The Crime Cafe with

Phil M. Williams

Presented By:

Debbi: Hi everyone! This week we have with us the author of 27 books, primarily thrillers. His stories tend to explore modern dilemmas and controversies which pit powerful villains against average citizens. He's giving away an audio version of one of them, NO GOOD DEED. It's my pleasure to introduce my guest, Phil M. Williams. Hi, Phil. How are you doing today?

Phil: Very good, Debbi. Thank you so much for having me on!

Debbi: It's my pleasure, believe me. I noticed that most of your books are thrillers. I also noticed that you do have at least one series, the 2050 series.

Phil: That's correct.

Debbi: What prompted you to write this series?

Phil: I think I was interested in – in thinking about what would happen in my lifetime. Right? I mean, I'm 48 years old, so I'm hoping I get another 25 years at least. So I was thinking, okay, well, I wonder what the world would look like. I don't know. 2050 is a good, seemed like a good round number. And I see a lot of the – I'm interested in history. I'm interested in some politics. And to me it was just sort of an extension of.

Now it's a very exaggerated version of what's maybe happening in the world today, but it's sort of taking the extreme versions of totalitarianism and projecting it on the United States and seeing what life would be like for. And in the series, there's four main characters. And so I wanted to see, wanted to explore what life would be like for the one character as a farmer. He's an average guy that's struggling, as a lot of our farmers are today, and struggling to make ends meet.

And then you have the congresswoman who's sort of a budding communist congresswoman who eventually rises to power. And then you have the banker, who sort of comes from a very shadowy family where they control a lot of the economics behind the scenes. So you get a chance as the reader to kind of, to see that.

And then you have just this regular woman who's sort of, who's a nurse, and she and the farmer end up. They end up, they end up crossing paths, but they kind of show that … those two characters show the every man and every woman perspective of what life is like in this dystopian future, whereas, and then the other side of the coin, you have the corporate power banker, and then you have the governmental power person that ends up being the president. They show you the power side of the dynamics, which I think is really interesting for the readers.

And you can see, as the series goes on, you can see how the plots wrap around each other and how the characters sort of interact with each other. And in the beginning, you don't always see how it all is going to connect, but it all kind of sort of weaves together, which I think was just unbelievably complex to do.

The plot outline was – Yeah, the plot outline was over 100,000 words. I think it was, like, 130,000 words just for the plot outline. And I put a – put a lot. I spent over a year just working on the five book plot outline before I even wrote a single sentence of the series.

Debbi: Oh, my goodness!

Phil: Yeah.

Debbi: I'm always in awe of people who can do that. Write out, like, entire plot developments in an outline and then turn it into a book.

Phil: Yeah, I'm definitely a plotter. And if you're not a plotter, I don't know, Debbi, if you're a plotter.

Debbi: I am, actually.

Phil: Okay.

Debbi: I'm very much a plotter, but I do like to kind of give myself this wiggle room to go off on other things. Yeah.

Phil: Yeah. I do the same thing. I mean, I think, like, I'll come up with a very detailed plot outline, but a lot of times when I'm writing it, I'll come with, something new will come up, and it's like, oh, that changes my outline. So then I got to go through the whole plot outline and make some minor changes here and there to make it to sort of fit the new direction.

But, yeah, I try to at least maintain some flexibility, not be so rigid on the plot outline, but. But I'm probably closer to rigid than, I'm on the opposite spectrum as, like, say, Stephen King, who just, you know, of course, he's the pantser. Right? That's the example everybody gives, I guess.

Debbi: Yeah. I mean, I'm amazed when people can do that, too. I'm just like, you know, no, I have to have some idea of where I'm going. I need a little roadmap of some sort.

Phil: Yeah, I agree with you. I'm the same way.

Debbi: So you've written a lot more standalones, though. What is it that draws you toward writing standalones?

Phil: That's a good question. You know, it's funny because I don't know many, many indie authors that are doing well that write standalones. It's just, it's not, I know it's a – it's a terrible business choice, but I personally enjoy reading standalones and I, I think that's probably why I like writing them. But I think it's, when you're writing a long series, I think it gets, to me, it gets repetitive, and I like the idea of a completely different – I like the idea of telling a complete story in a single book as best as I possibly can.

