

The Crime Cafe with

Charles Salzberg

Presented By:



Debbi: Hi everyone. This is the last regular episode of the ninth season of the Crime Café. I cannot believe that I've been doing this for nine years, honest to God. So, in any case, our guest tonight is a person who has worked as a journalist and he is a novelist, who has written for a variety of magazines, including Esquire, GQ, Elle and others. He's also written book reviews. He gets paid to do that. I have to find out about that.

Charles: Not much. Not much.

Debbi: Not much?

Charles: Not much.

Debbi: Well, you get paid something. That's nice. His series though is the Henry Swann Detective series, which is really cool, I think, at least based on what I've read. He has written true crime and a variety of nonfiction books, including a book about Soupy Sales, which I have to ask about. He's a writing teacher and mentor, as well as the founding member of the New York Writers' Workshop. It's my pleasure to have with me, Charles Salzberg.

Charles: Thank you so much for having me.

Debbi: Oh, sure. It is my pleasure, believe me. I just started actually your latest *Man on the Run*. Wow. What a great opening. You already have me hooked. I love your style. It has a kind of a chatty feel to it. Is this the way you write generally?

Charles: Yes. Almost all the stuff I write is in first person from different people, and I just like that conversational style.

Debbi: Yeah. Yeah. I'm with you there. Yeah. I like that. What inspired you to write the Henry Swann Series?

Charles: It was inspired in the beginning by spite. I was in an MFA program at Columbia, and I had to have a manuscript to get in, and I chose this teacher who said he read the manuscript - I'm not sure he did. It got me into the program and he said to me, do you know how to tell a story? And I said, yes, I know how to tell a story. He said, well, you don't tell stories. This book is written like Nabokov and Philip Roth, in a style like that. You

should read Chekhov. I was an English major. I had read Chekhov. Anyway, I quit after two weeks and I thought, well, this guy doesn't think I can write plot. I'm going to write a book that's very plotted, and those would be detective novels.

So the first Swann book was called [*Swann's Last Song*](#) because I had no intention of writing crime novels after that, or revisit Swann. It had a very interesting history because I wrote it and I sent it to agents and editors, and they all said we love this, but we can't publish it with this ending. The problem with the ending for them was the detective follows all the clues, and in the end, the murder has nothing to do with any of the clues he followed. It was totally random. So the reader finds out what happened, but the detective who's really a skip tracer had nothing to do with solving the crime. And they said you're going to disappoint detective/crime lovers because they need the detective to solve the crime. And so I said, well, that's not what this book is about. I was much younger then, and so I said if you're not going to publish it this way, I'm going to put it away and forget about it and go onto the next thing.

About 20 years later, I happened to stumble across the manuscript and I read it and I thought, this is pretty good. Maybe things have changed. I had been published much more in those 20 years in nonfiction, and I gave it to an editor and he said, I love this book but we can't publish it with this ending. I said, well, what if I change the ending? And they said yes. So in 20 years, I learned how to sell out essentially, and again, I had no intention of writing another crime novel, but it was nominated for a Shamus Award for Best First PI Novel. I didn't even know what a Shamus Award was, and when I lost, I got really pissed off and I said, I'm going to keep writing these things until I win something. So that's how it happened.

It was really inspired by a magazine article I wrote about a fellow by the name of Sidney Weinstein, who was what was called a skip tracer. Skip tracers are, to me, even lower than the private detectives. They're the ones that repo cars and they find husbands who have run away from their wives and lost people, and I kind of patterned it after this guy that I interviewed.

Debbi: That's fascinating. It's fascinating how much spite played into your decision to write crime.

Charles: Then I found that I liked it. After I got started and did a couple of books, I found this is pretty good. This is fun.

Debbi: It's awesome. What do you enjoy most about crime writing?

Charles: The character. I'm really big into character. I don't write typical murder mysteries.

Debbi: I love that.

Charles: Occasionally there are murders in the books, but only one did I write, [*Canary in the Coal Mine*](#). That was kind of like a murder mystery. I'm much more interested in other crimes, smaller crimes, crimes that I think that we can identify with a little bit more.

Debbi: I was going to say you can do all sorts of things with a crime novel. They don't have to involve murder, but do you plan to write more crime novels?

Charles: I do. I'm working on one now.

Debbi: I was going to say, what are you working on?

