

Episode 256

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Joining me today is a returning guest, J. Warner Wallace, also known as Jim, who I've been on a couple of other times speaking about books he's written in the past and the ministry God's called him to. But something pretty unique today, something we've definitely never covered on a Got Questions podcast episode, but he sent me a copy and I was intrigued by it. So today we're going to be discussing a new series of graphic novels. At least the first one is out, Case Files, and the first one is titled Murder and Meaning. So Jim, welcome back to the Got Questions podcast, and please tell both me and our listeners what led you to dip your hand, along with your son, into the graphic novel industry.

J. Warner Wallace

Well, yeah. So it's a weird space to be in, really, if you're a Christian apologist. And this has always been, I retired as a detective and spent the next 10 years writing books about my journey into Christianity through the evidence. And I always kind of thought, you know, I'd love to be able to someday write fiction. And I think it's because it's so free. You can almost go any direction you want to go, whereas all of the books I've written in the past really need to follow the journey of whatever case I was working. So as I'm retelling stories about cases, I could only draw from the cases I touched, but fiction is completely open.

J. Warner Wallace

So for example, this first book is a book about a serial killer. Well, you know, I've never worked a serial killer. I've worked cold case killers. That's a very different kind of person. So, you know, not many detectives in America have actually been involved in an investigation involving a serial killer. So that's what's so great about fiction is you can do anything you want. But I also knew that, you know, that's probably something that requires a certain skillset. I'm not sure I have. And so we've been thinking about how can we dip our toes into fiction? How can we head in that direction?

J. Warner Wallace

Well, my son is also a detective. He's been at the same agency that I was at for, you know, all my career. He's been there now 13 years. So he's following in the footsteps of his grandfather and his father at the same agency. And so he also is interested in this kind of thing. As a matter of fact, he's 36. He's in a generation of folks who I think are more deeply impacted by both comic books.

J. Warner Wallace

And I also see the rise of video games. Like, so when I was a kid, there were no video games really to speak of. But in his generation, you know, a lot of people understand what video games are. And it's an entirely different kind of visual interactive experience. So I just thought, okay, so what can I do with him? And he's got his own master's degree in apologetics. He has the exact same background of working in these kinds of investigations. And we saw that my publisher, David C. Cook, who had also done comic books in the past, had purchased a comic book company to kind of reenter the space of comic books and graphic novels. Well, my son, who's a huge comic book fan, he's got the biggest comic book collection of anybody that I know.

J. Warner Wallace

So if you're a really avid reader, I remember I was reading Stephen King's book *On Writing*, where he talks about writing fiction and how much of his day he spends reading the fiction works of other writers. So he always says, if you're not an avid reader, you're not going to be a great writer. And so Jimmy's an avid reader, and he understands how comic books are structured. So I said, would you be willing, let's talk to David C. Cook and see if they'd be interested in writing fiction.

J. Warner Wallace

So it turns out this avenue provides me the opportunity to do fiction, but it also scratches a niche that's unique to Jimmy. So what we're trying to do with these books is really do a little bit of both. We want to talk about fiction. We also want to talk about the case for Christianity. And we want to do that in a way that's pretty subtle. Like you see Christian art that sometimes really makes it almost a heavy handed effort to make sure that everything we know about Jesus is covered in the first hour of the movie or the book. And that's not what we're trying to do here. This is a very, I hope that if you're somebody who's not a Christian and you get this book and you start reading it, it's going to take a while for you to realize this is a Christian book, because our main character is not a Christian. And the themes we're going to discuss, I think are going to provoke your interest and maybe help you to start thinking about like, how do you ground certain things you've taken for granted? Like in this first book, it's about human value. How do you ground that? And so I could write a book on human value, but I know that a lot of people I'm trying to reach in this generation that has really been raised on comic books and video games and a lot of visual media, the glowing rectangle, every, you know, one gets it in junior high, your phone. How can I reach that generation? But also there's a lot of folks who are now my age, who are reading graphic novels. You know why? Because they're basically just storyboarding of movies. You know, it's

kind of like you're watching a movie storyboard. And so this is something I think we can at least get into this space and hopefully reach a generation who won't read my graphic novels, my apologetics works.