And then once I feel like I've exhausted it, I feel like if I were to try to write another one, it's just not going to, it's just the, it's always, the sequels always pale in comparison to the original, you know, and that's kind of the way I view my standalones. It's like, well, I put everything into that story and once it's over, I got nothing left to say.

Debbi: You know, I think that's great, actually. I think the fact that you focus so much on the quality of the story rather than worrying about, oh, I have to write, you know, three or four novels. Put them all out, you know, this year. I mean…

Phil: My bank account doesn't like it, but….

Debbi: Well, I get that. Believe me, I get it. Yeah. But I think – I think quality pays off in the end, when you come right down to it.

Phil: Yeah, I agree.

Debbi: How would you describe your writing to someone who is interested in buying your books, but isn't familiar with your writing?

Phil: I would say just looking at what the reviews tend to say, because I think my opinions on these things are always wrong. Even my opinions on my own work, as often if I'm, if I'm talking to a reader, you know, it's, it's, I think that the reader's opinions are probably more going to be correct.

And they tend to write like, if you look through my reviews, you'll notice a lot of people will say they can read them very quickly, they're page turners, that they're, and I – and I purposely don't write in particularly flowery language or, um, particularly complex. And now a lot of the plots can be complex, but I want the average person to pick this up and feel like it's entertainment, not that it's drudgery.

And so I've tried to write it in such a way. Plus, I don't, it's partly me, too, is I don't like to read books there. I feel like it's drudgery where the – where the author is, you know, so smart that I can't understand half the words in there. But, so I would say, yeah, they would probably say that they're – they're page turners, that they're – that they're going to be, there's going to be twists and turns and there's going to be characters that you love that might get killed off, that you just don't know what's going to happen next. That's right.

Debbi: Wow! Well, you make it sound incredibly intriguing. And I have to tell you, I agree with you on the flowery language. I'm with Elmore Leonard. Skip, you know, leave out the parts, people skip.

Phil: Yeah, that's true. That's exactly right.

Debbi: Amen.

Phil: That's a great quote. I love that quote.

Debbi: Yeah. I love Elmore Leonard. I mean, the guy was, was awesome. What are you working on now?

Phil: I'm working on a book now. The title is a working title, so it may not end up being the title, but it's, it's called WHAT HAPPENED IN THE WOODS. And it's about a – it's about a young woman who is from the trailer park. She's grown up hard and she's works at a fast

food place and she's, a guy comes in and she sort of had, she's had a rough go lately and she's – and she laments to herself how people come in, you know, those little plastic boxes where people put cash in for, like, I don't know, Ronald McDonald House or something. Right? For charity. And they put these in the fast food places.

And she's lamenting in her mind that, you know, fast food workers are the only ones who don't get tips. Right? And all the other food places, you know, most people, you know, you get tips. So she's sort of angry about this and she's thinking about how, and somebody puts some money in the little plastic thing and they kind of look at her for some sort of acknowledgement of their heroism, for putting this money that she's not getting. Right?

And she so just gives them kind of like the smile that doesn't mean anything. It doesn't go to her eyes. Right? And then she, and then another guy comes in, puts a large amount, like a five or ten, and the little end of it sticking out. Right?

And so she ends up stealing it and gets caught and gets fired. So she really kind of spirals down, and then she ends up running into this guy who is – Claims to be this model scout. And she's very – She's very skeptical, but she's desperate. And she eventually agrees to this $500 modeling gig for the day. Guy takes her out to the woods, and everything seems fine. It all seems in the up and up. He's a, you know, they do pictures. It's not, it's all above board. That's, you know, clothes on, the whole thing.

And then – and then – and then the guy, they do some pictures at this waterfall, and then they see somebody, or she thinks she sees somebody, and he goes to check it out, and then he never comes back.

And then she's – And then all of a sudden, she's being chased and basically, she's in a situation where she's fighting for her life, and at the end, they catch her and do terrible things to her. And then she wakes up in the same room every morning to do it all over again, and she just has no idea what's happening to her. And that – So it's a horror. It's a horror story, and it's a story about. And it turns out that she has some unique skills, given in the way she grew up. And basically, this group of men took the wrong person for once. And so that's kind of how the story kicks off.

