

# The Crime Cafe with

## Kim Hays

Presented By:



**Debbi:** Hi everyone. Today's guest is a dual citizen of the US and Switzerland. She's also the author of the Polizei Bern Series, featuring two detectives Giuliana Linder and Renzo Donatelli. Her work has been shortlisted for many awards and she has two books out in this series with a third coming next year, which is coming very quickly. It's my pleasure to have with me today, Kim Hays. Kim, hi. How are you doing?

**Kim:** I'm great, and thanks for having me.

**Debbi:** Well, it's my pleasure, believe me. It must be late there where you are. Switzerland, right?

**Kim:** Yes. Here in Bern, it's nine o'clock, but not too late. My eyes are wide awake.

**Debbi:** Still functional at nine. Very good.

**Kim:** Exactly.

**Debbi:** Good. You have a great website, by the way. I really love all the descriptions of Switzerland you have under the information tab about Bern in Switzerland.

**Kim:** Oh, thank you. I try to put in a lot of sort of strange and interesting facts, like that the Swiss flag is the only square flag besides the Vatican's flag. Every other flag in the world is rectangular. This is the sort of thing that nobody knows and why should they, but it's fun.

**Debbi:** Wow! I didn't know that. That's very interesting. So what was it that inspired you to write about the subjects that you picked, which are very topical subjects by the way. Pesticides and child labor?

**Kim:** Yes, and in the third book, I have homophobia as a topic too, so that's certainly ... I have a lesbian activist who's killed in a hit-and-run, but I realize you haven't read that one. I have, of course, so I won't go into that. You know, I love to research and I like to learn, as you know most writers do, as most people do. So I guess I'm lucky that things turn out to be topical, but often I decide to put something in a book that I want to learn more about. I used to write articles here for a Swiss language magazine, and so I had done a short article on organic farmers, and when

I started thinking about writing a mystery, I already started thinking about what background do I want to give it? And immediately I thought, well, what do I want to research? I knew that I would like to do more research on organic farming, and then of course, I had to think of a reason for an organic farmer to get murdered.

The second book, which involves a really terrible scandal in Switzerland—child labor—where children were supposedly fostered out, but really placed on farms almost as slaves from a very young age, into the late 1960s, early 70s. This was something I saw a museum exhibition on because it was just starting. The scandal was just starting. As late as the early 21st century, people were starting to be aware of it. And once I saw that, I thought it would be something very interesting to talk about. And certainly, one could easily imagine how murders or violence might occur as a result of something like that.

**Debbi:** Yes, absolutely. That's astonishing, I have to say. Linder is a really interesting character because she's always automatically picking up clues as she goes, and kind of filing them into her head, which is something I don't see a lot in mystery writing, the way she picks up these little details and kind of narrates them to you. I thought that it's an interesting approach to bringing the reader into the mystery solving part of it.

**Kim:** Well, thank you. I'm glad. I mean, obviously I don't want her to be a psychic, you know? So the clues have to be there for us readers. I mean, I'm also a reader as well as a writer, so a mystery reader. Readers want to get the clues, see where the clue is coming from, but it sounds like you're saying that it works. They are police procedurals, and I think that procedure and process is really interesting to me. In that sense, I think I'm more Swiss than the Swiss, or as Swiss as the Swiss since I've lived here 35 years. I think I really want to understand myself. I mean, I want to know how the crime gets solved, and I think that's what people who read police procedurals want to know. They want to see the process. I hope, anyway.

**Debbi:** I think the police are very attentive to that sort of thing. I think that's the thing. You really are creating sort of the experience of being a police officer or a detective, rather than a reader of something that is being solved, if that makes any sense.

**Kim:** Well, good. No, I'm very glad that you felt as a reader, that you were able to put yourself into that. I think something that's also important to me, because I'm interested in moral dilemmas. It's in part what I did my dissertation in sociology on, was to do with moral dilemmas. I'm not a police woman or a police person, but I think you must constantly have moral dilemmas unless you're really not a very thoughtful person. And so I think I want to show how the detectives also have to think, and worry even that they might have made a mistake.

