

The Crime Cafe with Sandra Woffington

Presented By:



Debbi (00:12): With me today is an author who, along with her Wine Valley Mystery series has written a standalone set in Saudi Arabia and a middle grade fantasy book, both of which have been shortlisted for awards. Her Wine Valley mysteries are also available in a box set that became a number one Amazon bestseller upon its release. That is amazing. I'm pleased to have with me today author Sandra Woffington. Hi, Sandra. How are you doing today?

Sandra (02:14): Hi, Debbi. I'm good. Thank you for inviting me to the Crime Cafe. I'm happy to be here. And I wanted to tell you, I love your intro music. It really sets the mood for crime.

Debbi (02:24): Thank you so much. Yeah, because I happened to find this music. I don't know if it was on the Mac or, or through YouTube, but I happened to find it and I thought, wow, that's just perfect.

Sandra (02:37): It is perfect.

Debbi (02:38): Well, thank you. Thank you very much. And thanks for being with us. At some point I'm going to sit down and figure out how many authors come on here who have traveled to interesting places because I seem to be collecting them. It was after you married that you moved to Saudi Arabia with your husband, correct?

Sandra (03:00): Yeah, he was already there. We actually ... Wild story, but I was on a tour of Europe for a month in, I was 21 and I met him in a disco in Lucerne, Switzerland. He was there on business from Saudi Arabia, even though he was American. And then I went back to California, he went back to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and then we got to know each other through letters and met once in New York, which was about halfway and then decided to marry. And then I moved to Saudi Arabia.

Debbi (03:32): Wow. That must've been quite a change for you. Now that first novel you worked on there. That was your first novel, and it was called *Unveiling*?

Sandra (03:45): Yes. I think what travel does for you at 21, it was, it was almost ironic because one of my favorite books growing up were the stories of One Thousand and One Arabian nights with Aladdin and Sinbad and magic, and also the wit. Outsmarting each other with the characters. And I felt like I landed there. It literally, when I was there, it was during the period of the oil boom around 1979. And it was still camels in the desert. I look at Riyadh today and it's a fast paced city, but it was quickly disappearing. And I was fortunate enough to meet Safeya Binzagr, who is a renown Saudi female artist. She actually has opened a school and a museum in Jiddah, which is on the coast. And she inspired that story because she was ... In her art, she tries to capture what she saw as her traditions and culture quickly disappearing.

Sandra (04:56): I saw that, too. There were beautiful mud, still mud houses, these fantastic mud buildings with balconies. And they were all being torn down and then European visions of beauty and marble, shiny marble were being put up. And when we took her out to see some ruins that she might be interested in painting, she took off her veils and I went, *Whoa*. And she had her niece with her. And it dawned on me that she's an artist and she needs her eyes. And yet she lives in this world where she has to veil. And that inspired my story. My character, Sara, is an artist and she is trying to also capture her traditions. And yet she's also rebelling against them, which I witnessed while I was there, too. That no matter where you go in the world, it changes

over time. And so Saudi Arabia is a case in point. They now have one of the biggest women's universities in the world.

Debbi (06:09): It's fascinating. It's interesting that you chose this type of person as your protagonist, you're writing from a different perspective, a different cultural perspective. You said you did a lot of research on this. How much research did you do before you wrote the book?

Sandra (06:28): I will tell you, a fun thing I learned through the writing of this book is that you can also get lost in research. I spent probably a few years and I read original accounts of travelers. Sir Richard Burton was one. There were several others that actually traveled in Arabia from the 1800s forward. And, of course, living there helped. And I was so driven to write, write the story, and I was terrified at the same time, because as you mentioned to presume that I could write from the perspective and be authentic with a Saudi voice and a story was terrifying, but I really, really wanted to write it. And I remember thinking too, when I landed in Arabia, I wanted people to see the country and the struggles of what I saw because it was, it doesn't exist anymore.

Sandra (07:25): It's already gone. So after I did a lot of research, I wrote it, I gutted it twice and I was prepared to throw it away. I just had to write it maybe for me, and if I couldn't be authentic, but I was very fortunate when I was finished that I looked for a reader and found Lina Karmouta, who was wonderful. She taught at the University of Riyadh for years. She earned her degree in Arabic, her master's degree in Arabic literature. So I could not have found a better reader. And she happened to be in California, not far from me. So she took on the task of reading it. And I was probably never more nervous about any book I'd ever written and she loved it. And that was, and she did help me. She pointed out a few things, but she was actually, she actually said, thank you for writing this. And I was just, whoa, that meant a lot. And it did come in as a semi- or an honorable mention for the Writer's Digest Self-Published Book Awards, which again was just, really made my day, too.

