

*Jon Land*

249: Thrillers, Cozies, and Everything in Between

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing. Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are over at diymfa.com/249 because it's Episode 249.

Now, today I have the absolute pleasure of interviewing Jon Land on the show. Now, you guys might remember Jon from a previous interview that he did, a roundtable interview, last year with a couple of other authors at ThrillerFest.

Now, I get to like pick his brain solo, and it's going to be super fun. Jon is the USA Today bestselling author of 44 books – including the critically acclaimed award-winning Caitlin Strong series. And the first book of that – not the first book – the most recent book of that series has literally just dropped yesterday.

One of the books in that series, Strong to the Bone, won the 2017 American Book Fest Award for Mystery/Suspense, and the most recent installment is Strong As Steel. He also took over writing the Murder, She Wrote series; and we were jamming right before we started recording about how quickly those books come out.

He's already got-- I think he's written-- He's written Book Four in the series already. The current installment is Murder in Red, which I am absolutely loving. And the first book that he took over in that series was A Date with Murder, which released in 2018.

On top of all of this, he's also teamed up with Thriller Master Heather Graham on The Rising, which is a first in a groundbreaking sci-fi series. So, he's got a lot on his plate. Thank you so much, Jon, for being here on the show, for making time with all of your busy writing schedule to be here today. It's so great to talk to you.

Jon Land: It's a pleasure. It's like a-- It's like a little vacation from work, but I missed the big 250th, the 250th show; I missed it by one, I could have been a benchmark, I could have been a linchpin. You know, it would've been like people would have been listening just because it was the 250th.

GP: [laughs] Yeah, I don't know, though. I don't know if like these benchmark interviews-- Honestly, often they'll come and go, and I'll forget that they even happened. I'll be like, 'Oh, the 200th episode was four episodes ago – well, look at that.' So, it's kind of funny how that happens.

So, I wanted to talk to you today, one of the reasons that I'm having an absolute blast reading both Murder in Red and Strong As Steel. And one of the things that really jumped out at me is how remarkably different these two series are, these two characters are.

And you know, for me, it's one of-- This is one of those marks of a writer who knows their stuff when you read two very different books that they are writing by the same person, and I couldn't tell that it was the same person writing both books. So, how do you juggle these two very different series? Like, how do you get into that headspace?



JL: Well, you know, that's a great-- First of all, that's a great compliment and also a great question. And I think the number one difference is the point of view because the Caitlin Strong books are thrillers; and they're written in the traditional thriller form, from the third-person.

So, you see multiple plot lines that converge, that's the thriller form. The Murder, She Wrote books, every scene is written in first-person from Jessica Fletcher's point of view. So, the thing about that is, is that your own-- there's no-- there's no narrator, there's no subplots, there is nothing but the voice of Jessica. She is in every single scene.

Whereas the fun of the Caitlin books is actually all the different point of views – as I said, that converged. I've never actually added this up, but I'd say Caitlin is probably in about 40% of the scenes, and here's why that is.

One of the reasons why I think I've embraced the Murder, She Wrote series, I've taken to it so well and embraced it so much, because it represents a contrast. I've never done first-person before. I had never written a mystery before. I had never written from the viewpoint of an older female character before, and I had never taken over.

Of course, there aren't this many established brands on the level of Murder, She Wrote, which enjoys 100% name recognition. What I'm getting at Gabriela – from a writing standpoint – is the best way to avoid getting stale is when you take on as much work as I do... when you write as many books as I write; you want each series, each book to be organic in its own right, and also distinguishable and distinct from the others.

So, it's like, I went literally, and this is interesting. I went from Strong from the Heart, which is the latest Caitlin Strong book that will follow Strong As Steel a year from now, almost exactly.

And I literally finished Strong from the Heart on a Saturday; and I started A Time for Murder – which is the one I'm about, the Jessica Fletcher book I'm about to finish literally today, first draft – on Monday.

So, I had never done that before. I had never written books consecutively with no gap between them. And what allowed me to do that was the fact that the POVs were so different, the characters were so different – the stories, the genres, everything was so different. It felt like I was doing something entirely distinct from what I had done before.

GP: I love that. It kind of reminds me of this trick I used to use in college – I called it productive procrastination – where like I'd procrastinate on like Project A or like Homework Assignment A... by doing Homework Assignment B.

And so, it's like I was always moving the ball forward, but I was never like burning myself out on a given project. And in a way, it sounds like a sort of analogous to that.

Obviously, it's not procrastination what you're talking about – but it's like by shifting gears from very different projects, you're allowing, I guess, a different part of your brain to rest and to sort of recharge... and then you can kind of work on something else that's very different. So, I love that idea.