**Debbi:** Exactly. Yeah. There's a lot of thought that goes into it because the consequences are so great, potentially.

**Kim:** Exactly. Yeah.

**Debbi:** How did you become so familiar with police procedure? Did you contact the police, talk to police officers, do other types of research?

**Kim:** I did contact the police, and I have gone to the police station here. The very one. I give the real address, the real one that I talk about in my books. But I'm incredibly lucky that I live in a little, sort of a horseshoe cul-de-sac, and I have a very high-ranking police woman, who's higher up than a homicide detective by now, as a neighbor, just across the playground from me.

**Debbi:** How convenient!

**Kim:** It's incredibly convenient. So she reads my manuscripts, and I trust her in that she tells me, look, if there are some small things in here that aren't exactly what we do, it's artistic license. You know, it is fiction. But if you write something that would make any Swiss police person fall over laughing or that's egregious, that's really wrong, she fixes it for me.

**Debbi:** That's awesome.

**Kim:** I mean, I make them have a much bigger cafeteria in the building than they really have. So in that kind of thing, she doesn't correct me. It doesn't have to be accurate, but she doesn't let me make mistakes. And, also, I ask her constant questions.

**Debbi:** Wow. Well, that's good. That's great that you have somebody there.

**Kim:** So lucky.

**Debbi:** That is fantastic.

**Kim:** And a very nice person.

**Debbi:** Oh, that's cool. That's always good.

**Kim:** Yes.

**Debbi:** What are your plans for the series? Do you anticipate writing a lot more books, or do you have plans just to continue writing them as they come to you?

**Kim:** You know, it's interesting you should ask me that. The fourth one is already written. The third one is, and of course that sounds impressive, but in fact, you have to be ahead. People who try to bring out a book a year, and an incredible number of very good mystery writers do, this takes a lot of work and I'm going to have four, and then I'm going to take a break. So people will get through number four, and I'm not sure that number five will come out a year later. I shouldn't confess this, but I haven't confessed it to my publisher yet, but I need a little break.

**Debbi:** That's understandable.

**Kim:** But I do think there's a lot more that can be said about this couple of detectives. They aren't a couple, but as you know, this is a meta story over the series, which is that the older woman police detective and her assistant, who's about 12 years younger—she's in her forties and he's in his thirties—they are very attracted to each other through working together, and they're both married with kids. So this is a big struggle for them.

**Debbi:** I was going to say this is a really interesting aspect of the books also that I wanted to get into. What made you choose that particular relationship for them?

**Kim:** Well, it's funny because what I first most wanted to do was give them both families. I love many police series with a loner detective, and of course, there are a lot of them, or detectives with alcohol problems or

whose partners have left them, and because it's so difficult to live with a police man or woman, which I can imagine. But I wanted, like Donna Leon's Guido Brunetti, I don't know if you know her series set in Venice.

**Debbi:** Yes.

**Kim:** You know he has a lovely family and they're very important to him in his life and even in his conversations and when he is solving mysteries. I wanted both of my detectives to have families, but you know sometimes things just develop themselves. I didn't know at the beginning that I was going to do this, but as I had them working together, and it's what happens in real life. Two people who work very closely together, whose partners can't quite ... in the case of police, you're not even allowed to really necessarily talk to your partner about exactly what you're doing, they become attracted to each other. So, of course, I had great fun having this younger, and as you know, very attractive man, become attracted to his 12 years older boss, I thought, you know what they say? What's sauce for the gander is sauce for the goose, or something like that. I figured, this happens with younger women, so hey!

**Debbi:** I found it very believable and very interesting. I like the relationship. I think it's great, part of what keeps me reading the series along with just the fantastic storytelling.

**Kim:** Thank you. I'm so pleased that you enjoyed them.

**Debbi:** I do. I do. You are both a Swiss and US citizen. I thought that was interesting. But you've also lived in Canada and Sweden?

