

# The Crime Cafe with

## S.J. Rozan

Presented By:



**Debbi:** Hi everyone. My guest today is the author of 18 novels and 6 dozen short stories. In a word—prolific! The recipient of several awards, including the Edgar, the Anthony, the Shamus, the Nero, and the Macavity, she has also received the Japanese Maltese Falcon Award, one of the coolest titles for an award I've ever heard, and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Private Eye Writers of America. She has edited anthologies and served on the National Boards of Mystery Writers of America and Sisters in Crime, and is a former president of Private Eye Writers of America.

She speaks, lectures and teaches and runs a summer writing workshop in Italy. A former architect whose practice focused on police stations, firehouses, and zoos, she is a native New Yorker who lives in lower Manhattan. It's my great pleasure to have with me today, the author of the Bill Smith and Lydia Chin Mysteries, S.J. Rozan. Hi, how are you doing today?

**S.J.:** I'm doing great, thank you. I just got back from the gym and I have the secret of my longevity —caffeine—and so I'm fine and thank you for having me.

**Debbi:** Oh, it's my pleasure, believe me. I remember you from Bouchercon when you would do those pickup basketball games.

**S.J.:** Yeah, we would still do them if I had gone to the last couple Bouchercons. I will go to Nashville and we'll do one in Nashville.

**Debbi:** Very cool. Wonderful. I should go just for that.

**S.J.:** Absolutely, absolutely.

**Debbi:** Cool. You have had an amazing career and you still are continuing to have an amazing career. How do you keep up with all of that? Do you never sleep or do you have an assistant or ...?

**S.J.:** I have no assistant and I do sleep, but I have a strict schedule of writing. I write in the morning, every morning except the mornings when I go to the gym, and then I write as soon as I get home for the same number of hours. It seems to work. I'm doing two series now and we have yet to see whether I will collapse eventually, but even with the short stories, it does seem to work. I'm a good procrastinator, but once I sit down to work,

which is why I need a steady schedule, this is how you do it. If I were just, hmm, I think I'll work later, that doesn't happen, but I do.

I get up in the morning, I go out for a walk because I spend so much time working as an architect going to the office that I can't just roll over into the living room, which you are looking at. So I go out for a walk and then I come back and I write, and that's it. I do that until the sponge is all wrung dry, and then I do other stuff. Then I can come back in the evening sometimes, if I have the evening available.

**Debbi:** Yes, yes. I hear that about writing in the morning. I do the same thing. You have to have that kind of regimented time set aside. Otherwise it could slip away.

**S.J.:** And if you can't do the morning, you can do the afternoon. You can do whatever works for you, but you have to have a time. You have to have a "this is it." First of all, you cannot wait for the muse because the muse is busy off someplace. Has dropped the idea in your head and then has gone off and you're supposed to run with it. But you also can't depend on yourself to do things later, like when you're supposed to do sit-ups every day and you say, after lunch. Oh no, now my tummy is full. Before dinner, and then the next thing you know, it's Tuesday and you haven't. So with writing, it's the same thing.

**Debbi:** Absolutely. That is so true. What was it that inspired you to create Bill Smith and Lydia Chin, these characters?

**S.J.:** Well, Bill was the first character in my head. For years, he was sitting in there waiting to be written. He is that iconic voiceover white male private eye, and who that character is, is a character who can comment on the world because he refuses to be part of it, although given who he was born—a straight, white, healthy male—he could be part of the power structure anytime he wanted. The earliest of these guys that Bill is following in that path had been cops and left the force, had been soldiers and were court-martialed out. They had tried to be part of the system and they couldn't do it because the price of their soul was just too high. And so that was the character I wanted Bill to be.

