

EPISODE 486

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[00:00:00] AH: I'm so pretty excited to speak to you for a whole variety of different reasons, but the most obvious one is your book, could you tell us a little bit more about your book?

[00:00:08] AK: Sure, *Red Widow* is my first spy novel after writing five other novels that were all in sort of the more fantasy realm. I was thrilled to get the opportunity from my publisher to do this book. I always wanted to write a spy novel, but I never – well, for various reasons, which we'll probably get into later, I just didn't have the opportunity. But I got this idea and one of the reasons I'm so proud of it is because it has mainly female characters. The protagonist is a female. It's the story of a young CIA officer, who was a rising star at the agency, and she ends up having a little bit of a career downturn, and she gets the opportunity to head a task force looking for a mole in the agency, someone who's giving away all of their Russian assets to the Russians.

So, as she's doing this investigation, she makes the acquaintance of another officer, Theresa Warner, the Red Widow herself, and she got that nickname because her husband was killed in an operation in Moscow gone horribly wrong. Lyndsey, the main character is doing the investigation. She gets drawn into this web of intrigues, these secrets that she was never intended to find out, and the secrets lead straight to the death of Theresa Warner's husband.

[00:01:24] AH: And Lyndsey is called the human lie detector, right?

[00:01:27] AK: Yes.

[00:01:28] AH: Is she based on someone that you came across in the agency?

[00:01:31] AK: No. I'm a little embarrassed about this because people who really understand the field will tell you that there is no such thing as a human lie detector. So, it's a little bit of an exaggeration. But at the agency, for a lot of things that you have to do, even if you're not an operations officer, even if you're not out there, trying to vet whether or not people are trying to deceive you every day, but you do end up getting a little bit of training in behavioral analysis. For instance, I was a recruiter for the CIA for a year, and that's where I got my training. Because as you're standing at career fairs, and that sort of thing, and you have foreigners

coming up to you constantly, not just foreigners, but you have strangers coming up to you constantly, they want to give you a little ammunition so that you can get a sense of whether or not somebody is trustworthy.

[00:02:20] AH: One of the things that I found quite interesting about Lindsey and about some of the other characters as just the way that you capture who they are and how they're living through a particular period. I know that you've received praise for the way that you can capture your characters, like what's the trick?

[00:02:40] AK: Oh, well, you understand human nature may be a little bit better. A lot of it is just kind of pure psychology and observation, I think, and understanding people's motivations. But a good part of it actually, I think does come from having worked at a place like the agency. I'm sure a lot of your listeners completely understand this. But the main mission of CIA is human intelligence, that's getting information from other human beings. And the way they do that is they get folks and they train them to be very good at persuading people to do something that's not always in their best interest.

I mean, these folks, the assets that they end up recruiting, have their own motivations for why they want to do it. But at the end of the day, we have operations officers, case officers, who are very good persuaders, and that wasn't something I had an appreciation for, until I went to work at CIA. I'd actually worked for 20 years at NSA, and people at NSA are completely different. The culture is completely different from CIA. And so, maybe it was just because I came to it later in life, it really struck me how different the culture is at CIA. And I'm not saying it's bad, I have worked with many wonderful people, many people who were super ethical, and would never dream of trying to use those superb manipulation skills on their coworkers. But some did. And that's part of what I ended up putting in *Red Widow*, what happens when one of those people who are often a little sociopathic decide they're going to turn their evil, evil skills on you.

[00:04:18] AH: Even being a host of SpyCast, there are times when I sometimes wonder if I'm just being ventriloquized and used –

[00:04:27] AK: It's true. I've talked to folks, like other authors, for instance of thriller, spy thrillers who haven't worked in the business, and they'll tell me about these oh so charming meals they've had with former intelligence officers, or nights in the bar. And as they're telling

me what happened, I'm like, "Oh, my God, you were so totally had and you didn't even realize it."

[00:04:49] AH: And tell us a little bit more about some of those differences between NSA and CIA. And maybe as part of the answer, can you just give our listeners a little bit more of an idea about the types of things that you're done?

[00:05:01] AK: Oh, sure. So yeah, NSA is a very interesting place. I spent two-thirds of my career at NSA and one-third at CIA. So, I know NSA really well and I'm going to say a lot of funny things about it. And your listeners understand, it's all said with love, right? Because also, that was the first place I went to.

So, I was a young adult, hadn't had a lot of experience in the workforce, when I worked at NSA. It's like your first – I describe it as like your first marriage. You marry for love and then the scales are ripped before your eyes. And then you have your second marriage, and you go into it with a little clearer head. The really weird thing is I went back to NSA, for the end of my career, so I don't know what was going on there, I should have known better. It's like going back and marrying your first husband, again, I suppose.

But I started out as a SIGINT analyst. And at the beginning, I had a fairly conventional career. I worked more or less than conventional targets, I did complex operations. And those are operations that have a combat component, but they also have other components. So, for the most part, this was the '90s. So, this was the era of multilateral peacekeeping operations, humanitarian operations. So, I did that. I actually was a National Intelligence officer in that field for a while. But then at 9/11, I ended up getting seconded because of that background that I had and I ended up working in policy for a few years. And at the end of that, one of my colleagues at CIA said, "We'd really like you to come and work for us using all the experience that you've gathered", for instance, and this is not something I'm proud of. I was involved in the Iraq War planning for the phase four operations and stuff like that.

