

St. Paul Pioneer Press: Local TV News Experience Gives Debut Author's Murder-Mystery Authenticity

LOCAL TV NEWS EXPERIENCE GIVES FIRST-TIME AUTHOR'S MURDER-MYSTERY AUTHENTICITY

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Julie Kramer describes what it's like to be a first-time novelist earning a starred review from Publishers Weekly and a "sizzling summer read" pick from People magazine.

"For industry acclaim," says Kramer, holding up a copy of Publishers Weekly, "this is priceless.

"When it comes to having your friends and family finally taking you seriously as a real writer, there's nothing like People magazine to tell them that it's good."

Kramer's debut thriller, " Stalking Susan ," which hits stores Tuesday, takes place in the Twin Cities and features heroine Riley Spartz, a TV investigative reporter for the fictional Channel 3. Spartz is out to solve the crime of a serial killer who targets women named Susan .

Kramer knows more than a little something about the world of TV news. Before becoming a freelance TV producer for NBC ("Today Show," "Nightly News," "Dateline"), where she has since covered everything from 9/11 to the Interstate 35W bridge collapse to the Larry Craig airport incident, Kramer won numerous awards for her investigative reports during her nearly two decade-long stint as a WCCO-TV producer.

It was a piece she did for WCCO with veteran crime reporter Caroline Lowe on two St. Paul cold case homicides that was the inspiration behind " Stalking Susan ."

Both cases involved women named Susan murdered in St. Paul on the same day two years apart. Susan Ginger Petersen, 28, was strangled on May 17, 1983. Her body was found in a Highland Park alley. Susan Jean Rheineck, 16, was asphyxiated May 17, 1985. Her body was found near the Mississippi River. The cases are still unsolved.

In " Stalking Susan ," the victims' last names, ages, occupations, time and locations of deaths were changed. The first names weren't.

"I almost changed the first name and then I decided I wanted to leave something of them in there," says Kramer, 49, who lives in White Bear Lake with her husband, Joe Kimball, a former Star Tribune reporter, and their two teenage sons, Alex and Andrew (she also has two grown stepchildren). "I never forgot them and I wanted to keep them in the story. It's the ones that are inconclusive, that you don't come up with a good ending, that tend to stay with you."

Lowe admits she didn't know Kramer had carried the story with her over the years. She hopes her former colleague's book might draw attention to the real Susan murders.

"I'm hoping, frankly, that somehow all the stuff gets stirred up again," says Lowe. "In a strange way, it might shake something loose and actually solve the real one -- even though the story is very different."

LEADING LADY: RILEY SPARTZ

As the thriller's star, intrepid TV investigative reporter Riley Spartz is as smart, fierce and driven as they come. And, after talking to folks who worked with Kramer at WCCO, one might guess she's an on-camera version of the author herself. While Kramer agrees there is some of her in Spartz, the character is a composite of folks she has worked with over the years. She specifically cites three former colleagues as major inspirations behind the character: Lowe; Kevyn Burger, FM 107 radio show host and former WCCO reporter; and Trish Van Pilsum, KMSP investigative reporter and former WCCO reporter.

The three were also some of the first people who got a look at "Stalking Susan" when Kramer finished it more than a year ago.

Burger admits it was "very cool" to see parts of herself in the book and immediately took a liking to Spartz, who she calls "unique" and "authentic." Says Burger: "She seems like the sort of TV reporter I would want to have a beer with at the end of a tough shift."

Van Pilsum was surprised when Kramer first told her about the book.

"It was so out of the blue and yet, when she gave it to me and said what she had done, it made a lot of sense," Van Pilsum says. "I knew she was an avid reader and loved reading mysteries. In many ways, her writing abilities far surpassed what she had the opportunity to do even in long form television writing. So, this made a lot of sense."

Lowe says when Kramer asked her to read an early copy of the book, she was sworn to secrecy. Kramer also turned to Lowe to help fill in some of the story's details -- she even joined Lowe on a trip to the shooting range to find out what it was like to fire a gun.

"I believe she's researched this book more than any story she's ever worked on," said Lowe, who also has her police license. "Plus, she's written a very good book. I'm looking for the accuracy piece, and I don't think anybody would be able lay a hand on her -- I think she really did a great job. I knew it was going to be an accurate book, but I guess I was pleasantly surprised that it was this fun and interesting, too."

NEWSROOM CULTURE

Kramer was focused on creating a TV reporter who wasn't portrayed as the annoying bimbo who gets killed off "when the plot starts dragging." She asked herself, why couldn't the TV reporter be a hero?

Not only did Kramer make Spartz a respectable leading lady but she also wanted to expose what she calls the "desperate world of TV ratings." Riley Spartz suffers from a mangled personal life, she has a difficult news director to battle, stories with high ratings potential to produce and a soon-to-expire contract hanging over her head. And then there's the blurry world she lives in where reporter and source intermingle a little too freely.

"The people in here are fictional, but they're a little bit of everybody I've ever worked with, for or against," Kramer says. "There are lines in there for each of them, and they know where their lines are. They're composites, some are purely imagination."

Kramer says she didn't want to write anything that sounded like too much of a stretch but did want to take people inside the world of television news and give them an understanding of what the job is like in the same way Patricia Cornwell has given people information about medical examiners and Kathy Reichs about forensic anthropology.

"What I do is weave some real stories I've covered in there so when people read it, they're not sure what's true and what's not," says Kramer, who included the 35W bridge collapse in the book. "I think that makes it a good read for them. It makes them seem very real when there are news events woven in."

When it comes to the atmosphere of a TV newsroom, Van Pilsum says Kramer got it just right.

"I think of all the books I've read set in newsrooms, this is by far the most accurate," Van Pilsum says. "I will say it's so accurate and so on-point that there are times when I cringe when I read it. Oh, Julie, do we really want people to know that ... ? But in truth, it is a very accurate -- although somewhat exaggerated for effect -- window into television news."

Like any good news story, " Stalking Susan " will have a follow-up. Kramer recently handed the book's sequel to her editor to be released next summer. In that book, Spartz spots a newspaper ad for a wedding dress that has never been worn. The dress leads her to a dangerous missing person case in White Bear Lake. And, yes, you guessed it -- it's sweeps month, the most coveted time for TV ratings.

Kramer says she's "stunned" and "amazed" at how things have worked out so far in her new career as an author. Growing up on a farm near the southern Minnesota town of Adams, she recalls what a big day it was when the bookmobile came down her gravel road with a new Phyllis A. Whitney book waiting for her. While she credits her longtime love of reading as one of the catalysts behind her leap into fiction writing, she says it's her career in journalism that really helped to set the stage.

"I think journalism was excellent preparation for writing fiction," Kramer says. "We're used to deadlines, we type fast, I've interviewed hundreds of people on the worst and best days of their lives. That helped me develop an ear for dialogue. And you cover so many crazy news events in real life that no character or plot in your imagination seems over the top. How many times have you heard a news story and thought, 'That can't really happen,' and it did?"