Now, when I started writing, a lot of the white male private eyes, because there were a lot of them, had partners who were just like them, only psychotic. And what that meant is that when the private eye had something that needed to be done that was morally ambiguous, he could say, gee, you know, there's someone shooting at me up there in the hills, and he's kind of got me pinned down in my house, and I kind of wish he wasn't there. And an hour later, having said that to his sidekick over the phone, an hour later the sidekick comes along and says, done, finished, took care of it, and so the private eye doesn't have to get his hands dirty. And I thought, that is absolutely not what the form is about. The whole point of the private eye form is moral ambiguity. These are already guys who have given up their chance to be in the power structure, to go down into the dirt and deal with what goes on down there.

So I thought, okay, if Bill was going to be one of those guys, then he needed a sidekick who was not at all like him. So it had to be a woman because he was a man, somebody small because he was big, somebody young because he was middle aged. And then I thought, well, and go for it. Make her somebody from another culture, and then everything he thinks he knows can be a matter for debate. What's for breakfast when the new year happens. Everything. So that was where Lydia came from. And she is Chinese because for various reasons in my background, Chinese-Americans seemed like a culture I could learn enough about to deal with.

So Lydia was created as a sidekick for Bill, and it became very clear that she wasn't going to put up with that, that she would be a sidekick, but then he had to also be a sidekick and this was a partnership. And I thought, okay, so the first book I actually wrote was a Bill Smith book, and then I wrote a Lydia Chin book, and then my agent sent them to Keith Kahla at St. Martin's then, who was my publisher. That is, they weren't my publisher yet, but they said, okay, we love it, we'll buy it, but we want to bring the Chinese woman out first, even though it was written second because—and this was very sensible, I thought—Bill is another white male private eye.

Of course Rozan is much more brilliant than anybody else because this was how my editor talked, but if anybody's looking for a white male private eye, why would they buy one they've never heard of when they

could buy Robert Parker, Lawrence Block. But Lydia Chin is something that's not been seen before. It's an Asian-American woman private eye. So this will give readers an entry into this series, which then will alternate narrators. And I thought, fine, bring Lydia out first. Lydia will like that better anyway. So that's how they were invented. That's who they are.

**Debbi:** That is so cool. Did you have to do a lot of research to get to understand Lydia's character?

**S.J.:** Well, one of the reasons I chose it is because I had always been interested in Chinese culture. In fact, I went to Oberlin College because they had a historical connection with Asia and especially China. I took courses in Chinese music and Chinese poetry and Chinese literature, old and new, so I was kind of steeped in that anyway and I had some Chinese American friends in New York. When I decided to do Lydia, I kind of doubled down on all that. I live not far from Chinatown, and I spent a lot of time down there and I would go around with my friends and they would show me things. Sometimes they would invite me home to dinner with their mothers, who would cook, and then they would laugh at the stuff I would eat because they tell me white people don't eat that. What's wrong with you?

So I had figured I had a handle on Lydia. I did do a lot of reading of young Chinese writers, people in her generation. Now since Lydia doesn't age very much, the young Chinese writers are a whole new generation, but the people who were writing at the time, and I did some research into ancient Chinese culture, sort of how the Chinese and the Chinese diaspora developed the way it did. I still feel a little shaky, but I have to say that every time I write and I do this occasionally a Jewish character, I feel a little shaky because I was raised reform. We weren't very deep into the traditions and stuff, and so I have to sort of research that also. So I'm not intimidated by researching Lydia and anything I really don't know, I run by a friend if I'm afraid that I have gotten some reaction to something wrong or whatever. But the greatest thing that ever happened to me in these terms was I was at a book signing and a young Chinese man came up to get a book signed, and he said, I only have one question, when did you meet my mother?

**Debbi:** Wow!!

**S.J.:** Because it must mean I got the family dynamics right.

**Debbi:** That's fantastic.

**S.J.:** The family dynamics are not so different in any ethnic family, any family that lets it hang out as opposed to keeps it all tight in. But the Chinese family, the Jewish family, the Greek family, the Italian family, all of these voluble families, the Irish—the family dynamics tend to be the same, and they hang out all over the place. There's a little more among the Chinese and the Jews that has to do with the oldest son who is coddled a little more than say, among the Irish. But these are things you can learn, so I try really hard to learn them.

