

The Crime Cafe with Ellery Kane

Presented By:



Debbi: Hi everyone. Before I introduce our first guest of 2022, I just want to say thank you to Lanny Larcinese—I hope I pronounced that right—for becoming our first new patron of the new year. Thank you so much. And our first guest for 2022 is a forensic psychologist by day and novelist by night. She was one of 10 semi-finalists in the James Patterson co-author competition. A Texan at heart, she now lives in the beautiful San Francisco Bay area. It's my pleasure to introduce my guest Ellery Kane. Hi Ellery. Thanks for being here today.

Ellery: Hi. Thanks so much for having me. I'm looking forward to our chat.

Debbi: Me too. Yeah, I've been. I will say this. We have something in common. We've both been to prisons to visit inmates for interviews for different reasons.

Ellery: Okay.

Debbi: I was an attorney at one time and had to go visit somebody in a prison.

Ellery: Oh, were you? I had no idea you were an attorney, so you know a little bit about how prisons are a whole...another world

Debbi: They sure are. Yeah, and kind of scary when you first walk into them.

Ellery: Absolutely. Can be a real culture shock for somebody that's never been in a prison before.

Debbi: Absolutely. For someone who doesn't know, what is your role as a forensic psychologist? What is it that you do?

Ellery: A forensic psychologist is a psychologist that has anything to do with the law, so it's really about the intersection of psychology and the law, and forensic psychologists do a lot of different things. Usually in the popular media, you think of people like Alex Cross or Clarice Starling, but forensic psychologists do a lot of different things. They can be involved in things like child custody cases or in determination of disability. What I do specifically is violence risk assessment, so I work for the Board of Parole Hearings in California, and I assess long-term inmates who have been in prison for many years, most of them for very serious crimes like murder or other violent offenses, and they're coming up for their parole hearing. My job is to assess their risk for violence to help the parole board make a decision about their release.

Debbi: As a forensic psychologist, how do you feel about the prison system and how well they're doing in terms of ...?

Ellery: Well, that could be a whole dissertation. I think that the area that I most focus on in terms of what's relevant for psychologists is rehabilitation, and there are a lot of great treatment programs in prison. Unfortunately, not all the prisons have access to the same kinds of treatment, so that means that not all the inmates will have access to the same kinds of treatment, and it can be a real issue for inmates that have specific problems like sex offenders. There's not a lot of great programming for them, so they do a good job in some areas, but other areas there certainly still needs to be some growth and some attention because one of the main goals of incarceration is rehabilitation. It's not just about punishment. And that's one of the things that I'm looking for is to see that somebody has changed and that can be really hard to do if you don't have access to treatment.

Debbi: Yes, exactly. Before we talk about your forensic pathology books, I'd like to ask you about some of your other work, your previous work. I saw this whole backlist that you have. The Legacy series—that's a trilogy and a prequel, right?

Ellery: Yes.

Debbi: Tell us a little about that.

Ellery: The Legacy series is actually the first set of books that I wrote when I first got back into writing. For as long as I can remember, I've always been a writer and I do a lot of writing for my day job as well. I grew up writing short stories and I always thought in my mind, someday I'm going to write a novel, but it sort of got pushed to the wayside with all of my day job duties and the amount of writing that I have to do for that, which is quite extensive. So, finally in 2014, I decided this is the time. I'm not going to put it off any longer. I'm just going to start writing. And I actually signed up for a writing course that I ended up never taking, because I just started writing *Legacy*, which was the first book and it just flowed, unlike any book has flowed since then, I'll be honest. That was the easiest one to write, and I wrote it in about six weeks and that series just came pretty easily and quickly. So those books were published in 2014, 2015, 2016, around that timeframe.

It's a young adult series, set in a dystopian world and it also involve psychology and forensic psychology in a way, because the main issue is that society has really become addicted to emotion-altering medications and they have had a big consequence on the world. The series is set at that time. It's set in 2041 and I think it involves a lot of my day job as well. So, all of my books have been inspired by my day job. I completed that series and then actually decided to take a turn towards thrillers, and that's my other series that I have ongoing, which is the Doctors of Darkness series.

