

# The Crime Cafe with Sherry Knowlton

Presented By:



Debbi (00:54): Hi everyone. My guest today is the award-winning author of the Alexa Williams suspense novels, including *Dead of Autumn*, *Dead of Spring*, and *Dead on the Delta*. A lot of environmental stuff mixed in there. I love that. A retired executive in the government and health insurance industry, she draws on her professional background and her extensive travels for story material. Her most recent publication is a travel memoir called *Beyond the Sunset*. It's my pleasure to introduce my guest today, Sherry Knowlton. Hi, Sherry. How are you doing today?

Sherry (01:36): Pretty good. Thank you so much for having me on the podcast.

Debbi (01:41): Well, I'm very happy to have you here, believe me. It seems like forever ago I read *Dead on the Delta* <laugh>, and I still remember the descriptions of the safari your protagonist went on. I was impressed with how you created a story that dealt with Alexa's personal relationships as well as the political, economic and environmental issues associated with elephant poaching and other bad things. Can you tell us about the series and what inspired you to write it?

Sherry (02:18): Okay. <laugh>, the series as a whole <laugh> is called the Alexa Williams Suspense Series. And there are actually five novels so far.

Debbi (02:33): Ah.

Sherry (02:37): *Dead on the Delta* is a little bit unique, which we can talk about in a minute. But the first four are all seasons, as you said, some of them in the titles *Dead of Autumn*, *Summer*, *Spring*, and *Winter*. And those are all based in this local area where I live, which is southeastern Pennsylvania. Excuse me, I've got a bit of a frog in my throat. And I was inspired actually because I wanted to write about an actual incident that had occurred in the local area where the dead body of a young woman was found. And for years, nobody could identify who she was. And that always sort of touched a chord. And so it inspired me to write. And then each of my subsequent novels does have a theme, whether it's women's issues, environmental issues, Those are the, probably the two, the two big ones.

(03:46): When I wrote *Dead on the Delta*, I had run out of seasons <laugh>. So, which of course I didn't think when I started with, you know, maybe I should have done something with more than four. So after I'd exhausted the seasons, I had to come up with both a new title and a new premise. And so I decided to send my protagonist Alexa Williams to Africa, to Botswana specifically to help her boyfriend who has been in all of the books, a lion researcher. So that it wasn't too farfetched to suddenly pop her off to Africa. And I was inspired to write *Dead on the Delta* primarily because of, first of all, I'm a big wildlife conservationist. And second of all, my husband and I have traveled to Africa on safari multiple times and simply love Botswana. And so I wanted to write about an issue that was near and dear to my heart and a place that I love to visit.

Debbi (05:06): That's awesome. I would love to go there. I mean, there's so, there are so many places I would love to travel. Botswana is one of them. Did you have to do a lot of research into the politics and so forth when you were writing that novel in particular?

Sherry (05:25): Yeah, with *Dead on the*, I mean, all of my novels take some research even though I often write about topics that I'm familiar with and, you know, the idea of writing a novel about Botswana seemed very good. And then when I started to sit down and really get into the details,

I thought, Okay, you know, going to Botswana for a couple of weeks here and there over the years isn't quite being expert on the situation. So I really had to research the politics which in the middle of my writing ended up changing a little bit with a new election. I had to learn really more of the specifics of elephant poaching. And then I also realized that although the idea of being a lion researcher sounded really cool to me, I didn't really know what they did on a day-to-day basis other than like, good stuff about lions. So yes, I did have to do a lot of research and I decided, and this was partly selfish, but my husband and I decided to go to Botswana again. And we actually spent a month there at doing research for the book, both on safari and then talking to people in the capital city there, learning about the politics and so forth and the government.

Debbi (07:04): That's fascinating that, that is like a once in a lifetime experience, I would think. Yeah, my gosh. Do you have plans to write more Alexa stories now that you're out of seasons? <Laugh> Hey, at least you didn't follow the alphabet, like somebody I can name.

Sherry (07:23): Yeah. Somebody, Yeah, somebody. Yes, I do actually, I'm working now on another Alexa book. I'd say I'm in the very early stages because I did take a detour sort of during the pandemic and write a travel memoir, two volumes. And so now I'm back into the Alexa again, getting my head back into that one. And although I, you know, I can't talk about all the specifics. I will say that she's back home in southeast, south central Pennsylvania for this one.

Debbi (08:09): Uh-Huh. And you're in south central Pennsylvania?

Sherry (08:14): I am, yes.

Debbi (08:15): Is it close to any major city?