So, they were very interested in all that experience that I had. So, I went to CIA, I worked there as a senior analyst for, I forget how many years. I ended up going to the recruitment center and from that, I ran into someone who said. "With your background at NSA", because signals intelligence is very, very technical, everything you do, they're super technical. They said, "We'd like you to come and help us with a little conundrum. We have social media." Social media, it

was just breaking at the time, and they really didn't have a very good idea of whether or not there was going to be intelligence value in it. Looking back right now from where we are now.

So, I was actually one of the first analysts to help figure out how to technically approach social media. And that ended up launching the last third of my career. So, the last half of my career, I've actually been involved in emerging technologies a lot, both at CIA and NSA. I was the director of a research lab for NSA. And I ended as an office director in technology forecasting, which is something I'd also done with the RAND Corporation. So, what really, really very career and the benefit of that, I think, is it gives me a lot of fodder for storytelling.

[00:07:48] AH: And one of the things that I find quite interesting about your career is, it seems to me that in the course of your career, you've constantly been rescaling yourself or kind of moving with the times. Tell us a little bit more about that? Was that like a conscious thing? Or was it just, "Hey, I've got this new job, and I need to do it. So therefore, I need to get up to speed with X or Y." Give us a little bit of a better understanding of your journey.

[00:08:14] AK: It was a conscious decision, but probably not the smartest decision. So, you know what a lot of folks do especially early in their career, you really come to love your job. And so, you just keep thinking about taking the next interesting opportunity that's in your career field, let's say, and not necessarily moving around or jumping to a job where you might have better, let's say, promotion opportunities or something like that. I ended up getting in complex contingency operations, because there was an incredible need for it. I mean, if you look back at the '90s, and I realized some of your listeners are probably just born then. Those of us who lived through it, Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda, all of those things, there weren't a lot of manpower or other resources dedicated to those issues. It was still, the intelligence community, tries to look ahead, but it does tend to move a little slowly, and so you have these huge resources applied towards the main adversaries Russia, China, whatever.

So, I really enjoyed that work, because you worked all the time. There were not a lot of people working in it. So, we had small teams that really had to push hard and I was very lucky to be recognized for my work in that field. I did enjoy it and it took me far. It took me to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and then it took me over to the agency for a good long while. But one of the great things also about a career in intelligence is that you get the opportunity to take on as much as you want. And before I went to NSA, I would not have considered myself a technical person in any way, like math was not my friend. But NSA, you can't work there

without rolling up your sleeves and getting involved in telecommunications and computer science and that kind of stuff. And I learned that I actually had an aptitude for it.

So, the whole last third of my career, all of the emerging technology stuff wouldn't have been possible without my intelligence career. So, it's always been a matter of sort of wanting to do, selfishly wanting to do what I wanted to do. And usually just pursuing something that looked like a fun opportunity and I'm just really lucky, I landed on my feet at the end.

[00:10:24] AH: Give our listeners just a couple of sentences, what are complex contingencies?

[00:10:29] AK: We don't talk about it so much nowadays. It's certainly the type of operations have morphed over time. But the classic ones, the ones that I was involved with, were mostly in the '90s. So, when you had multinational operations, a bunch of countries would send military resources and other resources to go help assist what was going on in Somalia at the time, for instance, Bosnia, when that couldn't resolve, and the UN sent in a peacekeeping force, for instance. A lot of times at that time, they weren't under UN or NATO umbrella. So, you had combat folks on the ground often. But then you also had other things like humanitarian operations where they were trying to bring in food, water, set up refugee camps, maintain the peace around those camps. So, that's why they were called complex because it was more than just combat operations, as if that wasn't enough.

[00:11:25] AH: And you mentioned, just to back up on Iraq again, you mentioned that wasn't something you're proud of? Could I just pull thread on that a little bit?

[00:11:33] AK: Sure. I mean, how long has it been? You think it'd be – it was a very interesting experience being in. I was in SOLIC, which is special operations, low intensity conflict, which is one of the departments under the Office of the Secretary of Defense. So, I didn't work directly for Rumsfeld. But I was in that sphere, and you don't want to point fingers and blame anybody. But you get a lot of folks who come into policy, they're either political appointees, and there was a fair number of them, or folks whose heart is in the right place, right? They want to help the administration, the administration has said, "This is our goal. This is our mission." And so, they run in and they want to try to execute the mission, but they don't have the expertise in the actual field. I wasn't an Iraq expert, but I was a complex contingency operation expert. And so, I was one of the folks there and there was quite a number of them, who had experience who were sent telling the policy folks that this is a mistake, that we don't have all the information we need. We don't have the right information sources, that even if we're going to do this, it's going

to take much more money, much more resources, much more attention than we see being dedicated to it. It was a rush job. I mean, I could go into this. It happened a long time ago. I don't want to cause any heartburn, or we could do many shows just about all of that. Yeah, so I was involved in it and I was one of the naysayers.