Debbi: Right. Yeah. So I think that's fascinating. I love that in the Legacy series, you have this female, basically action protagonist, kind of like an adventure protagonist in the dystopian world. Did you have to spend a lot of time? I mean you draw on your background, but it seems like there's some world building you'd have to do as well. Is that something that you really worked on?

Ellery: Yeah, absolutely. I think that was one of the big ... I think that's always a challenge when you're writing a dystopian novel is really setting up the world and building the world. I wrote the first book and honestly, I intended it just to be that, just to be a single standalone book. But I was working with an editor at the time and she said, I think you should keep going, and so I ended up continuing on. And as I continued writing the second book and the third book, and then the prequel, I built the world even more than I had ever intended and it became a much bigger story and almost a saga that I never really pictured from the beginning, but I'm so glad that I did continue on, because I think it's great to have those. That second and third book really round out the main character and you get to know all the characters so much better.

Debbi: That's fantastic. It's almost as if you started out with that world built in your head but not on the page necessarily, but it came to you as you wrote the series.

Ellery: Yes, and it drew a lot on my psychology background because I was talking about emotion-altering medications, and I made up some different medications in the books. Things that you would take to help you experience no anxiety whatsoever, or to just experience extreme happiness. And in a way, these aren't so different than the actual medications that we have available, that psychiatrists prescribed. So, I was kind of drawing on that idea of the way that we oftentimes I see in

society today, we are seeking kind of a quick fix. We don't really want to address what's underlying our problems and our emotions, but we just want to fix them and cover over them. So that's a lot of what the books are about. It's about carrying that idea to the extreme and what would happen if we really could just take a pill and our anxiety would just disappear, or we could just feel happy.

Debbi: Wow. I really hear everything you're saying. That's fantastic. I also love that the covers of those books have pictures of the Golden Gate Bridge on them. That's like a continuing theme. I take it, is San Francisco like another character in your books?

Ellery: It is, yes. And especially in that series. All of those books are set in San Francisco at some of the landmarks that you really think of when you think of San Francisco. So, the Golden Gate Bridge figures quite prominently. Alcatraz is sort of the setting for the villain in the book, and so all the things that you think of when you think about San Francisco are in that Legacy series in different ways and in a dystopian time. So, I agreed to that aspect of it too.

Debbi: Very cool. Let's see. Now you have the Rockwell and Decker series. Tell us about how you came up with these characters and the idea for that series.

Ellery: The Rockwell and Decker series is a series that I wrote for Bookouture, and this series kind of came about jointly between myself and my editor there. She had contacted me and asked me if I was interested in working with them and writing a series, and of course, I jumped on the chance. Bookouture is really well known for their great marketing and great sales, so I was really excited to work with them. She had in mind a detective and a forensic psychologist working as a team and to me, that was right at my alley, so I created these characters. Olivia Rockwell is the forensic psychologist and Will Decker is the detective, and there's a little bit of a romance, a budding romance between the two of them, and they tackle some pretty big cases in those first three books and their relationship continues to build. We also meet Will's partner, who's one of my favorite characters of the series, JB. He's kind of like that typical grizzled, jaded detective who partners up with Will and is always there to kind of give Will a hard time and sort of jab him every now and again.

Debbi: Yeah. That's always kind of a nice combination when you have that sort of people playing off each other like that. It's usually kind of cool.

Ellery: It's nice, because it also gives me a chance to write some humor into the books. And I think that's really important when you're writing about murder.

Debbi: Especially serial killers.

Ellery: Exactly! Even in my day job when I'm dealing with murder and all these serious things on a daily basis, it's important to inject a little humor. So really all my books, I try to have characters that are sort of foils and have a little bit of humor in there.

Debbi: I love it. To go back for a second to the Doctors of Darkness, that's a series also, isn't it? Are they connected in some way, but they're not about the same protagonist, correct?

Ellery: They are. They're connected in the sense that they're all about psychologists who find themselves in dark situations. They all have pasts that they're bringing to the job and some of those pasts start to rear their ugly heads. Each of the books features a psychologist, which is why it's called the Doctors of Darkness. The first book *Daddy Darkest* is actually the book that I was inspired to write for the James Patterson competition that you mentioned earlier, and that was really when my writing of thrillers kind of took off. I always knew that I wanted to write thrillers because those are so in line with what I do day to day, and so I came up with the idea of two friends on a trip to San Francisco and they get off the plane. One of them goes to the restroom and never returns. That was sort of the premise for the beginning of the book, and from there it takes off and we have both a daughter protagonist and a mom protagonist who is the forensic psychologist. And we sort of get to know about the mom's past and how that influences what's going on in the daughter's kind of harrowing present.