Sherry (08:19): Well Harrisburg is the state capital, although when most people think of Pennsylvania, I believe they either think of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh which, you know, Philadelphia's on the east of the state, Pittsburgh on is on the west. Harrisburg is sort of on the southern part of the state in the middle. We are known around here. I live near a city, a small town really more than a city, called Carlisle, but we're near the Gettysburg Battlefield. People know where that is a lot of times. The Carlisle Army War College is here for the whole country. There's lots of people who go to car shows that happen in Carlisle. It's, it's funny, I'll be in California and somebody will say, Oh, yeah, I've been to the car show in Carlisle <laugh>. So it's a charming little area, and it's much more rural than I think people who don't live in Pennsylvania would think. Pennsylvania, except for Philadelphia and Pittsburgh are very [inaudible] and farmland.

Debbi (09:36): Yes, yes, very much. It's a very rural state, actually. And in many ways, Maryland is also a very rural state in certain parts.

Sherry (09:47): Exactly.

Debbi (09:48): Even though there's a lot that's been urbanized over the years. Let's see. Now your travel memoir, this is your first nonfiction book, correct?

Sherry (10:03): It is, yes.

Debbi (10:06): And it must have been a very different experience writing it.

Sherry (10:11): And it was I mean, it was a lot of fun in a way because it gave me a chance to sort of remember a lot of, probably a 50 year span, and it being that I wrote it during the pandemic, we couldn't travel anywhere, so it was a sort of a way to re-travel in my mind. But it took me a while to figure out the format that I wanted to do for years. People have been telling me that when either Mike, my husband, or I, you know, tell some little anecdote about our travels, they say, Oh, you should write a book about this and <laugh>. And so that's sort of easier said than done, right? Yeah. And I wanted it to be a memoir of our travels, but I also didn't wanna be a, you know, like a travel book, like the best place to go in Las Vegas or you know, to be all about my life, just about, you know, my inner, inner thoughts and all of that.

(11:27): So I did sort of a hybrid where I started the book with several chapters about how I got into traveling, how I think reading, because I've been a big reader all my life, really influenced my desire to travel. And then the rest of the book is a series of essays about different topics. Like one topic is transportation, and I talk about all of the interesting and sometimes really crazy types of transportation we've been on around the world. Everything from tuk-tuks to elephants as a way of transportation. Another chapter is encounters with wildlife. So, you know, I take different topics and then I even work in a chapter or two of tips for travelers because we've gone on so many different types of trips over the years that I, we have some standard things we do that I thought I'd share with readers.

Debbi (12:33): That's excellent. That's really excellent. Can you share some of those tips with us now?

Sherry (12:41): Ah.

Debbi (12:41): Especially now in with the pandemic and so forth, <laugh>, what, what are your thoughts on traveling right now?

Sherry (12:47): Well, I think that it's time that you can go for it. But I do think you have to still be careful. And my husband and I this summer went to Brazil to a place called the Pantanal, which is a remote wetland area where we saw jaguars, that was our whole sort of focus. We wanted to see jaguars in the wild. And then we also went on an Amazon River cruise on a small boat as well in Peru. And we went with very small tour groups, like 10, 12 people. And everybody was pre-screened for COVID. We had tests, in one case a nurse actually tested us before we could get on the boat, but even so, we got a message after we left the boat, the Amazon boat that one of our party came down with COVID when she got home.

(14:02): So I think like everywhere these days you are taking your chances, but in both of these cases, we felt a little safer because they required us to be fully vaccinated and boosted and all of that. You know, the scary, scariest part was flying. Although the airlines that we used at that time, everybody was still wearing masks. So that raised our comfort level. You know, I think it's a matter of personal preference, but we are planning a trip next summer as well, so, you know, we'll see how it goes. We'll see how it goes.

Debbi (14:50): Oh, fantastic. I think it's fantastic that you've been able to travel so much and spend so much time in one place and really get to know it. That's amazing. Let's see. What authors have most inspired your writing, and who do you enjoy reading?

Sherry (15:10): Oh, wow. I was an English major, so I've read lots and lots of the classics. And, you know, I'd have to say that all of those have inspired me. One, some of my favorites when I was in school were Ernest Hemingway who I know has fallen out of favor a bit. But and also I did an independent studies on DH Lawrence, who also is maybe not as well regarded these days, but somewhere along the line, after I read all those weighty classics, I really started to drift into suspense and thrillers. And so when I read today you know, mostly for pleasure I will try to read a wide range, and it's not all suspense and thrillers, but my all time favorite and I'm going back in time again here is John D. MacDonald. He wrote the Travis McGee series, and I think he was like ahead of his time.

(16:33): Travis was like a white knight who captured you know, always captured the bad guys and saved the damsel in distress. But, you know, he was sort of an environmentalist before there was such a word as environmentalist. And so I really like that about him. Some of the contemporary authors I always try to read. Lee Childs is one. I like Greg Iles. I love Greg Iles. He wrote this trilogy about the south that involves history and threads of racism and, you know, family dynasties. And I think he's a really good author, too.

