

A CONVERSATION WITH ELLEN KIRSCHMAN about *THE RIGHT WRONG THING*

TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF, HOW AND WHEN YOU STARTED WRITING.

I've been writing stories and poems since I was a child. I got a lot of praise but no encouragement to take up a career that wouldn't pay the rent. So I turned to psychology. What I love best about being a psychologist, especially a police psychologist, are the stories. What I like least is the responsibility, the crises, and the record-keeping.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE YOUR NOVEL?

The stories I heard working with police kept knocking on the inside of my head asking to be told. That led to my first non-fiction book *I Love a Cop: What Police Families Need to Know*. After two more non-fiction books, I grew tired of the research and thought it had to be easier making things up. It wasn't. In fact, it was way more difficult.

Another source of inspiration is policing itself. There is no more complex job than police work. I use each mystery as an opportunity to explore an emotional issue facing current law enforcement. In my first mystery, the issue was police suicide. In *The Right Wrong Thing*, the issue is what happens to an officer who accidentally shoots and kills someone. In my WIP, the issue is the strain on investigators of internet child pornography.

Along those same lines, writing mysteries allows me to explore the hidden complexities and emotional costs of being a clinician.

HOW DID YOU USE YOUR LIFE EXPERIENCE OR PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND TO ENRICH YOUR STORY?

After nearly thirty years of working with cops, fire fighters, and other first responders, I continue to amass a treasure trove of stories that need to be told. I have first-hand experience (countless ride-alongs, three trips to the FBI academy, and so on) to draw on, plus a small army of cops and psychologists with whom I consult, who are willing to read early drafts. Part of the fun of writing mysteries is payback. I have a chance to settle some scores with cops who treated me poorly, my fellow psychologists, and a few ex-husbands.

ANYTHING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IN YOUR NOVEL?

A lot. Dot's love interest Frank is an avatar for my husband. Anyone who knows my husband can see this. There are tons of autobiographical pieces in *Burying Ben* and *The Right Wrong Thing*, things I witnessed, clients I treated etc. Many of the cops and psychologists are composites of people I have worked with. In fact, there was an online debate at one police department with cops trying to guess who Officer Eddie Rimbauer was based on. Dot's parents are not autobiographical. Dot's fictional father was a Berkeley student activist in the 60's, my father was a card-carrying Republican. Some parts of being Jewish, female, and a psychologist working in law enforcement are exaggerated for literary purposes, but definitely autobiographical.

The setting for *RWT* is in the Silicon Valley where I currently live and did a great deal of work. The fictional community of Kenilworth closely resembles cities in Silicon Valley. I don't use real names (except for the big cities like San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose) because I still have working relationships there.

WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE OR MOST SYMPATHETIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?

My protagonist, Dot Meyerhoff, operates off the beaten path and does some stupid stuff. But I love her persistence, her spunk, and her sense of justice.

WHO IS YOUR LEAST SYMPATHIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?

Dr. Marvel Johnson who is opportunistic, incompetent, abrasively cheerful, phony, and scheming.

WHAT PART OF WRITING YOUR BOOK DID YOU FIND THE MOST CHALLENGING?

Plotting is always a challenge. I work best when I have a general idea of how the book will end (who done it and why). How I get there is the fun and the surprise.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE THAT READERS WILL TAKE AWAY FROM YOUR BOOK?

An appreciation for the difficulties that police officers and clinicians experience as a result of their chosen professions.

WHAT WRITERS HAVE INSPIRED YOU?

At the moment I am inspired by Karen Joy Fowler, William Kent Kruger and Louise Penny. But there have been many others, too many to name. On the reverse side, I am grateful to a long list of terrible writers, some of whom are very popular, who inspired me to believe I could do better.

WHAT IS THE WRITING PROCESS LIKE FOR YOU?

It's a flow experience, totally absorbing. Reminiscent of the level of absorption I experienced as a child. I have a flexible schedule. When I'm working on a project, I like to work every day, to avoid losing momentum. Most days I write in the afternoon for 2-3 hours. Morning times are reserved for exercise, lunch and a nap. I write scene by scene and do minor editing as I go. I review the prior day's work, make needed changes, and move ahead to the next scene.

WHAT IS THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE ABOUT WRITING THAT YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?

Outline a book after it's finished. Get rid of all unnecessary words. Walk away when you're stuck and trust the process, something will arise.

WHAT IS THE WORST PIECE OF ADVICE ABOUT WRITING THAT YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?

To quit, give up, not believe in yourself.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU? ANY NEW BOOKS IN THE PIPELINE?

I'm nearing the end of the third Dot Meyerhoff mystery with many of the same characters. The plot revolves around a murdered child, the family's grief, the psychological deterioration of the officer in charge of investigating internet child pornography, and Dot's belief that the cops are focusing on the wrong suspect.

ANY FINAL WORDS YOU WOULD LIKE TO SAY ABOUT YOURSELF, YOUR NOVEL, OR LIFE IN GENERAL?

People ask me all the time if I love a cop because I wrote a book of that same title. I do not. I love a remodeling contractor/photographer. I live in a rural part Redwood City, California (alternately known by the post office as Emerald Hills). My husband and I love to travel. In addition to leisure travel, my work has taken me to twenty-two states and three countries. We are also longtime members of a local meditation community, the Insight Meditation Center, and are students of Vipassana Buddhism. My husband is from Iowa and it's not as bad as portrayed in my novel.

ARE YOU AVAILABLE FOR CONFERENCES?

Yes. In 2014 I participated in several writers' conferences.

- Bouchercon: Different Shades of "Cop", Moderator Andrew Gulli. Panelists: Colin Campbell, Rory Flynn, Elizabeth Heiter, Owen Laukkanen and myself. (Long Beach, CA.
- LitQuake Palo Alto: Shrinks with Ink. Panel moderator. Palo Alto, CA.
- California Psychological Association, SF Chapter, San Francisco, CA. "The Fictional Shrink"
- Left Coast Crime, panel moderator of Behind the Badge: What Mystery Readers and Writers Need to Know. Panelists: Marcia Clark, George Fong, Connie Dial, and Arthur Kerns. Monterey, CA.