

The Crime Cafe with Ellen Byerrum

Presented By:



Debbi: Hi everyone! This is the Crime Cafe. Your podcasting source of great crime, suspense and thriller writing. I'm your host, Debbi Mack. Before I introduce my guest, a quick reminder that *The Crime Cafe 9 Book Set* and *Crime Cafe Anthology* are available for sale from all online retailers, regardless of what device you use. So, go to debbimack.com and click on "Crime Cafe" to find the buy links, subscribe to the podcast and buy awesome Crime Cafe merchandise. With that then, it's my great, great pleasure to introduce the awesome fashionista crime writer, Ellen Byerrum. Hey Ellen, how you doing today?

Ellen: I'm great Debbi. I'm so happy to be here. Thanks for asking me.

Debbi: Sure thing! It's wonderful to have you on and so let's talk about Lacey Smithsonian. I had to laugh when I read your bio on your website and you described Washington, D.C. as "a city rich in history, culture, political drama and crimes of fashion".

Ellen: That is true. I absolutely believe that. Although now that we've moved to Colorado, I sometimes feel I owe an apology to Washington. I'm now living in a town, I'm living in a town where people when they dress up they have to wear their good fleece. So, that's the difference in our towns.

Debbi: Oh my gosh! Well at least their wearing something interesting like fleece.

Ellen: Well, yes but everybody's wearing it. Or you know, just your average gym wear because everyone here's into, you know sports, gym wear, skiing and in Washington lots of people wear suits.

Debbi: Right! And dull suits at that.

Ellen: I know. We just want to perk them up a bit.

Debbi: Well, D.C. is hardly the fashion center of the country or the world.

Ellen: Well, I like to call it the city that fashion forgot. And I also think it's the home of the congressional comb over and I often wonder why, why it is that congressmen and senators don't have the typical male baldness patterns. I think that there's a lot of plugs going on. That's just a guess, and Botox.

Debbi: You might have something there. I think you may be on to something. Before we actually start talking much about Lacey Smithsonian I wanted to talk about your days as a journalist. Tell us a little about your journalistic escapades. I think I spit that word out right finally, escapades.

Ellen: Yes, that's great. I was a reporter in Washington, D.C. for BNA, now Bloomberg BNA for 17 years and I mostly covered the Occupational Safety and Health Administration which is great if you're a mystery writer because you learn all the horrible ways people die on the job.

Debbi: Yeah absolutely, wow!

Ellen: Yeah.

Debbi: It's funny how real cases like that can inspire so much can't they?

Ellen: They really can and you know I was horrified to find out that people have actually died in vats of chocolate.

Debbi: Oh my gosh!

Ellen: You think you make that stuff up but it turns out it's real. So that was, yeah it was great and you know someone died in a vat of cherries. So, very tragic but odd you know.

Debbi: It is. It's just amazing! Truth truly is stranger than fiction.

Ellen: Yeah, it really is. And of course I started out on a small western newspaper. And I think the highlight of my reporting days then is when I crawled through a massage parlor window.

Debbi: [laughs]

Ellen: To get inside to interview the girls as it were.

Debbi: Whoa, very Brenda Starr.

Ellen: [laughs]

Debbi: Old reference.

Ellen: Yeah, it was a crazy town, so I was happy to get back east.

Debbi: Well, I have to ask you what inspired Lacey Smithsonian as a character.

Ellen: Well, I love mysteries and I was reading them constantly and I love women characters, you know sleuths, the detective character and they were rough and they were tough and they were smart. But I always came to a part in the book where it said, I can't dress myself. I don't know what to wear and it drove me crazy. How could a woman who is brilliant and smart and she can fight and she can deal with the guys and she's smarter than them. How can she not know how to dress? And I thought I really want to read about someone who can do that and then I came up with her being a fashion reporter who doesn't want to be one. She wants to be taken seriously. But, I've given her a skill that not a lot of people have. It's called extra fashionary perception.

Debbi: Hmmm.

Ellen: Hmmhmm. So she reads people's clothing. She reads people like a book and so she reads into what they wear as clues and it, it works out well in the books.

Debbi: That's a great angle.

Ellen: [laughs] Yeah, and in Washington people are very much in the, they're in the Talbots mode or the Ann Taylor mode and suits, but still there's a lot of variation. You see a lot of interns in what I call the three knuckle suit lengths. You know the, the oversized suits. They maybe haven't grown into them yet or they haven't learned how to get a tailor. But clothing and how we wear it, we tell stories about ourselves by what we wear. And Lacey keys into that.

