

The Crime Cafe with

Kim Sherwood

Presented By:



Debbi: Hi everyone. My guest today is the author of an award-winning debut novel *Testament*. She was shortlisted for the Sunday Times Young Writers of the Year Award. She is also the first female author of a Bond novel. It's called *Double or Nothing*. Here's the cover if you can see. I'm always doing that wrong. It's called *Double or Nothing*, and if you like action packed stories, I think you'll love this one. I'm thrilled to have with me today the first female Bond novelist, Kim Sherwood. Hey Kim, how are you doing today?

Kim: Hi, I'm good, thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

Debbi: Well, it's a pleasure having you on. Thank you so much and congratulations on making history.

Kim: Well, that's very kind. Thank you.

Debbi: Well, I have to say—the first question that comes to mind is how does it feel to be in this position, to have a job this amazing?

Kim: It feels pretty good. It feels pretty good. It's very surreal. You know, sometimes it becomes almost normal because it's kind of my day-to-day life now. And then on days like today we are recording on the 17th anniversary of *Casino Royale* so I'm down here in London for the celebrations. I'm at the Ian Fleming offices, which is why I'm surrounded by all of these beautiful Ian Fleming books, and to see my book next to his and with this legacy, it's very, very special.

Debbi: I can just imagine. Wow. And the other question I have is, how the heck did you manage to land a deal to write Bond novels from a feminist perspective, no less?

Kim: That's right. Well, really this comes down to saying very far-fetched things out loud repeatedly. So all of my life I've said to anybody who would listen, one day I want to write a James Bond novel, and I happened to say it to the right person, my agent who heard that the estate was looking for a new writer. They had liked my first book. They knew what a fan I was. They invited me to send them some ideas, and it all took off from there, and they were really excited about the kind of new directions that I wanted to take the world in, a chance to kind of expand the world of James Bond.

Debbi: Yes, yes, it does. Definitely. This book definitely goes there. How much did you prepare to write these books in terms of research and any other preparation that you made?

Kim: Well, in a way I've been preparing all of my life because I am, you know, an obsessive fan. So it was about going back to rereading the books, rewatching the films, and just thinking about the threads that Ian Fleming had set running that I could maybe pick up on again, while also bringing it into the modern day. And that's where a lot of the research came in, because I was trying to honor Fleming's vision while also make it feel fresh and contemporary in the 21st century. So I did a lot of research into climate science. The book features a climate catastrophe that the Double Os are trying to prevent. I did a lot of research into quantum computing, so really things at the very cutting edge of technology. I got to speak to scientists and doctors, which was just fascinating and I was so grateful to everybody who gave me their time.

Debbi: I'm always impressed when people do this level of research, do so much research that they could practically write books about the subject itself.

Kim: Yeah. Well, for me, research is such an integral part of the writing process. It has been for all of my novels. The author Hilary Mantel, who's a historical novelist, she said that a writer can hardly know what they need to know until they reach the scene, and she was talking there about historical research. But I think for me anyway, it's true for everything I've written. You get to a scene and you think, well, hang on, I've made Q a quantum computer now, so I better go learn something about quantum computing. And for me, getting to talk to experts and pick their mind, that's just such a joy.

Debbi: It is, isn't it? What sparked the idea for your first book in this trilogy?

Kim: It was an interesting challenge because the Flemings wanted me to kind of expand the world of 007, bring in these new Double O characters, and then in a way, James Bond becomes a problem because he's such an icon. If he's standing there on the page or the stage, the spotlight is on him, and that's where all eyes are going to turn. So how do you introduce a new character under those circumstances? You know, it's kind of unfair to the new character, so I thought I have to kind of get rid of him in a way. I have to ask him just to step a little bit out of the spotlight and into the darkness. That was my idea to have him missing from the beginning, and

to have a kind of new ensemble cast of Double O characters who are trying to find him. They don't know if he's been captured, possibly even killed, so they're looking for him desperately while also trying to work out whether this tech billionaire who says he can solve the climate crisis through technology is quite so saintly as he seems.

