

Elizabeth Kerri Mahon Final Interview

Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: In her upcoming book, *Pretty Evil New York*, which was written and researched during lockdown, author Elizabeth Kerri Mahon introduces us to some of New York's most notable female criminals. She joins us today. Welcome, Elizabeth.

EKM: Hi! I'm excited to be here and to talk to you guys. This is my very first interview regarding this book and talking about the lockdown, so...

VC: We're honored to be your first interview. (laughter). So for those people who don't know you, why don't you tell us a little bit about your background, and did you always want to write?

EKM: So I am a native New Yorker, born and raised. I actually started out as an actress. I went to Syracuse, studied acting, studied acting in London and I was a professional actress for 15 years. But I've always written. I've always loved books ever since I was a child. I started reading at a very early age and creative writing was like always one of my favorite classes in school. And I was one of those kids who if you had to write a 500 word essay, I wrote the first chapter of a novel. That was just me. Towards the end of my acting career I really started to think about what else I could do that was creative and fulfilling because the acting thing, I wasn't making a living at it, didn't love the business but loved acting so I thought, what else could I do? And I thought, writing. So for ten years I wrote and wrote and wrote. I started out writing romance, and I tried writing YA, and then out of nowhere, you know, we were all blogging in the early aughts. So I started a history blog. I started writing about women in history that I was fascinated with, and then I thought, maybe other people would be fascinated with that, so that is how I started writing.

KK: Well, it seems that your previous book, speaking of history, *Scandalous Women: The Lives and Loves of History's Most Notorious Women*," you also had a blog on the same topic, so this is the way you came up with the concept you just explained?

EKM: It just came to me one day, “Scandalous women.” Writing about women who were outside of quote unquote, society’s norms. Women who were daring, who climbed mountains, who had lots of husbands in an era where you couldn’t even get a divorce, women like that who led exciting, tumultuous, turbulent lives. And it was something that grabbed hold of me. Initially, it was just for me and then I slowly started to get the word out to people and people started reading the blog and commenting but initially it was just for me. It wasn’t anything that I thought was going to become a book. I was just doing it because I wanted to write about something that I was passionate about. It’s gaining readership. I was working two jobs and also writing the blog and also writing fiction and I was also the president of the local chapter of the writer’s organization that I belong to and then the financial crisis happened and I was laid off from my investment banking job and several of my friends had said, “Elizabeth, this should be a book.” And I knew nothing about writing a nonfiction book proposal so I did what anyone who does a lot of research does. I went and got a book called *How to Write a Nonfiction Book Proposal* and I wrote a book proposal for *Scandalous Women*. I was lucky because I had met an agent who liked my writing but didn’t think I had hit on the right project. So when I wrote the book proposal the first person that I sent it to was to this agent and she immediately said, “I love this and want to represent this book.”

VC: Now, moving on to *Pretty Evil New York*, how did you come to write this one?

EKM: I guess my story is similar to a lot of writers. I wrote my first book and it sold very well but I had a very hard time selling a second book. Lots and lots of book proposals, and I’m a member of a lot of writer’s organizations so one of the organizations that I’m a member of, Sisters in Crime, the New York City chapter, an editor from Globe Pequot Press had sent an email to the president of that chapter saying that they were looking for someone to write this book, *Pretty Evil New York*, and there was a description of what they were looking for and I thought, well, I can write this book. I quickly wrote a book proposal and – I’ve had ten years of writing book proposals so I’m an old hand at this -- so in two weeks I had the book proposal and I had four pages of a chapter on a woman named Polly Adler who was a madam in the 1920s and 1930s in New York. So I sent that to the editor. She liked the proposal and she liked the writing of the chapter but she wanted someone a little more evil.

KK: So you started to find these subjects obviously, and how many subjects do you have in *Pretty Evil New York*?

EKM: In the book I have 11 women. When I submitted the book proposal I had more women but because of the pandemic and lockdown I eventually cut it down to 11. There was a woman that I had written about on the

blog, a woman named Emma Cunningham and the Bond Street murder so I took that off my blog, did a little work on it, rewriting it and I submitted that to the editor and they offered me a contract for the book so that took about a month. And the next thing I had to do is, I had to submit the first chapter and a table of contents in January of 2020, which I did. And the book was going to be due in December of 2020, and then of course the pandemic hit and that threw everything... woo! Up in the air in terms of how I was going to write this book.

VC: Can you tell us what historical time frame or frames are these women from and tell us a bit about the type of crimes that they committed?

EKM: So my mandate for the book was, the cutoff was 1950 so it could be any woman prior to 1950 and the other mandate was that it had to be the entire state of New York. It couldn't be just New York City, so that made, when I was looking for women that made it a lot harder because there are a lot more criminal women in New York City (laughter) than there are in New York State. So that was, you're trying to find women who were outside of New York City, was difficult and the majority of the crimes in the book are murder. I have four women in the book who weren't murderers. They were con artists, Stephanie St. Clair who ran a numbers operation in 1920s and early 1930s in Harlem, Celia Cooney and her husband Ed robbed grocery stores in Brooklyn, the bobbed hair bandit, "Marm" Mandelbaum was a fence and Sophie Lyons was a con artist.

KK: When these women were caught and punished, do you think, in your research, that they were given the same amount of punishment that men would have had at that time?

EKM: Definitely! Most of the women-the murderers in the book. Two of the women were acquitted. The first woman in the book, Henrietta Robinson, was sentenced to death but then her death sentence was commuted to life in an insane asylum. Roxalana Druse was executed, Mary Farmer was executed, and Ruth Snyder was executed, so their punishments actually fit the crime. The thing that's interesting is at the time, a lot of people thought that women shouldn't be executed.

KK: But it seems some of them, as you said, they didn't get executed but they were in an insane asylum. So did they just assume they were insane?