[00:13:02] AH: Are we talking about like people like Douglas Feith?

[00:13:05] AK: I worked for Marshall Billingsley, was his name. He was 32, maybe. He bought into the ideology, the neocon ideology. A lot of those folks who didn't really understand what it was going to take to execute an operation of that magnitude.

[00:13:23] AH: So, over the course of your 35-year career, I mean, as you said, you must have just seen so much different types of human beings and so much different types of human nature. I just want to return to the novel. Help us understand how you take that experience of people watching of observation and how you make characters, say Lyndsey Duncan, is it like a composite? Or is it just completely fictional? Or are you thinking or that's a lot about, too close for comfort with someone you knew, so you try to relate it differently? Help us understand how you take all of these observations and then instill it down into a character?

[00:14:03] AK: Wow, that's a great question. And as you were asking, I was like, "Well, it's kind of a little of everything that you mentioned." The first thing is when my editor said, "Why don't you give this a go?" I knew exactly immediately what would be sort of a kernel for the story, for the plot. And it's based on something that actually did happen at the agency. It's just that it sort of ratcheted up to 11, if I can use a spinal tap reference. So, I just kept kind of saying, "This is bad, but what would make it worse?" And so, what if, what if, what if? And you end up with the plot that's in the book.

As for the characters themselves, a couple of them are almost 100% based on real people. So, for instance, the character who's the Chief of Staff of CIA, who unfortunately has this hot mess fall into his lap when the CIA director is on leave or something like that, is based on a real person. The character's name is Patrick Pfeiffer. The real-life person's name is Larry Pfeiffer, who you may even know, Larry is the Executive Director of the Hayden Center at George Mason University.

Well, Larry and I were interns at the same time and NSA all those years ago and we were laughing about it. Actually, we were in one office at the same time where we overlap, but we've

known each other for our whole careers. So that was a lot of fun being able to write a character about a friend. And the villain, I don't want to give away any spoilers. But the villain in there is based on a real person, it's somebody I've worked for at CIA, and he's still around anyway. But the main characters like Lyndsey is definitely a composite. I have met so many young women, just like her and who just come to the agency with the best of intentions, super smart, young women, very capable, they just want to do their best, and they're going to do their best. But now, from a vantage point of all these years, I look at them and I just go, "Oh, you don't know the heartache that you're in for."

[00:16:05] AH: That would be a good future SpyCast, maybe you and Larry, and we could call it The End Terms.

[00:16:12] AK: That would be great.

[00:16:14] AH: Let's make that happen. And the mole hunt is really interesting to me. Tell us a little bit more about that.

[00:16:23] AK: Well, that's another one of those things. I mean, honestly, a career in intelligence almost gives you too much to write about. So, in the beginning, I was trying to think of what are all the special things about the job, that people, even if you read a lot of spy novels and watch spy movies and shows that you wouldn't know about because it really is a very unique culture, I think. And then what are the types of things you end up getting involved in that are just heartbreaking? Well, one is I've talked to operations officers whose assets have been rolled up, arrested, some even killed, and what an incredible emotionally wrenching thing that is, to just be so helpless. So, I rolled a little bit of that in the story.

And then the other thing was absolutely true. Every year, you have to go through counterintelligence training, CI training. So, after 30 years, that's a lot of CI training, because they want to make you aware that there's always the possibility that someone you are working with, has actually been turned as a double agent, as a mole. But in real life, that's such a rare thing. So, I can appreciate their challenge. They're trying to keep us on our toes, and to know what things to look for. But in the course of that, you see these videos, interviews with officers, who were duped by Aldrich Ames, or Robert Hansen, and how so completely betrayed they felt. They thought they could trust this officer, when they were doing the human engineering against their coworkers and trying to get them to give up secrets.

You know you shouldn't do it, but you do it. I mean, that's kind of the way it is. Sometimes people push back and say, "Well, I can't give you that information." But a lot of times the talk is maybe a little freer than it should be. And I think that's why we have the yearly counterintelligence training. But it's seeing all of these things that just make the job so hard and really, make you question all the time. Did I do the right thing? Should I have said this? Should I talk to that person? Should I not talk? Trying to capture that. Some people call it paranoia, just trying to capture that in the book, that was really rewarding for me.

[00:18:35] AH: I find it quite interesting as well, because you've studied literature, as an undergrad, and then as a graduate student, that normally when I have former intelligence officers on the show that are more used to their studies being an international relations or economics or something. But yeah, tell us a bit more about that.

[00:18:58] AK: Well, see, this is what you get when you get someone as old as me on the show. So, when I started out, especially for NSA, this was back in the late '70s, early '80s, even though colleges did have computer science programs, they weren't churning out the numbers, that agencies needed, particularly NSA needed. They hired a lot of mathematicians, and they probably hired every electrical engineer they could lay their hands on and every computer scientist. But for a lot of work, what they did is they tested for aptitude. And when I applied, there was a three-day application process where they brought you in and they just tested you over and over again, in eight different categories. I forget what the eight categories were.

