

The Crime Cafe with Ellen Kirschman

Presented By:



Debbi: [00:00:13] 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 bring on my guest, I'll just remind you that the Crime Cafe has two ebooks for sale: the nine-book boxed set and the short story anthology. You can find the buy links for both on my website debbimack.com, under the "Crime Cafe" link. You can also get a free copy of either book if you become a Patreon supporter. You'll get that and much more if you support the podcast on Patreon, along with our eternal gratitude for doing so.

Debbi: [00:01:04] Hi, everyone. It's my pleasure to have as my guest today a crime fiction and nonfiction author who calls herself "A Shrink with Ink", and I don't think that's a reference to tattoos, although we could always find out. It's crime writer and psychologist Ellen Kirschman. Hey, Ellen, I'm so glad to have you on the show today.

Ellen: [00:01:29] Thank you. Debbi. I'm glad, finally, at last to be here.

Debbi: [00:01:35] Awesome. Okay. In your bio, you mentioned being born in New York City, but say you were born on the wrong coast. And I've often had that same feeling, because I love the West Coast. And you mentioned that you live in San Francisco.

Ellen: [00:01:49] Right. I live in the Bay Area.

Debbi: [00:01:51] Is that not the most awesome city ever?

Ellen: [00:01:54] Yes, it is. I love it.

Debbi: [00:01:57] I just adore it. What's your favorite part of living in San Francisco?

Ellen: [00:02:02] Well, I live about 40 minutes south, so my favorite part is that I can get up to San Francisco in just 40 minutes in my car or on a train. So I have one of the world's most beloved cities right there at my back door. I love a lot of things about the Bay area. The weather even though we have peculiar four seasons out here: flood, fire, earthquake, and landslides, usually. But most of the time it's temperate and wonderful, and I love the vibe out here. I know many parts of the country see us as being pretty ... a little on the "too far to the left" side, but that suits me just fine.

Debbi: [00:02:57] I know where you're coming from. It is a beautiful area, and I love the cable cars in San Francisco. That's one thing I love about it, and actually I used to live in Petaluma.

Ellen: [00:03:08] Did you?

Debbi: [00:03:09] That's about 40 miles north.

Ellen: [00:03:13] Right. Also a lovely community.

Debbi: [00:03:16] It is. It is very, very nice. Your first books were non-fiction. Can you tell us about them?

Ellen: [00:03:23] Sure. My first book, which just what came out, the third edition came out last May is called I LOVE A COP: WHAT POLICE FAMILIES NEED TO KNOW. And I'd been thinking about writing that book for almost 20 years, if you can believe it. It was just knocking on the inside of my head. We do so much training for police officers, but it was so clear to me as someone who worked primarily with police officers that this job just spilled over to their family life and their home in not always a very positive way, because the paradoxes, the kind of skills that make you a good street cop don't make you a very good parent, spouse, friend. You've got to really learn how to shift gears. So I really wanted to write something that would help police families navigate what it's like to be married to this job that they didn't select most of the time. So the book has been, it's been very gratifying. It's sold well over one hundred and fifty thousand copies. It's kind of, as people have said, the Bible for police families, and it's gratifying to know that I've been able to reach that many people and the help that many people.

Debbi: [00:04:48] That's really something. That's amazing.

Ellen: [00:04:50] Thank you. And then this second book after September 11th, my publisher said look we need to do this for firefighters, as well. And so we did and that book is actually now under contract to update that book because there's a lot that's happened since it was published. And then the most recent nonfiction book came out about two years ago, and that's called COUNSELING COPS: WHAT CLINICIANS NEED TO KNOW. And in my work, especially my current work with the First Responder

Support Network, it's really clear that many clinicians do not understand the subculture of policing and law enforcement in general. And when they don't understand it or when they harbor some personal attitudes, then they can make some really egregious mistakes in counseling cops. It's really hard for first responders to reach out and get help and when they do reach out and somebody makes a huge blunder or fails to connect with them where they're at in their particular life, they just don't go back to therapy and they write therapy off entirely as something that might be helpful to them.

Debbi: [00:06:11] Yeah. I can easily picture how people will shut down in the face of the wrong sort of therapeutic approach.

Ellen: [00:06:19] So I can give you an example, if you'd like. We had somebody that came through our first responder retreat who had been in two, I think, maybe three fatal shootings and was having terrible nightmares. All these shootings were legal, but he was having terrible nightmares, real doubts about himself, and it was affecting his family. So he finally went to see a therapist, and the first thing the therapist said to him was, "So, have you finally decided to stop being a trained killer?".

