

The Crime Cafe with

Naomi Hirahara

Presented By:



Debbi: Hi everyone. Our guest today is the Edgar Award-winning author of multiple mystery series and noir short stories. Her first historical mystery [Clark and Division](#) won a Mary Higgins Clark Award and follows a Japanese-American family's move to Chicago in 1944 after being released from a wartime detention center. She's also written numerous nonfiction books and a middle grade novel. It's my pleasure to have as my guest Naomi Hirahara. Hi, Naomi. How are you doing today?

Naomi: I'm doing well. Thanks for having me, Debbi.

Debbi: It's my pleasure, believe me. You seem to have several series going. How many series do you have and which one did you start with?

Naomi: Well, my first one was my Mas Arai Mystery series and its aging Los Angeles gardener and Hiroshima survivor who solves crimes. It's an homage to my own father. It's not my father, but inspired by someone like him, and that went for seven books. Actually two of my series, they've only made it as far as being duologies. One is the Ellie Rush bicycle cop mysteries, and there's a Leilani Santiago shave ice mysteries. I guess we're calling that the Leilani Santiago Hawaii Mysteries set on the island of Kaua'i. More recently, I've changed to historical mysteries and because publishers like series but it's loosely linked, it's called the Japantown Mysteries. And as you mentioned, [Clark and Division](#) is the first. The second just came out - [Evergreen](#) - and it'll be followed by a third one, but not from that main character's point of view, but another character.

Debbi: Interesting. So it's like the same world, but a different character.

Naomi: Exactly. And it's actually even a different time period, so the third one will be set in 1903.

Debbi: Huh. So you go back in time?

Naomi: Exactly. I wanted that latitude to jump around. And in terms of *Clark and Division* and *Evergreen*, I look at it as bookends to my lead character, Aki Ito, her kind of resettlement story, and I didn't want to turn her into an amateur sleuth where she's investigating random incidents. The two storylines in both books are deeply personal, so I kind of wanted her story to end with *Evergreen*.

Debbi: Yeah, yeah. Interesting. It's fascinating because I can't think offhand of another series where people go backward in time.

Naomi: Yeah. I mean, Tana French. She has her Dublin Murder Mysteries which go ..., but that's all in the same investigative unit, and it's different characters all in that same unit. But yeah, it should be interesting. I'm all for stretching the rules, so I think it'll work out.

Debbi: I love that. I love stretching the rules. That's great. Let's see. I was going to talk about Leilani Santiago, because I read the first book in that dual set, and I see you have a follow up to that. What was it that inspired you to write about Hawaii during the pandemic in that first one?

Naomi: Yeah. Well, the first one was before the pandemic and the second one, [*An Eternal Lei*](#), took place in the pandemic, and it was just a question of timing. That was published by a small press called Prospect Park Books, and it's since been acquired by a Nashville-based publisher. But my publisher and editor Colleen Dunn Bates, she loves Kaua'i and she loves Hawaii. I was writing it I believe around 2020, around that time, 2021. No, yeah, 2020, and I was asking Colleen because people have different opinions on whether you should, especially something that's more cozy-ish, should you set it in the pandemic or not? Because a lot of people, that's the last thing they would want to read.

But in talking it over with Colleen, we just knew the pandemic was like a seismic shift in terms of tourism and life in Hawaii, and I really kind of needed to go there and I'm glad I did because tourism fell by 80% and it was kind of a different type of Hawaii. So it almost became like a locked-room mystery, because not that many people are coming from the outside. Who committed it? Who is this woman? You know, this mysterious woman that was found in the ocean in Waimea Bay. Where did she come from? And it was actually kind of nice to have a lot of limitations to where this mysterious person/victim came from. So I was very happy to do it. Of course, I couldn't go to Hawaii at that point, but with the internet where I could watch Hawaii News right on YouTube and just the mayor of Kaua'i was putting out TikTok videos, and then there was a lot of people getting arrested for arriving on the island when they shouldn't have been. So even though I couldn't actually travel there, there were a lot of ways to see what was going on.

Debbi: Fascinating. And what a setting! I mean, like you said, almost like a locked-room mystery. I never think about that aspect of Hawaii, how isolated it must be or can be under certain circumstances.

Naomi: Yeah. And because so much of the industry is around tourism, many of the small businesses took a very big financial hit, but then there's also people, and we kind of see that through the investigation of the Maui fires, the impact of tourism on the islands too. So there's people who really, they call it the 'Āina, they want to preserve the land so there's this natural tension of people trying to promote tourism and people trying to keep it among native Hawaiians. So with mysteries, we need conflict so it's kind of built in.