A lot of the old timers like me, we laugh about it because we know we wouldn't be able to get a job today. We just don't have the requisite specialized skill. But back then, I remember, one of my friends was an artist, and she got a job as a cryptologist, musicians were getting jobs as cryptologists. It was just anybody who can solve puzzles, I think, was basically it. It actually makes a little more sense for me because NSA was hiring people with writing skills to become what was the new Gil field for them, reporters and that morphed into analysts. So, they were very much interested in the fact that I had newspaper experience.

[00:20:17] AH: And during the whole time that you were in intelligence, did you always think to yourself, "One day, I want to start writing novels", or is that just something that happened upon when you retired?

[00:20:29] AK: It actually started before I retired, but it's kind of a mix of the two. So, back in the '80s, I was still writing for newspapers. I was actually a music journalist. I covered the

Washington, DC music scene for some magazines and newspapers. And at the time, Congress was getting pressed to not charge honorarium for speeches they did, as congressmen, and in order to try to get the bill defeated, they attached a writer saying that it would apply to any federal person. There was a huge human cry and it meant that I would no longer be able to earn money for writing these music columns.

The bill did pass. We were all – anyone who was writing as a Fed was advised to stop, or there was going to be a class action suit or to put the money in escrow. And at the time, I was not making that much money. And I thought to myself, “You know, I came all this way, I should really try to give this career an honest go.” So, I stopped writing. And I stopped running for 15 years.

But then at a certain point in my life, and I think this happens to almost everybody, you start thinking about what are the things that I've always wanted to do? Things that would make me happy? And one was, I always wanted to be able to write a novel. But by that point, I was a national intelligence officer at the time, and I knew how hard you had to work, to really master something. So, I went back to writing fiction without the thought that I was going to publish anything, but just so I could learn what it really took to write a novel. So, like most intelligence analysts, I went back to school and I got my Master's Degree in Writing. You don't need to do that, but it does give you sort of a confidence to run in it. And it took me 10 years to write the book that would eventually be my first novel that sold. I was 50, at the time when we sold it. So, I still had about another 10 years working as an intelligence officer and that's part of the reason why I didn't start out with spy novels, because it's almost impossible to stay in the job and write a spy novel. So, I didn't.

[00:22:34] AH: *Red Widow* is your first spy novel, right?

[00:22:36] AK: Yes.

[00:22:37] AH: And you're retired in 2017?

[00:22:39] AK: Yes.

[00:22:41] AH: I've heard fiction writers in the past, some people have described the process as like when they're writing, it's like the playing a piano and it makes them feel good, and it puts them in a good headspace. And then I've heard other people say that it's just as brutal as

a slog, they have to sit down and force themselves to get 500 words out, and they do it day after day. It's like eating food that they don't like, but they keep doing it anyway. Which one is it for you on the spectrum?

[00:23:10] AK: Well, luckily, for me, it's probably both. I'd have to say, so I love to write, I love the first draft. I find revisions very painful. But the problem is, is the book really exposes itself in revisions. And I think that's where the artistry of the book comes in. So yeah, like a lot of people. I like the fun part. I like just running fast down the hill. It's walking up the hill that hurts. That's so tough.

[00:23:38] AH: With the writing process as well, like, because there's probably some listeners out there that are, "Oh, wow. How do you do that? I've always wanted to write a novel." Do you have our daily word limit, or give us just a brief sense of your process?

[00:23:51] AK: So, I think having had such long careers as an analyst, particularly working missions, like the complex contingency operations, where I am not kidding you, like a 16-hour day is often the norm 7 days a week and you'll do that for months. I ended up like really learning to trust my instincts, not only what thing I had to accomplish, or did I have to write the first draft, do I have to do these revisions? Editing and writing are almost like two different skills. So, I just kind of learn to trust my instincts for when I felt I would do a better, this was a creative day. No, this is an editing day. When you start it's very, very daunting. How I described writing a novel is like having hundreds of little threads hanging in a line in front of you. And your job as the novelist is to pull the threads in exactly the right order to exactly the right lengths. It's like weaving a carpet, just your little hands and your brain. And so, it can be very daunting to think. I've got to learn to do that. It's just something you do over time.

And the thing is, you write the first book, if you're lucky, you sell it. You breathe a sigh of relief, then you get a contract for the second book, and you have to do the same thing in a much shorter time frame. And that's when you realize you really didn't know what you were doing. And then the second one is really horrible. And the third one is a little less horrible. And the fourth one is a little less horrible. I'm working on book seven now. And I think, I finally think, I feel like I know what I'm doing.

[00:25:20] AH: And is book seven on espionage and intelligence again?

[00:25:24] AK: No, it's jumping back to the historical horror. So, that's the other thing we haven't talked about. My last two books, before *Red Widow*, are historical, like re-imaginings, with a little horror element to it. So, one of them was the Donner Party. The last one was, had to do with the Titanic, which was literally tens of thousands of facts. I'm never going to do that again. But I have one more historical horror coming out, it has to do with the Japanese internment. And it's very personal, because I'm Japanese-American. My in-laws were all interned. Many of my friends, their families were interned. It's a history that I know really well and I think it has a message that would resonate with what we're going through today. So, I'm very excited to write that book. That'll be coming out in 2022.

