

The Crime Cafe with Saralyn Richard

Presented By:



Debbi: Hi everyone. Today I have a return guest. I get a few of those now and then. My guest today is the author of the Detective Parrott Mystery series. The latest book in that series is *Crystal Blue Murder*. I almost wanted to say "Crystal Blue Persuasion". Yeah, I'm old <laugh>. Anyway, *Crystal Blue Murder* was selected as December Read by Women Writers Women's Books. Her second book in that series, *A Palette for Love and Murder* won the Killer Nashville Silver Falcion Reader's Choice Award in 2021. She's also written books outside the series. Standalones that have either been shortlisted or made the finals in various award contests. I'm pleased to have with me Saralyn Richard. Hi, Saralyn. Glad to have you here today.

Saralyn: Thank you so much for having me. I'm just thrilled to be on.

Debbi: Excellent. Good. I'm thrilled to have you here. So tell me was your title inspired by *Breaking Bad*?

Saralyn: No, but "Crystal Blue Persuasion" was running through my mind, an earworm during the whole time I was writing the book.

Debbi: Oh my gosh, wow. Because I noticed that the story starts off with a bang in terms of the explosion of a meth lab, I think it is. So what was it that inspired you to write this story?

Saralyn: Well, my series, my Detective Parrott series that started with *Murder in the One Percent* is set in Brandywine Valley, Pennsylvania, and that is a very rural, peaceful, serene, wealthy area west of Philadelphia. And there are a lot of parties that go on there. There are horse activities, equestrian activities. There are artists in the community. You're probably familiar with Andrew Wyeth and his family.

They live in Brandywine Valley and paint there. There are numerous things to do there, and there're just lots of stories waiting to be told. And the first book, *Murder in the One Percent* takes place with the equestrian crowd at a party. The second book, *A Palette for Love and Murder*, takes place with the artist community. And this third book takes place, starts off with the burning of a bank barn, and bank barns are prolific throughout Brandywine Valley and really throughout New England. They are, they're structures that are very, very interesting because they were built for functionality into a bank of dirt. It has nothing to do with the money bank. They were built into a bank of dirt so that it's a bi-level barn and it's protective of the animals that might live there. In cold wintertime, it's also convenient to store grain because you can get to the hayloft from the other side so that it's on the first floor. And those structures, because they're so old, have been in disrepair. And so people have societies out in the country trying to preserve the history of this country flavor have taken about renovating them and making them, preserving them for history, for historic purposes. And I've been on tours of these barns and they're just remarkable. They're just fabulous. Some people have turned them into houses and they're like 40,000 square foot houses with tall ceilings, really super high ceilings. You can get a 40 foot Christmas tree in your house.

So anyway, those exist in Brandywine Valley and the dark side of Brandywine Valley is because it's so isolated and remote, it might be a really great place to have a meth lab because people

aren't really checking, it's sort of live and let live, and no one would really suspect that there could be a meth lab in one of these bank barns. So that's what gave me the idea for the story. And Detective Parrott is on it from the call that he gets in the middle of the night to come to the bank barn where there's a fire and he goes through all the toxic work to extinguish that fire with the fire department and look for clues and they find a body in that barn. So that's how the book starts.

Debbi: Well, that's fascinating. I'd never even heard of bank barns before this. So they sound like remarkable structures.

Saralyn: They are. I have a book here. There are many, many books that have been written about bank barns that I did research using these books and authors, but I've also been on tours of bank barns and they're just really remarkable. So it's good. I love to read books where you learn something new and I like to write books where I'm able to convey something new, also.

Debbi: I was going to say, this is definitely a book where you learn something new. Let's see. You also, I noticed in reviews of your work that people will remark on how great your characters are, how much they love them. What is it that you do to create characters that are so relatable that people want to follow them?