EKM: Well, Lizzie Halliday, she's one of the more interesting characters in the book because again there are two schools of thought. One is that she's faking insanity and she was sort of using that to get off and the other school of thought is that she was, for want of a better word, batshit crazy

VC: Going back to the process of researching and writing during lockdown, what did you do? The libraries were closed. How did you handle that?

EKM: We all thought that you know, after two weeks of lockdown everything's going to get back to normal. I initially assumed, you know, two weeks and then the libraries will be open and I could go back to my plan which was to spend every weekend and maybe two nights a week at the New York Public Library at the Schwartzman Building doing research. One of my other mandates for *Pretty Evil* was, the editors really wanted me to use as many primary sources as possible and not rely on secondary sources.

VC: Elizabeth, could you explain, for those that aren't familiar with this, what is the difference between primary and secondary sources?

EKM: Primary sources are sources that were written at the time of the crime. So, newspapers, magazines, those are primary sources. Secondary sources are any book that was written more than 50 years after the crime or more recently. I'm going to say for the first three months of the pandemic, I was useless. The idea of researching a book even though I had a contract was just; I couldn't wrap my mind around how I was going to do this. Finally I realized that – and God bless New York Public Library—they made a lot of their resources that I would have had to have gone to the library for, available to people online. That made researching, once I finally got my butt out of my pandemic fog, it made it a lot easier for me to do and to get the primary resources I needed. Not all of them but enough of them.

KK: All the research that you were now able to do online, was that all of it for the book or when the library opened did you go back to do more?

EKM: So the libraries really didn't start to open until after the book was in. So up until January of this year the libraries were still closed. When lockdown happened what they did was, I was actually able to email the research librarians, tell them what articles I needed from certain newspapers that I couldn't access online and they emailed me the PDFs.

VC: So what was the most challenging part of writing this book and then what was the most fun part of it?

EKM: So the most challenging part is, I don't know how often you've read 19th century newspapers but the print is tiny. It is very, very tiny. Elizabeth almost went blind. That was difficult but on the other hand it was also fun because it's interesting to see the way that crimes were reported in the 19th century and how in some ways the way women were written about has stayed the same, in terms of demonizing women who were supposed to be innocent until proven guilty. Even back then people were digging through their backgrounds and you know, some of the women in the book, Mary Livingston, for example, who had four illegitimate children by three different men. That was a huge part of her trial and pre-trial, it was talking about relationships that she had with these other men.

KK: So it had nothing to do with the actual crime (EKM: No). They were bringing up her past.

EKM: Yes. You know, it's digging up the dirt and at one point during her trial they had 12 women – because women couldn't serve on a jury in the 19th century. It was 12 men deciding the fates of these women. So what the New York World, I think, did for Mary Livingston, they found 12 women from all sorts of walks of life to sort of be an alternate jury to sort of try her in the newspaper. And interestingly enough, they came to the same conclusion that the court did, which was that they acquitted her. That was one of the fascinating things. The other fascinating thing was learning about 19th century police and how they went about their business. The police were initially formed not to solve crimes per se. They were really more like riot police. Maybe solving some murders but if you had your house robbed and you wanted to try to get your stuff back you actually had to pay the police to get your stuff back. Otherwise they weren't going to go and look for it. And also how at one point the mayor and the governor were fighting over who was going to control the police in New York so at one point New York had two separate police forces.

VC: We hear you have another book in the works, *Spectral Women*. Want to give us a preview of that?

EKM: Yes, so I'm actually writing *Spectral Women* with two friends of mine. They actually brought me on to the book and I thank them immensely for it. What we're doing is we're looking at women in ghost stories and how these women fit into certain tropes, like ghost brides, spinsters, wicked women, and what does it say about women through these ghost stories. It's been fascinating to do the research

KK: The first thing that comes into my mind is Salem where they had all the witches and the ghost stories.

EKM: Well yeah, we are touching on some of the women who lost their lives in the Salem witch trials but also certain women like Lizzie Borden (whose ghost) allegedly haunts the house that she lived in where the murders took place which for many years –up until recently because the people who owned it are selling it—was a bed and breakfast where you could come and stay... you know how certain stories like Madame LaLaurie in New Orleans, most of the stories and the tours focus more on her and less about the poor enslaved people that she kept chained up in her attic and those deaths. Those are the people who actually haunt her house. It's fascinating to read about these ghost stories and paranormal investigations, it's been really interesting.

KK: Well, we can't wait to see *Spectral Women*, but where can we find *Pretty Evil New York*?

EKM: So *Pretty Evil New York* is coming out October 1, you can pre-order it from any independent bookstore that you like in your neighborhood, we love independent bookstores, but you can also order it from Barnes & Noble, Amazon, Books a Million, Powell's, if you live in Portland. Any online retailer you can order it from. But if you order it from your local independent bookstore that keeps those bookstores alive.

VC: Indeed it does. And where can people go if they want to learn more about you?

EKM: You can go to my website which is elizabethkmahon.com or scandalouswomen@blogspot.com. On twitter it's @scandalwomen as well.

VC: And last but certainly not least, do you have any advice for aspiring writers out there?

EKM: Well, two things. One, keep writing. I'm not going to say that you have to write every day because I know that's difficult with people's lives, but keep writing even if you are racking up rejections that you could paper your wall with. The second thing is, join writer's organizations, particularly if you're a genre writer, like if you write romance, or mystery, science fiction or fantasy, there is a writer's organization out there. Join it. Go to conferences, you will meet editors, you will meet agents. And then keep up with them. If you're on Twitter, follow other authors that you admire. So that's my advice.

KK: That's great advice. Thank you!

VC: Yes, that is excellent. This has been terrific, Elizabeth, thank you so much.

EKM: Thank you!