But then, we did sign a contract for the second *Red Widow* book. So, that'll be the next in the queue. Yay.

[00:26:17] AH: Can I ask, was it Manzanar or one of those camps in California?

[00:26:22] AK: No, my in-laws were sent to Topaz, which was in Utah, even though they came from Berkeley, California. They were sent to Topaz. The novel, which is called *The Fervor*, like half of it is set in Minidoka, which is in Idaho.

[00:26:36] AH: How did it feel to write a book on something that you lived with *Red Widow*, given your background and intelligence in espionage? How did it feel writing that compared to writing the other ones, which were different from what you've done during your career?

[00:26:53] AK: So much easier.

[00:26:56] AH: Was it?

[00:26:57] AK: It's so much easier, so much less research. Because I had just come out, just retired, so everything was fresh in my mind. But also, after you've done something that long, I just felt like all of the plot points. Every time there's a point in the plot where something has to happen right, a decision has to be made, the character is going to do this, I knew exactly what all of our options were. It just made it so easy. I could write it so quickly. The hard part with that book is, again, I don't want to give anything away, and I'm so afraid something's going to slip out. But there's two point of view characters, Lyndsey and Theresa. And when Theresa's point of view comes into the story, there was a big revelation.

Now as a writer, and I'm going to put my little craft hand on, as a writer, when you do something like that, you want to push it as far as late in the story as you possibly can, because you don't want to break the suspense. But the thing is, is that I think, I don't know, I'd be interested to hear how you feel, Theresa's voice, like how those chapters read and how they make you feel, is super, super strong. I felt it was like such a high point for the book, I hated to leave it for so long. And so, I kept fighting back through the editorial process to move her story further up. And then you get more of the interplay between the two women for longer in the book. There was still a huge twist at the end of the book.

But every time we moved it, because there was this long trail, if you think of the procedural and all of the clues and all this stuff, there was this long trail of literally hundreds of little things that had to be changed. I have so many spreadsheets from all of the plot points. And every time they changed in timelines, and even though it's easier in a lot of ways, it was really hard. And otherwise, I describe it as a giant Jenga puzzle. You move one little thing and you've got to move like these hundreds of other little Jenga pieces after it.

[00:28:55] AH: I never thought about that. But that's quite interesting. And I quite like that you mentioned this at the beginning, like having strong female characters in it, having particular types of women, can you tell us a little bit more about that?

[00:29:10] AK: Whenever people ask me, "Do you think you'd want to write a spy novel?" I always wanted to do it from the female perspective, because a lot of intelligence professionals and I'd be interested to hear your experience on this. While they enjoy looking at popular culture on our careers, a lot of them aren't particularly happy with it, right? They're not super true to form. And there's a reason why, audiences have certain expectations. This is entertainment. They want to be entertained. And there's certain conventions to storytelling, right? It's usually about one person, and the protagonist has to overcome great odds and they have to show personal fortitude and bravery and all that kind of stuff. That's not to say that doesn't happen in the intelligence community. But the work is much more teamwork, it's communal effort, we could go into the differences.

In modern storytelling, especially contemporary spy novels, not historical, it's almost always a man. It's centered around a man and a man's concerns and all that kind of stuff. And I'm not saying that's bad, and I'm not saying I don't enjoy it. But women are about half of the workforce and we just don't see ourselves being reflected in the work, what professional

women are like. A lot of times the women characters are kind of lacking, and they don't have strong roles. So, I always thought, if I were able to write a novel, I would do it from the woman's perspective. And there is a little bit too, I think, women do face a different kind of challenge, let's say in our careers in intelligence. I don't want folks to think I'm whining about it, or that I'm trying to make a big campaign out of this.

So, in *Red Widow*, I think it does reflect some of the inherent biases that there are against women in their profession and hopefully not in an annoying way.

[00:31:00] AK: I mean, that was one of the questions that I was going to ask you, and I'm not trying to just get here to good graces or something. But there's lots of people that worked in intelligence that end up writing books, or end up writing novels. And it's like, okay, so they've written a book, and they're written a novel, but you've really written books here, and you're getting like serious praise. So, for *The Hunger*, Stephen King, deeply, deeply disturbing, hard to put down, not recommended reading after dark. Coming from Stephen King, that's quite a big deal. What's the secret to your success? How have you managed to get like all of these kinds of rave reviews? How are your books doing so well?

[00:31:43] AK: Well, as much a surprise to me as anybody, because first of all, the last two books, *The Hunger* and *The Deep*, you know, are considered horror novels, even though when we – the publisher, I don't think thought of *The Hunger* as a horror novel, per se. I think they thought of it as more like mainstream fiction, but they tend to be – they have a lot of things kind of going against them. They're multi genre books, which are hard to classify, hard to characterize. But they're still genre. So, they don't really get the respectable reviews, The New York Times, and all that kind of stuff.

So, they face those challenges. For me, as a writer, I just always try to really try to write the best book I can. And maybe this is something I did get from the master's program. They do tend to skew towards literary. So, they teach you to be more character focused, and character driven stories, as opposed to plot driven so it's not just the ticking time bomb up above all else, but to really get into the character. So, everything that happens feels very true and realistic.

