

The Crime Cafe with Lorie Lewis Ham

Presented By:



Debbi: Hi. Our guest today had her first song and poem published when she was 13, so she got a real early start. Since then, she's published many articles, short stories and poems, six mystery novels, and written for a local newspaper. Those are still around, you know, and it's a great thing. And furthermore, she has been for 13 years, editor-in-chief and publisher of *Kings River Life Magazine*, and she produces Mysteryrat's Maze Podcast, where you can hear an excerpt from her latest book, *One of Us*, a story that takes place in Fresno, California, a place near and dear to my own heart. It is my great pleasure to introduce my guest, Lorie Lewis Ham. Hi, Lorie. How are you doing today?

Lorie: Hi. Okay. Thank you for having me. I've been fighting some allergies this week. If you remember Fresno about this time of year, there's blossoms everywhere.

Debbi: Yeah. Oh my gosh. Agriculture all over the place as I recall.

Lorie: Yes, definitely.

Debbi: Wow. Yeah, because I moved there from New York, so it was quite a change.

Lorie: Oh, wow. Yeah, that would be.

Debbi: It was. It was almost like heaven by comparison. Isn't that funny to say about Fresno? I don't know.

Lorie: It is.

Debbi: It's very. So tell us about your book, about Roxi, the podcaster/private eye, as I understand it. What a great combination!

Lorie: Well, the podcasting and the private eye part kind of take place a little further into the book. At 35, she was a children's book author and lived on the coast of California, and she lost her publisher. They dropped her series and she is like, okay, well now what am I going to do? And she has a cousin who's a P.I. who lives in Fresno, and he said, well, hey, come stay with me for a while, and so that's what she did. Then he talks her into helping out with a local community theater and someone's murdered during a rehearsal. He's hired to investigate and she helps him out, so that's kind of where the P.I. part starts, helping out with that. It's set in

the Tower District, which is the arts district of Fresno, so it's quite different from the rest of Fresno.

Debbi: It's the cultural oasis, I think you put it.

Lorie: Yes.

Debbi: Which I thought was an interesting way of putting it. What was it about Roxi in your mind? She started out as a supporting character in a previous book, correct?

Lorie: Correct. Kind of correct. I did a series featuring a gospel singer, and in the final book, [*The Final Note*](#), she's introduced, but she's introduced actually with a plan in mind to create a series for her. But it was a totally different series than what it ended up being.

Debbi: Wow, how interesting. In what way? What were you expecting to do?

Lorie: She ran a pocket pet animal rescue and as I said, was a children's book author, and that was going to be the focus. It was going to be set on the coast in a fictional town called Ayr, not very far from Santa Cruz. When I originally came up with that idea, there weren't any animal rescue cozies out there, and by the time I really had time to sit down and seriously work on it, they were everywhere. So I thought, well, what could I do differently? And so she got moved to Fresno.

Debbi: Oh, wow. Well, that's very interesting. In what ways is Fresno or the Tower District like a character in your book? How do you make a place like that part of the character, one of the characters in the book?

Lorie: Well, it has its own unique culture compared to the rest of the Valley, really. Not just Fresno. It's a very artsy area, lots of theater and art galleries, and it just has a very different feel to it, lots of historical buildings. In the book, Roxi talks about how it kind of feels like she's stepping back in time, as far as how it looks and feels. So I think that becomes just a really big part of the story itself, is that area and that community. It's like its own small town in a way.

Debbi: Yes. I can imagine. When I was living there, I think there might have been 300,000 people there. I don't know how big it must be now.

Lorie: Oh, I don't know, but it's a whole lot bigger than that.

Debbi: I was going to say.

Lorie: I think it's like one of the—now I'm just guessing—third or fourth largest cities in California.

Debbi: Wow. That's really something. Do a lot of people commute from there to other places?

Lorie: I know some do. I'm not sure how much. There's probably more commuting if you live in Bakersfield. I think a lot of people live in Bakersfield and commute to Southern California. There's probably some, I think. Fresno's gotten so big now that there's probably more people living in the smaller towns and commuting to Fresno for work.

Debbi: Interesting. Really interesting. My uncle used to work for the *Fresno Bee*. Is the *Fresno Bee* still around?

Lorie: Small world! Oh yeah, definitely. Just like any other paper, it's a lot smaller than it used to be, and a lot more of what they do is online. And interestingly enough, it's been a few years now, but they dropped their arts coverage almost completely.

Debbi: Wow.

Lorie: Yeah. So ...

Debbi: Oh my gosh!

Lorie: Yeah, so it was already a big part of *Kings River Life*. We've got the mystery side, but we were already covering a lot of the arts culture and we picked up even doing more since the Fresno Bee pretty much ... I think they cover big things like Broadway shows coming through town and things like that, but they used to have a regular columnist that covered all the local arts.