Debbi: Yeah. I thought it was interesting the way the various characters, the different Double O's would talk about James Bond and talk about their experiences with him, and there would be like a typical James Bond moment that they would insert in there. So it's as if the specter of James Bond was in the book.

Kim: Absolutely. He's both absent and present really, because he's there in flashbacks, he's there in memories, and as you say, he is there in conversations. That was a way for me to almost transfer or hopefully transfer the reader's empathy and love for Bond onto these new characters who love Bond just as much and have significant relationships with him.

We have Money Penny, who is now the head of the Double O section in what I felt was a very long overdue promotion, and she and Bond have kind of come up together through MI6, and she has a very kind of intimate friendship with him. We have Johanna Harwood, 003 who's had a romantic relationship with him, 009—Sid Bashir, who has been mentored by him, and we get to see him from all these different perspectives, which for me is one of the things I love most about Fleming's writing. He often looks at Bond from the outside, whether it's from the enemy's perspective in *From Russia with Love*, or from the leading lady's perspective in *The Spy Who Loved Me*, and I really wanted to get into those moments. How do these people perceive Bond, because so much of Bond is how people look at him in the cinemas, how we look at him. We create him with our gaze.

Debbi: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. How did you come up with all those different characters anyway, those different particular characters? I mean, I was particularly interested in Harwood and Dryden.

Kim: Thank you. Thank you. Well, that was another really fun challenge of this. You're going to have new Double Os. Who are they going to be? I started off looking at some of the kind of legacy and law around the Double O section and the idea of being a Double O, so I started off thinking about

this idea of a license to kill, which sounds really fun and cool, but when you think about it, it is an enormous ethical responsibility that you are judge, jury and executioner in the field. I wanted to investigate that so I started to think about what is the opposite of a license to kill, and I felt like it was a doctor's Hippocratic Oath to heal, and that was where Johanna Harwood, 003 came from.

She starts life as a trauma surgeon, then something happens in her life that brings her to the attention of Money Penny, and she's recruited as a Double O. Similarly, Sid Bashir kind of came out of examining this idea of, what we see in a lot of Bond narratives is Bond killing one person to save the world. I was really intrigued by that notion and there's a kind of utilitarian philosophy to that. I was really intrigued by this almost contrary notion in the Koran to save one soul is to save all of humanity, and I began to wonder what if you had a Double O from a religious background, a Muslim Double O who's been raised to believe in that ethos but now has taken on this other oath. So with all of these questions, I was looking at the kind of existential crisis almost that sits at the heart of being a Double O.

Similarly for 004, Joseph Dryden, I wanted to look at the route that people take to become spies. What are they carrying with them? And a really common route is soldiers who were in Special Forces, really highly trained, served multiple missions and then suffer an injury that means they can't serve on the frontline anymore, and that often brings them to the attention of intelligence services. So that's Dryden's background and how he comes to join the Double O section.

Debbi: Very interesting. How much of an adjustment was it to write for the Bond franchise as opposed to your own work?

Kim: It is a really different creative process because the Fleming family are really involved. Every draft is read by multiple people, by the whole family as well as the publishers. And usually writing is a very solitary process. My first novel took me seven years to write. My next literary novel that has just come out here in the UK, *A Wild & True Relation*, that took me 14 years to write. Obviously, some of these things overlapped. I don't just look deceptively young, but they took a long time, and a lot of it was just me sitting by myself in a room. This is very different. It's a lot of collaboration and that takes some adjusting to, but for me, it's been really

helpful because it's kind of opened up my creative process and allowed me to kind of ... it's almost like when you're a kid and you play imaginary games. You get to say to your friends, well, let's pretend. What if? What if James Bond was missing? What would happen then?

Debbi: Yeah. It reminds me of the screenwriting process

Kim: Right.