Debbi (08:43): That's fantastic. That's really great. You can't ask for much higher praise than that. Right?

Sandra (08:48): Right, right.

Debbi (08:51): You've also written the Warrior and Watchers Saga Series about seven adolescents. And each of them has some kind of physical challenge. I thought that was interesting. And they have the job of saving the world?

Sandra (09:07): They do. They have to stop the seven ancient gates of evil from opening. And that book was also inspired by a real individual. In teaching, I also teach middle school, at a small private school, Montessori school. I had in my class one year a young man who was high-functioning autistic. And I think it changed all of our worlds that year, including his. He had the first birthday party. My students were so nurturing of trying to, you know, just incorporate him in everything they did. He had his first birthday party, his mom told me with them, the whole class went, but I realized I like to use the word differently-abled and in all of my, you know, no matter. That's what I see in the world. And so not only did I want to create a book that was about diversity, but also one about how everybody needs heroes.

Sandra (10:13): And I don't think there are enough books out there. I've read a lot of literature, too, on the differently-abled types of books. And there are a lot about overcoming difficulties instead of about the uniqueness of individual people. So in this series, which is really fun, each one takes place in a different mythological underworld. The first one is Hades' Tartarus, so it's the Greek mythology. The one I'm just finishing now, *Evil Hears* takes place in the Japanese and Chinese mythological world. And what's fun though, is each of these characters because of their unique abilities, it almost, it ends up being a bit of a superpower that it's something that they can do. For example, Amir is blind and in one scene he saves the day because that's a skill set that proves useful in that particular setting. That series is very dear to my heart.

Debbi (11:19): Well, it just sounds wonderful, because you know, it really emphasizes how, just because you lack one ability doesn't mean you can't make up for it with others.

Sandra (11:31): Exactly. My student, I still the same student. I still tutor him occasionally. And he's now in junior college, so yes, we can. All, we all have, we're all a part of the world. We all have skill sets we can use.

Debbi (11:46): I love that. So what prompted you to write crime novels set in the Wine Valley?

Sandra (11:54): Yeah, so I love murder mysteries for one thing. I've grown up on, you know, all of Agatha Christie. Christie's Poirot, *Midsummer Murders*, you name it. If there's a murder, *Murder, She Wrote*. I just, I've grown up with it and I've always loved genre. And again, it's interesting when you set out as an author, cause that was the genre I decided I wanted to write. I was still nervous. It's one thing to watch a lot of mysteries, but it's another to sit down and write them. So, I do live in Southern California. So Wine Valley is based upon the Temecula region.

Sandra (12:43): So except of course it's all fictional. And it's been a great locale because we have, you know, you have the beach not far away. My two main characters, I really love. They just keep growing with me in every book. We have Detective Max King and Dr. Joy Burton, and they're complete opposites. Max is blond, blue-eyed hunk, and they're both 26 when the book starts. And then, they turn 27, and Dr. Joy Burton, who is a forensic psychologist is the opposite. She's the dark noir character. I like to say that if Wednesday Addams grew up and became a forensic psychologist, she would be Dr. Joy Burton. So in fact, Wednesday Addams is her sort of alter ego, I guess you would say. And the fun thing with this series is that even though they're a standalone murder for each one, which is unique, there is a subplot, which is that Max and Joy discover that they are in fact fraternal twins and they have the same mother, but two separate fathers. There's the fun of research. That really can happen.

Sandra (14:08): And when they were three and a half, their house exploded and they were adopted by two separate law men. David King becomes the chief of police of Wine Valley. And Joy is adopted by Sam Burton, who was an FBI agent and the story starts after. So they grew up apart and then after the fathers die within a few months of one another, Joy finds clues that lead her to Max. And then they start working together, because she's the forensic psychologist and he's a detective. And so she stays in Wine Valley. So, yeah, it's a fun series.

Debbi (14:52): Wow. That's really interesting. So each book is like a different mystery, but there's this overarching storyline between the two protagonists?

Sandra (15:03): Correct. Yes. And that will eventually come to a head and all will be revealed. And then, and then it will go on just more as a, you know, more of a straight up murder mystery from that point forward.

Debbi (15:19): Really interesting. Do you have a plan in terms of how many books you'd like to write for that series?

