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Physics Can Be Fatal: A Talk With Elissa Grodin

Elissa Grodin's father founded AMC Theaters and invented multiplex and megaplex movie theaters. She has an extensive background in film. Elissa studied film at Dartmouth College, and painting at the New York School of Visual Arts. Living in London, she wrote for the *London Times Literary Supplement*, reviewing books and films. After moving to New York, she worked for Twentieth Century Fox, reading novels to be optioned for film rights.

As a freelance journalist, she was on assignment for *American Film Magazine* and interviewed Charles Grodin, the actor and writer. They were married a year later.

She wrote six children's books, one being fiction.

Physics Can be Fatal is her first adult novel.

Your publisher is Cozy Cat Press, specializing in cozy mysteries. Why cozy mysteries?

My mother introduced me to Agatha Christie when I was a child. She remains one of my favorite writers. Agatha Christie had a profound influence on me.

What other important influences have impacted your writing life?

I have precise memories of early influences starting at around age seven. When I was little, I grasped what my true nature was; I understood I had a creative nature, so from a young age I was looking for a road map. I was strongly influenced by Shel Silverstein when I read *Uncle Shelby's ABZ Book*. For the first time in my life, I understood the concept of subversion. That was a huge intellectual light bulb for me. I understood you could subvert the status quo. You could do it by writing.

The next powerful influence was the movie *The Great Escape* with Steve McQueen. I learned about existentialism--about ways of seeing the world. The next important influence was J.D. Salinger because he made poetry out of angst. It impacted me deeply. The next big influence was Jane Austen from whom I learned you can write about the entire human condition on a very small canvas. And the last great influence was Agatha Christie who made me decide that cozy mysteries would be my genre.

Which authors do you read?

I love reading Alan Bradley, M.C. Beaton, Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers and Marjorie Allingham; all writers from the so-called golden age of mystery writing. I read others in various genres, but those are the ones I love.

***In Physics Can Be Fatal*, your protagonist Edwina, is a young college physics professor and amateur sleuth. Will she be a continuing character in a series?**

Yes, this summer I'm finishing a second one with Edwina called *Death by Hitchcock*. I'm using my film studies background writing it. I'm a huge film buff. And I'm making my late father an off-stage character, which is great fun. He was a larger-than-life personality.

You studied at Dartmouth. Is there a similarity between that school and Cushing College, where the events in *Physics Can be Fatal* take place?

Yes. Like most writers, I use bits and pieces from my life in my writing. Of course, they're mixed with fantasy. But as I said, my late father will be an off-stage character in the next one, so my past and present lives tend to creep into the novel.

How do you go about plotting a mystery novel?

I start with character because that's the crucial part. I base my characters on bits and pieces of people I either knew or know now. I do that, realizing we're all capable of every impulse under the sun. I'm intrigued by the idea that we all deviate from the Golden Rule. That gets me going on any plot. We're so-called civilized people; and yet, do these ridiculous things that bring mayhem, mischief and murder into each other's lives. I think of the repressed things we would all like to do to each other. So, I come up with a central event, like "the murder" and then weave connections among my characters around that event.

If there was any writer, living or dead, with whom you could have dinner, who would that be?

Agatha Christie, without question.

And if there was any writer you could become, who would it be?

It would be Agatha Christie. I know...I sound like a stalker. I admire her personally and artistically above all others. She was modest; genteel; self-realized; she was a mother. And she lived to a nice old age. I just love her.

You're married to Charles Grodin, a very successful, stage, screen and television actor. And he's also a writer. Has that been either a hindrance or help in your career?

He's a help in every way. Above all, he's a good man. I have a happy life with him. He's been very helpful with career stuff. Supportive and full of goodness.

At the end of the interview with Charles for *American Film Magazine*, he asked you to marry him. That was your first meeting. Did it shock you?

No, not at all. You know what? I was expecting it. I know it sounds weird, but there you go. We

were star-crossed. We really hit it off. It was a deep connection. So in a way, it was life imitating art, imitating fiction.

What did you say when he proposed?

I just said yes. And a year later we were married. It's been fabulous. We've been married for thirty years.

Where to from here?

After Death by Hitchcock, I'll keep writing about Edwina and her sleuthing. It gives me great pleasure.