I've just tried to always embrace that, to try to write the kind of book that I want to read. And yeah, we've just been super, super lucky. So, most of the books have ended up being reviewed by The New York Times. I can't believe *Red Widow*, which is a genre book was made Editor's

Choice by The New York Times. I mean, they don't do that. I was super surprise. And you probably know this, Fox has picked it up for a TV show. And the reason they picked it up, they told me is because of the woman's story, that they really like the fact that you have two women characters who at times are in opposition to each other. And even though one of them did something that a lot of people would consider very bad, she did it for the right reasons. You don't have like an evil person. And I think that's really what's resonated with a lot of folks, especially women. You just have this one character who was put in a very bad situation, and she's trying to do what she knows in her heart is right, even though it's going to make her look like a bad guy.

[00:33:44] AH: How did you see gender relations and intelligence change during your 35-year career? Because that's quite a long period of time. I imagine you must have saw like quite significant changes over that time.

[00:33:58] AK: Yes, thank goodness. I mean, it's not perfect. But oh, my gosh, when I think back to some of the things that happened when I started, at NSA, for instance, and again, I hope they realize that I say this with love. But I started out, being an intelligence analyst or a reporter, as they call them, was predominantly women. There might have been about, let's say, 30 interns at any given time, and maybe five would be men. We'd see the men get preferential treatment all the time, put in for classes that were considered milestone classes, and you couldn't even be considered for promotion, until you would take in that class. And they would turn down bunches of women, but they'd make sure the men got in the classes as soon as possible, and they didn't see anything wrong with that.

I had a friend once who – this is really odd. She and this guy, when you're an intern, you do rotations through offices, and just by quirk of fate, they ended up rotating in the same office so they literally had the same career and she was held back from her promotion for a year longer. And when she asked the head of the intern panel why that was, they said, “Well, he's a man. He has a wife. He's got a family to support. You don't, you're a woman.” I mean, they would actually just say that to your face. There's no way around it. You can't change your gender. It's not like you can just take an extra class or get a certification or something and make them happy. There was no way around it. That is actually the way it was.

Fast forward 35 years, is it better? Sure. Is it perfect? No. There's still a lot of subtle – I mean, I could tell you stories. Even when I was an office director, I had a couple hundred people

working for me, some of the things that still happen to that is just mind boggling, and you realize how much of the culture of an institution you still have to change and fight.

[00:35:50] AH: Do you think that maybe I'm reading too much into this, but is there a part of you or women that were of your generation on intelligence, where you leave and think, yeah, but had hugely successful career, but if I was a man, I would probably have been the next rung up, or I've got more money or something? I don't know. Help me understand how you made – how did you make peace with the sort of gendered nature of the institutions and the culture in your career and so forth?

[00:36:22] AK: That's a really great question and it's really hard. I mean, I don't know that I did ever make peace with it, to be honest. So, I'll give you an example. When my last job there I was made the deputy director of an office to do technology forecasting. I was the only one who had any experience in technology forecasting. I had been involved in a big team at the RAND Corporation. We did one for the intelligence community a few years ago, and I studied directly under a guy who's one of the foremost technology forecasters in the world. So great training, great experience, did a few more smaller scale ones, for the agency, as well.

So, came over to NSA, very excited to help them with this, and did they make me the director? No. They made me the Deputy Director, which traditionally, you end up doing all the administrative things, make sure the clocks – the trains are running on time, and that kind of stuff. The director was not a particularly good director. He ended up leaving for another job. It's that kind of stuff. And I just saw it, and I saw it happening to other women too, over and over again. We talk about it now under the me-too culture, a mediocre –no offense, a mediocre man often is good enough, and they'll give them the job or whatever. But for a woman or a person of color, you have to be the best, you have to be Superman in order to even be considered and how was that fair.

So, at a certain point, I just realized, I'm never going to overcome this. I had originally planned when I went back to NSA to stay for 10 years and I left after 3 or 4, I forget, because I was kind of heartbroken at that point, that they just kept pushing people to the top, who were of a certain type, and technical excellence, and having your heart in the right place and trying to do the right thing all the time wasn't necessarily going to be recognized. I thought, I'm in a good place in my other career, the writing career, maybe I should start working for myself, instead of some institution that doesn't appreciate me. It's been going gangbusters. Now. I'm an

executive producer for television, and writing two series and never imagined I would have a career like this when I started out at NSA as a young woman.

[00:38:36] AH: Yes, it's incredible. I'm so glad you're doing what you're doing now. Although, I'm sorry that you had that experience with the director and deputy director position. Tell us a little bit more about that. What's that technological future, is technology forecasting? Help us understand that a little bit more.

[00:38:56] AK: Sure. I mean, one of the things is we are in a time of just incredible technological change. I mean, look at artificial intelligence alone. It's not something you watch every day, you may not realize how far we've come in just five years, and all of those science fiction things that we were told as children that we'll have some day, robots that will assess our every need, self-driving cars, all kinds of stuff. It's all going to come about and it's going to come about because of what we're able to do in artificial intelligence. And that's just one area of change that we're saying.