Sandra (15:25): I just want to keep writing the series. So I did put the two prequels of Max and Joy up on on the blog that you, that you have. And then, I will just keep going. The next one I'm starting on is *Frascati and Fratricide*, so it's always a name of a wine. And then a murder, like *Beau noir and Blood*, something like that, *Merlot and Murder*. But I'll keep going. So the book that I'm working on also right now for that series is another prequel and it's called *Grand Cru and Gangs*. That is, Joy's boyfriend in Wine Valley is Officer Reed Steele. And so it's his prequel that takes place in Los Angeles, where he's on the gang unit in Los Angeles. And that book is going into a box set with 18 other authors that I'm really excited about.

Sandra (16:27): I've always wanted to do this. I met, though not physically met, but met Judith Lucci. Wonderful author. And she's been in box sets before, and I was always intrigued. So a friend and I started an authors group called DEAD authors. That's for dark, edgy, and dangerous. So there's no cozies. And through that group, we have about 80 authors now about 18, wanted to be 17 plus me wanted to be in the box set. And so we've each written a new story. It's going to go into it's called the *Dead Silent Box Set* collection. And I think what's really fun about being able to do this is that it gives readers an opportunity for 99 cents. The whole set is 99 cents to sample a lot of different authors and maybe find a few new ones that they like. And the authors in this group are fantastic.

Sandra (17:30): It's Judith Lucci, Fiona Quinn, Stephen Mora, Dan Petrosini, Michelle Medhat. It's just a fantastic group, but it is a limited edition. So it'll only be, it's out on pre-order now on wide channels. And then it will be 99 cents through the first week of release, January 19th. And then after that, it goes, it'll be just exclusive to Amazon for \$9.99. And then after six months, the whole set disappears, we all get our books back and then we distribute them separately. So it's a fantastic opportunity for readers wanting to sample a lot of authors at one time.

Debbi (18:14): It is. That's fantastic. That's a great idea. Let's see, you mentioned feeling terrified. I know that feeling, because I've been writing about a female Marine and I've never been a Marine. That's like a subculture in itself.

Sandra (18:34): How did you do, too?

Debbi (18:38): I tried where I could to talk to people who were in the military and who had some sort of connection with the Marines as much as possible. I had a really hard time finding anybody to read the stuff. I did manage to get a few people who would come back with a few comments, but it was never like they didn't read the whole story. And I always felt like, I don't know what I'm doing. I have to, you know, take what I've read. I read a lot of books about women in the military or in the Marines, both. It was, it was just extrapolating from what I read and what little I could get at talking to people.

Sandra (19:28): But the good news is you're doing it anyway. I think that's what inspires us. We get that story. And you do tell it, you do tell it about the female Marine, which is awesome. I find

with the murder mystery series, I'm always learning new things. I start with character and building characters, but you know, one character is a snake milker. I didn't know anything about that, but you go research and then you fill in the gaps somehow trying to make it as real as possible.

Debbi (20:05): Exactly. I mean, at some point kind of human nature kicks in and you kind of understand what they might do in a situation. That kind of thing.

Sandra (20:14): Exactly. I think that's where the research really pays off or, or reading, as you said about an actual account that does pay off. That's why I start with character in my stories until that character becomes real to me, then I don't feel like I, I can write them. I know their dialogue. For example, Max and Joy. They've evolved. So even though they weren't raised together, they sometimes joke almost like they were children because they didn't have that time together. And so they fall into this, you know, thing with puns going back and forth. And then at other times, you know, they're very opposite, but you're always learning more about each character as you go along, too. I mean, I didn't know anything about forensic psychology either, and she's a forensic psychologist. So the fun thing I have been able to do is with each book, she teaches one night a week, as well. And so I'll try to build in a scene where she gives a lecture and it always ties into the case. You know, might be one time about serial killers or it might be about interrogation techniques or something that, something that ties in.

Debbi (21:32): Mm. Yeah. Yeah. And how do you push past that feeling of terror though? What helps you with that?

Sandra (21:44): I think just jumping in and writing it. Particularly, I can go back to *Unveiling*. As I said, I gutted it twice. But I learned a lot. One thing was the research. The next thing is I should have spent probably more time on character on the specific character that would have helped. So that helps me push pass it. When I feel like I really know who this character is, I feel that I can write them. I've gotten better with research, too, where I was saying I got lost in it before. And I spent so much time on research and I realized at one point, I think I was using research as an escape because I can go research more instead of writing the story. But as you know, at some point you have to sit down and you need to, if you're going to do it, you're going to, you have to write the story. And finally to myself, I said, you need to either do this or stop talking about it. And so I sat down and I wrote it, and I gutted it and then I rewrote it and then I gutted it. But now I don't waste the time because one thing I learned in that is the character analysis portion. You still learn things as you go. And then the other thing I've learned is research. Research before I write a book, which helps. If it's *Pinot Noir and Poison*, for example, I researched poisons so that I knew what was going to be involved in the storyline and that helped. But now what I call it, getting it, getting in, finding what I need and getting out, I don't get lost in the research. I'll go find what I need and say, Oh yeah, that's it. That's perfect. And some times you find those lovely kernels that you can't wait to put in a book that are surprises for the reader as well. And then you move forward and you just keep writing. I try to write 3,000-5,000 words as a goal, for each day of my writing days. And so that, that just helps me keep going forward. I was fortunate enough, long time ago, I got into a class taught by Saul Stein. It was a private little group. And I always remember, he said, you have to get to the end. He said, then you can start rewriting, but you have to get to the end of the story and just write it.