Shea Houdmann

I think you've touched on something that's very valuable and important. I mean, I grew up, I loved reading comic books when I was younger. I could tell you a story about my late teens, deciding to sell my entire comic book collection to a local comic book store. And then looking at it 30 years later and discovering how much money that collection would be worth now and trying not to cry. But besides that story, I've seen people like some of the different Bible stories that have been made into comic book form and the entire, I think there's Action Bible and some other ones that are actually really good graphic novels depicting Bible stories. I've seen young people who have no interest in reading the Bible that you gave them that and their interest has peaked. They're reading the whole thing, they're learning. And that is a bridge for them to actually engaging with the Bible more. So I love what you're doing.

J. Warner Wallace

And what I've always appreciated most about your books and the way you speak, the issues you address is you have both a solid Christian worldview and a very solid understanding of human nature, what the human experience is actually like, the things you've observed, the cases you investigate and so forth gives you a unique picture. And that's one of the things I noticed in this graphic novel. It's like, this is real. This is what stuff like this actually really happens out there. And it's being written by two people who understand how real these things are.

J. Warner Wallace

Yeah. And I think this is one of the reasons why I was glad to do it with Jimmy. I felt like, you know, if you look at the script for a graphic novel or a comic book, it's so bizarre. The template that we start with, because it has to describe the scenes and what's in the scenes, what's the setting like. And you're writing a movie, you're writing a screenplay basically. And you have to talk, here are the characters in the scene. This is the overarching narrative of the scene, but here's the dialogue bubbles of the scene. There's so many weird layers as you're reading through that script. And I was like, wow, man, I'm so glad that Jimmy's writing this because this is just not native. I might write it in paragraph form, but that's not what comic book or graphic novel scripts look like. You're trying to guide the artists.

J. Warner Wallace

And I got to, first of all, credit. You write the Action Bible. That is a David C. Cook publication. And so this is the same company that we're partnering

with on this. So Cook, who's got some experience in how you can reach another generation with well-illustrated stories, Action Bible is all from scripture. We're now reaching out into this genre. And without these artists, oh my goodness. You know, we had a really good artistic team. They're mentioned on the inside cover of the front book. And I really, we actually finished it. And we said, why aren't these artists on the cover? But Cook has a certain format for this and they didn't want the artist names on the cover.

J. Warner Wallace

But I'll tell you, we write a screenplay, but it turns out the director, the wardrobe guy, the lighting guy, the scene creator, the set designer, they're all the artists. They're bringing this idea to life. And the same way that, you know, the Bible's pretty explicit in terms of certain settings, but you know, the Action Bible, they had to be creative about what angle are they going to take and where's the lightning going to come from? It's like a lot of movie kind of ideas are in graphic novels. And we were so blessed to have that approach with this team. So it's mostly, you know, we feel like we played a minor role in this in some way. It's such a collaborative effort.

J. Warner Wallace

But I think that the issue for us was realism. Like you said, we knew, let's look at the Christian worldview for a second. And how many, you know, from the number of visitors that come to Got Question, you know, they're coming because they're trying often to, they have questions because they're trying to reconcile the messy world in which they live with the teaching of scripture. So what does this mean?

J. Warner Wallace

Last night, we were at a small group in our church. It's all first responders. And we have some questions that came up in the group. What's the first resource I'm going to go to on my phone? It's going to be your website. Why is that? Because we're trying to reconcile something that doesn't seem like it fits. And maybe you've got an answer for us. Well, we know this is true of the Christian worldview. It should have answers for the messiness of what we experience.

J. Warner Wallace

And if the Christian worldview is true, it ought to resonate, not just in like a Pollyannish version of life, because every one of us at some point is going to be challenged, is going to suffer in some way, struggle with something, get fired, lose your job, get sick, all the things that we experience as humans. How does Christianity survive? I've got to explain to the parents of a 10-year-old why their daughter was murdered. Can it survive in that context? Can it survive in this story where we've got several detectives who

are chasing a serial killer? I mean, we'd like to think that it's kind of like a superpower. Like in the end, all the planes land peacefully on the runway and everyone's going to be happy.