**Kim:** Yes, and the fact that I started in Sweden and I live in Switzerland, two SW countries is a complete coincidence. I didn't just decide I needed to get the set. I did a year after I graduated from college where I actually went and worked for a while in a factory in Sweden and lived there and traveled there. I still have good Swedish friends, but that had nothing to do with later meeting my husband who's Swiss, and is actually four years younger than I am—not 12, thank goodness. But, anyway, as you may know because I wrote about it on my blog, we met on a park bench in France.

**Debbi:** That's so cool.

**Kim:** So nothing to do.

**Debbi:** But you're not going to Swahili.

**Kim:** No.

**Debbi:** I noticed your bio said that you've held a wide variety of jobs. I have also held a wide variety of jobs. I have a theory about that. I get the feeling that holding a wide variety of jobs tends to inform your writing in various ways, due to the sheer diversity of people you deal with when you take different types of jobs. What are your thoughts on that? Has the background informed your writing?

**Kim:** Yes, that's interesting. I would say absolutely. I think that living in lots of different countries ... I also grew up in Puerto Rico, although my parents were outsiders. I think the experience of being a foreigner, both in Puerto Rico, even in Canada, because it was during the Vietnam War, and here it does make you observe in a certain way, and it does also give you a certain distance, which then makes you into an observer, hopefully not too much of an observer. I've lived here for 35 years. I feel very Swiss, but as far as the jobs go, I think also when you change jobs, if you have to do it too often, it's nerve wracking, but you have to observe to adapt. So I think a lot of it has to do with learning to feel comfortable in different situations, and I somehow think that that informs writing too. That you have a distance and yet you can be close as well, hopefully.

**Debbi:** Yes. Learning to become part of a new community, so to speak.

**Kim:** And yet often never quite belonging, which is difficult, but at the same time, makes you more of an observer, I think.

**Debbi:** Yes, because I've done quite a bit of moving around myself when I was younger, and it does definitely create a distance of sorts from people. But at the same time, it's not like you don't want to be there or be part of it, but at the same time, you're just sort of looking at it and going, okay, that's what happens here. I should be doing these things, or something like that.

**Kim:** Yes. And sometimes let's face it, we're talking about it like it's so educational, but sometimes, especially when you're 13, 14, depending on when you move, it can be extremely difficult. And at some ages, it can teach you something about bullying, which as you know is a topic in one of my books, so you learn a lot of interesting things that could become part of, because being the outsider isn't always easy.

**Debbi:** It is not, but sometimes we need somebody's point of view as an outsider to wake us up to certain things. Who are your favorite authors?

**Kim:** Well, I do read other things besides mysteries, very happily. I like science fiction, I like fantasy. I like what gets called literary fiction, although I think plenty of mysteries are literary. I like some romances, so I read a lot of things, but I'll talk about my favorite mystery. I guess I'd rather talk about my favorite mystery writers.

**Debbi:** Cool.

**Kim:** One of my favorite mystery writers is Josephine Tey, who goes back to the thirties, forties, fifties. She was Scottish, but British, and to me, she's somebody who writes about people. Her books are novels. They are not thrillers, and I don't think my books are thrillers. I think they have suspense, but they're not thrillers. She focuses very much on the personalities of her characters, the baddies and the goodies, and I think she's great.

Another person I like, as I mentioned, is Donna Leon. I think I like her very much and she's influenced me because she writes about a detective with a family living in a country where Venice in her case and in my case, Bern, they're almost characters in the book. The setting is so important. The setting shapes what happens. And I love Michael Connolly. To me, if you write police procedurals, Michael Connolly is your God, because he's just so brilliant.

**Debbi:** He is good. He is excellent. And Donna Leon, I love her books. I love the Venice setting. Having been to Venice, it's like I'm revisiting when I read it.

**Kim:** Yes. I mean, I'm no expert, but she seems to describe it so, so brilliantly.



**Debbi:** She does, and the stories are great. Let's see. What advice would you give to anyone who's interested in writing for a living?