Debbi (17:21): Hmm. Well, those are all great choices. Yeah, John McDonald. Yeah, he sure was an environmentalist ahead of his time, wasn't he?

Sherry (17:31): Yeah. Uh-huh.

Debbi (17:32): Boy. how would you describe your mystery to somebody who isn't familiar with your work? Is it kind of like cozy? Is it more adventure-mystery? How would you describe it? Thriller?

Sherry (17:46): I would say you know, often I say mystery slash suspense. They're definitely not cozy. So people do get killed not so much on the page, but there's a lot of danger and suspense. The seasons novels also have a historical story that parallels the contemporary story and intersects, maybe that's why I like Greg Iles because of the, you know, I like the way history just seems to keep repeating itself in some ways. But it's not sure, not flat out thriller either. So I'd say suspense. Sometimes. I say it's Nancy Drew for grownups.

Debbi (18:42): <Laugh> Cool. And better written <laugh>. I saw a Nancy Drew recently, and was just struck by how wooden the, the writing was, frankly, <laugh>.

Sherry (18:53): Well, you know, I was shocked when I grew up and found out that what's ... Carolyn Keene was the author, right? She wasn't like a real person. I mean, she was a series of real people. And it was, I was so disappointed when I found that out.

Debbi (19:12): I know the feeling. Yeah. I, I grew up on those books too, and had the same sort of feeling. It's like, what do you mean she doesn't exist? Huh? <laugh> these books are proof <laugh>.

Sherry (19:26): Exactly. Exactly.

Debbi ([19:29](#)): Let's see. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us before we finish up?

Sherry ([19:36](#)): Oh, well I guess.

Debbi ([19:40](#)): Any new developments with the series that you can share?

Sherry ([19:44](#)): Well I, I think that the main thing is people keep asking, Well, when's the next Alexa book coming out? And, you know, I love that people are engaged enough that they actually are, you know, wanting the next one to come out. And I have to disappoint them a little when I say I'm just starting this next one. But it is bringing her back to some of the familiar territory, and I expect to even revisit some themes and situations from the first book. So I think it will all come together and be of interest. But as always, I'll try to work in some women's issues and environmental themes as well.

Debbi ([20:35](#)): That's great. I mean, I'm always impressed when people bring meaty topics to their their mystery or suspense writing. I mean, it's more than just a bunch of bodies, there are real issues here <laugh>.

Sherry ([20:49](#)): Yeah. And, you know, and I think that's like part of the reason that I like to write. I guess the other thing I would say though is that it's a balancing act because you don't want to have them a read or pick up a book who, and think it's a suspense novel and find out that in fact, they're getting like a sermon on whatever. And so it, I, I like to keep people on the edge of their seat and, but have the theme be one that hopefully I'm conveying a message.

Debbi ([21:29](#)): And what better way to do it,

Sherry ([21:31](#)): <Laugh>. Exactly. And, and the only other thing I would mention is, since we did talk a little bit about my travel book, is that my publisher Sunbury Press decided that it really should be broken into two volumes. Oh, because it contains a lot of photos that my husband and I took on our travels around the world. And so the first volume is out now, it's called *Beyond the Sunset: Adventures Outside My Comfort Zone*, the second volume which is also *Beyond the Sunset*, but it's *Volume Two: Expanding My Horizons* that will come out in December. So if people are interested, give them a look.

Debbi ([22:20](#)): That's interesting. How are they how are the two parts different?

Sherry ([22:26](#)): It's really I guess a continuation of ... the second is a continuation of the first but it deals with different topics each, you know, different sets of essays. And maybe I'd say that Volume Two, I turn a little bit, I start the first one by, you know, talking more about my initial journey into traveling. The last part of Volume Two talks a little bit about how I think, as a person having benefited so much from traveling. So I turn inward a little bit more, and also talk about the way that traveling, as you said earlier in the session, that it really has influenced my writing as well.

Debbi ([23:23](#)): Very good. Well, I love the sound of that. I mean, it just sounds great. A travel memoir in two parts. So, I wanna thank you so much for being here again. It was really great talking to you.

Sherry ([23:39](#)): Oh, and I really appreciate it. So thank you so much.

Debbi ([23:43](#)): Sure thing. I hope that everybody out there also enjoyed listening to this interview. If you did, please leave a review where you listen to podcasts and consider becoming a patron of the show. I still have to start putting up revised chapters for my latest novel on Patreon, and I hope to get to that real, real soon. Honest, I've been putting up chapters of my other work there. In any case we offer bonus episodes and copies of all the transcripts, which I'm compiling seasoned by season as I go. So check out our Patreon page. Our next episode in two weeks will feature my guest, Schuyler Randall. In the meantime, take care and happy reading.