Debbi: That's interesting! So sort of like a woman in jeopardy but not a victim.

Phil: Definitely not. I mean, she's a victim. Obviously. She's outnumbered, but not a…

Debbi: A helpless victim.

Phil: That's for sure. I guess probably she's a survivor, right?

Debbi: Survivor, yeah.

Phil: Yeah, she's definitely a survivor. And she's somebody who's – She's a small person. She's petite. You know, she's not anything. And I don't like writing about, like, you know, special agents that can beat up anybody. That's not interesting to me.

To me, what's interesting is, like, okay, let's take this young girl who has nothing, grew up in poverty, is a small person, put her in the woods with these big men that are used to doing these terrible things to women and see how she would get herself out of this. And it turns out she's got a very interesting background.

And the story is being told in the before time and the after time because in the before time she's in a situation where her mother goes to prison for drugs, and then she ends up with her a strange father who she hasn't seen since she was very little. And he's got his own issues, but he's a somebody who's just retired from the military and has some very special skills, but also isn't quite right mentally.

And so he sort of puts her through all these weird, weird trials out in the woods where she vowed after these things that happened when she was younger that she would never go back to the woods. And here she finds herself back in the woods.

But a lot of these – a lot of these lessons, which she thought were the most horrible things that she had ever learned when she was a child, she's finding them quite useful in the now time. So, anyway, yeah, so I'm excited about it. I'm looking forward to finishing it. And the first draft is all done. It's with my editor now, but hopefully it'll be out sometime in the winter.

Debbi: That's great. Good to hear. How much research do you do for your novels?

Phil: It really depends on what I'm writing about, but I do tend to do a fair amount of research because I think it is really important. You probably agree it's really important that we get things right, and obviously, we don't know everything as writers. There's so many things I'm writing about. Like, if I'm writing about prison, for example, I've got my novel REDEMPTION went heavy into prison, and I didn't really know much about prison. You know, I've thankfully never been there, but my brother used to work there, so I interviewed him, you know, on all these different, like, little details about how it was.

And then I did a tremendous amount of reading about firsthand prisoner accounts and to get a feel for what it was like. And that's essentially, I'll come up with a storyline for what I want to write about, and then as I'm going, I'll start doing the research, and I'll find that really changes the plot because as I learn about these different things that, you know, you feel, you figure out, oh, that would never work because they would never do it like that because that's not what, you know, a plumber would do or that's not what, you know, whatever profession they are would do.

Debbi: Yeah, boy, I know where you're coming from there, because I'm writing about a female Marine now, a veteran. I've never been in the military. What do I know? Right?

Phil: Yeah. Right.

Debbi: I start reading everything I can written by female veterans.

Phil: That's great!

Debbi: I'm just like, whoa. Getting into their heads, and it's like, whoa. Oh. So that's how they think. Okay. They would do this in that situation. Oh, my.

Phil: That's the beauty of what we do. I think, though, is that we can, because there's no two people's experiences in life are the same. Like, nobody. Not even – Not even twins.

Debbi: Exactly.

Phil: And so we have the opportunity to empathize with other people's situations and then put that on the page in a way that's – And I think the more we get it right, and then the more details and the closer it is to reality, the more I think, the more justice we, we do to those people in similar situations who can read that and look at it and say, hey, that, that reminds me of me. They're talking about me. You know, they're – they're identifying with those characters and those feelings.

Debbi: Exactly.

Phil: I think that's a wonderful thing about fiction writing, is that we, in a sense, can make the – Can make the world a more empathetic place, because everybody who reads these books can learn about what it's like to be somebody other than themselves. And they can see all the parallels. Right?

I had this conversation with my wife the other day. I said, you know, I've heard there's been some talk of, like, you can't write. Like, for example, I'm a man. I can't write. I shouldn't be writing a first person as a woman, you know, or I shouldn't be writing somebody who's a different race or a different whatever, a different sexual orientation.

But I told my wife, I was like, look, I'm an empathetic person like everybody else. I know what it's like to feel lost – to feel left out, to feel alone, to feel ugly, to feel stupid, to feel happy, to feel all the different things like that. These are things we all have in common. And I think, as writers, we definitely have the ability to figure out how somebody else in a completely different background than us might feel in that same situation. And I think that's one of the beautiful things I love about writing fiction anyway.