Saralyn: I have this philosophy about people that there's no one who's entirely bad and there's no one who's entirely good. And I've seen this throughout my years as an educator. Even the worst acting child in a school has some redeeming qualities, has some motivation that makes him act out something that can be addressed. And so I try to carry that over in my writing, and I think that that's one factor. And the other is that my characters really come to me first. My story revolves around the characters instead of the other way around. And before I even have a plot at all in mind, I have interesting people that are ready to populate the story, and I talk to them, I listen to them and they, they're with me the whole time that I'm writing. And then afterwards too, I never lose my characters. They're always, they're like my friends, imaginary friends, but friends.

Debbi: I can relate with that. Yeah, I understand. Well, that and the song, "Crystal Blue Persuasion" <laugh>. What an earworm. Let's see. You must have done a lot of research for this too, I assume.

Saralyn: I didn't know too much about that. And I didn't know that much about the procedures for containing it and how dangerous it is. And there's some other things that happen in this book also that required a lot of research and really all of my books, with the exception of the one that takes place in an inner city school because I really lived that life myself for a lot of years. That one did not require a lot of research, but all the rest of them really do. And research is one of my favorite parts about writing a book because I love meeting people. I love talking to people. I love learning new things, and I love the interactive part of research, and I want my books to be authentic. If they're not, someone is going to call you on every little detail that is inauthentic. And so I really spend the time doing the research ahead of time so that I know that or I'm confident that my stories will read true.

Debbi: I have a funny feeling that's the constant worry of every fiction writer out there, <laugh>, that somehow we're going to get the details wrong. Let's see. What are you working on now?

Saralyn: Actually, I'm working on the next Detective Parrott book, which is an anomaly for me because what I usually do is write a Parrott book and a standalone, a Parrott book and a standalone, because I don't want to burn out Parrott and I don't want to burn out myself on writing these same characters, the same setting and so on. But the reason that I broke that pattern this time is that I have a fantastic story, and the story just ripped me, the characters in the story. And I thought, I can't wait to do this one. I have to do this one now. So I don't have a title for it yet. I'm just about maybe one-fourth of the way through reading, through writing it, the first draft. But it's an incredible story and I'm very excited about it.

Debbi: Some stories just sort of beg to be told.

Saralyn: Mm-hmm.

Debbi: They sit there in your head, begging to be told <laugh>.

Saralyn: Right.

Debbi: Let's see. And what about Parrott's wife? I remember she was pretty significant in the previous book, *A Palette for Love and Murder*. So does she play a part in this story?

Saralyn: She plays a part in every story now because in the very first book, they weren't married yet. She was just his fiancee and she was in Afghanistan doing a tour of duty with the Navy. So she's back and they're married, and of course, they're not completely happily ever after because in fiction, there's no such thing as completely happily ever after. But she has some issues, and those issues continue to be a part of the plots. Parrott's life has this way of intertwining with his cases. It is subtle, in a lot of the cases, it's just a subtle intertwining, but somehow what's going on at home affects what's going on at work and the other way around. So Tanya is an integral part of that because she is Parrott's soulmate, and sometimes they disagree and sometimes they have big decisions to make, and those things can impact his work and his work can impact those decisions.

Debbi: Yeah. Yeah. So the last time we spoke, you were working on one of your standalones, I believe. Can you talk about your standalones a little bit?

Sarylyn: Sure. I have two of them. One is called *A Murder of Principal*, and that is the one that I mentioned before that takes place in an urban high school. And it's what it says, it's a murder of principal, and there's a new principal that comes to the school, and he's kind of a maverick and not very popular with most people because he's extremely student-centered. And there are a lot of people that just don't like him. And he, very soon after he starts the job, he's killed and the assistant principal has to step up and help the police solve the case. So that's basically the

premise for *A Murder of Principal*, which is a really fun book. And the most amazing thing about that to me is I have worked in probably 50 different high schools in this country as a teacher, an administrator, or a school improvement consultant.

And I have lots and lots of friends and readers who have also worked in schools. And when this book came out, I kept getting from everybody, you wrote about my school. You wrote, this is exactly my school. And some of them were schools that I had worked in and some of them weren't. But what that told me was that schools are kind of universal places and the experiences, the things that go on in school, especially behind the scenes, is pretty universal. So that was a lot of fun. And that book came out last year, or, well, two years ago. And then last year this book came out, *Bad Blood Sisters*, and I think this is the one I was working on when we talked last. And I've always wanted to write a book that's set in my hometown, which is Galveston, Texas. So *Bad Blood Sisters* is my answer to that.