JL: It's a great point. And with the Jessica Fletcher books, the Caitlin Strong books are a lot easier to write because, as a thriller writer. And there was a great review of my manuscript for Murder, my last Murder, She Wrote book, which proclaimed the fact that I had invented a new genre, the Cozy Thriller.

And thrillers are easier because they're all about suspense, they're all about keeping-- I'm about two things; keeping the reader in suspense and keeping the reader turning the pages – making it impossible for them not to go from paragraph-to-paragraph, page to page, chapter to chapter.



Now, in a thriller, cliffhangers are organic because you're not going to get back to Caitlin. You're going to-- You're going to cut from a cliffhanger with Caitlin to another scene, maybe two other scenes before you get back.

With the *Murder, She Wrote* books, it's different again, because they're first-person so I can't use cliffhangers in the same way; I've got a cut from Jessica back to Jessica. So, I go with instinct.

That's why the body count often will start to mount. That's why sometimes, and this is what I tell writers about how I do it; I don't outline, I surprise myself. I'm organic in the sense that I have an idea where the story is going, but I let the story take me where it wants to go. So, I'm never exactly sure.

I find out the mystery. I solve the mystery alongside Jessica. I don't impose anything on Jessica; we're working together. We're right there working together and, you know, and actually, having fun. It makes it challenging, it makes it scary – but in that fear, in that anxiety is where the edge lies.

GP: I love it. And so, I want to unpack a bunch of things that you've said over the last couple of answers. One of them is the sort of difference in the form; and you've given us a little bit of a taste of that, like the difference between sort of the thriller form versus the Cozy Mystery form and now what you're talking about with the Cozy Thriller.

So, can you unpack that a little bit? What are these forms exactly? Just for the purposes of our listeners and, sort of, for learning purposes, what is the thriller form versus the mystery form? What are some of the key differences? What are some of the notes you have to hit in the different forms in order for it to really hang together?

JL: There are two things that separate the thriller from the mystery; and this explains how I've created a hybrid in *Murder, She Wrote* of the Cozy Thriller. The first and foremost one is that the hero's life is, the hero themselves – he or she – is in jeopardy. It's not just that they're trying to solve a mystery; it's that as they're solving this mystery, they realize they are being threatened as well.

GP: And this is in a thriller genre, correct?

JL: That's what separates a Thriller from a Mystery. The second thing is stakes. Mysteries traditionally tend to be about murders, they tend to be about crime. Obviously, that sounds that's almost-- And it's almost too simple to put it that way – but the mystery is solved, the story is over.

In thrillers, when the mystery is solved, the story is just beginning because what happens in a thriller is there is something greater. There is a sense of menace. The stakes are higher. The hero isn't just trying to solve a crime; the hero – he or she – is trying, is racing, is striving, is fighting to stop something terrible from happening.

So, my take on the *Murder, She Wrote* series – the Cozy Thriller, if we want to put it that way – the Cozy Thriller... Jessica finds that she, in all of the books that I've done in the series, Jessica's life is threatened at one point, in all of them, as she begins to peel back the curtain to see what lies behind it.

It's always a murder that triggers her interest and her involvement. But in the case of what I'm doing, and by the way, this was being-- This was done in the, at a lot of the previous books of the series that a great writer named Don Bain did. And I get it--

You know, people who may criticize me for taking the series in another direction, here's what I say to them, Gabriela; and this is crucial. I say to them that I haven't taken it in another direction; I've taken it back to where the television series was.



Because when you watch those old episodes-- And I watch one a day, especially when I'm writing the Jessica Fletcher books, I watch one Murder, She Wrote episode a Day; and a lot of them were edgy and dark and had these wonderful plots where Jessica not only was solving a murder, she was uncovering a real estate scam in Cabot Cove.

She was trying to save her-- You know, find justice for her nephew, Grady, or her niece or someone else who was close to her, which created an immediacy. The way I describe what I do with Murder, She Wrote is that I'm writing these books as if the series were being conceived today.

So, it's not the same Jessica Fletcher necessarily that readers of the, you know, may be accustomed to because it's more like the TV series, number #1; and it's more like 2018... no, I'm sorry, 2019, number #2. So, in that respect, that's much more of what makes them Cozy Thrillers.

GP: I love it. And I love how you've sort of unpacked what those various things mean. I definitely agree with you that in thrillers, there is sort of that overarching menace.

Like once they've solved the mystery – as it were – once they figured out the puzzle, that's when they realized, 'Oh, there's where the bomb is, or there's where the big bad thing we have to stop is,' and that's... like you said, the story's just beginning.