**Debbi:** That is fantastic. How has their relationship evolved over time?

**S.J.:** Oh, with the speed of an acorn becoming a mighty oak. Bill has been in love with Lydia since before the first book, since they met. Lydia at first didn't know this, then she wouldn't admit it, then she wouldn't admit how she felt, then she wouldn't let it matter because it was too complicated for her family and her mother and all this. Finally they have developed—I don't think this is a spoiler because it happened four books ago—but they have developed a relationship which is more than just a partnership, although she still lives at home with her mother, and he puts up with that because he has no choice. He can't make any demands. He's older than she is, and he's been around the block a couple more times, and he knows there's no point in making demands. Once you start making demands in a relationship, it's over. So he will let her set those kinds of rules, and meanwhile, it seems to be working out.

**Debbi:** Excellent. Good. Good for them. Keep it going. Tell us about your latest book, *The Mayors of New York*, and how there may be more than one of those.

**S.J.:** There are many. New York is run ... New York is governed by the Mayor, the City Council, all of this stuff. But in real life, the people who know what's going on in their neighborhoods, on the blocks, the people who get things done, those are the real mayors, and every neighborhood has one or two. The little old lady who sits in the park, or the woman who does your taxes and knows everybody and everything. I don't want to

give it all away, but those are the people who really run things. It's not the politicians. And in fact, the City Council people, if they're smart, know who the mayors are in their districts and will go to them and say, I'm interested in having this happen. What do you think? What do you think the people will think? And will enlist them.

And so those were the mayors I wanted to write about, because political power in New York has always, to a more or less extent, to a greater or lesser extent, been corrupt and been pocket lining. This particular mayor that we have right now is particularly egregious at it, but he's certainly not the first, and so things get done in New York when they're done by politicians for various 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours' reasons.

The things that get done actually for the people in the neighborhoods are done to the extent they can be by the actual mayors, and those were the people I wanted to write about. Very few of them have titles. Some of them call themselves mayors. There's a guy at my gym, everybody calls him the mayor of the gym, except he doesn't call himself that. He thinks it's ridiculous, but he is the guy who knows all the gossip and he knows who you can go to with this question and, and who you might want to avoid when you're doing that. He's the guy! Pretty much every neighborhood in New York, every street, every block has a guy. Sometimes it's a woman, but it's always the guy you go to. You go to the guy, and those were the people I wanted to celebrate in this book.

I did it by starting with the real mayor who has a problem. The real mayor is a woman, New York's first woman mayor, and her son has run away from home, and she does not want this handled by the police because being a woman, she has enough troubles. She's involved in salary negotiations with one of the police unions. New York has this odd situation where the municipal unions—police, fire, sanitation, and I believe maybe corrections—all have parity relationships. So once you negotiate one union contract, all the dominoes fall into place. So if you make a mistake in that first contract, you're really kind of screwed, and she is trying to negotiate that first contract. And so she doesn't want the police to handle this, she doesn't want publicity for this, and she can't be a hard ass with the police contract if the police are looking for her missing son.

She's pretty sure that he ran away, not something bad happened, but still she wants him found so she hires Bill and Lydia. And to do what she needs, what the actual elected mayor needs, they have to go to the other mayors and that's what happens. My favorite thing about New York is all the neighborhoods and the ethnic food and the people and their accents and all that stuff, and I got to write a lot of that in this book. I enjoyed myself immensely.