Debbi: That's amazing. Well, it's a little discouraging, but I'm just glad to see that papers can continue in some form these days. It's nice to know. How much research did you do when you wrote the book?

Lorie: Well, first off, I'll tell you, it took about 10 or 11 years for me to write this one because around the same time I wanted to start that, I started Kings River Life and it kind of took over.

Debbi: I was going to say.

Lorie: So it took a lot longer to get this one done—I don't want this to sound—but not a whole lot because I was already very familiar with the Tower District. I would do basic things like, okay, what street was this on? And since I don't live in the Tower, I just get to visit it, I would ask people on Facebook, okay, what's the best pizza place in the Tower? Things like that. And then of course I did research on the mystery side. I have some connections that I've worked with since my first book series, so there was that. And also, Stephen Carlucci, her cousin, actually is a carryover from the other series. He never gets his own books. He's always kind of a sidekick. I already knew a lot about Roxi's family too, so I didn't have to do a lot of really in-depth research, and through Kings River Life and through my kids being in theater, I had a lot of connections in the local theater scene, so I knew a lot of that. So yeah, not a lot really. Just kind of firming up some facts and stuff.

Debbi: When I think of the Central Valley. I always think of it as the real California in the sense, because so many people kind of equate California with Los Angeles or San Francisco. And to me, the Central Valley was really like the real California, because you had all these just regular people, farmers. Very important agricultural area.

Lorie: Oh, yes. Definitely.

Debbi: Hugely. And then of course, you have these literary people who have written about it like William Saroyan and John Steinbeck, two of my favorite writers, actually. Do you have a favorite writer, whether from Fresno or not?

Lorie: Well, I have been a huge Sherlock Holmes fan ever since I was a teenager. And then from there I got into reading Agatha Christie, so they have remained big favorites of mine. On a more contemporary level, I'm a big fan—I'm realizing I'm saying I'm a lot. Sorry, people—I'm a big fan of Cleo Coyle's Coffeehouse Mysteries, and also Sophie Hannah's redoing... She's doing the new Poirot books. I really enjoy that. Ann Cleeves, Anthony

Horowitz. So those are probably my favorite, more contemporary authors.

Debbi: I just recently read something by Anthony Horowitz. He's excellent. He's really amazing.

Lorie: Oh, he's amazing. Yes.

Debbi: Oh my gosh.

Lorie: And prolific.

Debbi: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Definitely. Do you have a favorite movie?

Lorie: Oh, wow. I'm not sure that I actually do. I really enjoy movies, but don't know that it would be. It's easier for me to come up with favorite TV shows. I'm more of a TV person than a movie person. *It Happened One Night* with Clark Gable. That is one that's kind of stuck with me for a long time. The Star Trek movies, which ties into my TV love. There's a lot of movies that I've really enjoyed. I think it'd be hard for me to pick a favorite.

Debbi: That's cool. How do you manage putting out a weekly magazine and producing a podcast and writing mystery fiction? How are you doing this?

Lorie: I'm not sure sometimes. The magazine really, it's a group project in that I couldn't do it without our other writers and our other book reviewers. As time has gone along, I do less writing for the magazine, but I handle the business side and posting it on the website and the promotion and all that part of it. Just the running of it. And the podcast, the podcast gets a little tricky sometimes. It's not your typical podcast where we're interviewing people. We are picking stories and then auditioning actors and rehearsals and all that, so that one has ended up being a bigger challenge than I expected. And as to the books, like I said, this one took about 10 or 11 years. I'm trying really hard. I'm working on the second one. I'm trying to get it out in two years so we'll see. We'll see if that actually happens, but that can be a challenge to balance

Debbi: I admire you taking on all of that, because really that is a lot of work. How have you found your writers? Where have you ... what do you do to find writers?

Lorie: Well, that's kind of changed and developed through the years. When I started out, it was just me and it was kind of just going to be a side project while I was out of work and looking, figuring what I was going to do with my life, and it kind of grew from there. Our first reviewer actually was someone that I already had review things for me on my own website as an author. Her name's Cindy Chow in Hawaii. And how do you do? I can't even remember. We've known each other for so long. I don't even remember exactly how we met. But our writers are actually all over the country, and I just kind of met them through Sisters in Crime, through Facebook, through conferences, and then our local writers, just through being involved in the community. One of our main writers, he does reviews, but he also does a lot of local stuff. Terrance McArthur is also a Sister in Crime, and I'm pretty sure that's how I actually met him originally so even locally, Sisters has played a part.

Debbi: Wow.

Lorie: And we have had some high school students write for us, and mostly online we just connect.

Debbi: So basically you kind of put out, say a call for submissions maybe, and people will respond?