Debbi: I agree with you completely. I mean, the first screenplay I ever wrote was with a male protagonist. Had a male protagonist. And, well, that's all I'll say. I mean, it's like, you can write whoever you want to write as long as you make it true to that kind of person, you know? Do your research, talk to people?

Phil: Absolutely.

Debbi: Yeah. So what do you find is the best way to build a readership?

Phil: I think that if you're thinking strategy-wise, I mean, for people that might be listening, that are writers, I mean, I think it helps to stick in one genre. I've not done that. I mean, I've written, I think, in seven or eight different genres, and I think that helps me as a writer overall. But I don't think it's a good way to build a readership because not everybody reads the same type of things. Or, you know, like, my thriller readers are not necessarily going to

be my literary fiction readers or my nonfiction readers. And it's very hard to kind of build a good readership if you're writing in different places.

So the smart thing, the smart play, I think, is to write in one genre, although I've, like I said, I've broken that rule, but, and then I think, obviously, what we talked about earlier is quality. I think that's the, more than anything else, if you're writing great stories that people resonate with and love, I can't think of a better way to build a readership.

But, of course, you've got to have the marketing piece, so you have to be able to get people to even read it to begin with. I mean, even giving away books, which used to be much more effective than it is today, most people have, I've talked to a lot of readers. They have tens of thousands of books on their Kindle, and they've told me, they're like, if I read nonstop from now until the time I die, I wouldn't even read 10% of what's on my Kindle.

Debbi: That's right. That's exactly right. That is the nature of the problem right there.

Phil: Yeah. Yeah. So, I mean, as much as I'm – I think there's still a time and a place to do free books here and there, it's becoming less and less effective. And ideally, it's not really about the money or it's not about $0.99 or free or full price at $4.99 or whatever you want to sell your books for. It's about getting people to actually read them, you know?

And to be honest with you, I think you would probably do better paying people a dollar to read every one of your books than you would giving them away for free and have – and have – and have a tiny fraction of those people read them just because those people that actually read them, if their books were good, they'd probably go on to buy more.

Debbi: Yeah. Yeah.

Phil: To be honest with you, I'd do that. Anybody wants to read my books, you know, and write a review. You can't do that —

Debbi: I'll give you a dollar.

Phil: Yeah. You don't have to write a review, just read them. Here's a dollar. But, yeah, I think that in the long run, you'd probably be better with that than just giving them out. Because I think it's something like a very, like 10% or less actually read the free books that they get a – Yeah, it's very low.

Debbi: I'm not surprised. I'm not at all surprised, actually. And it's – That's the big, big hurdle now, really, just to have your stuff read.

Phil: Yeah, it is. There's just so much.

Debbi: It's too available. Everything's too available.

Phil: Yeah, you're right. There's a sea of books out there. Just a sea of them. And how do you, you know, find a way to stand out and it's. It's not an easy answer, for sure.

Debbi: Not at all. No. What are you reading these days?

Phil: I'm reading a….

Debbi: What's on your book pile…

Phil: Let's see. I've got. I'm actually reading OJ IS INNOCENT AND I CAN PROVE IT. I don't know if you heard that.

Debbi: Yeah, I'm looking forward to reading that, actually.

Phil: It's written by William Dear, who's a private investigator from Texas. It's very, very interesting. And I'm reading that partly because I've got a YouTube channel called Thriller Vault, where I do a lot of – I tell a lot of stories. I'm basically telling stories, but they're mostly true stories.

So, for example, like, I did a story on OJ. He wrote a book. It was through a ghostwriter a while back called If I Did It. I did a really weird book. So I actually wrote a story on that where I'm OJ and I'm just telling the story as if I'm OJ from my perspective, you know, based on the book, you know? And so I did.

And so then I got through that. I kind of got interested in, like, oh, well, I came across the William Dear books. I started reading that. And to be honest with you, that's made me think that it possibly might have been his son and not him, who actually committed the murders, which is wild, because I was firmly in the camp that he's probably guilty. Like most people, by the numbers, statistically speaking, most people think that he's guilty. But after reading the William Dear book, I'm starting to really think that it was likely his son Jason that was actually the murderer.