**Debbi:** That's great. It's a great concept. I love it.

**S.J.:** Thank you.

**Debbi:** What advice would you give to anyone who is interested in writing for a living?

**S.J.:** Have another source of income. No, it's really your expectations. Expectations is kind of the wrong word, but your lifestyle has to be on the low end. There are some very wealthy writers. I am not one, and there are very few of them. You might hit it really big, but you probably won't. What you're looking at here is one of two rooms. That's all I have, and I've had this place for 40 years now. If you're willing to live low on the hog as it were, and if you're willing to work really hard and take ideas as they come along. I had an idea that came along in the form of a writing partner. This happened to me twice who said, boy, I have such a good idea for a book, but I'm not a narrative writer. What do you think? And rather than saying, no, I do my own, both times I thought, you know, that's actually a great idea. I could write a book.

The first time, the publisher folded after two books. This time, we're hoping that doesn't happen. I have a book coming out in April. That's the start of a new series from Soho. We don't think Soho is folding. Of course, the other guys were an imprint of Penguin, so we didn't think they were folding either. But you have to do freelance work. You have to write short stories. You have to do anything that comes along And so it's kind of a chaotic life, which may be why my apartment looks like this, but it's not.

I talk about how regimented I am. I write in the morning every morning, but I'm writing something different. Right now, I'm working on two different essays plus a short story I was shaping up last night when I was



at a concert, plus this novel, plus I'm supposed to talk about the next novel. You have to be willing to do that and so be nimble is what I'm saying. But it is not impossible to earn a living as a writer. I think the focus when you start should be just on producing publishable work and then getting it published. Not thinking in terms of how to make money but getting your chops together. And I would say that is the thing you really need to do most is get it together as a writer.

**Debbi:** Yes, that is absolutely true. And I think that's a message that needs to get out a bit more, because there's so much emphasis now on, use this social media, do that, do this, do that. That's not going to make up for bad writing.

**S.J.:** It's not. There is a lot of advice on how to find an agent and on packaging yourself, but the agent has nothing to sell if you don't have a finished, good novel and the package will be empty.

**Debbi:** That's right.

**S.J.:** So you need to focus on the writing, especially most people who are starting out aren't in a position to do it full time. You have a couple of hours a day, which is what I had when I started, and there are hours when normal people are out with their friends at the bar and I was home writing. But those are hours you need to be writing. You need to be focusing on the work. Social media and all that stuff can come later. There's a big gap ... people may not know that, but there's a big gap between when you sell the work. First of all, when you find the agent and when the agent sells the work, and then when you sell the work and when the work comes out. That's when you do the social media stuff and all that. But you don't focus on your brand until you have something to put the brand on. And that thing is the most important. And so I would say just write, write, write, write, write, write, write, write, write, write, write. Who is it? Gladwell says a million words before you're any good. I don't know if that's true, but a lot of words. A lot of words. You just have to keep doing it. And once it's done and you consider it finished and you're proud of it, then you can go about the rest of the thing.

**Debbi:** Amen to all of that. Amen. Totally. You are so right. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?

**S.J.:** Yeah. I've been reading some short stories for a contest lately, and I must say a lot of them are really good. There's a lot of really good writers out there. Those of you who are really good writers and you don't know it, I think you probably are. Just keep at it because, A.I. and all this nonsense aside, the world will still need writers. It'll need us and there will always be a place for a storyteller, and that's what we are. So tell the story that intrigues you most, and just tell it and tell it and tell it.

**Debbi:** Oh, that is just so fantastic. I love hearing people say things like that. Thank you. Thank you for that message. And thank you again for being here, for being on and talking to us and giving us advice.

**S.J.:** Thank you for having me. I do love to talk.

**Debbi:** Well, I love to listen.

**S.J.:** It's a solitary occupation, so it's nice to be able to talk about it.

**Debbi:** I get it. I totally get it. Yes, it is nice to talk. To all you listeners and to my patrons, please, thank you for your support. Thank you very much and please leave a review if you enjoyed the episode. Also, check us out on Patreon. You'll find my books there among other things, as well as ad-free episodes, bonus episodes, et cetera. So until next time, when our guest will be Jeremy Scott, take care and happy reading.