And so it's my heart for that. And one of the things that's unusual about this book is that the entire book is written from a single person's point of view. And I had never done that before. So it was a challenge. If you're a writer, you understand that challenge because your character has to be in every single scene, and nothing can be revealed unless it's through her eyes, her ears, things people say in front of her. But it's a delicate thing when you're writing from a single point of view. But the benefit of that is that it makes the book very intense and very personal. So even as I was writing the book, I was so in sync with this character that I felt she was, I was she, and she was me. And so when something bad happened to her, that bad thing happened to me also. And that intensity for me as a writer, I think passes on to the reader. And so it was a lot of fun to write that book too. And it came out last year, both *Bad Blood Sisters* and *Crystal Blue Murder* came out in 2022.

Debbi: Well done.

Saralyn: Thank you.

Debbi: Your mention of Galveston now has me, with "Galveston", "Galveston" running through my head, along with "Crystal Blue Persuasion". Oh boy. This is turning into old time rock and roll.

Saralyn: One's in one ear and one's in the other.

Debbi: Yes. Let's see. When you finish a book, do you launch right into writing the next book, or do you kind of wait?

Saralyn: I usually just launch right into the next book. And I will say probably the reason for that is I came to this writing career after my career in education. I wanted to write from the time I was a little girl, and I had, this was a dream deferred for me. And I finally have dedicated time, place, attitude, tools, talent, research, all the things that I need, I finally have. I have two critique groups. I have lots of people who help me as beta readers, and so I don't want to waste any time with all of those things surrounding me. I want to, it's not that I'm in a mad dash to produce

books, and I don't have a pressured schedule for it, but I also don't want to waste a year or six months or even three months. I don't want to waste time when I have lots and lots of stories to tell. I hope I'll have time to write them all.

Debbi: I completely appreciate that thought. Not wasting time, <laugh> completely. Let's see. What do you do when you're not writing? What are your favorite pastimes?

Saralyn: Well, one of them is reading, and I had a tight last year. In addition to putting out both *Bad Blood Sisters* and *Crystal Blue Murder*, I also reissued *Murder in the One Percent* and *A Palette for Love and Murder*. So I really put out four books in one year, and that was so crazy busy, just unbelievably busy that I didn't have time to read. And I think I went almost a whole year without reading. Maybe I read three or four books in the whole year because I was so busy doing my own writing. And I feel that I suffered from that. I feel that my life is not complete without a book to read. So that is, if I had to say what my most important hobby is, it's reading because it fills up my soul, it fills up my head, my heart, and my soul.

But I also have some activities that I do. I have two dogs, and one is an old English sheep dog. And so a lot of my leisure time is taken up with certain things that have to do with my dogs. I live on a beach and I love the beach, so I try to spend some time there. I like to garden, I like to cook. I like to play bridge and mahjong and word games and just all kinds of games. I try to spend as much time as I can with family. And sometimes we can't do that in person, but we do it on FaceTime, so we're always doing creative kinds of FaceTimes. We sometimes bake together and we sometimes play cards together over FaceTime. We've become very creative during the time of COVID.

Debbi: That's a great idea.

Saralyn: Yeah, we play games and we just do a lot of things on FaceTime.

Debbi: That's fantastic. Has your marketing changed much now that the pandemic is sort of, I don't know, it has not disappeared, but it seems to, people are trying to get together more now.

Saralyn: I'm going out more than I did. *A Palette for Love and Murder* came out right as the lockdown started, so I had to cancel all of my in-person events, and people were in shock over COVID, so nobody was thinking about a book. So then we started using Zoom and having lots of virtual meetings. And I still do a lot of virtual activities, but I have started doing more in-person events, and I had one yesterday and I have one next week. And so my calendar's starting to resemble the kind of activity that it used to have before COVID. And I would say I still have to be careful because some of my friends, I just lost a friend to COVID last week. So I think we all still need to be careful.