[00:07:00] Right. I see your eyebrows going up. And you're not a clinician, so wasn't that a horrible thing to say?

Debbi: [00:07:07] Talk about the wrong thing.

Ellen: [00:07:09] Totally, because here was an officer who himself was feeling like a victim. Why did this happen on my watch? Why did this person insert themselves in my life? And so that really convinced us that we need to develop what we call culturally competent clinicians---people who may only see a couple of cops a year, but do understand what they do and why they do it.

Debbi: [00:07:37] Sheesh. I would hope so. Good grief. Let's talk about your crime fiction now. If a potential reader asked you, how would you describe it? Is it more procedural or more detective?

Ellen: [00:07:56] Neither. Actually, Dot Meyerhoff is a police psychologist. Actually, Debbi, when I started this, I thought doing research for nonfiction is so difficult. Let's be

easier to make stuff up. Well, it's absolutely not. I was delusional. It's way harder to write a fast-moving, engrossing piece of fiction as you know yourself as a writer than it is to write nonfiction, which is basically reporting. You have to know what good science and junk science is, but I found fiction much harder. So I have this character Dot Meyerhoff, who is herself a police psychologist. She's younger than I am. She's 52, and she should be counseling cops, not solving crimes. But she never gives up on anybody and when her officers, the ones she's supposed to be counseling, get into trouble, she gets drawn into either their cases or the way their cases are affecting themselves psychologically or their families. I would describe my books as psychological mysteries or thrillers. I tackle serious subjects, but I have a lot of humor in my books. You can't work with law enforcement if you don't have a sense of humor. And so I hope, I'm actually confident that my sense of humor comes through in these books, even though I'm tackling some very, very serious subjects.

Debbi: [00:09:41] Yes, I think that's important, to achieve that balance. Humor as well as the serious stuff. Can you tell us a little bit about the story arc that your series follows, if there is one, in terms of your protagonist's development. Where does she start, and where does she go?

Ellen: [00:10:05] Well, it's not necessary to read them in order, but the first book is called BURYING BEN and that relates to Dot counseling a young rookie who is still in the field training program, and he's struggling he's having a terrible time, particularly with his training officer and Dot's fighting with the training officer. They've tried to get him to sort of settle down, be more of a teacher and less of an evaluator, because he's pretty rough. And, in the middle of all of this, this young officer commits suicide and leaves a note blaming Dot Meyerhoff and blaming his training officer. So Dot, she's brand new on the job. She's just literally walked in the door of this police department, and so she has to restore her own confidence, she has to restore her reputation with that department, and she is also in the throes of recovering from a failed marriage, in which her ex-husband (also a police psychologist) has left her for a much younger woman with whom he now has children. So she's kind of broken when she gets to the police department and then this terrible thing happens that this young man kills himself.

[00:11:37] In the second book called THE RIGHT WRONG THING, I tackled the issue of what happens when a police officer makes a dreadful mistake, shoots and kills

somebody that is innocent, and then this book THE RIGHT WRONG THING, a young female officer, also barely out of the training program, mistakes a young woman's cell phone for a gun and shoots and kills her. So Dot is counseling this officer who has terrible PTSD, awful survivor's guilt as a result of this and wants desperately to apologize to the family. At the same time, as a female, one of the early females in this particular agency, she's been really, really rejected by her male counterparts. They've been nasty to her. They think she is weak. She can't hold her own in a fight and so forth. And when she shoots and kills this young teenager who is also pregnant as it turns out, suddenly she becomes a hero to all the men in her department. And this turns her stomach. She does not want to be part of that club, if that's what it takes to nail the boards up on the clubhouse, that you got to kill somebody. So she's really conflicted in many ways. And she does try to apologize to the family with some catastrophic results which I will not reveal. The third book is called THE FIFTH REFLECTION, and by this time, my protagonist Dot has gotten a lot more confidence in herself, is fighting constantly with her police chief who is kind of a doofus in many ways. Well-meaning at times, but awfully unclear on the concept a lot of the time.

[00:13:47] So Dot has also now started to date a man named Frank. Frank, I must tell you, is, well, I've actually borrowed my husband's entire life for this character of Frank. So much so that his family now calls him Frank, when his actual name is Steve. So Frank is taking photography lessons, and my husband is a photographer, from a very beautiful woman who is a Buddhist and in the process of studying with her, her child goes missing. She has a very small child who goes missing and Frank gets involved and Dot gets involved in trying to find this child and figure out what's happened to her. Dot is a little unsettled by Frank's relationship with his teacher, which is totally straight and on the up and up. And in the meanwhile, a young officer who you would have met in the first book is in charge of investigating this case, and he becomes so immersed in trying to find this missing child that his own family starts to fall apart.