So, one of the things that I also think is really interesting with the Cozies, in particular is... and I was actually having a whole discussion with my students in my class about this some weeks ago, where, you know, a lot of times writers get confused with the idea of the inciting incident, right, in like writing terms – that incident that pushes the character into the story.

And in a Cozy Mystery, one would think that the inciting incident is the moment that the dead body appears. But I would actually argue that it's a little bit different. I would argue that that might be the opening moment that sort of opens the story.

Jessica Fletcher's such a great example of this where she often, there's something that happens that makes her double-down on having to solve this crime. There's usually that moment where she goes from just sort of an intellectual interest in solving the murder to... now this got, this became personal because it's threatening a friend of the family or someone's being wrongly accused or et cetera.

So, can you talk a little bit about how that sort of, the mechanisms of the beginnings of a Cozy Mystery or Thriller, and how you kind of put those puzzle pieces together?

JL: It's a great question. It also is one of the areas of common ground between my Caitlin Strong series and the Murder, She Wrote series that I've taken over – Jessica Fletcher and Strong, what they have in common.

The definition of a hero, in either the mystery or the thriller, is not someone who does something for themselves; it's someone who is performing an act, you know, for the betterment of someone else.

In the case of Caitlin Strong, she's trying to save millions of people, often. There's often a huge plot. You called it the big bad thing; that's a great way of putting it. Hitchcock called it the MacGuffin, what everybody is after. So, Caitlin is after the big bad thing.

In the Murder, She Wrote books, the big bad thing is by definition, much smaller – but, and instead of seeking justice or preventing the deaths of millions of people, Jessica is usually seeking justice for either a close associate friend or relative who has been accused of something they didn't do... or more likely a friend has been wronged.



An example of this in *A Date with Murder*, not only there's a couple, Babs – it's this couple who are very close with Jessica, the husband is murdered. Well, you don't know it's murder at first.

The widow finds herself in terrible financial straits because before he was murdered, he was swindled. His money was stolen. So, Jessica has a twofold purpose in *A Date with Murder*, and this is true of pretty much my take on all the books.

In *A Date with Murder*, she is not only trying to solve the mystery of the murder of her friend; she's trying to find justice and get the money back for the woman who's been widowed, who she's even closer to. So, she's very proactive; and this is where the TV series and my take on the book series meshed together.

It's, if you notice in the TV series, the killer, Jessica is almost always the lone voice for justice. She's always the one fighting the system. She's always the one driving everyone crazy with her unique and astute powers of observation. John D. MacDonald said the greatest thing I think about what the definition of a story is, stuff happens to people you care about.

And I think the key with Jessica, what makes her someone you care about the same way you care about Caitlin Strong is how she fights for other people – other people that no one else believes that they're innocent, she believes that they're innocent. Caitlin is doing the same thing.

You know, there is-- You know, some terrible thing has happened and something much worse is about to happen if Caitlin doesn't put the pieces of the puzzle together. It's almost like the Caitlin Strong books have got this massive jigsaw puzzle that I'm fitting together.

In the Murder, She Wrote books, it's more like a coloring book where I have to color in the pieces and bring shading and light... I have to bring it all to life – or maybe a better metaphor it's instead of being a jigsaw puzzle, it's connecting the dots in a mystery.

What I do with Jessica Fletcher is connecting the dots. What I do with Caitlin Strong is assembling a jigsaw puzzle. It's just a question of the stakes and the complexity – but what's the same, and this is what's crucial and why I'm having--

This is where the series, the two series come together, the pace is the same. Theoretically, my goal with both series is to end every chapter with a cliffhanger and begin every chapter with a hook. My goal as a writer, is to make it impossible for you to put my books down – so in the ultimate extreme, you're reading everything I write in one setting... one sitting, I should say.

GP: Yeah, it's interesting that you say that. Like, I hadn't thought about it as I was reading the, you know, so I've been reading the two... kind of, alternating between *Strong As Steel* and *Murder in Red*. And it's so true that like with the end of every chapter, it does kind of end with that--

I mean, there're different types of cliffhangers, right? Like in *Strong As Steel*, you've got like a shootout that's about to happen at the end of a chapter. Whereas at the end of a chapter in *Murder in Red*, it's more like there's a phone call and the phone rings, but we're like, 'Ooh, who's on the phone?'

And we want to like read the next chapter to see what happens next. So, you're totally right; it ends in that way with every chapter.

So, question for you; as you're working through each of the books and, obviously, these, like we said, the sort of amplitude of these cliffhangers and the amplitude of the pacing is different, but the pacing pattern is similar.

