

The Crime Cafe with

Melissa Yi

Presented By:



Debbi: Hi everyone. My guest today is a doctor who studied emergency medicine and works in emergency rooms, I presume. She has received many accolades for her work, including a Derringer Award for best short story of 2023, and finalist for the Silver Falchion for best thriller. She also writes medical humor - which I find fascinating and want to know more about - and has won speculative fiction awards as well. It's my pleasure to have with me today Melissa Yi. Hi, Melissa. Thanks so much for being with us today.

Melissa: Oh my goodness. Thank you so much for having me.

Debbi: Well, it's my pleasure to have you on, believe me, and your background just fascinates me. I used to be an EMT and my husband was a firefighter. He's retired now, so I can thoroughly appreciate the whole hectic thing involving emergency rooms, what that must be like. Do you still practice medicine?

Melissa: I do. Not as much as I did, but I still like to keep my hand in.

Debbi: Excellent.

Melissa: I just have to say good for you guys, because now you can sleep. The nights are so hard.

Debbi: Yeah, yeah, for sure. Yeah. I remember getting up in the middle of the night to go on calls and it was like, whoa! I mean, sometimes those five in the morning ones were the worst, right before the dawn. I would get into the back of the ambulance and would just feel nauseous. I couldn't explain that.

Melissa: Oh, that's because that's a very physical job also. For me, I would say 3:00, 4:00 AM is tough because you've been working so long, but there's still so much to go. To me, 5:00, 6:00 people are starting to wake up. Normal people are alive at this time, it's not so bad. You might start to get some sort of backup, but the middle of the night, really, you are it, and I just find that very tough and very bad for circadian rhythms.

Debbi: Oh, yeah. Yeah, really. I was much younger then, so I could adjust to it a little more easily, I suppose. But I've always been sort of in awe of people who go to medical school, because I went to law school and the med

school was right down the street from me. And I was like, wow, I'm so overwhelmed with work, but what if I were in med school? Oh my God! You guys have to study all these bones, all these muscles, all these nerves. It just amazes me.

Melissa: I think law school is very cognitively taxing, though. I think there's so much involved, so that it's a different kind of stress.

Debbi: Very much so.

Melissa: Medicine is really holding people's lives in your hands. That's the stressful part of medicine.

Debbi: Yes, yes. That to me has always been ... you guys are really in there, doing stuff, fixing people's medical problems, things like that. What is it that inspired you to create Dr. Hope Sze?

Melissa: Very good.

Debbi: Thank you.

Melissa: You know, for me, honestly, there were a few things. I'm from Ontario in Canada, and the medical system was relatively good when I went to medical school. People probably don't know this, but in Canada, the federal government has the money and then they give the money to the different provinces, and when you finish medical school, you get matched anywhere in the country. You don't have to apply everywhere, but a lot of people apply across the board so you could end up in Newfoundland to BC sort of thing. I ended up in Montreal, Quebec, which is actually not far from Ottawa, my hometown. It's only a two hour drive away. But for me, the medical system was mind-blowingly different because it's a different province.

First of all, the nurses had been on strike because they were amongst the lowest paid, so the morale was not good. They also had to draw all their own blood; there was no phlebotomist to do that. And I was like, wow, that's strange. Then they started coming onto me, okay, well you do the electrocardiogram. I'm like, oh, okay. I didn't realize that. I thought you were a nurse, sorry. She said, well, I am a nurse, and I said, oh, okay, but you don't do electrocardiograms? She said, not on this floor. So there

were all these regulations that ended up ... Everything was being dumped on everybody, basically and it was really tough and for patients to just be waiting in the emergency room, and even if you're admitted, you still have to wait for days, maybe.

Everything was so stressful that subconsciously, I think it made me think of murder. I think also that, for me, I just wanted to be able to battle something that wasn't disease, that wasn't bacteria or viruses, to have some sort of thing that you could physically fight and find justice. So in my head, I was like, wouldn't it be great if there was a physician, a resident doctor like myself, who saves lives but also fights crime? And so that's when Dr. Hope Sze was born.