[00:15:17] He has a baby at home the same age as the missing child. So this really is so close to his own life that he becomes psychologically really pretty unhinged by the whole case and so Dot's trying to hold him together, hold the woman whose child has gone missing because she knows her together, and still manage her just sort of new life with Frank. And some people I know, some readers really have qualms about reading a book in which anything bad happens to a child. But I have to tell you that, while there

are some aspects of child pornography that I talk about in the book because I like to teach the reader ... teach is the wrong word, but I'm a police insider. There's a lot I know, and I think people are interested in reading about it. This book has nothing graphic. None of my books have anything, any graphic sex, including this one about a child and it's just more about the investigator and his exposure to what he has to do for a living, which is to look at child pornography online. You only learn about him. You don't see what he is seeing. The reader will not be exposed to that.

Debbi: [00:16:44] So it sounds like you combine psychological suspense and a way of conveying to readers some inside information in terms of what it's really like to be a police officer or somebody connected with that world.

Ellen: [00:17:02] Exactly. My wish is that next time a reader of one of my books sees a police officer, they're going to look at them differently. They're going to see the human being that wears that uniform and has that badge. So you've got it. You got it exactly. Thank you. I'm working now on revisions on the fourth Dot Meyerhoff mystery. It doesn't yet have a title. It's a lot of heavy lifting in this revision, but it involves a dispatcher and one of the things that I hope a reader will eventually learn from this book is what it's like to be a dispatcher, because they are unsung heroes in my estimation.

Debbi: [00:17:54] Wow. I love hearing this, because my husband is a retired firefighter, so it's great. That's awesome. Let's see. Have you ever considered writing another series or stand-alones?

Ellen: [00:18:07] I do consider writing a stand-alone. And I actually have a short story. It's going to be in an anthology coming out this year from the Nasty Woman Press and the anthology just got a title. It's called SHATTERING GLASS. And my short story, it's the first short story that I've written since in college, and it's the first thing I've done that's in the third person, because all my Dot Meyerhoff mysteries and my nonfiction are written in the first person. So, yeah, every now and then I get the idea that I want to try another form like a stand-alone and give Dot a rest, cause she needs a vacation sometimes.

Debbi: [00:18:57] You also teach.

Ellen: [00:19:00] I do. I teach. I hold workshops actually internationally for police families and first responder families. I teach peer support because I really believe in the value of peer support. But mostly I do those workshops for the police couples or police families, and occasionally, I will do something for other clinicians who are wanting to learn about working with this very unique population. And then I volunteer a great deal of my time at the First Responders Support Network retreats, where we hold retreats for first responders who are suffering with the symptoms of post-traumatic stress. And then we have a parallel set of retreats for the significant others and spouses of first responders. So I devote a lot of my time to that.

Debbi: [00:20:06] That's fantastic. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?

Ellen: [00:20:14] No. Oh, I blog with *Psychology Today*, if anybody wants to keep up with that. Largely about issues involving first responders, primarily police, and then I also have a newsletter. And if people want to sign up for my newsletter, they could go to my website and do that very easily on the home page.

Debbi: [00:20:38] And your website is ...

Ellen: [00:20:40] Ellenkirschman.com.

Debbi: [00:20:50] All righty. Well, that's awesome. And Ellen is also doing a giveaway, and I will have information about that on my blog. Coming up after I put this up, I will put that up on my blog. If you're listening to this, be sure and check out my blog because the information will be there as to how to enter Ellen's giveaway for her, I believe, it's your latest book.

Ellen: [00:21:15] I don't remember. We'll figure it out.

Debbi: [00:21:18] It's been a while. Anyway, so having said that, I will just say thank you, Ellen, for being here and thank you everyone for listening. And please leave a review on iTunes or Stitcher or wherever you listen to this, because it really helps us a lot. Also, please go to debbimack.com and check out my blog, so you can see our

giveaways. Also, where you can subscribe to the podcast and buy our Crime Cafe ebooks.

[00:21:50] In addition, there's also the Patreon page where you can support the podcast and get perks in return. So I hope you'll check those things out. And with that, we'll have another episode next week. So tune in for our next guest who will be Danny Lopez. And until then, happy reading, and I'll talk to you later.