Debbi: Sorry to hear about your friend. Yeah, we do have to be careful, unfortunately. Do you have any tips for people who are interested in writing for a living? Anything that you haven't mentioned before on the show before this?

Saralyn: I teach creative writing, so I have lots and lots of tips for writers. And I can't remember what I mentioned on the show before, but I'll share this one tip that I got from Erik Larson, so I'll pay it forward. As you probably know, he writes very creative nonfiction books. And my creative writing class was studying nonfiction. And so I contacted him and I said, what advice would you give them? And he gave me some really great advice that you should always stop in the middle.

And I said, do you mean in the middle of a sentence? Do you mean in the middle of a paragraph? Do you mean in the middle of a scene? Do you mean in the middle of a chapter? And he said, yes, <laugh>, all of those just in the middle of something. Stop writing when you're in the middle. Don't polish off your chapter and then go to bed, end your session while you're still in the middle, because when you start up the next day or your next writing session, it's going to be a smoother and easier hitting the ground running because you know where you're going, you know where you were. You can just pick right up and get started. And I think that's really great advice, and I think it saved me a lot of time because when you do finish a chapter, there's a certain amount of, "Where am I going next?" And you don't have that anymore if you stop in the middle.

Debbi: Yes, I have actually heard that from another author. I think it might have been Robert Crais, but I'm not sure. But yeah, when you stop in the middle, you have that momentum going for you when you go in, so, yeah. Very cool. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?

Saralyn: I can't believe we've gone so that this is so fast.

Debbi: Yes, I know. <laugh>

Saralyn: It's such a pleasure to talk with you, Debbi. You always have such great questions and you're a fabulous author yourself.

Debbi: Well, thank you. <laugh>

Saralyn: Why don't we add something about your writing here?

Debbi: Who, me? Well, let's see. Gosh, I'm actually working on a short piece that features Sam McRae, who is my protagonist from my four-book series. It's kind of like a break from Erica Jensen because Erica's pretty intense.

She's a veteran and she has PTSD and all these problems. So I thought, wouldn't it be nice to go back and do some legal stuff? So I'm working on that. Plus I've just come up with an idea for the third Erica book, and it's kind of real fresh in my mind and I'm like scribbling things down. And it's at that phase, kind of like.

Saralyn: It's a fun phase.

Debbi: Where you draw out those little possible diagrams of people who could be involved and what they could be doing and thinking. Yeah, it's an exciting phase. Yeah, so there's that. So, I'm hoping to get the shorter work out there maybe on what do you call it, Substack. I've been kind of exploring Substack and it's interesting. It's an interesting place because people with Pulitzer Prizes are writing there. Just amazing to me what's going on there. Anyway, <laugh>, having said that I just want to thank you for being here. Really, thanks for your time and for answering questions and just spending time with us and being able to get to know you and your work.

Saralyn: Well, thank you so much. I look forward to more conversation.

Debbi: I hope so. Yeah, grab a spot while you can. I'm booked out till 2025 if you can believe that. I cannot believe this. <laugh> It's amazing. I don't know. But anyway <laugh>.

Saralyn: It's great.

Debbi: Thanks. Yeah, so thanks again for being here. And with that, I will just say to everybody, please remember to leave a review if you enjoyed this episode. And also secondly, check us out on Patreon. We have a Patreon page and there are perks for people who support the podcast. So with that, I will just say in two weeks we will have our next guest who is Lee Anne Post, who I believe is actually four authors writing under one name. I don't know how we are going to do this particular interview. I don't know if we're going to have a four-way five-way, less than four. It's going to be very interesting to see what we do.

Saralyn: I know Lee Anne Post, and I've read *Thoughts and Prayers*, their book.

Debbi: Yeah, I'm looking forward to talking about that. Yeah. So in any case thank you all for listening and I will see you in two weeks. And in the meantime, take care and happy reading.