Lorie: More of a call for writers as opposed to, and then they can pitch ideas, but we have a lot of specific stuff that we do cover. And so since it's all volunteer, it's one of those things, would you be interested in writing this story? And then they commit to it and commit to a deadline and that sort of thing. So usually just a call would anybody be interested in writing locally? We really haven't put out a call for book reviewers. We've picked up some extra ones along the way. Just people I already knew like Claire Murray is filling in, doing some extra book reviews for us, and I know her just through the writing community.

Debbi: Well, that's fantastic. It's just amazing what you've organized there and the way you keep it running.

Lorie: Thank you. It can be a challenge sometimes. The technical side is what tends to hang us up once in a while.

Debbi: Tell me about it. I know the feeling. How have you found actors? Are you connected with the theater there in Fresno? Is that where you're getting them?

Lorie: Yes, yes. Well, my kids both did theater in high school and did some local theater. My youngest is still doing local theater, so that was my first connection to theater. And then we review shows in *Kings River Life*, which started fairly early on, and then I've gotten to know the theater community and actors through there as well. Honestly, finding actors for the podcast has probably been the biggest challenge. It kind of goes in waves. Sometimes we'll have plenty and then other times we'll just have to delay an episode, like we actually are going to be one short this month just because they're busy with their own lives too. You know, people getting sick and all of that. But the actors are there. I'm familiar with them through doing theater reviews and through my kids and attending theater and making theater friends.

Debbi: Excellent. Very good. And what advice would you give to someone who's interested in writing for a living?

Lorie: For a living?

Debbi: For a living, yes.

Lorie: Make really, really, really, really sure that that's what you want to do. It's very, very difficult to make a living from writing. I think you first have to just be wanting to do it, because you can't not write. It's just in you and it's something you have to do, whether it ever gets published, whether it ever gets read, or whether you make money off it or not. It's just something you have to do. It's inside of you.

Debbi: I so agree with you on that. Yeah, it really is a tough business to make a living in.

Lorie: Oh, definitely.

Debbi: Even with all of the advantages we enjoy, there's a flip side to that.

Lorie: Yes.

Debbi: Suddenly everybody's publishing and it's hard to get noticed.

Lorie: It is.

Debbi: It is. So it must be kind of tough. Do you take ads for your journal there, or how do you finance it, I guess?

Lorie: We do. We do sell ads in *Kings River Life*, definitely. We also have a Patreon—haven't had a lot of success with that yet, but also juggling so many things, I also haven't had a lot of time to dedicate to growing it too and so that's a challenge. But probably primarily from advertising, which interestingly enough, has mostly been authors.

Debbi: I'm not surprised somehow. Oh my goodness. Well, is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?

Lorie: Well, I hope that people will check out my book and I'm actually having a sale on it in April for my birthday. The eBook will only be 99 cents on Kindle for a month. So if you haven't checked it out yet, that'll be the ideal time to pick it up. And I have a new book that like I said I hope will come out this fall. I'm working on edits. It's going to be called *One of You* and well, I just hope people check out my books and the magazine and the podcast and all of it.

Debbi: Fantastic. I'm happy to hear that you have a sequel lined up for that first book.

Lorie: Yes, definitely.

Debbi: And another question I have actually is how would you characterize the story? It's a private eye story, but at the same time, it seems like a cozy.

Lorie: Well, when I was writing it, I was thinking more traditional, but then when reviewers started reading it, they kind of called it more like a cozy with an edge. So kind of a cozy/traditional mix. I mean, it wasn't intentional that it has the cozy side of ... you know, there's not much in the way of cussing and nothing too graphic and stuff like that. That just happened. That's just how it is and how I write. But I think it does have, with the P.I. side, it has a little bit more of an edge than some cozies do.

Debbi: Yeah. Yeah. I think cozies are sort of leaning that way toward that edge. It's nice. It's kind of nice to see a little darkness mixed in with all the

lightness. But at the same time, a mystery that feels warm can be a real welcoming thing in the world that is mixed up and crazy sometimes.

Lorie: Definitely. Very true. Well, I hope that people will enjoy visiting the Tower District now. I have fictionalized some things and added some businesses that don't actually exist for the sake of the story, but I hope they'll have a cozy time getting to know the Tower and getting to know the characters as well as just the mystery itself.

Debbi: I love it. I mean, now I feel like going back to Fresno and just seeing the place just to go see.

Lorie: You'll have to come visit.

Debbi: I'll have to come visit. I'll have to talk my husband into taking a plane ride. It's very, very difficult at this point. Wow. Fresno, it's been years, but I just want to thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today about this. I appreciate you coming.

Lorie: Well, thank you for having me.

Debbi: Oh, it was my pleasure. Believe me. So with that, I will just come back on and just say thanks. Thank you so much for being here, Lorie. My thanks to my Patreon supporters. I'm on Patreon as well. If you enjoyed the show, please consider leaving a review or supporting the podcast on Patreon or by sharing it on your socials. That helps too. Our guest next time will be Weldon Burge. And until then, take care and happy reading.