Debbi: Oh, that is so cool. I see you have a kind of a separate subseries perhaps in - what is it called - the Hope Sze Seven Deadly Sins? Is that an offshoot?

Melissa: Yes, yes, yes. The first series is finished. Those are nine novels, and the difference is - and these ones obviously are about the Seven Deadly Sins - and they also have a supernatural element. Again, I just don't know how my mind works, but one of the main characters, Hope's best friend, basically just turned around and said, I can talk to ghosts. And I was like, what? You never mentioned this before, but Tori, she doesn't talk to people a lot. She keeps things very close to her chest, and so it took like seven or nine months before she told Hope that she could do this. So the last book, *White Lightning*, there are ghosts in it. This next series will just unleash the supernatural as well as medicine and thrillers, so just mashing everything up.

Debbi: That sounds fascinating to me. I love the idea of mixing these kinds of different genre elements in - supernatural, paranormal, mystery, medical thriller. Fantastic. I think that's great.

Melissa: Well, I'm glad that you're so flexible. I think for some people it would just be a big no, but for me, that's what makes it exciting, to be able to incorporate that.

Debbi: Exactly. I love that actually. I just think it's fantastic. Really, I love when people mix genres up. I mean, there are other books out there that I am wild about because they bring in other elements from other genres for

that very reason. You obviously have a lot of professional experience working in the ER and so forth and in medicine, but are there areas that you still need to research when you write a novel?

Melissa: All the time! Oh my goodness, yes, for sure. The first book in the Seven Deadly Sin Series is *Wrath*. It's called *The Shapes of Wrath*, and it's set in the operating room. I was like, hey, everybody. It's been a long time since I have been on surgery or anesthesia. Can you help me? And so there are a group of women physicians who are wonderful, wonderful, and so they stepped forward to talk to me. And I'm just like, thank God there are all these people who are smarter than me, can just fact check me the whole time, and in fact, each other. Everybody has their own area of expertise, and one of them would be say well, if it were a patent peramenovali (sp?), and then I'm saying, no, no, that would cause this instead, and it will be a whole discussion, and I would just say the final answer is ...?

Debbi: Oh goodness. So where is it that you would ultimately see your series of books going? This latest one?

Melissa: Are you asking me which ...?

Debbi: What's your plan? Do you have a number?

Melissa: It's actually interesting to me because with my previous series, I would just let my subconscious go and somehow tie things together, which was pretty interesting. But now the Seven Deadly Sins so that's very helpful to give me something more concrete. And from the very beginning actually, I was really attracted to the idea of doing forensic psychiatry, again which I don't have a lot of knowledge of, and a doctor in North Bay asked if I would want to visit? I'm a forensic psychiatrist and you can stay at my house. Yes, I would like that very much.

Debbi: Wow.

Melissa: So I thought about it a lot, and you probably have heard of National Novel Writing Month, where you try before write a book in a month. And so last year what I did was I tried to write a little bit of all the sins, or of the ones that I hadn't done yet, to figure out what I was going to do for each book. I ended up deciding that I was going to do *Pride* last and that it was going

to be forensic psychiatry. So the difference with this series is I know that some of the players from the previous novels in the series will come out and be involved in the final book,

Debbi: And what are you working on now?

Melissa: Sloth.

Debbi: Sloth. Yes.

Melissa: February 1st, I have Gluttony, which is *Sugar and Vice*, and that one was so much fun because I love to eat. It's one of my big passions in life. I am somebody who, like strangers have commented on my eating. So for example, Montreal is French and has a very strong French culture. I was at a French restaurant there, and a woman came over and said, oh, I just wanted to tell you that my husband and I bake, and we were watching you eat the bread, and I told him, if everybody ate bread like that woman, we would never go out of business. Someone has offered to share a dessert with me, because I was just like, what do I choose in the restaurant? Well, do you want to try mine and then you'll know? And I was like, yes. I would absolutely love to do that. My husband, who's an introvert is just like, this is so strange, whereas I'm like, this is good. Thank you so much for sharing your dessert with me.

