

The Crime Cafe with

Liz Alterman

Presented By:



Debbi: Hi everyone. My guest today is the author of a book that I've had the pleasure of reading and reviewing. A suspenseful novel that weaves in humor and social commentary. It's called *The Perfect Neighborhood* and I highly recommend it. It's my pleasure to have with me today the author, Liz Alterman. Hi, Liz. How are you doing today?

Liz: I'm good, Debbi. Thank you so much for having me, and for reading the book as well.

Debbi: Oh, I loved it. And I'm glad you're on. I'm so glad you're here with us.

Liz: Thank you.

Debbi: What inspired you to write the novel?

Liz: Oh, thanks for asking. It's funny, I love to read thrillers and mysteries, and I guess one day I woke up from a dream with the idea for the plot, sort of the beginning and the ending, but I didn't really have the middle. I mentioned the idea to my husband, and the story involves a little boy who goes missing on his walk home from kindergarten. When I told my husband, you know I just had this really vivid dream, he was saying, oh, I wouldn't write it. There were so many kidnapping stories. Just try to come up with another idea. So I tried for about six months, and as I was kind of doing the dishes or gardening or something, these characters were speaking to me, and the plot was kind of revealing itself and coming alive. And after giving it six months with no other ideas, I thought, okay, I'm going to sit down and try it. And my kids—I have three boys—and my oldest will joke, why would you write about a missing child? That's so disturbing! Can't you write something light?

I said, as a parent, to me, that's so much more frightening than let's say a zombie story. The thought of something happening to my kids is probably the most frightening thing I can imagine.

Debbi: Wow. You know, it's funny because I have been reading so many books about either missing children, kidnapped children—what was the other one I was thinking of—at-risk kids.

Liz: Sure.

Debbi: It's like there's this huge sub-genre of kid-related anxieties coming out in writing. What are your thoughts on that? Do you see that as well?

Liz: I do. I think we see that a lot. It almost goes in cycles where I think we see a lot of that, or we also see a lot of women in peril, women in bad relationships or women at risk, other things like that. But now that you say that, and especially as I've seen other titles come out, I will say, okay, I think my husband may have been onto something. There is a lot in that field already.

Debbi: That doesn't hurt any, actually, and in a sense, it almost helps because you're part of a wave of something.

Liz: That's true.

Debbi: And actually you're tapping into something I think very primal, very primal for parents, particularly mothers, I would think. I'm not a mother, so it's very hard for me to really think about that. But if I think about my own mother, it makes sense to me, a lot of sense.

Liz: Absolutely.

Debbi: Can you tell us a little about the plot?

Liz: Sure. So the book starts off, and it begins with a lot of gossipy voices of neighbors who are speculating about this younger woman in this upscale neighborhood who decides to leave her husband in the middle of the night. The person who spies her leaving is a young man who has returned from a tour of duty in Afghanistan, and so people feel that maybe he has come back a little different. He's not quite the guy that he was, and he has taken it upon himself to patrol the neighborhood. And so they think maybe he's almost inventing more of a story than there is, but he is the one who first spots her leaving. She's this beautiful model and actress, and her husband is a former rock star who gives music lessons to kids in the afternoon. And so everyone sort of speculates, if these two can't make it work, how can we? They're this golden couple and everyone's kind of had their eye on them.

Then fast forward two months. This little boy goes missing on his walk home from kindergarten, and it's almost like that record scratch moment

of everybody taking a look around and thinking, we're supposed to be safe here in this lovely neighborhood. Is there a predator in our midst? Is it someone we know, someone among us who knew this little boy's routine? His mom is a real estate agent, and sometimes she can be a bit of a cold fish. He has a stepbrother who's maybe not thrilled about his dad marrying that real estate agent. So there's sort of a lot of people who get called into question. I kind of wanted to explore the idea of what it's like to live in a nice community where you think maybe nothing can go wrong and the secrets—or not necessarily secrets—but you can look at someone's life from the outside and think it looks beautiful and perfect and flawless, and then you open the door and there's a whole different world going on behind closed doors.

