

CRIMINAL INTENT

Featuring: Kelley Armstrong

Interviewed by: Janet Costello



Kelley Armstrong, is the author of the New York Times bestselling Women of the Otherworld series, and the Darkest Powers / Darkness Rising trilogies. She also has two books to date in the Nadia Stafford mystery series, with a third expected next year. She has been a member of Sisters in Crime for 9 years.

Q: The essence of your Nadia Stafford series is succinctly caught early in *Made To Be Broken*. “I moonlight as a hitman to keep my business – a wilderness lodge – open. After the crash of my life seven years ago, the lodge is my lifeline to sanity, and if killing traitors for a small New York crime family keeps it running, then that’s fine with me. I know it shouldn’t be. But it is.” Tell us how you came to write this series, and your agent’s role in that.

A: It actually was born of desperation and terror. You always think that after you sell your first and second book, you’ve got it made. My two books, *Bitten* and *Stolen*, were packaged beautifully, in hardcover, with lovely art. But there was no sign of a werewolf on the cover. Also, the urban fantasy audience generally buys mass market paperbacks. So they weren’t selling as well as hoped and I worried about selling a third. My agent, Helen Heller asked me, “If you were not writing the Otherworld, what would you be writing?” I knew it would be mystery thrillers. She encouraged me to think about what kind of protagonist they would have. I wanted someone predatorial, but not super-natural. That meant a hitwoman. Of course, Helen knew my third Otherworld would sell, and it did, but she wanted to keep me calm and had me write *Exit Strategy*.

Q: You’re more recognized for your other series, the Women of the Otherworld and the Darkest Powers / Darkness Rising. But it has been observed that a mystery plot is prevalent in all your work. What are your thoughts on the role of mystery in storytelling?

A: For me, some sort of mystery / thriller is essential in a book. Those are the stories I like to tell, and I love adding the paranormal into it, too. My reading has always been mystery and thrillers. Carol O’Connell’s Mallory series is a good example of a really dark character in mystery. Mallory’s darker than any of my characters.

Q: Your first two Otherworld novels, *Bitten* and *Stolen* have what reviewers called “hard-boiled

heroines”. Nadia Stafford is strong, physically and mentally. Is it hard to write these strong women, with dark secrets, while keeping them from becoming femme fatale stereotypes?

A: I’d say that strong women are my favourite type of character to write, so there is no problem. Nadia’s not particularly young or gorgeous. She’s a tomboy so when she needs to play the femme fatale, it’s a real stretch.

Q: Gun play. Your main characters are familiar with weapons and shooting ranges. What is your experience with firearms?

A: Relatively little. I have gone out and tested them. I know what it feels like from trying. But I’m not as familiar as Nadia is with shooting.

Q: Violence is not scarce in your books for adults, be it targeted killings, fight scenes, or werewolves at play. You recently tweeted, “Someday, in asking about giving my adult books to young readers, someone will be concerned about the violence, not the sex. Someday...” What different approaches have you taken on sex and violence with your YA Darkest Powers / Darkness Rising series?

A: *There is violence and sex in my books. Nobody ever asks about the violence. For my young adult books my approach is different. There are younger characters; one protagonist is a very sheltered fifteen year-old. She’s never dated, and through the book is working up to her first kiss. Her story is a 3-book arch, taking place over just a few months, so she won’t be experiencing much more than that. These series are less graphic, with less violence. But there are zombies, and that does mean raising the dead. Off-screen, characters are killed. That’s part of the darkness of this work.*

Q: You have a very devoted fan base, for all your genres: mystery, contemporary fantasy, YA, and graphic novels. What are some of the things you do to recognize this?

A: Oh, I am so indebted to my readers! They are what lets me earn my living as a writer. I receive their feedback, and there is the temptation to give them more of a character they like. But if I'm done with that character, I have to stay true to the story arc. To *not* do that would ultimately be a disservice. But I pay attention to what they want, and find ways to fill their requests for more on some characters. I also give free stories, and I always have a few boxes of each book to give away in contests. I'm always looking to say thank you in some way.

Q: Talk about using beta readers.

A: Beta readers mean something different to every writer. My beta readers are used near the end of the process, between the last edits and the copy edit. I have Canadian, UK, and U.S. editors *and* critique partners, prior to that stage. So I provide printouts to a number of readers, all of which I've known for a long time or I've had long-term correspondence with. They are my continuity people. They catch those types of things from within the series and within that particular novel. They also catch cultural errors. I have beta readers from Australia, Hong Kong and France to help catch international issues. They are great, in case I've messed it up a little bit.

Q: While the majority of your work is available as audio books, I could not find audio versions of the Nadia Stafford series. Who is your audio book audience?

A: I didn't realize they weren't on audio! Probably they would be the same audience as the others. My audio books are always sub-contracted for me ó even

the companies that do them change. I don't hear a lot from my audio readers. Sometimes one will say that the narrator was great, and another will say she hated the narrator ó both on the same audio book. I will hear when something is mispronounced. My character Jaime Vegas ended up with a Spanish pronunciation óHaimeeö. Harper Collins sends me a list of words that have more than one pronunciation to reduce that type of error.

Q: You have written many short stories. What do you prefer about this format?

A: Short stories are perfect for ideas that just fit that length. Succinct ideas. It's nice to write quickly, and to be able to polish. Although, they are a little bit tougher. Every part has to be polished. For 120,000 words, you can be a *little* more lax. With a short story, I will read the whole thing aloud. For novels, I'll read the first few chapters, and selected scenes, but not the whole thing.

Q: How has being a Sister in Crime affected you?

A: I love the organization. I love what they stand for. I'm not incredibly involved, nor am I in any organization I've joined. But it's so important. You see the difference between men and women in the industry. Also, I've wrapped up the Women of the Otherworld series. My next series is going more toward the mystery genre so I hope to get more involved in SinC then.

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Learn more about Kelley at <http://www.kelleyarmstrong.com/>

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