How does that ramp up as the tension ramps up in each book – and how do you sort of modulate that for the sort of bigger, ‘big bad thing’ type of bad guy in Caitlin Strong versus this sort of more contained bad thing in *Murder in Red*?

JL: I think it's being aware that when we talk about the big bad thing, as we get closer to the big bad thing... the doors have to get bigger, the doors that the characters are going through. So, there's a-- What you're--

What you're getting at is that there's a progression... that the stakes are getting higher as the characters are becoming aware of more, that they've uncovered something that is bigger than they originally expected.

That's the fun of both these stories; the heroes, Caitlin Strong and Jessica Fletcher, do not know from the start what it is that they've uncovered. They think it's something smaller in both cases, but it always grows; it's like a tree, it's like the base of a tree that sprouts branches.

The size of the branches are bigger in the Caitlin Strong books than they are in the *Murder, She Wrote* books, but it's the same thing – but the other thing is they're both quest stories, so to get at the answer of modulation and how you approach... how I approach the structure, because these are structural issues. It is the quest.

The hero, and this is traditional, that thriller takes its form from the quest story from, you know, the first thriller ever written was the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by Homer; that was a thriller.

There is more structure to the thriller, the basis of the thriller structure in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* than anything else that's ever been written; and what is that about? It's about Odysseus going on a quest. All he wants to do is get home. You know, he's just trying to get home.

In the *Murder, She Wrote* books, the quest, which is what I'm always keeping my eye, you know, on the prize – that quest – Jessica is trying to figure out who killed the person who dies early in, you know, who dies early in the book. You know, that's her quest.

Caitlin is trying to figure out, for example, in *Strong from the Heart*, the one I just finished – I'm using that as an example because it's fresher in my mind – it opens with an entire town being found dead, everybody died the night before within five minutes. How? That's where we start.

With *Murder, She Wrote*, it's somebody gets killed and Jessica realize something... realizes something that others don't realize and has her own personal stakes in finding out the truth.

GP: So, let's talk a little bit about-- I love how we're-- I love this comparison between the sort of structural elements; and I wanted to broaden the discussion a little bit more to talk also about the contrast between the setting.

On the surface, it's obvious that these are very different settings. I mean, in the *Strong As Steel*, we are literally within a few pages shifting from different time periods like in the prologue to different locations and different points of view... literally different places in geographically-speaking between where Caitlin is and where Cove is.

And then, in *Murder, She Wrote*, we're in a very contained environment, for the most part. We tend to be indoors, in a hospital – in a, you know, library... in a space that's a contained space. And with the exception of like one, you know, little day trip she takes down to talk to the FDA, we don't really see her leaving Cabot Cove very much or going too far afield.



So, can you talk a little bit about how the scope of the world supports the structural elements of the story and the journey, the quests that these characters go on?

JL: It's such a great question because you think about the backdrop of a small town like Cabot Cove, a coastal town of Maine, versus the entire state of Texas.

There's not a bigger contrast in the world and that reflects the sensibilities of the characters, but also the stakes of the stories... setting works in that respect, in that, the Cabot Cove is a confined setting, whereas Texas is a sprawling setting where you can basically – you can see the whole world in Texas in 24 hours, literally.

It's very interesting because readers and viewers much prefer, at least from what I've been able to glean, much prefer the story set in Cabot Cove. They like the familiar sense of character. They like seeing the characters that they know and love. And when people say, "I don't write these as Cozy Mysteries", I say it depends on your definition of a Cozy.

For me, a Cozy is meeting people you're familiar with, knowing the good guys are going to win in the end and getting in touch with old friends – whereas a thriller, you're meeting a lot more new people that you haven't met before in past books. It's kind of like in a thriller, you reinvent the world. In my Caitlin Strong books, I'm reinventing her world at the beginning of every book.

In the Murder, She Wrote books, I'm picking up where I left off in Jessica's world – not necessarily from a plot standpoint, from a story standpoint, but from a Cabot Cove's standpoint.

Murder in Red opens with a funeral – appropriately enough for a mystery, right... or a Cozy Thriller – and then segues to a reception at the Cabot Cove Library where Jessica is talking about getting--

One of the things that happens in that scene is she's-- One of her priorities is getting it deemed a historic building, so it can't ever be scooped up by developers. That is something Caitlin Strong would never care about, ever, about a historic building; it wouldn't matter to her.

But I guess what it comes down to is when I'm writing the Murder, She Wrote series, Murder in Red, I'm dealing a lot with minutia because that's what a Cozy does. You see, you get a lot about Jessica riding her bike, why she doesn't drive; she has a pilot's license, not her driver's license.