Charles: I'm working on one with a little bit of a different twist, because the main character has a touch of ESP and no one in the world knows he has it. He's embarrassed by it; he doesn't use it. The only person who knows he has it is his best friend, and his best friend comes to him one day and says my college-age daughter is missing, and I'd like you to help me find her, if you have this power, using it. And so reluctantly to help his friend, he has to tap into this ability he has. Very reluctantly though.

Debbi: Reluctant why?

Charles: It scares him a little. It makes him different. He's afraid of it. He wants to be just like everyone else, and so he's shunned it over the years.

Debbi: Yeah. Yeah. That's interesting. You wouldn't want to over-rely on that, but at the same time, it adds an interesting twist to the whole detective genre.

Charles: Yes. Well, that actually comes also from a book I was going to do with a woman who had that ability out in California, and she worked with police departments. I went out there and interviewed her, and I found out how she does it and how it works for her, and this stuck in my mind for years, and I thought one day, maybe I'll use that, so I decided to.

Debbi: That's really cool. You've also written a lot of nonfiction, including a book about Soupy Sales? How did that come about?

Charles: Well, that's quite a story too. I was approached by an agent friend of mine, and Soupy was a client. They already had the book deal, and they needed someone to work on it with him, to write it with him, really to write it. I had always been a fan growing up, so it was kind of exciting, but I said yes before I met him. And then when I met him, very nice man, but I think he was suffering from Parkinson's and maybe he had had a stroke and he could hardly speak. Try writing a memoir with someone who can't speak. I should have met him before. I would've found that out, but I just trusted the agent, so I had to rethink the entire book. So instead of just interviewing him and getting stories from him, I had to deal with it as I would a magazine article, and I found people that worked with him over the years, worked on the shows with him, and got stories from them about him. The book was really fun to do, and I spent time with him, but unfortunately I didn't get him in his best years.

Debbi: Oh, that's such a shame.

Charles: A very nice man though, and never made a lot of money doing what he did, too.

Debbi: Huh, interesting. because I remember him well. I remember he did the whole pie-in-the-face thing, didn't he?

Charles: Yes, he did, and it became a big thing. People like Frank Sinatra would go on the show to get hit in the face with a pie.

Debbi: Right, right. He was something. How much research do you do for novels?

Charles: Well, I'm really lazy and I do as little as possible, but sometimes I do have to do research. It can be fun, depending what it's for. Research for me is something that happens often before I even decide to write a book. So,

for instance, [Man on the Run](#), the character in that book, which he's actually a character in [Second Story Man](#). That's the first time he appears. That book was inspired by an essay I read in the New Yorker years and years ago about a master thief, a master burglar. I think all writers have this. It kind of sticks in your mind, certain stories. I didn't know that I would eventually use it in a book of mine, but I was looking for something to write about, and I thought maybe it's time to do a book with a master burglar, and then I did have to do research.

Every crime writer, if you look at their browsing history, Debbi, we're all scared to death that one day someone's going to look at our browsing history and see all the stuff we've had to read, had to research.

Debbi: Oh, yeah. I think about that a lot. I type something and it's like, does anybody else know I'm doing this? What would they think?

Charles: It'll keep us on the straight and narrow.

Debbi: There you go. Yeah. We won't really get on their radar unless we act on it in a weird way.

Charles: Right, exactly.

Debbi: The thing you're working on now, is that a continuation of that character?

Charles: No. No. These are totally new characters, the one I'm working on now.

Debbi: Totally new characters. Okay. So do you think you'll extend the series that you have now?

Charles: You know, I never thought of it as a series in the first place. [Second Story Man](#) was written as a one-off. I don't want to spoil the ending, but it ended and then I wrote another book called [Canary in the Coal Mine](#), which had nothing to do with it. And then when I was kind of thinking about what I wanted to work on next, I started to think, well, what happens to that character, Francis Hoyt, after *Second Story Man* ends? And so I started *Man on the Run* really to find out what happens to him afterwards, because I don't plot anything. I don't know what's going to happen on the next page, much less the next chapter, so it's kind of a revelation for me

writing novels. I find out what's happening not much before the reader will find out, and so it was really just a matter of curiosity. I wanted to know what happened to Francis Hoyt.

Debbi: Wow. I'm always amazed by people who can just sit down and write without plotting it out with any kind of outline at all, not knowing where they're going.

Charles: Yeah. I don't know where it comes from. It's worked. It has always worked for me.

Debbi: I think that's fantastic. That's great. I wish I could do that. I should probably try it just to see if I could do it.