I really love meeting people and having adventures, even mini adventures, so Gluttony was great. It was actually a little bit more work for me because I'm like, well, what am I going to do? If I could tell a little story, Debbi?

Debbi: Sure. Absolutely.

Melissa: I always wanted to go to this restaurant called Onoir with the letter O, where there's no light. Noir is black in French, and it's in complete darkness so you don't see your food, you don't see your companions, you don't see the servers. The people who work there, their sight is limited, so whether they're completely legally blind or close to, and it's a big adjustment to go in there. So I was just like, well, I'm doing Gluttony now is my chance to go to Onoir so I did. I didn't end up incorporating that one in my book, but that was a very interesting experience. Just how anxious I

was to step behind the curtain where I couldn't see was very strange. So the server was totally fine calling out and whistling and using echolocation to walk, and of course knew the layout, no problem, whereas I was lingering behind. Where am I going in this black room? You can pick surprise dishes if you want. They'll just surprise you and you don't know what you're going to be eating that night. I'm a bit of a control freak, so I did choose my food, but to tell you the truth, when I finished eating, I was like, well, I don't know if I got it all. No one can see me, so I just used my fingers to finish it off. It's all good.

Debbi: Well that's a very interesting story and a very interesting restaurant, it sounds like. Boy!

Melissa: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. That's the best thing is that you can research cool stuff when you're writing.

Debbi: They should call you the Extroverted Omnivore

Melissa: Oh, I love it. Thank you.

Debbi: That'll be my nickname for you now

Melissa: Thank you. Yeah. I love it.

Debbi: Awesome. Who are your favorite authors? Who inspires you as a writer?

Melissa: Oh, you know, I have a ton of favorite authors. I do have a YA that's going to be coming out, so I have been reading a little bit more. So at ThrillerFest, which is one of the awards that I have won with the BIPOC Scholarship to ThrillerFest, I met Maureen Johnson and I am just re-listening to her books now and she makes me laugh all the time. So right now I'm on *The Box in the Woods*. Dragons were in *Sugar and Vice*, so I picked up Robin Hobb and I love her so much. She writes sets of trilogies basically, and her world is so complex, it made me understand the world as well as the characters and everything like her description of gentrification, for example. Yes, that is what happens to artists who get pushed out and everything, but in her case it was people who live in the trees and stuff like that. It was beautifully, beautifully done.

And then for mysteries, because this is a crime, Maureen Johnson is a mystery author, but I'll just say I always love Kris Nelscott, Jim Dresden and Dana Stabenow. You cannot go wrong with those three for me.

Debbi: Awesome. Sounds good. If someone made a movie or TV show based on your books, who would you imagine playing Hope? Who would you want to play Hope?

Melissa: Okay. Okay. I just have to tell you. We have a play.

Debbi: Yeah, I was going to say. What's the play about? I want to know about that play.

Melissa: Okay. So I do have somebody playing Hope and her name is Stefanie Hitgano and she is lovely. Just seeing the emotion play across her face is very moving, and it's so interesting to see somebody else personify the person who's basically me in residency. So I love that very much. So I know that the vast majority of people have not seen her act, but if you want to, you could come to Ottawa February 8th to 10th, and then you would be able to get a glimpse of her talent.

Debbi: Wow.

Melissa: So, we did have another actor play her as well, who was very talented. So I've been so lucky to have had people bring Hope to life. Oh, and I also have audiobooks and so couple of people read *The Shapes of Wrath*.

Debbi: Oh, that's fantastic. That's great. Isn't it something amazing when you hear other people say the lines of the characters you create, and maybe it's a little bit different, but it's more awesome than you imagined it? That's the way it's been for me anyhow.

Melissa: Yes. Congratulations to you. Yeah, absolutely. I have to say before this, I did not understand the role of the director as well in it. So, I find it just interesting because I don't think as visually as I could, so it's also humbling to see the just physical shape that it can take, which is very beautiful. So hats off to Micah.

