to say, okay, now I'm a fiction writer. I'm sorry. I don't know why I keep having these. I think it's the pollen. It's horrible here. Where are you, Debbi?

Debbi: I'm in Maryland, so the pollen hasn't come out quite yet here, but it's going to get there.

Amanda: It's bad here. It's all over my car. So I think that I am definitely more angled in nonfiction writing. So when I write fiction, I have to really give myself license to let go and not be so controlled by how did it really happen? Could this happen? I'm getting better at that. I really believe that every single book I write, I get better at it. Let's hope that we all get better at something the more we do it.

One funny story in my third book, in my series, *No Wake Zone*, during the pandemic, I was writing a lot and rewriting a lot, and I was sitting on the couch one day and I went, it would be so cool if this happened right here. I was convinced that was going to be the best thing, and then I realized I had written myself into a hole, and I still really wanted that thing to happen, but now I had to go back and change a hundred other things to make that happen because they didn't make sense anymore. And so that's where I think fiction writing gets a little complicated. You have to know your characters. You have to know what they look like. You have to know

their backstory. You have to make sure that if they have brown eyes in this scene, they have brown eyes in this scene. And if you're just doing one point of view, the main character, she can't know what other characters know or what they're thinking. So there's a lot to keep track of. I do keep a glossary for all of my characters, for every name, every location. I have descriptions, and I have it in alphabetical order, and then I keep really detailed chapter summaries so I can go back and fix inconsistencies.

But I think that's the hardest thing about fiction writing, is that you're creating something that's not real, so therefore, if there is a disconnect it's your world, you created it. So if there's a disconnect, it's your fault. I also had an age issue from one of my books to the next, so once I got into the second book, I realized that I had already established certain ages, and I thought, well, okay, that's it. I can't change that now, because these are characters in real time. I have not written anything about the pandemic yet, so everything I've written has been set in 2019 or prior, and I think I'm just going to skip it.

Debbi: I can't blame you.

Amanda: I haven't decided, but I know that that's a big thing that authors really get concerned about. I also have friends that don't even want to use social media or texting or write about any of that, so everything they write or cell phones is mid-nineties or prior. . But I incorporate all that because that's the world that we live in.

Debbi: Yes. Yes. Well, if you want to write historical fiction, that's fine.

Amanda: Right, exactly.

Debbi: If you want to write contemporary, that works too.

Amanda: I would have to research to write historical fiction, so I'm glad to write right now as things are and I think for me, I would have no problem setting something later and referencing the pandemic, but I don't want the pandemic to be the whole story, so I'm going to have to figure that out, because if I go into Book 4 of that series, I'm either going to have to jump way ahead, or I am going to be smack dab in the middle of it and have to figure out how to make that a thing.

Debbi: What advice would you give to anyone who would like to make a career in writing?

Amanda: That's a great question. I'm also an athlete. I'm a runner. I do yoga, and I believe that everything that we do, we get better at if we continue the discipline. Writing is a discipline, and there was no better preparation for me than being a TV reporter, so I would say get a job where you have to write all the time as much as possible. As a journalism professor, I am definitely seeing how a lot of the skill set for writing has just fallen by the wayside, and I don't know if that's related to the pandemic. I don't know if that's related to the fact that everything is shorthand now in texting and even email and social media, but writing is an art and good writing - and I don't mean just writing a book or writing a screenplay or writing a podcast, I mean writing a letter. I mean writing a paragraph.

If you want to engage people and share a message, whether it's nonfiction or fiction, you have to be a good writer. I just think that it is a constant thing in my life of always trying to improve my skill set. And you know when you write something and it's just spot on and you feel great, and you know when you write something and it's not great. I think we all know that. So my advice would be to write, and obviously we all have to make a living. I know when I graduated from college, I told my parents I was just going to go be a writer and write books, and they said respectfully, no, you're not. You're going to get a job. So I put all these things that I enjoyed together. I was always involved in theater and writing, and I thought, wow, TV reporting! That might be fun. That was 35 years ago, so it worked out for me. But I would just say, encourage them no matter what kind of writing it is. Just if you want to be a writer, get a job that involves writing, and then work on your personal stuff on the side.

Debbi: Great advice. Thank you very much. Is there anything else you would like to add before we finish up?

Amanda: No. I think that I love the fact that you're doing a podcast about writing and about authors because I feel like so many people don't read anymore. I will tell you that I did go for a long period of time where I didn't read much, but now I'm getting back into it and it's just such a joy and it's the most relaxing thing. I think the fact that we live in a world where everything is going so fast, if you could just take a little bit of time every day to

read, I think it's so good for your brain. It's so good for anxiety. It's so good for your imagination, and I just love it. I did just remember one of the British authors, Ruth Ware.

Debbi: Oh yeah.

Amanda: She's one of the ones I really enjoy. I always have a book going now. Always. Never go anywhere without a book.

Debbi: Amen to that.

Amanda: Yeah, I've moved away. I do audio books as well, but I've moved away from the electronic book. I just like having the book and so I'm always reading a book.

Debbi: I'm the same. I can put an eBook out there. I'll read an eBook, but there's nothing like that print book in your hands somehow.

Amanda: Exactly. And I do know people who don't read. I have people in my life who don't read, and I just think about what they're missing. If everything were to go down, if our electrical grid went down, if the internet went down, the readers, we know we're going to be okay.

Debbi: Exactly. That's right.

Amanda: Because we have something to do to occupy our minds, and there would never be enough time to read all the books I want to read.

Debbi: Yes, exactly. Well, I want to thank you for being here today. Thank you so much.

Amanda: Oh gosh. It's been a joy. Thank you for having me.

Debbi: It was my pleasure. Before we go, I will just put in a quick plug for my new podcast or the one I'm doing in cooperation with [F. R. Jameson](#). We discuss film noir every month at [Dark and Twisted Alleys, a Film Noir podcast](#). And next up on that is going to be the movie [Out of the Past](#), which is a fantastic movie, so don't miss our discussion. Also, if you enjoyed this episode, please leave a review. If you would like to become a supporter of the podcast, please check out the Patreon page for our podcast, where

you can get bonus episodes, ad-free episodes and other things. In the meantime, our next guest will be [Steffanie Moyers](#). Until then, take care and happy reading.