Debbi: Yes. Yes. I mean, things are not always the way they seem. Certainly people who seem to have perfect lives don't always have perfect lives. Nobody really has a perfect life when you come right down to it. How would you describe your writing style? Would you say you're more a thriller writer, mystery thriller, crime novel? How do you like to describe your writing?

Liz: That's a great question. I think suspense is something that I feel is a throughline. I feel almost guided by if an idea catches me, rather than sticking with a specific genre or a theme, I like to hop around. Before [The Perfect Neighborhood](#), I had written a young adult thriller that some people will say maybe the first half is scary and thriller-y, and then the second half is more of a coming-of-age as the main character deals with the aftermath of what she went through. Prior to that, I had written a memoir that I like to think has a little touch of suspense in it. It's about the period when my husband and I were laid off within six weeks of each other, and so we kind of struggled to get back on our feet. So I try to add humor, yes, but definitely as I like to joke, don't try this at home. It's not fun.

Debbi: Yeah. Yeah, and you have to laugh at some point.

Liz: Exactly. If you don't, you'll cry, so...

Debbi: Exactly. Your novel seems to comment almost as much on suburbia as it does on say, rumors and secrets and the darkness beneath a perfect exterior. Was that intentional?

Liz: It was, a little bit, because I've always lived in the suburbs. I'm in New Jersey, and it's funny. I guess I've lived in a few different suburbs and I've worked in a few different suburbs and different people that I've stayed in touch with will say, oh, you based this on Princeton, or you based it on Westfield, or you based it on Chatham. It's a fictional town, but it's sort of an amalgamation of all of those places. I think as lovely as a certain place may be... also, I used to cover local politics and local Boards of Ed for different online and local newspapers. Again, you kind of scratch the surface and you can definitely see the underbelly of areas and that even the most beautiful place can have its darkness.

Debbi: True, true that. How much research do you do when you're working on a novel?

Liz: Well, with this one, I really wanted to try to get it accurate in terms of let's say your child is missing and the police arrive. What are some of the first things that they do? So that was something I really wanted to kind of dig into, so I did a lot of research there and just saw what are kind of the first questions that they ask. A lot of times, I didn't realize this but they might think your child is hiding somewhere in your home. Let's look close or let's check with the neighbors first before we really panic, and I'm sure in their experience, they probably bump into parents who think the worst and then it turns out their child is in a neighbor's basement playing, or just in a backyard of a new child or something, or went home with a friend.

I know, one time, we got a call, a little boy was missing, and it was just that he decided to get off at a new bus stop that day, that he just felt like taking a longer walk on a nice afternoon, but his mom didn't know. She knew who else was on the route, and my son was on it, and she called and she was panicked. And then I could ask my son, and he said, oh, yeah, he felt like taking a longer walk home so he is trying to pick new stops. I said, his poor mother is going to have a heart attack because she was expecting him. So I tried to do some research into that to be as accurate as I can.

Debbi: Do you have contacts with the police that you talk to about this?

Liz: I've done a lot of internet research, and then a friend of mine recommended a Facebook group called Cops and Writers. That's one that, even if you don't ask a question, if you just kind of want to join it and scroll and browse and see what other people ask, but they seem very open to answering any questions, any sort of law enforcement related questions, so I really appreciate that.

Debbi: That's really cool. That's a great resource. Thank you. I never even knew about that.

Liz: Yes. My friend knows. She writes thrillers as well, and she knows all of those secrets.

Debbi: Cool. What kind of writing schedule do you keep?

Liz: Oh, I have to say, I've not been as disciplined as I should be lately, but I try to write mostly in the morning. I think that's when I'm freshest and so I try maybe from about eight until noon, but definitely I get distracted. I had even gone to the extent of paying for that Freedom app. I don't know if you've seen that, where you can block your internet. You can customize the period of time, and so I would do it in 45 minute increments, and this lovely green screen comes on and it will say, go, do, be free, or some positive message that should reinforce it. But, even then, I'm still very guilty of ... as soon as I can't complete a sentence or I don't know what's going to happen next, I will go and scroll through social media or email a friend or think of something I need to order, or make a list of things I should do. So definitely not. I have to get better. That's one of my New Year's resolutions.