Charles: I think you can, and for me, what it does, it keeps it fresh. You know, there's Jeffery Deaver, the writer, Jeffery Deaver. I interviewed him once.

Debbi: He's great.

Charles: He does an outline of like 120 pages.

Debbi: I can't do that.

Charles: No. Not only wouldn't I do it, Debbi, but I don't think I'd write the book if I did the outline, because I would know everything that was going to happen, and it wouldn't be fresh for me, and I'd be afraid that it wouldn't be fresh to the reader. So I admire someone who can do that, but it would inhibit me from writing the book as opposed to helping me.

Debbi: Yeah. Yeah. You can get a little too confining with one's outline. For me anyway, because I need to have that room, that wiggle room to consider another option.

Charles: Exactly. Exactly.

Debbi: As long as I'm reaching certain emotional touch points here and there, in terms of solving the mystery, then I feel like I've done my job.

Charles: Exactly.

Debbi: I don't know. How would you describe in terms of genre, what you write? What sub-genre is it?

Charles: You know, it's a good question because people ask me. I consider myself a crime writer, not a mystery writer, not a detective writer. A crime writer, and it allows me to explore anything that has a crime in it. One of the Swann books, the second one [Swann Dives In](#), you don't know what the crime is till halfway through the book, and by the end of the book, you're not even sure there was a crime. Those are the kind of things that sort of challenge me and make it fun to write.

Debbi: That's fantastic. You are really making it intriguing in terms of what you write that now I really want to read all your books.

Charles: That would be nice.

Debbi: I hope everybody listening is feeling the same way, because that just sounds wonderful. I mean, to not be stuck with certain preconceptions about what it is you're supposed to be writing, sounds like, to me, sounds like your approach.

Charles: It works for me. I mean, when I was a kid, I always wanted to be a novelist. I thought of myself as a literary novelist, and so now I've sort of melded the two because I consider them to be literary novels. Some of the best crime writing is very literary. There are some writers now who are writing crime, who are just really fine writers.

Debbi: Yes, absolutely. That is so true. So is there anything you'd like to add before we finish up?

Charles: No, I think you pretty much covered it. I teach writing and I really enjoy that, and I think it makes me a better writer too, teaching, and I've had some really successful students too, and it's fun for me to do. It's even more fun now that we have Zoom, because I don't have to leave the apartment to teach.

Debbi: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Isn't it great? I mean, working on stuff like that, teaching other people. When I've done mentorships with people from my college, I always feel like that's some of the best stuff I've ever done, just relating with them and so forth.

Charles: I'll tell you a quick story. This was years ago, a friend of mine who was a magazine editor called me up and he said, I have an assistant and she's really smart, and she could use some writing lessons. Can she take your class? And I said, sure. She comes in the first class - very pretty, blonde, tall, maybe 23, 24. The second class she brings in a piece to the workshop, and it's an essay about her first day at work. And she called the essay "The Devil Wears Prada." That was Lauren Weisberger. She had no sense of writing a book, and she kept bringing in these essays about her working for *Vogue*, for Anna Wintour. I kept telling her she had a book, she had a book. Finally after a year, she had about a hundred pages, and she called me up and said, what do I do? I said, find an agent - which she did - and we know the rest. If you get a copy of her book, *The Devil Wears Prada*, you'll see in the acknowledgements she wrote, if you don't like this book, blame Charles Salzberg.

And after that, it's really interesting. I still do. I get calls or emails from young women - because she always mentions me on her website or whatever - wanting to get into classes with me, thinking that somehow I can make them into the next Lauren Weisberger, which I cannot.

Debbi: No, that's up to the writer.

Charles: Yes, absolutely.

Debbi: Nonetheless, having a good teacher is a wonderful way to start. I really admire what you're doing, so thank you so much for being here today and talking to us. This has been a real pleasure.

Charles: Thank you. A pleasure for me too.

Debbi: Thank you. And with that, let's see if I can replace myself. Hey, I did it without any problems. What do you know? On that note, I would like to thank everyone from the bottom of my heart. Everyone who has supported this podcast on Patreon. Everyone who has listened; everyone who has left a review. Thank you so much.

The next time you hear this voice, unless you watch my YouTube channel, it will be the first episode of the 10th season of the Crime Cafe. It'll be the next time you hear me on the Crime Cafe anyway, because I actually have

another podcast. It's a podcast about film noir, but that's another subject. Anyhow, in the meantime, until the next episode, take care and happy reading.