You get into-- You know, in the latest one I just finished, for the first time ever-- I've done, I don't know, almost 50 books now, right? Because 44 is dated because there's four more coming out so I think I'm going to be at 50 in like six months.

But I had never done a scene in a beauty parlor before; one of my characters had never gotten her hair, his or her hair done. But in A Time for Murder, which is the one I'm just finishing now – Murder, She Wrote number #50 – and boy, have I got a surprise in A Time for Murder for long-time Murder, She Wrote fans... something no one has ever seen before in the TV series or the book series, I can't tell you how excited I am about that.

So, there are things, the priorities are dictated by the genre; and the genre priorities... I can do different things, but I have to stay within the limits because I want to, not just because I have to – but I need to stay within the limits of the genre in terms of the importance of what's going on in Jessica's head, how she feels about losing her husband.



I have gotten much more into Jessica's sensibility than was the case in the past. I've tried to make her a fully rounded character the way I thought Angela Lansbury was maybe more than the Jessica of the books when I took over the series. And I've had a blast doing that. It's kind of like putting new wheels on the applecart without upsetting it.

GP: So, you can't dangle a carrot like that, and tell us that you're doing something completely new that you've never done before and then not tell us what it is. Come on!

JL: Well, *A Time for Murder*, the one I just finished, the one that's following *Murder in Red*; *Murder in Red* coming out in next month, in May. And then the following November, you're going to see *A Time for Murder*. You're going to meet-- We're going to meet Jessica Fletcher as a young woman for the first time.

GP: Ooh.

JL: She's still married to her husband, Frank. She's substitute-teaching in the town of Appleton where they met volunteering on a local theater production. They're raising their nephew, Grady, Frank's brother's son; Frank's brother and his wife were killed in an accident, so they're raising Grady.

You see them buying 698 Candlewood Lane. You meet Amos Tupper, the sheriff played by Tom Bosley... who was later replaced by Ron Masak, who played Mort Metzger in the TV series. You meet Amos Tupper; and you watch Jessica before she becomes a published writer, solving her first murder ever... which is intrinsically connected to a series of murders going on in the present.

So, what you may be gleaming from this, Gabriela, is the fact that I'm bringing a subplot... every third chapter in *A Time for Murder* is set 25 years in the past, every third chapter. So, you see the murder in the present, and you see the murder in the past. Not only does the fun lie in solving both of them, the fun lies in wondering... how do they connect?

So, this is kind of-- This is my fifth book in the series, and I think it represents a synthesis of the Thriller and Mystery genre. This is truly the Cozy Thriller. And yet, and here's the interesting thing, it's the purest mystery I've ever written... and certainly, the purest mystery I've done of the five books, because it is literally two whodunnits that are connected.

And I had so much fun writing it; it was so challenging because it's hard enough to come up with one mystery murder plot in a book... nevermind having to come up with two, and then having to connect them. But it was fun.

And this is the thing; I'm taking over a series that when I started had 46 books published, how do you keep a series? There were only 28 Hercule Poirots, there were only 18 full-length Sherlock Holmes novels. There were over 80 Perry Mason. So, that would be, you know, an able comparison.

But think about that, 46 books; and I take over a series and I want to not only keep it fresh, I want to make it feel alive. I want to make it-- I want to-- I want to bring it-- I want to do things that haven't been done.

Now, here's the good news; the response has been overwhelming, for the most part, positive. Here's the bad news, don't read my Amazon reviews because I'm getting savaged by some people who wish I could do it exactly the way it had been done before.

But the worst thing a writer or a creative person can do is try to do it exactly like somebody else did it, follow a formula – because when you're following a formula when you're writing--



You know, when you're writing, if you're a James Patterson's co-author, which is a wonderful opportunity as a writer, by the way; and it's a lot of money, but he hands you an outline – and you stick to that outline, literally, chapter by chapter... you know, 'This is what you're going to do in this chapter.' That's not organic writing; that's something I would have a lot of trouble doing.

So, I wanted to make Jessica Fletcher my own... as much as Caitlin Strong is my own. And people ask me, "What would be the greatest compliment you could be given?"

And I've never answered it, I've just asked myself my own question, but if Angela Lansbury herself – who's now 91 and telling people she wants to do another TV movie, she wants to play Jessica one more time.

If Angela Lansbury read one of my books in the series – in the *Murder, She Wrote* series – and said, "Wow, that feels just like a TV episode that that I starred in," then I would know that I had it right.