For intelligence, which, as you know, is heavily dependent on technology. None of the agencies could do what they do without technology. I guess that's why Q is such a popular character in the James Bond movies because we all need our Qs. So, what I was doing, and I actually am still a consultant on emerging technologies for both government and industry, but my clients are confidential, is we help them figure out what are the coming technologies that are likely to impact the business of intelligence? So, not the target so much, but how we're able to do our business. Again, like Q, what technologies are coming along that are going to enable Q to make us better devices.

Every technology is kind of a two-sided coin. So, on one side is what we call the defensive side. How is it going to help us protect our agents, help us come up with better collection systems or something like that? But the other side is offense. How would an adversary use this technology against us? So, that's what I try to help the agencies do, is do their work better and protect themselves better. There's a very small cadre of people that do this, actually, and I have to say, now I'm thinking of getting out of the field, because it's a little hard to do this and do the right thing at the same time.

[00:40:50] AH: Why is that? Is there just so much material that you need to keep abreast of because it's so fast moving?

[00:40:56] AK: Yes, absolutely. When I got started in this, most of my day was spent reading. Now, after 12 years or so, I have a pretty good running sense of what would be a significant change in a development in most technologies, or when I see a new technology to have an instinct of whether or not there's going to be something in it for intelligence. So, I don't have to do quite as much, but it still is, just a metric ton of reading and research and to do to stay on top of it, because it's very fast moving, especially right now.

[00:41:26] AH: And how do you triage your information for that? Are there any particular sources? Do you subscribe to certain magazines or newsletters? If someone wants to like dip their toe in this, what's the best way to go about it?

[00:41:38] AK: To dip their toe in it, it would depend a lot on how much of a background they already have in technology. And it's changed a bit. And part of the reason I think why I'm able to do this is because I did have so many years as a SIGINT analyst. SIGINT analysts shift through a lot of, let's just call it traffic, a lot of information, looking for the clues, looking for bits and pieces that indicate to you that, "Hey, there's something substantial going on here, something new, something that has the potential to change the situation." When you have a couple dozen years of experience doing that, it makes it a lot easier to shift through tons and tons of information.

Just in the time that I've been doing this, which is about 12 years, it's really changed. I mean, it used to go, and it's all a reflection of like how it's changed, and how we, how the whole public consumes information, where we've gone from – where you might have to try to go out and pull in 600 stories a day to stay on top of what's new.

Now, the tendency for these aggregator sites, trusted entities, such as MIT Technology Review, or I'm trying to think of some other ones. I actually use a lot of business media sources, because now, like the venture guys, stay right on top of any emerging technologies. And so, I'll catch a lot of breaking news there, and they often have their own interpretation of why it's important, for instance, so that gives me a little bit of a leg up. But honestly, if you're a halfway smart person, and you throw six months into it you can probably come up with your own list of the sources that probably scratch the itch for you and could start doing it.

[00:43:22] AH: Give us an example of just one thing, if there's anybody out there who's retired listening to SpyCast, and they get out of the game when Minox cameras were all the rage, give us an example of something that we can work with here or something tangible.

[00:43:38] AK: Well, one of the hottest things right now are NFTs, non-fungible tokens. And I'm getting asked every flipping day to do something on NFTs and whether or not there's something there that the intelligence community should be worried about. It's actually a great example, because on the surface, no one would think that there was anything for the intelligence community when it comes to NFTs. So, for folks who aren't familiar with them, it's literally just like a little piece of code that links you to authentication of something. And mostly, if you read about them in the press these days, they're linked to artwork, not a painting, per se. But usually some kind of digitally formed piece of art. And the art itself, you can find anywhere, it'll be all over the internet. That's not what you're buying when you buy an NFT. You're buying a little piece of blockchain code, that because it's unique. it verifies your ownership of that.

You can think of it as almost like a diploma or a deed to a land. There are a lot of printed diplomas and deeds, but there's only one that has your name on it or is linked to a particular property and has your name on it. You can think of it as ownership. Well, we're already seeing NFTs morphing away from just artwork and they're starting to apply it to all kinds of things, including, again, if you think of a diploma, or deed, to identity. And identity is a really important thing for the intelligence community, protecting identity, hiding identity, just think of the Mission Impossible stories. I mean, that's your classic cover situation where you have to pretend to be somebody else for a short period of time. And in the modern day, it's getting harder and harder to have a secret identity, because it can be uncovered with enough digging.

What would maybe the implications of NFTs be for identity intelligence? You might be able to hide the fact that someone's paying you money because people are buying these NFTs, sometimes for millions and millions of dollars. What's the implications for someone making secret payments to the next Aldrich Ames if it's linked to an unbreakable crypto code? So, that's the kind of work I have to do. I have to look at emerging technologies and try to really think about what are the factors, it's usually a confluence of factors, not just a technology, but the stars aligning that make for huge disruptive technology.

[00:46:09] AH: With the novel writing process, how does that go down with the pre-publication, review board, and getting novels authorized and so forth as the gig for people that are not in the community? Give them a sense of how that differs or doesn't differ.