J. Warner Wallace

And that's just not the way the world is the way that we see it as detectives. It's really messy. And people are really broken and fallen. And you see the same kinds of fallen nature in the bad guys, quote unquote. Well, you see that in the good guys, quote unquote. What you see is that we're all the same fallen, messy person. So we wanted a book that would kind of capture that, the realism of that, yet still make some sense out of the world in which we live from a Christian worldview. We're trying to kind of answer some of the questions that I think people have related to law enforcement and the messiness of the problem of evil, for example. So these are some big questions.

J. Warner Wallace

And what's interesting about it is if I gave you like a five reasons why God might allow evil, that can be very helpful. And you know, we both do this. You do this on your website. We've done it in books. You know, we're trying to give you a written response to this issue. But if I can share a story with you, which is what Jesus often did, now you start to live in the story and you go, okay, okay, I see now. This is what it looks like in real life. So we knew we could probably do a little bit of that in a graphic novel where we could just take you into the scene, let you struggle with the characters, let you become one of the characters, let you experience it the way they're experiencing it. And instead of just giving you five reasons why this might be the way it is, the way the world is, show it to you in a narrative.

Shea Houdmann

Exactly. The power of story. I mean, it's no denying it. Jesus taught in parables so often, so many different truths we learn. And I, multiple times, I'm struggling to try to explain a theological concept to someone and I can remember something that happens in a movie. And I'm like, okay, have you seen this movie? Do you remember this scene? And use that. And I was like, oh, something about having the visual connection for a lot of people, not everyone, for a lot of people can make a huge difference to have a visual connection to theology, a doctrine, a memory, rather than just reading text. Truly powerful what a graphic novel can do. Maybe just whet our audience's appetite a little. So give a spoiler-free breakdown. What is the storyline in this first graphic novel?

J. Warner Wallace

So we know we have at least two that we could do with this publisher, so we're taking advantage of that. We don't feel like we have to cross every D and dot every I in the Christian worldview in just one effort. We've got several efforts here. So we're going to bite the apple in one specific area. We're going to ask the question, what gives humans value? And it's not just that we have value over other animals, but even amongst humans, we notice this as detectives, that in your city, you can have a bunch of murders can occur and nobody seems to even care. The press may or may not even cover it. You expect them to cover it, but they may or may not. But if a celebrity in Los Angeles is killed tomorrow, it'll be national news.

J. Warner Wallace

And as a matter of fact, we've seen it in our state and you probably have seen it in every state in America where if the right person, quote unquote, is killed, there might be some change in state law to adjust for what happened to that one. Meanwhile, that crime has been going on for years and no one's cared. So why is it we think that some people, their death is more meaningful or they're more valuable in some way than others. And how are we grounding that? Is it just notoriety that makes you valuable? Is it what you've achieved that makes you valuable? Is it how much money you have that makes you valuable? These are the things that we typically in culture will ground our value in and even our own personal identity in.

J. Warner Wallace

So what we've got, and just as a rough narrative here, is we've got a serial killer who's going, is in Los Angeles County, and he himself feels like he has been undervalued by one of the other lead characters in the book. And he is now selecting victims that are increasingly valuable according to culture.

J. Warner Wallace

So he's in Los Angeles County. So ultimately you could start with somebody who's a nobody. And that's my question. Is anyone a nobody? Like we'll say that sometimes. Yeah, he just hit a citizen, as if to dismiss that this person really matters, just somebody. And then he's going to increase his targets until he's heading towards celebrities and towards people who are typically given value by culture. Well, we want to challenge that in the book. Where does value really come from? And along the way, as this team of detectives is starting to solve this case, they're starting to ask their own questions about how they're grounding their own personal value.

J. Warner Wallace

Our lead character is a 25-year vet who's getting ready to retire. And he realizes that if he leaves this job, he's nobody. He's only somebody in his own eyes if he stays. So he's struggling with value. And so we have lots of little

tidbits about challenging value along the way. But ultimately, when this thing gets solved, we want to be able to ask, we want the reader to say, yeah, how do I ground that? Maybe I've been grounding it wrong all along.

Maybe there's a better view of this. And so that's the kind of thought we're trying to provoke at least.

J. Warner Wallace

And it's going to be a while as you read this book.