Debbi: I've collaborated on screenplays before and it's really a wonderful process.

Kim: Yeah. Yeah.

Debbi: It really does open you up creatively.

Kim: Absolutely. I think that there is something about that. Kind of like a TV writer's room maybe, everybody coming together with ideas and with passion.

Debbi: Precisely. How far along are you in writing the trilogy? Have you written any of the second? How much of the story arc have you ...?

Kim: Yeah. I finished the second book now, and we're up to designing covers and things, which is really fun, but I actually mapped out the trilogy before I started to write, and the first thing I wrote was the final scene of Book 3, so a little bit like a roadmap. I know where I'm heading. I might deviate here and there. We'll see. We'll see how it all develops, because I think the more you write a novel, the more the novel tells you what it wants to be and it's the same with characters, but I know ultimately where my target is.

Debbi: Awesome. So do you have any thoughts on the future in general of the Bond franchise in the books or the movies?

Kim: Well, it's a really interesting time for Bond. You know, as I said, it's 70 years of literary Bond, 60 years of cinematic Bond last year. I think when you come up on these anniversaries, you do start to take stock, and it's extraordinary when you think about it, that Ian Fleming created this iconic character that's lived beyond him, lived beyond everybody who's

embodied him and really has a very particular place in popular culture and in the kind of zeitgeist and collective unconscious.

I think where we go next with Bond will almost depend on what happens next in the world, because Bond remains evergreen because he is flexible and adaptable and he can reflect the world and he is what we need him to be. So I think whatever happens next with him, it will be what we need from him.

Debbi: That's a great observation because I've just seen Bond change over the years with the political and gender roles, all of that changing, so Bond has had to adjust with the times.

Kim: Absolutely! You see that all the way through the films, and people might have an idea of Bond as static because there's certain elements of Bond that don't change. There's the kind of essential ingredients and they have to be there—martinis and fast cars and all those things. They have to be there, but there are other things about him that change a lot. When you compare, say Roger Moore's Bond to Timothy Dalton's Bond, Timothy Dalton's Bond made the height of the AIDS crisis. Far fewer sex scenes, a really different attitude. You always have Bond kind of adapting with its times and reflecting us back to ourselves.

Debbi: Absolutely. What authors have most inspired your writing?

Kim: Well, Ian Fleming is certainly up there. I first read Fleming when I was about 12 and I wanted to try writing spy fiction, so I bought *From Russia with Love* in pound paperback, and I completely fell in love with his really visual, vivid style. I read all of those as a teenager, and then at the same time, I was seeking out other spy fiction as well because I was just falling in love with it. So Peter O'Donnell's *Modesty Blaise* series was a big influence on me., and Modesty is often called like a female Bond, but she's so much more than that. People, if you haven't read Modesty Blaise, stop listening to me and just go and do it immediately because she's just so effortlessly cool and brilliant. So that was a big influence on me.

John le Carré, of course, big influence and I love his writing and I think he was a chronicler of the modern British state through spy fiction. I love what he does with the genre. And then also kind of more broadly in crime writers like Raymond Chandler, Elmore Leonard, Walter Mosley, writers with a really strong voice. I was reading and rereading them all through

my teenage years and twenties. I think the whole thing is a kind of melting pot into *Double or Nothing*.

Debbi: Yeah. Yeah. Isn't it interesting the way mystery fiction and spy fiction seem to have a kind of combination there, a kind of link somewhere?

Kim: Yeah, absolutely, because you have the quest narrative I think underpinning both. In both detective fiction and spy fiction, you have this structure where the kind of forces at battle are shrunken down to individuals, and whether it's the detective or the spy representing the side of good, or if it's going into noir, it might be more complex than that, but they have a mission. They go out on their quest, they pick up some allies along the way, some enemies along the way, and there's a kind of final showdown and maybe they make it home or maybe they don't. But I think there's a chivalric narrative that underpins them both that goes back to medieval literature, goes back to ancient Greek myth. So although in some ways cozy crime and spy fiction might seem quite far apart, I think actually they're very genetically related.