Debbi: All right. Excellent. What sort of humor books do you write? You write medical humor books? I'm intrigued by that.

Melissa: Okay. Yes. Cool. So I write for *The Medical Post* and that ends up being essays that are less than a thousand words, mostly quite often funny and quite often just odd things that happened to me in the emergency department. And then I just gathered them together into books. So a book called *The Most Unfeeling Doctor in the World and Other True Tales from the Emergency Room* was an Amazon bestseller when it came out. People really enjoyed hearing about it. But actually just as an aside, there are also people who read it who didn't enjoy it of course, but in general, people just thought it was interesting.

Debbi: Well it sounds really interesting. Yeah. Sounds great. Somebody should do that for lawyers

Melissa: Yes. Oh, did you end up practicing law then?

Debbi: Oh yeah, I did for 10 years, yeah.

Melissa: Oh, good for you.

Debbi: Yeah, I even had my own office for a while.

Melissa: Awesome.

Debbi: The stories I could tell! The stories other people could tell. It's amazing. It's really amazing.

Melissa: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well I'm going to tell you two things. So a bestseller sort of side by side with me was an EMT. And of course, you know, Scott Turow and John Grisham and everybody, so go crazy with your lawyer and EMT and whatever else stories. There's a market for them. People want to know.

Debbi: Oh boy. Well I really have to get in touch with some of my husband's friends then, because I'm sure that they have lots of stories. I was going to ask you something. Oh, advice. What advice would you give to anybody who would like to write for a living?

Melissa: This is a question I ask everybody who makes a life in the creative arts. I find it fascinating because for me, I feel like I took the correct way, which was that I wanted to be able to support myself and I didn't trust that

writing or the arts could do that for me. So that's why honestly I went into medicine that I just was like, I'm going to be my own patron of the arts. I am going to be able to always put a roof over my own head and over my children's head. It was very important to me. Even though my boyfriend who became my husband had said he would support me, I just wanted that independence. and it also gave me a lot of stories so it ended up working out.

The advice I would give to other people would be, one of the things that nobody told me that I wish they had told me was that it's very important to make friends. You know, people always tell you, write a good book. Yes, write a good book. Market your book, market your book, but also other people lift you up and I do it too. It's not that you're trying to exclude anybody because I love to include people, but if you've worked with somebody and you know them and they're a good writer and they're easy to deal with, it's just so much easier to reach out and be like, Hey, I know this project. Do you want to join me, or do you want to be on my podcast or on my YouTube channel? Whatever it is, it's just a lot easier.

So if you are at home and you're an introvert and you're writing, that's good because you're honing your craft, but it's also good if you can join an organization, go to a conference. I know people moving away from Twitter, Blue Sky, whatever, if you can make friends, that is key. You will help rise together.

Debbi: Absolutely. I agree with you 100%. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?

Melissa: I will, I guess I'll just plug one more time that the book that's coming out is called [Sugar and Vice](#), and the play that's coming out is called [Terminally Ill](#).

Debbi: Boy, I want to go to Ottawa now and see this thing.

Melissa: Yes, please. We'd love to have you

Debbi: You guys have to record it and put it up on YouTube or something, maybe. Or Vimeo somewhere?

Melissa: We need the money.

Debbi: Yeah, yeah. Ask for money on admission. Yeah, no problem with that. You can do that. Somebody can. I really appreciate your being here today. Melissa, thanks so much.

Melissa: Thank you so much for having me, Debbi. I really appreciate it. And keep reading and writing, everybody.

Debbi: Alrighty. Well on that note, thank you everyone for listening. And just want to say if you're watching this on YouTube, please hit like. If you're listening to it in the podcast, please leave a review. They help! And take a look at our Patreon page. We are a Patreon-supported podcast and I'm very grateful to my patrons, believe me. And so on that note, our next guest will be Leanne Sparks. Until then, take care and happy reading.