Debbi: Very good. What keeps you motivated to write?

Liz: Oh, I always joke that I'm never going to be a good housekeeper. So I feel like this is kind of ... and also, I have to say I wish I had other hobbies or talents, but I'm definitely not an athlete. Even when I've tried to experiment with piano, it's almost like I can see where the keys or the notes should be, and I look away and my mind goes blank again. So I feel almost like writing, there are definitely difficult times, but I feel like

slipping into another world is such a wonderful escape and a lot of fun. I also love to cook and bake and I feel like writing is almost like that, where you're putting something together and depending on the ingredients. You can either come up with a winner or you can come up with something you have to throw in the garbage and start over.

Debbi: Make sure to add some yeast to it to leaven it.

Liz: Exactly. Right.

Debbi: Blow things up just a little bit. Make it exciting. Some spice.

Liz: Exactly.

Debbi: Some spice. Lots of spice. What authors have you found most inspiring?

Liz: Oh, that's a great question too. I kind of read across all genres and I was actually just listening to your podcast with Matt Witten, and I love him. I read *Killer Story* and *The Necklace*, and I just love hearing about his journey of how he started off as a playwright and he did not. I think what I find so admirable, not just in his ability to keep readers in suspense, but that he's followed his passion and that he hasn't given up, so I really admire that. And then a book I have been recommending for a while is Meg Mason's *Sorrow and Bliss*. That's another one of my favorites, because I think she takes what could be a hard subject about the main character who has some struggles with her mental health, but she still adds a lot of heart and a lot of humor there. I just really love the interpersonal relationships in that novel. That's one of my go-to recommendations.

Debbi: Wow! That sounds intriguing. I'll have to check it out.

Liz: I love that.

Debbi: I'll add it to my growing TBR list.

Liz: I know, right? We need more time in the day.

Debbi: Absolutely. I could sure use more time. You mentioned a couple of other books that you've written. Can you tell us a little about them? You narrated one of them. One of them is an audio book, right?

Liz: I did, yes. That was the memoir so that was definitely a challenge because I feel, as I'm sure you know, as a writer, by the time you get to that point, you have already read it about 4,000 times. So to read it one more time live is a challenge. I feel very fortunate that Audible had purchased it and then it's going to come out in print next June, so it currently exists as audio only. That, as I mentioned, follows the period that came after my husband and I lost our jobs, and we were both in media. I guess what the book really focuses on is how unemployment can impact your self-esteem, just your identity. Also, I was panicked in the wake of it where I wanted us to just get back to work as soon as possible. My husband who had been in the same job for 18 years, sort of was looking at it like a brief vacation, and he was in no rush to get back to work, and I was kind of like, who's going to keep paying this mortgage? So I guess it explores just how we reacted to it and what happened. And then also, I do think I sort of mistakenly thought that, okay, if I apply for a job or if I apply for enough jobs, surely one will come my way, and that was just not happening at all, so that was really discouraging too.

Debbi: Yes. It's amazing how much we're defined by our work.

Liz: Absolutely.

Debbi: I know that it was really kind of jarring for me to stop practicing law and start writing for a living. It was just very different. It was just so different. It was like, suddenly you're alone in a room sitting there writing. It's so different from practicing law.

Liz: I can't imagine, and it's a whole different type of writing too, I'm sure.

Debbi: Oh, yeah. I mean, you have to unlearn all that explanation stuff you do as a lawyer and get into the flow of writing fiction, of creating a world, that sort of thing.

Liz: Yes. I can't imagine. What a gear shift that must be.

Debbi: It was quite a gear shift actually. I ended up getting a lot of inspiration from other writers. I would read the way they wrote and I'd go, Hmm, I see what they're doing there.

Liz: Oh, that's great.

Debbi: Yeah. To me, it's like if you want to learn how to write, take a writing class and read, read, read.

Liz: I think so too. Absolutely.

Debbi: My gosh, because there's so much inspiration out there to be gotten, as well as just great stories.