GP: I love it. And you know, I have to say as I've been reading *Murder in Red*, that's the feeling that I could, like I can literally hear Angela Lansbury's voice in my head; and it's because the story feels very grounded in sort of those original roots of what the show was about.

And I was a total *Murder, She Wrote* geek as a kid. So, I absolutely love-- I'm loving this book. One of the things that I also really loved is that there are all these little like hidden "wink wink" "nudge nudge" moments in *Murder in Red* where you kind of make reference to Cabot Cove syndrome, right? The syndrome of the fact that this small town has had this many murders in it.

So, can you talk a little bit about how do you handle that? Like, I love the way you handled it because it's so funny.

JL: It's a great point and, you know, the best reference I have for that, going back to Caitlin Strong and the *Strong As Steel*, the series of which *Strong As Steel* is a part. Caitlin is a female Texas Ranger. She's basically a female Jack Reacher, and she grew out of existence--

I'll get to the point, I just want to give a little background. She grew out of the fact that when I started writing the series 10 years ago, 11 years ago now – there were no other, there were no female action heroes.

There were mystery heroes, but there were no female Jack Reachers – no female Mitch Rapps, no female Scot Harvath. I wanted to create a woman who could stand toe-to-toe with a guy, so I made her a Texas ranger. And what I was getting at with Caitlin Strong was she's killed more people in my books as a Texas ranger than all the Texas Rangers combined in the 20th century and the 21st century.

She's killed more than all of them; and yet, every book she starts again; she's still a Texas Ranger. In *Murder, She Wrote* it is the, if murder – it is the murder capital of the world. And there's one theory that they were going to do an episode at the end where Jessica Fletcher was actually a serial killer and killed everyone just to give her something to write about.

But yes, and you know, a lot of times if you're writing in a vacuum, you don't refer to these, you don't poke fun at yourself – you don't reference these, kind of, things; I find that disingenuous. And the fact is people criticize me for--

I do get some criticism also on those Amazon reviews for noting the history of Cabot Cove. But there was an episode of *Murder, She Wrote* with Ron Masak as Mort Metzger who says, "I've been here a year and they've already been five murders." So, the TV series did it too.



GP: Yeah.

JL: The TV series was doing it, and it is poking fun. There's a point in *Murder in Red* where Mort says, "Well, maybe we can discourage people from moving here"… instead of saying "Cabot Cove population… Cabot Cove, last year, 12 people murdered", so they make fun of it.

It becomes almost in jest because everyone reading the books or watching the TV series knows there's a murder every week. So, it's not a secret, but how do we deal with it? If we ignore it, then we are not being genuine to the reader.

We're basically saying to the reader, "Though all those other murders that happened, we're going to forget about them… you know, all those other things that happened, we're just going to ignore them."

That's no fun. It's much more fun to organically put it out there and deal with it; and that's what I do with the poking fun of how many murders that Jessica Fletcher solves, how many times people have died in Cabot Cove.

GP: I think, you know, the key thing here also is to mention that it's woven in, it's very subtle. It's not like you're hitting us over the head with it on every single page. I started to – just like as an exercise for fun – to highlight whenever those mentions came; and they were pretty spaced out throughout the book.

But what I love is exactly what you said, that like, it is kind of grabbing the bull by the horns. We're not beating around the bush, we're not pretending that these other murders didn't happen – but instead, you're sort of acknowledging it and making it into sort of an inside joke, almost like an Easter egg for superfans who are aware that all these other murders happened because they read all the freaking books up until that point. So, I thought that was really cool.

JL: And it's important though not to refer to too many things that happened in the past so that readers new to the series or who haven't read the previous book, don't feel like they're lost. One of the great things about the *Murder, She Wrote* series – and to a slightly lesser extent, the *Caitlin Strong* series – is that they can be read in any order. It doesn't matter what order you read them in.

I tell people the mark of a great series is to be able to pick up any book in that series out of sequence and not realize that you're reading a series. But it makes-- When you finish it makes you want to go back and start from the beginning or, you know, read whatever else--

I mean, I didn't read, for example, I didn't read the *Spenser* Books by Robert Parker in order. I didn't read the *James Lee Burke*, *Dave Robicheaux* series in order.

The only series I ever read in order – and this is interesting, I read when I was a kid – I read the *James Bond* books in order from Ian Fleming; and it was a wonderful experience that I still refer to because he is such a different character in the books than he was in the movies.

And it's so interesting reading all the way through because you see not his growth as a character – in the case of *James Bond* – you see his deconstruction as he's exposed and suffers so much that eventually there's really nothing left of him by the time Fleming gets to *The Man with the Golden Gun*, which was a different approach that is normally the one taken by Mystery and Thriller writers.