Debbi: Well, it's a very interesting case.

Phil: It's really interesting, but…

Debbi: Because as a lawyer, it kind of offends me when people are suspected of something and then people start jumping to conclusions, that that means they're guilty of something.

Phil: Yeah.

Debbi: So to hear that this stuff is coming out is very interesting to me.

Phil: Yeah.

Debbi: What advice would you give to anyone who would like to write for a living?

Phil: I would say that's a good question. I mean, it's, things have really, things are really moved quickly from when … things are really different from when I started. And they're... I don't know what my advice would be. Let me think about this for a sec. I would say…. I would say.... I would say, go into it with…..

I would say, you want to be hopeful because, like, for me, I was very naive when I started, and I was very, like, hopeful that. And I think everybody who's starting out, they're like, oh, I'm going to write the greatest novel ever, and it's going to be an instant bestseller. And, you know, we have these – we have these crazy ideas early on. But I think that as much as it's embarrassing for me to admit that that's kind of how I felt when I was first starting out, I think it was necessary to have that naivete because you don't realize how hard it is.

And I think that if I didn't have that hope in the beginning, I probably wouldn't have, like, if you told me, hey, Phil, you're not going to make any money till you write at least ten books. I don't know. I mean, that's a daunting past for somebody who's never written a novel. So me going into it, very naive, is like, oh, well, this first book didn't work out, but that was pretty fun, and I did a pretty good job. And we try another one, and then you're like, oh, this one's going to work out. Okay, well, maybe not. So then you're ten books in. You're like, okay, well, I'm starting to see some progress, but had I gone into it with realizing how daunting the task is.

So I think – I think I would recommend go into it with some hope and try to have fun with it. And if it's something you enjoy doing, I think it's something you should pursue. But if it's something you don't like, and hate. And you're just doing this because, you know, you think this is some path to. I can't imagine anybody thinks that, thinks that this is a path to wealth because I don't think it is.

Debbi: It's not.

Phil: I mean, I guess it could be for some people, but it's more of a – it's more of a labor of love, I think, than that. And, but if you, I think if you go into it with that and then whatever upside you get financially is great, but I wouldn't go into it with, I'm going to be a millionaire author or something like that. I mean, it's certainly possible, but I don't think that. I don't think – if money is your goal, I don't think writing is probably the right profession for you, if money is your top goal. Now we all have to make money and live, of course. But anyway, that's probably where I would.

Debbi: Yeah. Yeah. It really is not a quick path to riches at all.

Phil: No.

Debbi: And the people who make the big money are outliers.

Phil: For sure.

Debbi: It happens. But …..

Phil: Yeah, a lot of them are very old at this point. Like they've been around for a very long time.

Debbi: Right. They have time they have built up.

Phil: And the trad publishers are basically holding on to their names with a death grip. Even when they die. They're hiring new authors to write their, under their name.

Debbi: They've created brands.

Phil: So if you're a new person trying. Yes, if you're a new person trying to break into the traditional publishing game, good luck with that. It's not the way it used to be, where there were some chances. It's much more difficult now.

Debbi: It's very hard. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?

Phil: No, that's it. Just thank you so much for having me on. I really appreciate it.

Debbi: Well, it was my pleasure, believe me. And thank you so much for being here. I really appreciate the chance to talk to you about all of this stuff because it's very interesting.

Phil: Oh, thank you! One thing I would want to mention, if anybody who wants the audiobook, if they just email me, I think the email is in the show notes and they can just email me and ask. And as long as they have audible for the US or the UK, I can send them the audio books, the codes for it, and all they have to do is have the app. So they have to be on Audible to get it. But it's totally free.

Debbi: Fantastic!

Phil: Anybody who emails me, I'll be happy to send them a audiobook. That's what my evil plan is. I give you a free audiobook and get you hooked, and then you'll buy some.

Debbi: Well, that's a very nice, benign, evil plan, I gotta say. So on that note, thank you so much again, Phil!

And thank you to everyone listening! Thank you for listening or for watching on YouTube, depending on what you're doing.

And our next guest on the show will be Michael Young. In the meantime, take care and happy reading!