Debbi: That's really cool, cause it is unusual to see these days a strong female protagonist with fashion sense.

Ellen: Yeah, I think so.

Debbi: I suppose that I'm thinking of Sarah Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski. She likes her shoes. I remember that.

Ellen: Right, she does like shoes. But so many of them they're rough, they're tough, they're brilliant, they're great, they don't dress and I would think that the tipping point for me came with Sue Grafton, who I love, Kinsey Millhone's black dress.

Debbi: Oh yes!

Ellen: And she's always describing it, you know it's polyester, you can roll it up in a ball, you can retrieve it from under your bed and truly I just want to light a match to that polyester monstrosity.

Debbi: Oh my gosh!

Ellen: And there was one book and I can't remember which alphabet letter it was, where Kinsey, Kinsey had a friend who gave her a wonderful green cocktail dress and she was wearing it and I knew the minute she got it that nothing good was going to happen to that dress and it got blown up. So, you know I think there is a fear of being a strong woman who can be attractive as well as smart, and powerful, and shoot a gun. But there shouldn't be, so that's my take on Lacey.

Debbi: Well that's a very interesting perspective. Thank you! I was going to say did you give her the last name Smithsonian because she had the fondness for vintage clothing?

Ellen: [laughs] You know characters sometimes name themselves and I named her that and I thought, no you can't really do that, but I gave her a back story that often in my books I have found that people change their names and many people who came to this country changed their names when they got here. So her ancestor was a Smith from London. He was a Cockney from London and he just wanted a tonier sounding name and he named himself after the museum and of course there are no Smithsonians. There are Smithsons but no Smithsonians. So that's where Lacey came from.

Debbi: Wow, interesting.

Ellen: So.

Debbi: How does her story evolve over the course of this series?

Ellen: Well she, it does evolve and she does grow and she does learn more things. In one of the books, *Armed and Glamorous* she goes to private investigation school in northern Virginia and I did that and had my PI registration in that area and she runs into an old love who is, who used to be a town police chief in a small town out west and he is now back in Virginia where he grew up and he's in a private investigation firm with his dad. So, Lacey learns that, and also she goes through a personal evolution of hating being on the fashion beat, and then accepting that she has this skill and also that she is breaking stories and breaking murder stories, including one of a missing intern on Capitol Hill and of course we always get inspiration from the Capitol. And it ties in with a young woman who wanted to be a designer who disappeared during World War II. So, there's a link between the two and you know, so Lacey understands that she has this gift and so she comes to accept it if not always love it, and then by the time, you know, I'm writing, I just finished the 11th book, it's going to be out for sale October 16th and in that book everybody else wants to jump on her beat because that's where the action is. And so people are coming in with suggestions and things. So, she has had that evolution and you know, relationships with people evolve and with Vick, her main squeeze. So, she does learn and grow and one thing I think is kind of unusual about my books is that they always tackle a different subject area. I mean you'd think that fashion is very small and very constrained, but it's not and in every book I've had to learn something new. I have a book called *Shot Through Velvet* and I had found out that the last velvet factory in Virginia was closing down and so I took a day off work and I went down and I interviewed the guy and he showed me this amazing velvet factory and of course I was with an OSHA reporter and he said, "You sure could kill a lot of people in a place like this", which of course is music to my ears in one way, but horrifying in another.

Debbi: Yeah.

Ellen: But the equipment, it's velvet is a very hand intensive fabric. It cannot be automated completely. So, you know, your fingers and your hands are at risk and there's this huge blade. When you make velvet (and I didn't know this), velvet is sewn with the nap on two sides and how you get the velvet fabric is you have to slice through these big panels of fabric and the blades are like 6 feet of whirling round blades. Very dangerous! So, and then also they have these huge vats; these dying vats.

Debbi: [agrees]

Ellen: And I had so many options with my victim and I decided to dye him blue. So, the victim is found dyed blue in a vat. Yeah, so but I had to learn about velvet and of course now that our...we have no more dress grade velvet factories in America and the impact of this velvet factory closing can really shatter an entire town. So there's far more than fashion. It is a, you know, whole way of living. So, it is wonderful to be able to learn those things and you know, explore and research.

Debbi: I think that's fantastic because that shows me that Lacey wanted to be taken seriously and ended up finding what she wanted in a way she didn't expect.

Ellen: Exactly. Like so many of us I think [laughs].

Debbi: Yeah. So, tell us about your latest book then. What happens in it without giving away spoilers?