Debbi: Hmm. Interesting. What are you working on now?

Ellery: So now I've kind of taken a bit of a hiatus from the Rockwell and Decker series, and I'm still working with Bookouture. I'm working on a standalone thriller. The title is still under wraps so I don't want to say it, but it's really honestly a book that I have had so much fun writing because it's something that is inspired by a real-life situation that's kind of close to my

heart, which is that my elderly father had some people that came into his life that sort of took advantage of him financially. I always knew that this was a topic that I wanted to write about and I wanted to incorporate some way into my books because I think writing is so therapeutic and it helps you to just get out your emotions and play out scenarios that could never happen in real life. But it enabled me to get a little revenge through the written word so it was really fun to write.

Debbi: I understand. Yeah. but really, there is a lot of emotion that comes out in writing this stuff when you write about what you know.

Ellery: Yeah, for sure.

Debbi: Let's see, what books do you like to read?

Ellery: Gosh, I tend to read sort of polar opposites, so I will read thrillers and then I will read a little bit of contemporary romance as well, so I kind of go back and forth. I think it's important to not just read the same type of thing, but to have a little bit of variety. It's similar to how I approach my day job, which is very heavy and dark a lot of times, and so I'll spend a lot of time watching more humor or romance on TV, just to sort of break up the darkness in my mind. I don't want to get stuck in that dark place. I did read a great thriller recently that I have loved, and it's not too often that I will push a book onto people and say you have to read this book. The book is called *The Push* by Ashley Audrain and I have been telling everyone about this book because I think it's fantastic. It's a thriller and it's not just a thriller. It's a lot about motherhood. and I don't have any children, but I think all mothers will relate to this book, and the writing is just beautiful so I highly recommend it.

Debbi: Wow. That's quite a recommendation. I've written it down. Are there any authors in particular that you find most inspiring?

Ellery: That's a tough question. I think I've gleaned inspiration from just all over. Some of my favorite authors growing up that really influenced me— James Patterson comes to mind. I love the way he writes his short chapters, and I try to do that as well in my writing. That's one of the things I kind of stole from him. To me, the short chapters, it just keeps you going. You can just easily say, oh, just one more, just one more and by the time you finished the whole book, so I love that. I also have always loved Joyce Carol Oates. She's more of a literary writer, but I remember reading

her short stories in high school, and just her use of language and the way she leaves you with kind of these just creepy sort of imagery and feelings. I love that.

Debbi: Yeah. Let's see. What do you wish people understood better about prisons or forensic pathology?

Ellery: Oh, gosh. Well, I think probably the biggest misconception about my job and about what I do and it's a question that I get asked a lot is why would we ever want to let a murderer out of prison? Aren't murderers just going to go out and they're going to kill someone again? And I think that's probably the biggest misconception about what I do. Murder in and of itself is a very low recidivism crime, which means that most people that commit a murder never commit another murder, and the inmates that I evaluate, many of them are older so they're in their fifties, sixties. They have had a long time in prison to reflect on their lives, reflect on what they've done in the past. Many of them have done extensive amounts of treatment, and they've made a lot of changes in their life. And we know that long term offenders who get released from prison have a very low recidivism rate. So, the inmates that I evaluate in California, their recidivism rate is like 1%, and of that 1%, very few of them commit violence. You can count on one hand how many life term inmates have been paroled and gone on to commit violence. So, I think that's probably the biggest misconception is that people can change and murderers especially are not very likely to go on to reoffend, so these are really the individuals that we should be letting out of prison, which is surprising to most people.

Debbi: Yeah. I think most people would find it surprising, but in a way, I don't find it that surprising because a lot of times murder is sort of a one-off thing, right?

Ellery: Yeah. It's a really extreme type of event. I think a lot of people though in their minds equate that extreme event with something that is more likely to reoccur, which simply isn't the case.

Debbi: Interesting. How do you maintain a writing routine and a full-time job? I've always found that really, really a challenge. When do you write?