Debbi (24:15): Yeah. You just have to start. That's what I always tell people. It's like, just start no matter how you start, even if it's just writing a journal, just start.

Sandra (24:26): Right. And just turn off the editing side of the brain and just let it flow. Just let the characters talk capture the scenes they're in. I always love it when characters surprise me because they do something in a scene I hadn't planned. That is just fun, but they do, they take off on their own and that's when it becomes very real.

Debbi (24:49): Very true. Very, very true. You took some really amazing photos, I thought, of the camel races in Saudi Ever think of selling stock photography, just out of curiosity.

Sandra (25:03): I hadn't yeah, I don't, I do have a few pictures from that time. Yeah, I mean, I hadn't, that's an interesting idea. I could put a few up. Yes, I have another one I took. We used to, I learned how to dive in the Red Sea, which was fabulous. And we would go out at night, night diving which was just kind of scary. And I did once see in my flashlight beam a blacktip reef shark. So that was a fun experience.

Debbi (25:40): Wow. Oh, my gosh.

Sandra (25:43): Yeah. I've got a picture of that guy.

Debbi (25:47): It sounds like you've done some fantastic traveling. That would make an interesting subject for a book. Have you thought about that?

Sandra (25:56): You know, I think the travel does come back in all of the books. It does come back for sure. In the Warriors Watchers Saga Series. Even though I think the one it doesn't take place in is probably Wine Valley. That one, I'm in a specific locale, but with teaching every year. One thing I like that my school has always done is to try to plan a year-end trip for the children. This year was different. We didn't do it, but they fundraise all year long because we want them to be empowered. We want, we don't want to hand them things. We want them to be empowered to learn that the world is, they can go anywhere. They can go see the world and we encourage that. So it's one thing to teach the students about the rainforest and then to take them on a trip to Costa Rica where they're zip-lining through the canopy and learning about it firsthand. So, yeah, travel. I haven't thought about travel writing per se, but I do find that exotic locales do come into the Warriors and Watchers Saga Series, and different diverse cultures as well. One book will take place in India, for example. So the books move around.

Debbi (27:25): That's fantastic. Now I want to read them.

Sandra (27:29): Yeah, I didn't travel this year, but I still love to travel. There are a couple of places I'd like to still see in the world.

Debbi (27:36): Oh, me too. For sure. Let's see. And in addition to the project you have going in terms of the ... is it the box set?

Sandra (27:48): Yes. The box set.

Debbi (27:49): What are you working on now?

Sandra (27:53): I am working on just finishing the editing for *Evil Hears*, which is the second book in the mythological fantasy series. And then I have already outlined and done my character

studies for *Frascati and Fratricide*, which will be book number 11 in Wine Valley Mystery Series. Yeah. They just, I can't believe it already. It seems like every time I turn around, I've got to get a few more titles and book covers.

Debbi (28:22): Oh my gosh. Wow. Well, you're prolific. That's great.

Sandra (28:28): Working on it.

Debbi (28:31): That's fantastic. That's a good thing. Is there anything else you'd like to say before we finish up?

Sandra (28:38): Oh no, I can't think of anything. I just, again, want to say thank you for providing this show. I am a fan of the Mystery Cafe or the Crime Cafe, and I've been listening myself to all the different authors and I learn a lot. I think that's one thing that as an author, we're always learning too, from other authors and people.

Debbi (29:07): I totally am with you there. Totally. I've learned so much just from doing this show, seriously. But I really appreciate your being here today. Sandra, thanks so much. Don't forget everyone that Sandra has a book giveaway, three Kindle copies of Books One through Four of the Wine Valley Mysteries in boxed sets. So there you go. The winner will be selected on December 20th. So check my guest blog post, check her guest blog post on my blog for details. And if you're a fan of the podcast, please consider leaving a review and checking out our perks on Patreon for supporters. Just go to my website, debbimack.com for the details. Thank you so much for your time and attention. And in two weeks, our guest will be Dana Haynes. Until then stay safe and happy reading.