Debbi: Absolutely. Before you started writing fiction, you were a journalist, and then you became an editor. Correct?

Naomi: That is correct.

Debbi: Do you feel that these experiences helped you as a writer?

Naomi: Oh, most definitely. I mean, these days, unfortunately, so many news outlets have closed. I'm 61 right now, but when I was establishing myself as a writer in my twenties, so that's in the 1980s, it was still a viable way to make a living. Also, I was an avid reader of *Writer's Digest* magazine, and Larry Block had a column in the back, one page, and one of his columns was what are the best occupations as you're emerging or developing as a writer? And he was saying, one is to have a job where you talk to various people and check, being a reporter. I was at an ethnic newspaper, a Japanese-American newspaper that was right next to Skid Row and City Hall, so I talked to a wide variety of people.

I think the second kind of job, he said, is to get a job where you actually are writing, and it doesn't have to be fiction, but to help hone your craft, and check, that's what you're doing as a reporter. You can't wait for the muse to hit you, because often people ask what's your writing space or what do you do? And as a reporter, those were the days that we really didn't or couldn't use the internet. I mean, we couldn't depend on that. So I was filing stories over the phone so it was really fast paced. I think

that was helpful because - except for when the pandemic came - I really didn't have any problems with writer's block.

I think the third kind of job Larry Block recommended was a job where you make the most amount of money for the least amount of effort, and of course, journalism is not that kind of job, but I did other things later so I heeded his advice in all three areas.

Debbi: Yes. Excellent advice, too. Let's see, what are you working on now? The third book in the series?

Naomi: Yes, I am working on the third book, and of course since it's in 1903, there's a lot of research and it's set, luckily, where I live and grew up - Pasadena, California - and I'm just having a blast doing a deep dive. *Clark and Division* and *Evergreen* investigated the resettlement of Japanese-Americans to different places because of the World War II forced removal and incarceration, which is a dark subject, and I needed to lighten it up. And so I am now looking more at the aesthetics of a place like Pasadena, where we're kind of a center of the arts and crafts movement. So I get to look at really pretty buildings and go to museums and look at paintings, and it's been really fun and delightful and I have to work in some kind of mystery.

I was at Poison Pen bookstore recently, and I was talking to Barbara Peters, and I was cavalierly saying, I have to find a dead body to put in my mystery. It's going to be Crown City, which was the name of Pasadena back then. And Barbara says, well, you don't have to have a dead body necessarily. You don't have to have a murder. And I go, that's true. So I'm kind of getting my characters in order. I'm getting a potential person who's going to encounter trouble, but I'm thinking maybe this one won't be a murder. I'm not sure, so we'll see.

Debbi: Yeah, it's interesting. It doesn't always have to be a murder. There can be other crimes that are committed that are about as serious in their own way. Let's see. How much research do you do for these historicals? There must be some research that goes into this.

Naomi: There's a lot, because I am really investigating parts of our history that haven't been told. And actually, if it can be found in a secondary resource

like a history book, I'm not interested. I want to come up with some original research that perhaps cannot be told in a nonfiction book because there's too many gaps. Of course, in most cases, there has to be some kind of criminal element, so as a mystery writer, I could swoop in and imagine and connect the dots, but I will say actually technology has made it easier. For instance in *Evergreen*, it takes place in 1946 Los Angeles, and I have worked in my old newspaper. It's called *The Rafu Shimpo*. It originally had started in 1903, and during the war of course, it had to close, but it reopened in 1946, January 1st. So I've been able through my library card from the Los Angeles Public Library to go into the database and look over each issue. I probably did look over each one, but it's also keyword searchable, so it's been wonderful to have resources like that that provide a kind of chronology. I have manipulated some of the dates, but in the notes in the back of the book, I've noted what I've done. So it's as clean as possible, but it's just a framework where I could hang my particular fictional book on. It's a wonderful way to actually introduce people to history. I'm already getting comments like I never knew that about Los Angeles during that time, and maybe these readers would not have picked up a nonfiction book on the same topic. But if it's a mystery with a character that they like to follow, they'll go with it.

Debbi: Yes. Isn't it great when you can learn something from a book as well as be entertained by it? I love that. What authors have most inspired your writing?

