

Paperback Writer

The bestselling Faye Kellerman is back—and better than ever

Mindy Schiller

I remember the first time I picked up Faye Kellerman. It was the summer before my freshman year of high school, one of those long Shabbat afternoons when observant families like mine have hours to while away. I had wandered into our family room to see if my mom might be up for a game of Scrabble, but she was deeply engrossed in a book. I plopped down on the couch next to her and fingered a worn paperback lying beside her. She appeared to be reading its sequel.

My mother took her eyes away from her novel for a second. “You should try that,” she said. “It’s good.”

“Yeah?” I said skeptically, skimming the back. “What’s it about?”

She gave me a rough plotline: a red-headed detective named Peter Decker is called to investigate a rape that takes place in the mikvah, or ritual bath, of a small, yeshiva community outside of Los Angeles. Rina Lazarus, an Orthodox Jewish woman who happens to be drop-dead gorgeous and—conveniently—a widow, runs the mikvah. She helps Decker navigate the nuances of this “insider” world, allowing him to solve the mystery. In the meantime, they fall in love.

Sounds good, right? I thought so. I started reading.

And reading and reading. I didn’t stop until I had finished the book. Shabbat had long since ended and I was hooked.

It’s not hard to get hooked on Faye Kellerman. When this Modern Orthodox dentist-turned amateur-mystery-writer penned her first book, “The Ritual Bath,” she gained immediate acclaim by winning the 1987 Macavity Award for Best First Mystery—all the more impressive because her husband, Jonathan Kellerman, had already made the *New York Times* bestseller list with his psychological thrillers. Kellerman rewarded her fan base by returning several months later with her *own* NYT bestseller, a sequel called “Sacred and Profane,” that delved more deeply into both the relationship between Rina and Peter and their respective religions—Orthodox Judaism and Southern Baptist Christianity.

Now, 20 books and over 20 million copies later, Kellerman returns with her latest in the series: “The Mercedes Coffin.” Like its predecessors, “Mercedes”—which hits shelves this August—takes a good, long look at the seedier parts of Los Angeles; specifically, the music industry.

Kellerman has earned her success. Readers aren't quite sure what they like most about the Decker/Lazarus series (or her three other stand-alone books, for that matter): the tight-as-nails crime plots or the immensely likeable—perhaps even lovable—characters. Or, the religion. Because Kellerman explores religion in all of its facets—from the first page of the series' earnest discussion of potato kugel recipes to the more substantive tug-and-pull Decker feels when he reconciles belief in God with the evil he sees on a daily basis. As with almost all of her books, the main characters are committed Jews, and so Judaism emerges frequently in the plotlines without seeming forced. While Kellerman's books may not be great literature—they're unapologetically mystery thrillers—their religious and cultural richness make them a cut above the rest.

So who is the woman behind the series? *WJD* caught up with Kellerman over email to find out. Here, she discusses her life, her art, and the mystery of how she does it.

World Jewish Digest (WJD): *You used to be a dentist. So what happened? You just woke up one day and said, 'I'm going to be a New York Times bestselling mystery writer'? Explain it to me.*

Faye Kellerman (FK): Nothing happens overnight. I was always a child with a very vivid imagination. I used to walk around the house talking to myself and making up stories. Everything I read or saw on TV or at the movies was fodder for my daydreams and stories. It was O.K. when I was young, but not good when I went to school. I had to concentrate on studies and my daydreams kept on getting in the way. If I was going to get anywhere in education, something had to give and it was my stories. I buckled down and became a good student.

After 20-some odd years of education, I graduated dental school pregnant with my first child. It was the first time in a long time where I didn't have to marshal my energies towards passing tests. After my son, Jesse—now the writer [of crime fiction] Jesse—was born, I was blessed with a terrific kid who had a sunny disposition, but during childrearing there is a lot of downtime where the mind wanders. Since the mind abhors a vacuum, stories started reappearing.

This time I decided to do something with them and put ideas to paper. I never would have done this had I not been married to Jonathan Kellerman. Jon was always writing one thing or another. He totally inspired me.

WJD: *You have these two people, Peter and Rina [the heroes of the Decker/Lazarus series]. Both of them are very well developed, but it's ultimately Peter you choose as the protagonist. I would think it would be easier to get inside of a woman's head than a man's. Why did you choose Peter and not Rina?*

FK: That's easy enough to answer. I primarily write crime fiction novels and it's easier to get Peter involved in the story because he's a professional. I love writing with Rina but it's hard for an Orthodox Jewish housewife to be the focus of a crime story without it being artificial. There are only so many times that it can be a friend of Rina's or a relative

that pulls her into a murder mystery. Still, I've managed to do it quite a few times—including the book I'm currently writing, which will be out next year. I always enjoy when I can construct something in the plot that includes Rina as more than an ancillary character.