You know, *Caitlin Strong* is always *Caitlin Strong*… *Jessica Fletcher* is always *Jessica Fletcher*. I don't even know how old *Jessica Fletcher* is. In my own mind, she's probably mid-sixties, but she doesn't age.



Caitlin does age; you know, she's a year older or so, in the area of a year older every book. Whereas we never mention how old Jessica Fletcher is; we never have any dates.

GP: That's really interesting. And also, what's interesting with Jessica Fletcher, so how do you handle it when-- She's kind of not aging, but then there have been changes like, clearly, her nephew has aged because she took care of him – and, clearly, like Amos has left and Mort has come in as the sheriff. So, how do you handle shifts like that in time when she's, sort of, staying constant but people around her might be changing?

JL: That's a great question, and here's how I do it. Again, it comes down to being genuine and honest with the reader. In the TV series and the books prior to my coming in, Mort always referred to Jessica as Mrs. F or Mrs. Fletcher because in the TV series he takes over as sheriff, I think it was five years in.

The years that he is sheriff unfold over, even though it was over maybe 9 or 10 years in TV time, it was only two years or so in real, in Cabot Cove time. What I've done with Mort is they've now known each other, I'm hypothesizing, they've been solving murders together for 10 or 12 years.

So, Mort calls her Jessica because now they're friends, they're not just strangers. Now, because I got so much criticism for doing that, now I make it a joke between them... whenever they're working he starts calling her Mrs. F or Mrs. Fletcher again. And she goes, "Do you have to do that Mort? Can't you call me-- Do we have to go back to that again?"

So, you mentioned little Easter eggs, that's like an Easter egg. I'm poking fun at something I've been criticized for by having Mort, jokingly, call her Mrs. Fletcher, because it just didn't--

First of all, two things; I said, I have brought the series into the 21st century. I made, I write them as if it's the TV series being done today, the way NCIS or Law & Order would've been done.

And people are far less formal than they were in the 1980s; everything is a first-name basis. People call their-- Kids call their parents by their first name sometimes, it's crazy.

So, I just think that the 21st century Jessica Fletcher would not call someone she has known for 12 years, 15 years, whatever it is, Mort Metzger, sheriff; she would call Mort, and he would not call her Mrs. Fletcher. They've known each other too long. They've been through too much. So, there needs to be an evolution.

GP: I love it. And I love how that, again, ties back to-- It handles the fact that time has elapsed without pointing a finger and saying, "Look here, time has elapsed." So, it kind of-- It's sort of a way of like acknowledging it without having to make a big deal out of it because, ultimately, making a big deal out of it pulls the reader out of the story.

As I'm reading *Murder in Red*, I don't really care how long she's known Mort, all I care about is what happens next and, you know, who's that on the phone that's calling right now at the suspenseful moment? So, I love it. So, can you tell us; what's next for you? I have a hunch you've got a lot of things going on.

JL: Oh my God.

GP: Can you tell us what's coming up?

JL: Well, I just finished as I've mentioned, *Strong from the Heart*; and I'm finishing up today literally *A Time for Murder*, which is the book that will introduce us to Jessica as a young woman.



I think the next project, and we're going to break some-- Want to break some more news? let's break some more news.

GP: Yeah.

JL: A movie that I've always loved, I think one of the best crime movies ever made was *Donnie Brasco* with Johnny Depp and Al Pacino based on the real-life story of Joe Pistone... an FBI agent who busted the mob, spent six years undercover, and brought down the five – literally, brought down the five New York families.

Joe and I are working together on a series which will bring *Donnie Brasco* back, his alias played by Johnny Depp in the movie as a fictional character. So, it will be a *Donnie Brasco* novel. He was never real to begin with, but now we're making him a fictional character instead of an alias.

So, you know, we're playing with a timeline a little bit and stuff like this because they're set in the present. But the interesting thing about the *Donnie Brasco* series that I hope to be doing – or I'm planning to do with Joe Pistone, who's a wonderful writer and a terrific guy, by the way – what you're going to see is a kind of link between what I do in the *Caitlin Strong* books and what I do in the *Murder, She Wrote* books because it's first-person, just like the original *Donnie Brasco* was, but it's a first-person thriller.

So, where *Caitlin Strong* is all thriller and the *Murder, She Wrote* books are Cozy Thrillers, the *Donnie Brasco* is kind of somewhere in the middle of those two things. So, with the way we started out was talking about writing in, basically, the same genre – but not repeating myself, and not writing the same book over and over again when I'm doing different series.