Debbi: I think you're right about that. I've been reading some short stories that are based on the character Miss Marple from the Agatha Christie series.

Kim: Right.

Debbi: And I was struck—it had been a long time since I'd read anything Christie-related —and I thought, wow, she was really some kind of character, this Miss Marple. I hadn't fully appreciated.

Kim: Absolutely. I actually had the pleasure of writing *Double or Nothing* at Agatha Christie's house because they let writers go and stay there in the attic of her country house in Devon. So I wrote a big chunk of Bond there and it was very fun imagining James Bond and Poirot and Miss Marple and everybody hanging out and thinking what would they think about this?

Debbi: That is so cool. That is definitely very cool. What advice would you give to anyone interested in a writing career?

Kim: I think to have faith in yourself because it takes a huge amount of inner belief and stamina and morale to keep going in an industry that's of course competitive in terms of—not like a sport, but there's almost

limited oxygen in the room for a certain number of books at any one time. There will be rejections and there will be setbacks, and there'll be times where you have to be your best champion. I'm always saying that to students when they maybe have a bit of a wobbling confidence, I'm always saying to them, just go back to your original intention. Why were you passionate about this project? Why did you have a compulsion to write it? What is your inner drive? Go back to that and have faith in it because ultimately that's what you need to sustain you. And then also related to that, sometimes you alone might not be enough, so get some good cheerleaders around you. I feel very grateful to my family who are always there to cheer me on.

Debbi: Amen to that. Anytime I get discouraged, I think I'm going to play this back and listen to your advice there. That's wonderful advice. Do you have a favorite Bond film?

Kim: Yes. My favorite Bond film is actually also my favorite book ***From Russia with Love***. The film, it just has all the classic ingredients. It has the train, it has the gray suit, it has Connery's walk, it has the great helicopter scene, and it has such good dialogue. I just love the kind of Hitchcock style to it. For me it's kind of classic Bond distilled. And I also love, and you get this even more in the book, seeing Bond from that outside perspective, seeing him from SMERSH's perspective as they try and plot his downfall. I love how Fleming ... You know, it's the fifth book and he's created this myth of Britain, as he says, and then in this book ***From Russia with Love***, he sets about testing that myth and seeing if he can break it. I love how playful and experimental he was with this kind of iconic character he created.

Debbi: Hmm, interesting. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?

Kim: Well, I guess I just hope people enjoy the book. For me, it really is the honor of a lifetime to get to play in Ian Fleming's sandbox. It's honoring Fleming's vision, but it's also bringing it into the 21st century and creating characters from diverse backgrounds that hopefully open the door a little bit and allow more people to kind of see themselves as the hero. You know, for me as a kid playing James Bond, I used to play that I was Bond. I wouldn't play I was a Bond girl and that's no disrespect to Bond girls, but I wanted to be the hero. I hope that what I've done here in widening out this ensemble cast is that Bond is still Bond, but there's also new heroes

from different backgrounds and distinct perspectives that I hope people will enjoy and want to follow their adventures.

Debbi: Wow. I did the very same thing when I used to watch television as a child. I would always identify with the male detective.

Kim: Right. Well, they got to be the heroes.

Debbi: I know. It was like, why would you want to be anything ...? You know, why would you want to be the girl hanging on him? Yeah.

Kim: Yeah. Very few people fantasize about playing the secondary role.

Debbi: Great. Well, Kim, it is such a pleasure. It's been such a pleasure talking to you. Thank you for being here.

Kim: Thank you. Thank you for having me. This has been really lovely.

Debbi: Thank you. And thank you to all my listeners. If you enjoyed the episode, please leave a review if you would, and consider becoming a patron of the podcast where you can get bonus episodes, samples of my fiction and other perks. Our next guest will be Heather Weidner. And until then, take care and happy reading.