WJD: *For me, the romance is the best part of the series. But now that Rina and Peter's relationship has matured, the initial tension and passion have taken a back seat. In this latest one, "The Mercedes Coffin," they just seem very comfortable with each other. Did that happen organically or did you do that consciously?*

FK: There is nothing like the first blush of romance. But after 25 years with a series, the initial tension and passion, as you've noted, can't sustain that high note. I don't ever want them to be completely comfortable because it makes for banal interaction. And I can't change the characters and make them do wacky things. So to keep the spark in the series, I can alter their surroundings. I can place them in unfamiliar—and often dangerous—situations, and see how they react. That's actually the basis of most of the non-genre fiction today. It usually starts with a family and then someone dies, or goes missing or has an affair. I don't have to have all sorts of mayhem and misery happen to the family because I have Decker who, day in and day out, is exposed to some kind of mayhem. And while he doesn't get overly involved with his victim's family, there has to be some relationship or he would be a very bad cop.

WJD: *Some of your books are sexually and physically graphic—even just between Peter and Rina. Did you worry, when you first started publishing, about how the Jewish community might receive you? How they might receive your kids?*

FK: When you write, you can't gear your books to what others might think. That's antithetical to the creative process. That's writing by committee. The books come solely from my head and it's almost a visual and auditory thing. While you're writing you see things, you hear things and you try to translate what you see and hear into words. If I have to start censoring myself—is so-and-so going to be offended?—the end product is going to be mush. Good writing creates joy, sadness and in crime fiction, it has to create tension. Lucky for me, I haven't received many letters that complain about how graphic some of the scenes are. I never do violence for violence's sake, but murder is violent and to candy-coat it would be disingenuous.

WJD: *Rina appeals to me because she doesn't need a flashy career to know her own self-worth. She's proud of who she is—and sharp as a whip, too—even though we don't know much about her education or career choices. Where did you come up with her? Does she mimic you at all?*

FK: All my characters come from me and all of them are different from me. Thanks for this question. Self-worth doesn't mean you're a journalist or a high-powered lawyer. Self-worth means that you feel you have a role in this planet. The way Rina comports herself in sticky situations, the way she balances husband and children, the way she contributes to her society, be it by religious example, gardening or teaching, gives her a

place here. I really enjoyed this question and I hope it serves as a model for all women. We are all important if we take our roles seriously, but have a lot of fun doing it.

WJD: *In a way, Peter and Rina are polar opposites. Rina's unabashedly religious, pure to the core. Peter is pragmatic, skeptical, questions everything. It seems like you've got the best of both worlds in terms of being able to express yourself. Is that why you made them just so?*

FK: Two sides of the same coin. I wouldn't say they're polar opposites, but Rina's optimism is balanced by Peter's skepticism. When you're a cop, you have to be skeptical because people are always giving you bull. But when you're religious, you have to believe that God designed a world that is bigger than your individual ego and that it's up to us to find meaning and joy in this beautiful place.

WJD: *The thing about your books is that they're disquieting. I watch Peter interview cold-blooded murderers and then in the same chapter, go home and wash up for Shabbat dinner with his wife, who's spent the day ordering seeds for her garden. I mean, how do you deal with that? Does it take you a while to detox?*

FK: Writing is cathartic, but I do have a few outlets. First and foremost, I love to have a good time with my family, be it playing with my granddaughter or going out with Jonathan. Jon has lots of hobbies, I used to have a lot of them, but I find as I get older, I'm happy with less. I love to read, I love to do puzzles, I love to hear good jazz and I love New York because it's one of the few cities that has a cabaret scene. I also love nature. Every year Jon and I try to visit a national park. This year we're going up north to Lake Louise. I'm very excited about that.

WJD: *How does your own family's history in Europe, before and after World War II, play into your books?*

FK: Usually my family and their histories don't figure in at all. Of course, "Straight Into Darkness," [one of three stand-alone novels not part of the Decker/Lazarus series], was an exception. As the first generation after the Holocaust and the daughter of a Jewish soldier in Germany, what my father told me as a young child stayed with me and will always stay with me. "Straight Into Darkness" is not only my attempt to understand evil—that part was a failure—but also to understand my father. That part, I had a little more success with.

WJD: *I've read that you grew up Conservadox. Tell me what that was like. How have you seen the Jewish world change in the last 20 years?*

FK: Mostly I grew up as a regular kid. I went to public school, I had crushes, I studied to do well in my courses. I kept kosher, I took off for the holidays and sometimes I was the only person taking off for the holidays. It made me strong and aware of who I was. Mostly my childhood was simple and of course, it was simpler times. So no cell phones, no computer but there was TV. The shows were sweeter and everything around that time

was a little softer—except if you were a black or any other persecuted minority. Jews had it a little better because the world was still feeling guilty from the Holocaust.

WJD: *Is there any tension living in a house with so many big name authors? Or do you and Jonathan (and Jesse, too!) basically respect each other's niches?*

FK: We respect each other and it's not only *not* hard, it's easy. Jonathan is my first editor and a wonderful one at that.

WJD: *Tell me something out of the blue. Something neat about yourself I couldn't possibly learn from reading a profile and would never know to ask.*

FK: I love to do interior design. Every few years, I want to change something in the house. I love period art deco design and modern as well, and I adore modern art. Not contemporary art, but modern art—from the turn of the century to the fifties. Also, I think step-down living rooms and fire pits—hallmarks of mid-century modern houses—are neat.

Mindy Schiller is the associate editor of World Jewish Digest.