We hope it moves fast enough. You know, graphic novels are typically like maybe, oh, I don't know, six comic books or eight comic books in one. You know, it's kind of like a comic book is like a chapter in a graphic novel. So it's 160 pages. We hope it moves quickly. It's pretty verbal. I mean, if you look at the kind of word count in it, there's a lot to, because we're trying to develop characters that are real. We're trying to expose their thoughts, real thoughts, struggles, real struggles. And I don't think we've got a single character in here that's going to come away as a superhero. I think every one of them is flawed because all of us are flawed. So we just tried to be very realistic with the development of the characters. And I hope we've given people something to think about in an unusual format.

J. Warner Wallace

And of course, you know, what's great about Jimmy is that he has such a huge comic book collection that I think he understood the pacing. He understood how, he's just an avid reader of comics. I knew we weren't going to stop until he was satisfied that this would rate.

J. Warner Wallace

And we got so blessed by the artist that as we started to see these characters come to life visually, we got more excited. And then it became a very collaborative effort, you know? So we had to make sure that some of the things were accurate, you know, like how do people hold guns in law enforcement? You know, what kinds of uniforms do we wear? How do we stand when we're talking to somebody? These are things that we actually think about. And so if you're a cop and you're reading this book, you're going to go, yeah, that's actually how we do it. And this is unusual compared to other things we see on TV, at least, where we're trying to capture the subtleties of how the job is really done. But we hope it's fast paced.

J. Warner Wallace

But the goal really here is this is a gateway book. We don't want to write a book that's not a gateway book. If it does not get you thinking about the Christian worldview, we've missed the mark. And so we want, in the end, this to be something that advances people's approach to the gospel. For me, I needed you to make this gospel feel like it was important to me, because I

didn't think it was. I needed you to kind of seed, before I could hear the gospel as anything other than noise, I needed to address the objections I had. And two, I had to throw the ball in a way I could catch it. And I hope that this book does that.

Shea Houdmann

A couple of things. One, a friend of mine who's a firefighter, through a connection to his fire chief, was connected to a recent movie where a fairly well-known actress actually called and asked my friend, so what's it like when someone dies? And so he actually described having witnessed, sadly, many people die, described to her, here's how you portray it. And then all the people who've watched the movie is like, wow, that death scene is accurate. And for those people, it punches especially hard. I never even really thought about doing the same thing in a graphic novel, making sure it's accurate how it's portrayed. But for the people who know what it's supposed to look like and sound like, that would make it even more real.

Shea Houdmann

And second, regarding the main plot of this graphic novel, we get so many people who struggle with understanding and even believing that they're made in the image of likeness of God, that every person has dignity and value because of their connection to God, because of how God created them, that whether you're a nobody or a somebody in the world's eyes, equally, according to Scripture, according to Christian theology, everyone has equal value in God's sight. So the murder of a homeless drug addict is no different than the murder of a popular celebrity or famous athlete or whoever it is. But one of them, obviously, as your graphic novel points out, catches people's attention much more.

J. Warner Wallace

Yeah. And it's very interesting because cops are just humans and we suffer from all the stupid distractions that any other fallen human would suffer from. All the same pride issues, all the same humility issues, we struggle with all of that. So for example, if you were on a team of... Usually homicide teams in Los Angeles County are more than one person, it's going to be like five, let's say, and a sergeant. And that means you're going to get every fifth murder. And you're going to have to help on the other four until it's your turn again. So you're going to get every fifth murder. And we all know who's next up. And so if you're the guy who's next up, you're like, oh gosh, any day now, mine's coming, because you're the next guy up.

J. Warner Wallace

And so what happens is if you happen to be the next guy up and you draw the person who's one of the victims in our book, who's the homeless guy who's a

drug addict. And then the next guy up draws the celebrity. You are feeling like, oh dang, I'd rather work that case. You're thinking to yourself, I'd rather work that case. Why? Because you even see your own value. Like I want to work the case that seems to matter more. We fall into this thinking that is not a Christian worldview thinking.

J. Warner Wallace

And by the way, I suspect that if a Hollywood movie star is murdered tomorrow, that the Los Angeles police department will allocate resources to that that are far and above what they would allocate to other kinds of murders. Because the press is applying pressure to get this thing solved in a way they aren't applying to other kinds of murders. So you see, it's all of us from detectives to the people who are covering it to the city mayor. All of these folks have a priority and they're basically levels of importance, tiers in which they say, hey, this bottom tier, we don't really have to worry about them. They're not going to affect anyone's vote. But these top tiers, if we don't solve it, we're going to look like we're incompetent.

