



Linda Fairstein: Author and Former Head of the Manhattan District Attorney's Office's Sex Crimes Unit

[By Charisse Dengler]

I spoke with author and attorney Linda Fairstein the day before her newest book, *Bad Blood*, was set to hit bookstore shelves, and her excitement was contagious. With enthusiasm and passion, she explained to me what it was like to transition from working as an attorney to writing full time and how she manages to incorporate aspects of both of her favorite professions into her everyday life.

Fairstein, who began her career in the Manhattan District Attorney's Office, is full of interesting stories—both the ones she writes and the ones she's lived. When Fairstein first began working in the Manhattan D.A.'s office, she was one of only seven women among 180 attorneys. In those days, she said, women were discouraged from participating in any criminal trial work because it was too gruesome.

"When I went to the office, it was 1972," she said. "The D.A. at the time was a man named Frank Hogan who was very famous nationally in law enforcement. He was a very well-respected and well-known prosecutor and ran a great office, but he was very old-fashioned; and he really didn't think that criminal court was an appropriate place for women to be working."

In her interview with the D.A.'s office, Fairstein was told that criminal court work was too "tawdry" for women. Instead, women were allowed to work in the law library, in the grand jury, or in the appellate courts. However, with the help of her University of Virginia School of Law dean, Fairstein got hired. Hogan passed away two years later, and Robert Morgenthau took his place.

"[Morgenthau] had entirely different ideas—was enormously progressive about diversity in every sense of the word," she said.

In fact, it was Morgenthau who promoted Fairstein to serve as the head of the office's

newly created sex crimes unit at the age of 28 because he thought it would help earn women's trust in the system with regard to sex crimes. Fairstein, who said she never pictured herself staying in the position for the nearly 30 years that she did, loved her work as part of the sex crimes unit and enjoyed being a part of the changing laws and scientific developments surrounding sex crime prosecution.

In addition to heading up the sex crimes unit, Fairstein was one of the very first people in the nation to learn to use DNA evidence, a term she hadn't even heard of until 1986. One of the famous cases involving DNA evidence that she was involved in was the notorious Preppy Murder/Robert Chambers case.

Fairstein began her writing career when she was approached by a publisher and asked to put together a nonfiction book educating people on rape and sexual violence law. The book, which is titled *Sexual Violence: Our War Against Rape*, was released in 1993 and later became the *New York Times* "Notable Book of the Year." Upon its completion, she began to consider trying her hand at fiction, something she had always wanted to do.

In the summer of 1994, Fairstein began work on what would become her first novel, *Final Jeopardy*, which would later be turned into a television movie. Since then, Fairstein has written eight more novels: *Likely to Die*, *Cold Hit*, *The Deadhouse*, *The Bone Vault*, *The Kills*, *Entombed*, *Death Dance*, and *Bad Blood*.

Interestingly enough, even after the success of her first four novels—written while she was still working full-time as an attorney—Fairstein wasn't ready to leave the practice of law and become a full-time writer. She loved the law too much.

"Unlike many writers and many of my friends who are writers and lawyers—many of them left the law to write because that's what they wanted to do—I loved my job, and I love the law," she said. "I didn't want to stop practicing. I wanted to do both."

However, just when she was about to hit her 30-year mark with the D.A.'s office, she started feeling like it might be time for a change. She said there were other factors that influenced her decision, as well, such as the tragic events that occurred on September 11.

Looking back on her first four novels, Fairstein said she could see how they suffered due to the fact that they were written in what little spare time she could find when she wasn't working or spending time with her family. She said she feels the series really takes off at book number five, *The Bone Vault*, which was the first book she penned as a full-time author.

Fairstein's novels comprise a series focusing on the life and exploits of Alex Cooper, who heads the sex crimes unit in the Manhattan D.A.'s office. In order to generate ideas for her books, Fairstein makes sure she stays current



regarding the law and, specifically, the law as it relates to forensics. For instance, her newest novel includes a forensics twist based on information that she recently learned about and considered fascinating. She also likes to include interesting bits of New York history in her stories.

Fairstein wrote a lot of the story for her newest novel around the New York City water tunnel's construction. This meant she had to do her research 600 feet below the city, something she described as "enormously creepy." She had heard that women are not allowed into the tunnels under the city for superstitious reasons and decided that was the perfect place for her main character to end up.

After Fairstein shared with me a detailed plot summary that had me on the edge of my seat, I asked her to describe how she was feeling on the eve of *Bad Blood's* release.

"It's a wonderful, exciting moment," she said. "It's quite thrilling to think that these things that were just ideas rolling around my brain are finally between book ends and in a book jacket and out in the world."

To catch Fairstein on tour and get your very own signed copy of *Bad Blood*, check out the tour dates on her website, www.lindafairstein.com. *Bad Blood* can be purchased at all major bookstores.

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New York County District Attorney's Office
www.manhattanda.org/hp_flash.htm