Ellen: Oh, I'll just give you a bit of the setup. And I'll preface this by saying, I was a playwright and I was involved with Washington Theater for a number of years before I started writing novels and I loved it. I was a playwright and, you know the theater is such a rich area and when you think about Washington, D.C. It's a company town and the company is the government and all of the satellite companies that supported the lobbyists, the lawyers; they all support our main company town. But, there's a whole nother D.C. out there. You know, the restaurants, and the theaters are their own world I think in D.C. So, I really called upon a lot of that when I was doing my new book, *The Masque of the Red Dress*, and I have created a Russian theater company. Now, people may not know this but in D.C. there is a company called Synetic and it is made up of people who immigrated from Georgia, but not Russia. We have to, you know, be distinct about that. So, they're Georgian and they do a very specific dance movement theater in D.C. But I thought it would be great during this time of Russian interference with our elections and our minds on Russia and Russian agents and you know, Russian agents these days have a very short shelf life; some of them. I mean there are long lists of all the Russian agents who've been found here, in Russia and London who've been killed. But, I also think of how close espionage and the theater can be. You know, it's a whole different world that spies create. They write the script, they set the stage, they complete the action. So, I really wanted to get these ideas together in *The Masque of the Red Dress* and the dress in question is a fabulous dress that has been sold at a theater sale. Now, I don't know if Washington does this, but I know in the past the big theaters have had yard sales of their props and costumes and I never made it to one, but Arena Stage had one and people could buy the costumes and the props and you know, various stage furniture and the things that make up a stage. So, this book opens at a theater and there's this amazing red dress that Lacey spies. Now, she doesn't get it, but her co-worker, LaToya Crawford, who is an African American reporter at the paper, spies this dress and like 20 seconds after she says, "I would never wear anything that some other person wore", she sees the dress and the dress almost has a hold on her and so she buys it. She immediately gets into a fight with a woman who comes out and says it has, you know, it's a mistake, it's not there but you know, LaToya is very, very fierce and she wins the dress and then they find out that the dress was worn in a production of *The Mask of the Red Death* by Edgar Allan Poe and the leading lady who wore the costume played the character of death and she died on closing night. So, this dress has become sort of symbolic in the theater community and actresses vie every year to wear it to the Helen Hayes Awards, and it has sort of become a good luck, bad luck kind of dress where they think if they wear it and they, you know, defy the bad luck. So, it's become sort of this thing, but you know also a burglary and murder follow in its path, and so it's up to Lacey to determine what happens. And also LaToya who has this dress, obviously knows of Lacey's extra fashionary perception and at the last minute when she's going home from this sale and she shoves it at Lacey and she goes well, you've got to clean it because you've got the clothing voodoo, you know you've got

that voodoo and so Lacey has control of the dress. And then LaToya's apartment gets burglarized and so things escalate from there.

Debbi: My goodness! Well that sounds fascinating and I wish more people knew about the theater in Washington because I used to know people who worked for the government who said, "I wish there were more theater here", and I was like there's theater all over the place.

Ellen: There is theater all over the place. In fact Washington is touted as, I believe (let me check) the second largest theater town...the second largest theater town in America. But there are lots of small theater and it's terrific. You know you've got, you have more than Ford's Theater and the Kennedy Center and the National. You've got Source, and you've got Roundhouse, and you've got Synetic, and studios, so it's a huge network of creative people and I think another thing people don't realize about D.C. is a lot of people have boring jobs and they have to let out their creativity. When I worked at BNA, not to say it was boring, because my job was not. I loved covering occupational safety and health and learning about people, company and safety and also all those murder rates, sorry not murder rates, death rates. But you know, other people have to write about tax. So, at the end of the day, they simply have to do something creative and theater is a big outlet for a lot of people in D. C.

Debbi: I think that's absolutely true. Speaking of creative pursuits, I have to ask, what was it like seeing *Killer Hair* being made into a TV movie?

Ellen: Well it was, it was really a fun and fabulous experience and I was prepared to be appalled at whatever came on the screen. But, I was really glad; they filmed 2 of the books in the series, *Killer Hair* and *Hostile Makeover*. However, there were 2 screenwriters so the first movie, *Killer Hair* mostly followed the book and when I, I saw it when it came out with some friends and every time they deviated I gasped. So, you know you shouldn't look at me when I'm watching something like that. But it really hewed pretty closely to the script and I was surprised that they used a lot of the dialogue that was in the book and I think that is because I was a playwright. I'm very interested in dialogue. I'm very interested in how the voice of every character is different, you know. I have a character, a hair stylist from New Jersey. I've got an ex KGB agent from Russia. Everyone has a very distinct voice. So, I think that came across in the dialogue that is in the books and so that was fun. But, probably the best part was I was able to see them filming the exteriors in Washington. Now, the movies were filmed in Canada where apparently everything is filmed these days. But they did boost the budget to get the actors to D.C and you know they've got, you can see the White House and Farragut Square. So, there are some wonderful scenes and I was able to take a day off work and go watch. And if you see the movies, which are very hard..., I think they might be available now on Amazon or iTunes or something. I have a walk across the screen. It's in front of the White House, which was very special for me. So, I just sort of...they said well just walk across, and of course I'm walking like a reporter. So, I'm just walking like fast because that's my walk. Walking with a purpose is what you do when you're a reporter. So, I'm the one like racing across the screen. But I have red hair, so I'm you know, that was good. Everyone knew it was me.