Ellery: I think in the past, before I worked with Bookouture, I was just accountable to myself so I was independently publishing my own books

and I could make whatever schedule I wanted to. So, if I didn't feel like writing one day or I felt really tired, I would just not write that day. But since I've been working with Bookouture, I found that I have a deadline now and so it's important for me to stay really focused and disciplined. So, I write at least 500 words a day, every day with the exception of days that I have really heavy workload, then I will just try to write something and I keep track of my writing with a little writing app that I use that helps me to set a goal for myself. I'm going to write 80,000 words for this novel at 500 words a day and how long is that going to take me, so that I can make sure to meet my deadlines. And then in terms of when I write, I just kind of fit it in whenever I can. It's usually at the end of the day, when my brain is tired but I think that's one of the biggest things that I've learned about writing and in terms of like writing advice that I would offer to people is that if you want to really be a professional writer and you want to produce novels, you can't wait for inspiration to strike. You just have to simply put your butt in the chair every day. Writing is a lot about discipline, which I don't think I realized when I was back in high school growing up and dreaming of being an author. I never realized how much discipline it required, but it really does. If you want to complete a novel, you have to sit down every day, whether you feel inspired or you don't, and you just have to write

Debbi: Amen to that. It's the God's honest truth, folks.

Ellery: Easier said than done.

Debbi: Easier said than done, too. Where can people find you online?

Ellery: I have a website, ellerykane.com, and all my links for various social media are on there. I'm on Twitter @ElleryKane, and Facebook as well. You can find the links on my website. It's probably the best place to go. And again, that's ellerykane.com.

Debbi: Cool. Does anybody ever joke about Ellery Queen with you? Like maybe there's some connection?

Ellery: Well, there actually is a connection in that Ellery Queen is where I stole my name. It's a pseudonym and Ellery does come from the Ellery Queen mystery magazine, and then the Kane part of the name comes from Erica Kane who was a mainstay on *All My Children*, and I just thought they sounded great together. So it sounds like you had it figured out.

Debbi: Oh my God. That's great. That's fantastic. My husband used to be addicted to that show. He was a firefighter. He's retired now. Firefighters watch soap operas. Really, they do. He got me into it. I'd never watched it before that. That's funny. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?

Ellery: Anything else in terms of writing advice, I think I would say the discipline portion is always really important. And then one thing that I've learned from my job as a forensic psychologist is that you really have to, as a writer, constantly be observing and taking in your environment. And I think that being a psychologist, it's been such a blessing for my writing because every day I interact with different kinds of people and I'm constantly listening for how they speak for dialogue, watching how people interact for my action scenes. It's really been a blessing to have that experience for my day job. But I think for anybody, just the power of observation is one of the best tools that we have as a writer. So, I would say observe and, and be disciplined would be my two points of advice.

Debbi: Yeah. I agree with you there. You'd probably be really good at screenwriting too as a psychologist. The psychology plays a huge part in that.

Ellery: I would love to try that. Yeah, I would love to try that. I did kind of toy with the idea for the first book *Daddy Darkest*, writing a screenplay, but as I was looking into it, I realized, gosh, this is a whole other type of writing and thinking about doing that, plus continuing my novels plus continuing my day job. I'm sure that I'll attempt it eventually when things slow down a little bit.

Debbi: I know the feeling and strangely enough, I started screenwriting almost 10 years ago. I think it's been 10 or 11 years actually.

Ellery: Oh, wow.

Debbi: It's absolutely crazy to do it, but it is fun. I mean, I know other people do it too, so it's like, okay, I'm not the only one.

Ellery: Right.

Debbi: So, if you ever want to, just feel free to give me a shout and I'll lead you to some resources, if you're interested.

Ellery: I sure will. Yeah, I will do that.

Debbi: Cool. Well, I want to thank you for being here today. Thank you so much.

Ellery: Thanks for having me.

Debbi: It was my pleasure, believe me. For everyone out there who's listening, remember the Crime Cafe has two ebooks for sale through all major retailers—the 9-book box set and the short story anthology, as well as I have my own Erica Jensen and Sam McRae mystery series books up, too, at all retailers, and with a big thank you to all my patrons, including Lanny Larcinese. Here's to a great 2022. Our next guest will be Jennifer Dornbush. Until then, take care and happy reading.