J. Warner Wallace

Here in Los Angeles in the district attorney's office, I can remember what happens to people when you lose a big case. The populace says you should have won that one involving a celebrity. When you lose those cases, you end up being unelected. You end up losing the next election. Your electability is based on not how well you're doing on the cases of regular citizens, but in your four years in Los Angeles, you're going to have one or two high profile cases. We even call them that. They're high profile. Well, what makes something high profile? It's because we've assigned value to that victim that we have not assigned to others.

J. Warner Wallace

This is the kind of stuff we want to challenge as we kind of work through this. This is why I think this kind of a book, and look, there's lots of ways we could have gone. I think the next book probably will be focused more just on how we ground moral notions. Are there objective moral truths? How do we ground our beliefs about morality? That's probably where we're going in the next book. But these are the kinds of things that if you're working as a cop, you probably already thought about them. You probably had to deal with them because they're law enforcement kind of exposes some of the best and worst in humanity. And if you're thoughtful at all, that's why I think we're so enamored with cop shows because it does expose larger metaphysical issues that we have to at some point wrestle with.

Shea Houdmann

Absolutely. So many cop shows and then so many law shows and then cop shows that turn into law shows. It's so, so popular because there's a weird attraction we have to the dark side of humanity, but I think it also challenges our thinking, ways that can be uncomfortable, but also we like things that would challenge us.

J. Warner Wallace

Ya for sure. You know what's interesting about that too, Shea, is that I was thinking about how this idea of fiction and how it challenges us, I don't know why that sometimes is. We started off talking about this, why that is sometimes so powerful. But I remember Jimmy would tell me when he was growing up, I got saved at 35, he was about eight. So he remembers that period of time and as he was reading comic books, he recalled that a lot of his moral formation was not so much from scripture, but from characters he saw in comics, particularly Spider-Man, Stan Lee's Spider-Man back in the day. And what he said was that he would learn this virtuous idea that Spider-Man's constantly having to delay his own satisfaction. He finally gets the girl, but of course, on the night of the first date, the villain's going to strike and he's got to decide, do I go with the date or do I go capture the villain? And so he's always sacrificing for this greater good.

J. Warner Wallace

And I thought, wow, in some ways I hear that and I'm like, really? All the time we've spent talking about scripture and this is where you think you're forming your moral ideas? But it just goes to show you the power of fiction in our lives and how if we don't help, if we don't saturate ourselves with fiction that supports our Christian worldview, eventually we start to embrace another worldview. And it's very subtle. We just don't even recognize that we're doing it. And this is why we always say you need to guard your eyes from things that are really offering an alternative that is not true. Because if you watch it long enough, if you read it long enough, if you live it long enough, you are living it now. You've actually exchanged the truth for a lie. So we just thought we needed to write something that would resonate from a Christian worldview and have the same kind of formational power. It could help you form your worldview.

Shea Houdmann

So what I hear you saying is that with great power comes great responsibility.

J. Warner Wallace

Yes. You get a bonus point for capturing that. Yeah, there you go. You're in. Very good.

Shea Houdmann

So Jim, whenever I have an author on the podcast, especially when the book is something that I've been blessed by and I think there's a huge audience for, I just love to present you with the opportunity. Who is this for? Who would be most blessed, encouraged, built up by reading this graphic novel?

J. Warner Wallace

And I think Jimmy captured it best when he first talked to me about this. So what do we love? Where's our identity? There's three things that, I mean, I love Jesus first. Why would we write about anything? I only write about things that involve Jesus. And Jimmy feels like the same way. And he also, of course, loves law enforcement. I mean, he truly loves his job. He loves what he does. And I did too. And Jimmy's a comic book lover. So I think when Jimmy's writing at this kind of thing, and I'm just kind of helping him organize his thoughts and kind of guide this thing and make sure we have a good foundation and apologetics we can help people with, not that he needs my help sometimes, but the reality of it is he thinks that's the three loves, Jesus, law enforcement, comic books. And I think if you're one of those people who loves Jesus, law enforcement, or just crime, true crime mysteries, and comic books, this is probably going to reach you.