So, here's yet another approach which will keep my writing fresh if, you know, depending on how this goes. I'm about 20% into *Capitol White*, which is envisioned as the first in the *Donnie Brasco* thriller series. So, that's coming-- That's one of my next projects.

And of course, I still-- There'll be more *Caitlin Strong*, and here's-- Boy, are we breaking some news today?

GP: Yes.

JL: Let's break some more. Let's break some more. And this hasn't been confirmed yet because, you know, but after *A Time for Murder* where we meet Jessica as a young woman, the one after that will be the *Murder, She Wrote* version of *Ten Little Indians And Then There Were None*, the classic Agatha Christie story where 12 strangers lured to a mountain retreat are being murdered one at a time.

Jessica, in what I'm envisioning as a book called *Murder of Twelve*, will be somewhere like that and people will be getting knocked off one at a time, an entirely different kind of mystery for me to write. Also, totally different and distinct from what I've done before.

GP: But also, like such a cool nod to one of the great murder mysteries ever written, right? Like, I mean, *And Then There Were None* is this phenomenally tightly plotted and very well-known book. I love that.

JL: It's a perfect mystery; and you're absolutely right, it was among the greatest mysteries ever written. And that's, I'm going to pay homage to it in *Murder of Twelve*.

GP: Yeah. Next, you'll have to do like *Murder on the Orient Express* except Jessica Fletcher style, right? Like that would be awesome too.



JL: I would probably do it on an airplane going across the ocean, where she has seven hours to solve the mystery before the plane lands. I just thought of that now, now that would-- Here's the challenge; can we stretch that out to 70,000 words in 300 pages? It sounds like a great hour episode of *Murder, She Wrote*, but is it a book?

And sometimes with the Caitlin Strong books, I get a great idea that can make for a great subplot, but not an entire book. But in the *Murder, She Wrote* books, except for this most recent one, there are no subplots.

So, if we're on that airplane when we start the book, we got to be on that airplane when we finish the book and we're not going anywhere else but the airplane... kind of like *Murder Takes The Bus*, one of the classic episodes of *Murder, She Wrote* where they get stranded at a diner and people start dying – and it was a classic. This is fun. I mean, a conversation like this makes me excited to get back to writing.

GP: You know, it reminds me of what you were saying with *Murder Takes the Bus*. I mean, that's such a great nod to the old *Twilight Zone* episode, right? There's that one episode where they--

JL: Will the Real Martian Please Stand Up?

GP: Exactly, that one. And it's such a great nod, and I wonder-- I feel like a stopover like that, like what makes *Murder on the Orient Express* work so well is the fact that they're stuck in the snow and that they're not moving.

JL: Absolutely.

GP: So, like, you'd have to have the plane land, like get rerouted somewhere and then they're stuck in like the airport. Like that's how it would have to work. Otherwise, you're right, it wouldn't, a seven-hour flight isn't enough for a book.

JL: You know something, I'm going to give you credit in the acknowledgement space for helping me out with my, you know, *Murder in the Air*.

GP: Exactly.

JL: You came up with a title.

GP: Oh my gosh, seriously, if you write it, you have to come back on the show and talk about it because that would be amazing.

JL: The real thing would be, it would be to have Jessica do a *Murder, She Wrote* book in Texas – and have Jessica run into Caitlin Strong.

GP: Oh my gosh, that would be so awesome.

JL: Yeah. So, look for Caitlin Strong and Jessica to do cameos in each other's books sometime down the road, that would be fun. But you got to be careful because sometimes you do something like that, and it's almost too cute by a half.

GP: Exactly. Yeah. But oh my gosh, this sounds so-- Oh my-- So many amazing projects that you have in the works, I'm so excited. So, I always like to end with the same question, what is your number one tip for writers?



JL: I've changed my number one tip for writers. I used to say, "Tell a story, tell a great story... beginning, middle, and end". Now I say, "Love the process". If you love what you write, the people reading it will love what they're reading. If you don't love what you write, you have to be your number one fan.

The greatest gift a writer can have is to love what they're doing, love the process. Not just the words, the story you're telling – but the process of telling it. And if you love the process... not, I don't agree with the old saying "I love-- I hate writing, but love having written", love writing. Because if you love it, if you're having a good time writing it, the reader will have a great time reading it.

GP: That is such great advice. I love it. Thank you so much for being here, for sharing all these insights with our listeners. It's been such a blast talking to you, Jon.

JL: I had a blast too. And we've got a title and a new idea, so I guess you're going to send me a bill if that's okay.

GP: [laughs] Well, thanks so much for listening, word nerds. As always, keep writing and keep being awesome.