**Kim:** I guess I should preface that by talking about myself, because I was just phenomenally lucky. I did not start trying to write novels. I have written articles freelance, but I could never have supported myself doing that. I did a lot of research for them, and I once figured out that I was probably making about \$5 an hour for the time it took me to research and write my freelance articles. Not money you can live on, especially not in Switzerland, the most expensive country in the world. I would say in my case, I didn't start writing till my 50s and I basically phased out of my job and my husband supported me. It's that simple. I mean, why would I pretend? I couldn't have done it. I ended up writing full-time and I couldn't have done it without someone to support me. But I guess most people don't have that.

So I guess what I would say, though, is I would recommend to people if they wanted to have a career as a writer to get a part-time job that they—and hopefully this is dreaming—but that they really enjoy, because it doesn't do you any good to be miserable and bored. Try to find a part-time job, hopefully doing some other kind of writing like proposal writing. I wrote proposals a lot. That I did make money. Funding proposals for nonprofits, and then just do the best you can. When you aren't at your job, write as much as you can. So few people can support themselves with writing and certainly not with writing fiction or poetry. I mean, I would never discourage someone from trying.

When I think about this, I just want to mention that I knew he's dead, but I knew well a poet C. K. Williams. He was a good friend of my uncle. He was a Pulitzer Prize winner and he won a National Book Award and he wrote poetry, and I know from my uncle that until he was about at 60, he got a job teaching writing at Princeton. I bet that he was able, and he was very successful. But in the early days, first his father supported him and then his brother. They both worked for companies; they were in industry. They just happily supported him. You know, it was like the days of the Renaissance when you had a patron. I think it's a very touching story that instead of saying, get off your butt and go get a job, and what is this poetry garbage, they both accepted—first the father and then his little

brother—that Charlie was gonna be a great poet, which he turned out to be, and that they were going to support him.

**Debbi:** I think that's wonderful.

**Kim:** Isn't that touching now? How many people are that lucky? But you know, it's nothing to be ashamed of. Think of all the famous Renaissance painters, who had their Medicis to support them.

**Debbi:** That's right. Yeah. It's a tough business, that's for sure.

**Kim:** A tough business

**Debbi:** In terms of making money, no matter what anybody out there says. It is a tough business. Is there anything you'd like to add before we finish up?

**Kim:** Well I guess I'd like to mention the names of the three books.

**Debbi:** Please do.

**Kim:** Although I think you did, but I realize that some people are listening to this on a podcast, but I thought for the people who were watching it, I could hold up the books. Can I do that?

**Debbi:** Excellent. Please do.

**Kim:** Okay. So the first book, which is about the organic farmers, is called *Pesticide* because obviously organic farmers do not use pesticides. And that is the first one. It's the one with the cabbage on it.

**Debbi:** I love that cover.

**Kim:** And the second one ... I do too. I think it's great. I have to say Jennifer Dow is the name of the person who designs my covers, and I think she's brilliant. The second book, *Sons and Brothers* is very much about a father, a man in his seventies who is beaten up and drowned at the beginning, and his son is suspected, his estranged son. So it is very much about sons and fathers and brothers, some sisters too.

And the third book, which hasn't come out yet, has a bicycle on it because a woman is killed right at the beginning. It's not a spoiler in a hit and run when she's on her bicycle. So that is how the murder occurs, and at first they don't know it is a murder, so I have given that away but you find that out. You figure with my two detectives involved, it's probably going to become a murder.

**Debbi:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Kim:** So there they are.

**Debbi:** A bit of a hint there, a bit of a spoiler. I mean, you're reading a mystery, right?

**Kim:** Yes, exactly.

**Debbi:** Well, I just want to thank you so much for being here and talking with us about this, because your books really are great and I hope that everyone will check them out.

**Kim:** Thank you. I'm so pleased that you enjoyed them, and of course, I hope people do. That's why you write books when you're a writer. You want people to be entertained by them.

**Debbi:** That's it. Amen to that. So, on that note, I'll just say, if you're listening, please leave a review if you enjoyed this episode, and tell all your friends about the podcast, and your family and the guy next door and his family ... and I'll stop there. So next time, my guest will be Jason Kapcala. Until then, happy reading and Happy New Year. Hello, 2024! Be seeing you!