Debbi: [laughs]

Ellen: So, it was really fun and a lot of people ask, you know are they going to more. Not right now, however you know some other people have been interested in doing it. But, Hollywood is sort of like lightning in a bottle, you know it's quicksilver and the attention span is not necessarily there for a long time.

Debbi: Oh yes!

Ellen: You probably know that [laughs].

Debbi: I'm familiar with that, yes. Let's see, I was going to say before we wrap up want to give us some hints about where Lacey is going or share anything else?

Ellen: Where is Lacey in the future? Well, she is finally engaged to Vic and but a lot of people are really interested in some small characters. One is the food editor, Felicity Pickles who annoys me greatly, and annoys Lacey and she's in love with what I call the death and dismemberment reporter, Harlan Wiedermeyer, and they're getting married, and so I keep having people say, what about their wedding, when are they going to get married. So, obviously I have to write that and it's going to be terrifying because I'm going to have a cookie, a cookie reception which is something they do in Pittsburgh.

Debbi: Huh

Ellen: It's very strange to me but not to people in Pittsburgh. They have these bizarre things and so, you know there's a lot of food references, but that will happen. But, you know on the other plane I wrote a thriller called *The Woman in the Dollhouse*. It was originally named *The Dollhouse in the Crawlspace* but I re-named it and it's begging for a sequel and I love that one. It was such a delight to not write about fashion quite frankly and that was also sort of inspired by my years in D.C in Middleburg, I placed it in Middleburg which I think is just the most gorgeous place around and my fascination with extremely wealthy people [laughs]. So, yeah the big question there was what would it be like if you woke up rich, just stinking rich and you had no memory of this? And then I was also dealing with, you know research into memory drugs where there's a huge ethical question. People are talking about you can suppress traumatic memories, which may be applicable in cases of PTSD or rape survivors who have, you know horrible memories. But, if it's our memories that make us who we are, is that really what we should do? So, I was really throwing, you know I always throw together, you know five, six, seven, eight ideas that are pulled from different sources and inspirations and you know, I really love that book and I really need to write a sequel to it.

Debbi: Huh, ever see the movie *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*?

Ellen: I did yes, yes.

Debbi: What do you think of that, the idea of memories making us?

Ellen: Right and that's a weird, sad movie in a way

Debbi: It is.

Ellen: But, you know scientists are messing around with that right now; those sorts of drugs. They haven't as far as we know, been tested on human subjects. In fiction of course they have, but...

Debbi: Of course in fiction.

Ellen: Absolutely! And I want to get back to a play. I've been working on a play and I really want to get back. Yeah, there's nothing like a play when it's working. I mean the theater is really the agony and the ecstasy because nothing feels better than a play when it's working and when the people are laughing. And there's nothing worse when it isn't and the actors don't know their lines and that kind of thing.

Debbi: I got to say, I just love live theater.

Ellen: Yes.

Debbi: It's electrifying when it works.

Ellen: It really is and I prefer like a more intimate stage, you know rather than a big arena where you really feel the energy coming from a stage and the actors and the writing.

Debbi: That is so cool.

Ellen: Yeah, that's just what's on my horizon for now.

Debbi: Well that's very cool. Thank you for sharing that.

Ellen: Oh, you're welcome.

Debbi: And I will just take this opportunity now to wrap things up.

Ellen: OK.

Debbi: Unless you want to add something else.

Ellen: I'm good [laughs].

Debbi: OK, well I'm so glad you came on the show, Ellen.

Ellen: Well, thank you Debbi for asking me. I really enjoyed it.

Debbi: So, it was great to have you on and for everybody out there remember that you can get *The Crime Cafe 9 Book Set* and *Crime Cafe Anthology* from my website. Buy links are there under “Crime Cafe” and you can subscribe to the podcast and please leave a review if you would. Thank you very much and see you in two weeks.