J. Warner Wallace

And that's why we've really been fortunate, Shea. We have not had to say to myself, like, I don't write books and start off by saying, well, who can I sell this to? Often publishing companies are going to ask you that though. But I've been blessed. I just get to write about the things that I'm interested in. And I happen to work for all those decades in a business that other people, it's one of the most popular genres in both TV series and podcast is true crime. So we get to kind of play in this area and examine what it can teach us about Christianity and what Christianity can teach us about it. And so we get to scratch an itch that we both have. We love Jesus. We love law. We love the true crime space. And Jimmy's a lover of comic books. I think if you're in one of those three categories, you're there.

J. Warner Wallace

Now, in terms of just what a publisher would ask, when we first started, we thought this is going to be so real that I don't think this is going to be an adult graphic novel. But as we wrote it and saw it printed out, and now I've had people read it who have got junior high kids, they're like, no, my junior higher loved this. He thought it was awesome. And I thought, well, is it too gory? Is it too real for like a younger audience? And I think what I've learned is that to be honest, these are the series that people are watching right now on streaming video. Our young people, our 13 year olds are already way beyond what we're

going to illustrate in this book. And when there's no profanity in the book, there's nothing like that. So, I mean, they're already well beyond that.

J. Warner Wallace

I was talking to my wife about it. She says, you know, when we watched the Superbowl last year, she was shocked by how many horror movies were advertised in the advertising when you know you've got young kids watching the Superbowl. So if you've seen that kind of advertising, or you've watched any of the crime dramas and even the eight o'clock hour on legacy TV, you've already seen this. So I do think that opens it up to young people. And I'm okay with that.

J. Warner Wallace

Here's what I mean. I'd be okay if the only people who bought my books were high schoolers. I'd be absolutely okay. Now, do high schoolers read a lot of books? Probably not. So you'd be limiting your audience pretty significantly. But I truly believe that that is the most important demographic in the church. It is the next generation of Christians that's going to shape the future of the church in America. And so I think we have to address them where they are. And that means a full, robust, it means novels that aren't graphic novels. It means novels that are graphic novels. It means nonfiction that is accessible to this age group. It means every form of literature that we can possess. As Christians, our worldview should be, it should shine. It should blossom in every creative act from music to movies to comics to, and when it doesn't, because we've compromised something in the level of creativity, I think we do a disservice to Jesus. So I think that this is the kind of thing I think can be accessible to young people, and I hope it is.

Shea Houdmann

Awesome. So, Jim, the graphic novel is Case Files, Volume 1, A Murderer Meaning. It's been a long time since I actually sat down and read a graphic novel or comic book, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I love how deeply the Christian worldview is in it without explicitly being in it, especially in the beginning. It gets more clear. For an informed reader, I eventually, okay, I can see where he's going, but it wasn't so, what's the word I'm looking for? Not the word I'm looking for, so clear in the beginning that would turn people off who weren't looking for something Christian, but it's there.

Shea Houdmann

So I'm praying and hoping that God will use this. Many people will be encouraged, and many people who wouldn't otherwise read anything with a Christian worldview will be blessed and taught by reading this. I know it comes out soon. I know you're excited about seeing how it does, so I'm just praying that you and Jimmy are blessed and continue writing more of these, because I

definitely think there's an audience and there's a need for what you're doing here.

J. Warner Wallace

Well, I just can't believe that you're blessed to have you on this show, because I feel like the work is so adjacent, like we're trying to carve this thing from two sides. I just think that this is why I hope to have a symbiotic relationship. But again, I think if there's any character in this book who's going to search for truth, that's what you and I are trying to do. We're just trying to provide them different ways to find it.

Shea Houdmann

So I just realized overt was the word I was looking for.

J. Warner Wallace

Overt, there you go.

Shea Houdmann

Thanks for coming to my mind 30 seconds after we needed it. I know.

J. Warner Wallace

Oh, trust me. I'm like an hour after I think about it. After I get off the podcast that's when it usually comes to me.

Shea Houdmann

Jim, thank you for joining me and again I love what you are doing. Keep me updated on future releases and truly I love how you present Christian worldview. You make people think and you do it in unique ways and you do it in believable ways because it's very very real. This has been the Got Questions podcast with J. Warner Wallace about their new graphic novel, Murder and Meaning. Got questions? The Bible has answers and we'll help you find them.