Naomi: I think probably for the types of mysteries I write, a lot of African-American detective novelists including Chester Himes, and there's actually a tie-in. I tip my hat to him in *Evergreen* too. When he was writing *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, one of his mysteries, he was living in Los Angeles in a community called Boyle Heights, and that's where I set *Evergreen*. He was actually living in the home of a family - a Japanese American family - that had been sent away. He's not present in the book, but he's definitely mentioned. And Walter Moseley. Before that, in high school probably the play *Death of a Salesman* was pretty integral because it was like an everyman kind of an anti-hero, and I didn't realize until then that you could have an anti-hero be the star protagonist of your tale. And I think that opened the door for me to write a character like Mas Arai, a gardener.

Debbi: I also noticed from your bio, your family history clearly it would seem plays a part in your writing. You said a lot of it is very personal. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Naomi: Sure. I can't help but always root for the underdog, and I think it is because my own father was working class, and was a gardener. I mean, on the West Coast, especially in southern California, 1 out of 10 gardeners after World War II were of Japanese descent, and that's because they were either released from camp and could not be employed by any other place, or they had come from Japan and they couldn't speak English well. I was very close to my father. I thought he was very philosophical, he was smart, he just couldn't speak English that well, and he couldn't speak Japanese that well, too, because he was born here, but raised in Japan and came back. So I think I always felt like someone like my father's being disrespected, or I think he has things that would help us as a community. I mean, it's kind of similar to what Walter Moseley does. I think he's trying to create African-American male heroes and in Mas Arai, that was my attempt to create a Japanese-American one.

Debbi: Walter Moseley and Chester Himes are two of my favorite writers, I have to say. I love them both. Oh, Veronica Gutierrez says hello. She was on last time.

Naomi: I saw that. I'm so happy. Yeah, we're kind of traveling in the same geographic terrain and I haven't had a chance to really talk to her much, so I'm really happy to be going to Bouchercon in San Diego. It's funny, you could be in close proximity, but then you have to go somewhere else two hours away to actually talk. So I'm really happy.

Debbi: Actually, yeah.

Naomi: Happy to get to talk to her more. And my husband will be with me, and he's from Boyle Heights, so I'm sure they'll have a lot to share with one another.

Debbi: Cool. What advice, apart from what Lawrence Block had to say, would you give to writers who are interested in making a living, a career out of writing?

Naomi: Diversify, and don't say no to certain things. At this point in my life, I am saying no, but I think when you're starting out, just consider. I've done family memoirs, and there came a point that I was receiving more income from writing fiction, and I said, oh, I'll do no more family memoirs. But I soon learned I couldn't close that door. Actually, I just recently finished up a memoir for a family, and every type of writing when you're interviewing someone with a different kind of life, that's kind of opening the door for you to perhaps write a fictional character. I'm not saying to steal that person's life, but you have a better understanding of, especially maybe someone who lived in another country that you really haven't spent much time kind of opens our world.

So whatever kind of writing it may be, I say be open. I'm so glad that I do nonfiction and fiction, because there's been times where you're kind of wondering about your contract for one of your fiction books, but you're able to make money through another project, and I think it just makes you feel secure. It's not good to write out of desperation. So I think just be flexible, but I think it's hard for people who can't juggle because it's not for everyone. Some people are more linear workers. They need from A to B, to B to C, to C to D. So if you're able to multitask and go from A to D to B, that's an advantage that can really help you sustain a writer's life.

Debbi: I agree completely. That's great advice. I always think of it as compartmentalizing. It's like, okay, I have this thing I have to work on. Now there's this other thing I have to work on. They involve different parts of my brain, but I can do them. Let's see. Oh, is there anything else you would like to add before we finish up?

Naomi: Not really. I don't. Thank you very much for having me.

Debbi: Oh, it was my pleasure, believe me. It was great to see you and great to meet you, and get to talk to you about your books because they sound fantastic. I know I love the one about Hawaii that I read, so now I have to read the one about that bicycle cop.

Naomi: I think you'll enjoy it. Yeah. It's called [*Murder on Bamboo Lane*](#).

Debbi: All right. I love the idea of a bicycle cop in Japantown. Wonderful. On that note, I'll just say thanks to everyone who's listening or watching, and I

want to especially thank my supporters on Patreon where patrons have access to ad-free episodes, serialized versions of my work, plus they're in text and audio, some of them. And also I have a new shop, which anybody can visit, whether you're a patron or not, so visit my Patreon page. I'll include a link below. Our next guest next time will be Jenny Briscoe. So until then, take care and happy reading.