Liz: There really is. I don't know about you, but I also like to flip between ... I was going to say when you asked about books, another one of my favorites from this year was *You Could Make This Place Beautiful* by Maggie Smith, the poet. I listened to that on audio and she narrates it. What I loved about it is in many cases, she's speaking to the reader and she'll say, I could have started this story here, or I could have started this story there, and I love that she's kind of acknowledging the challenges that we face as readers, but then also kind of addressing the curiosity you might have. I'm sorry, maybe I'm saying that in words, but as a writer, you have all these options. Where should you start? Where should you include? What details should you withhold? And then as a reader or a listener, you're kind of thinking, well, I wonder why she started here and then she kind of answers it. Or is she going to go here and she'll say, reader, I'm not going to show you this and here's why, and it's really interesting.

Debbi: That does sound interesting. I'll have to look into that one too. What advice would you give to anyone who is interested in writing for a living?

Liz: Oh, I would say I think you have to be pretty resilient. I think you have to know going in that you can work super hard and that's no guarantee of success. A lot just has to do I think with timing and luck, and maybe just having your piece of writing land in the right inbox with the right editor on the right day. I guess getting back to resilience, I would say you can be at this for such a long time. One time, I was listening to a masterclass with

Judy Blume, and she's very open and honest about a novel that she had written. This was well into her career. She was writing an adult novel and the editors were telling her something's wrong with it. We need to rework it.

I always listen to these while I'm cooking or baking, and I was thinking, how did Judy Blume not stand up and say, "I'm Judy Blume. Come on. I know what I'm doing." I guess her point was that, even if you have a lot of books in your portfolio or on your resume, that doesn't mean that the next one is going to be a hit or sell. I guess you can't really take anything for granted in the writing life, I would say. But I would also say, I think a lot of people, even if you don't want to write or you think I'm done, writing might not be done with you. If it's in you, it's in you. And I think it's hard to shake if that's your passion.

Debbi: I think what you're saying is absolutely true and very good advice. What are you working on now? What's next?

Liz: Oh, that's a great question. I just finished a thriller that—I hope it's thrilling. It involves families that have been good friends for a long time, and then something occurs between their children that sort of fractures those relationships. I just finished it and I'm hoping to work on revising it over the holidays.

Debbi: That sounds interesting. Sounds like it has a lot of characters in it.

Liz: It does, it does. You get to meet their moms and then the sons who are in their twenties and their siblings are in it briefly as well.

Debbi: I think multi-generational stories can be so interesting.

Liz: I think so too. And how everyone sort of relates to each other, perceives the other.

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

Liz: Oh, no. I'm just so grateful for the chance to speak with you, but I would love to offer a giveaway to your listeners of a signed copy of *The Perfect Neighborhood*. If anyone is interested in entering, maybe they could subscribe to my newsletter, which is on Substack just under my name, Liz

Alterman, and then, maybe by the end of the month, I would be happy to draw a winner and mail out a hardcover copy.

Debbi: That's fantastic. I didn't know you were on Substack. So am I.

Liz: Oh good. Okay. We'll have to follow each other.

Debbi: I'm all over the place on Substack. It's kind of ridiculous. I don't know what I'm doing there. I'm feeling my way along, so to speak.

Liz: I know. I think I may have oversubscribed. I feel every day I wake up to about 10 newsletters and they're all so interesting. I want to read everything and then comment and share if you can.

Debbi: Yeah, yeah. It's almost too much, but it's cool. There's a lot of cool stuff on there, I have to say.

Liz: Definitely.

Debbi: Well, I just want to thank you again for being here. It was wonderful talking to you and I really did enjoy your book a lot.

Liz: Oh, thank you so much and thank you for having me.

Debbi: It's my pleasure. It really, really is. And I hope you have a great weekend.

Liz: You, too.

Debbi: Thank you. I would like to also extend that wish to my listeners and watchers here on YouTube or whether you're listening on the podcast channel. Once again, thanks to my patrons and everyone out there listening. Please leave a review if you enjoyed this episode and tell all your friends. Be sure and tell all your friends, and check us out on Patreon where I have bonus episodes and ad-free content.

On that note, our next guest will be Michael Farris Smith. He has a pretty amazing story to tell, let me tell you. Until then, take care and happy reading.