[00:46:26] AK: So, when you get a security clearance, the first thing they do is they slap a piece of paper down in front of you, and it's a nondisclosure agreement, and you have to sign –

or they won't give you clearance. And it obligates you for your life, your entire life, not just years, while you're employed, that if you ever write anything that has to do with anything you've worked on, you must give the agencies the opportunity to review it, to make sure that you're not disclosing classified information.

So, when you're writing a spy novel, that looms large in your head, because there's the chance that they could put the kibosh on something that's pivotal to your story. So, I did worry about it a lot. But like I said, I spent 10 years just writing my first novel that I sold. And during that time, I did try to write a couple spy novels. So, I did go through the pre-publication review process for those books. So, I saw over time that it kind of is a pendulum that swings, sometimes they're more restrictive and other times, they're not, for whatever reasons. Sometimes there are political factors that influence it an administration may really not want to see any people in intelligence write novels that happened under the Bush administration, for instance.

I'm not saying that pre-pub folks let anything classified slip through. But just to give you an example, when I started out, they didn't even want you to use the term chief of station. They said, even though that was in many, many, many books, because you worked for the agency, that would be validating the use of the term. So, if you read *Red Widow*, you'll notice that I use different terms for certain things and that was me flinching, afraid, they were going to tell me again, "No, you can't use that term." And now I see a lot of people with use, former agency people use these terms in books. So, I think, the pendulum has swung, and they've kind of loosened up a little bit. But I'm happy to say that I did not get asked to make one change to the manuscript, that was a huge relief.

[00:48:30] AH: One of the things that I was thinking of was for the novel, do you have to say, "Look, here's something that this may touch on this passage here, or a base that's on this operation? I've tried not to give the game away, do you think this is okay?" Or do you just give them the script and they read it and they infer what they want and take away what they want, and they say, this or that is okay?

[00:48:55] AK: It was the latter for me. I don't know if anybody does do them disservice of saying – I mean, if it's nonfiction, I can see where they probably have a lot of lengthy discussions like jawbreaker, or something like that. I'm sure there were a lot of talks about exactly what kind of details could be given, and which couldn't. That's a great question. I'm going to have to ask some of the other novelists I know who were former agency people, if they pointed things out. So no, I just sent it off and said something like, "Hey, I hear you have a

30-day window for coming back with your answer. I'll hear from you in a month. Bye.” Yeah, I just didn't want to rattle that cage at all.

[00:49:33] AH: If you're happy to talk about this, you mentioned that a couple of times being a Japanese American. Give us a sense of like, how that was involved in your career, if at all. It's just something that I want to start talking about on SpyCast, so it's not like an elephant in the room, just where we start talking about like things like gender and race and so forth.

[00:49:58] AK: I think that's a great thing for you to have a discussion on. I know for me personally, I don't think it was a huge factor. I think the bigger factor was that I was a woman, and a pushy little woman at that, which is not popular. But at NSA, for instance, I'll just be candid, I do think they have a race issue there and they've had it for a long time. Partly, NSA is a technology, I mean, it's so much like a technology company. So, it wouldn't be unexpected for them to have a lot of the same issues that tech companies have. A lot of them are the bias against women, they're agist, they favor younger employees, all kinds of things, bias towards certain schools, even where you graduated.

But NSA does have an issue with this. And I do remember at one point, I think it was in the '90s, when they started having minority representatives on all kinds of boards and committees, promotion boards, as well as other boards. And I would get called a lot to be the representative because I was at a certain grade, I was known in my field. But I was told that questions were raised sometimes. Why was she made the minority rep? They didn't know what I was, first of all. A lot of people thought I was Latino because I'm also half Portuguese, and I don't look Asian, I probably look more Latin than anything else. People were confused. When I was a manager, I had a lot of people of color working for me and I know a lot of them were very unhappy. A lot of them were very unhappy about how they perceive their careers were being handled.

[00:51:39] AH: One of the other things that I was hoping to touch on as well was, do you ever plan on writing a memoir or doing something in the nonfiction realm?

[00:51:49] AK: That's a great question. I've talked to my agents about trying to do something nonfiction, like whether it's about technical, spy craft, for instance, something like that. But I don't think they have much of an appetite for that. They did say that it would be nice if I wrote a cute kind of memoir, but I'm not a cute kind of person. So, I don't think that's going to happen.

[00:52:12] AH: I think we've done quite a good job of digging into your career. I mean, I feel like I could speak to you for hours, but I'm mindful of your time. So yeah, I was just wondering, do you think that there's anything that is important about your book or about your career that we haven't touched on? I know, there's a lot more that we could, but just in case I'm overlooking anything, you want to bring anything up or touch upon anything?

[00:52:41] AK: Gosh. No, you have done a fabulous job. It's been so much fun talking to you. You've had great questions, and you pose them so tactfully. I'm sure once we stop, I'll probably think of a few things. So, maybe I can come back someday and we can talk about some more interesting stuff. But the intelligence agency is just like our country, and at a really interesting crossroads. I'm sure you're there with me where we just hope, right, it's just the dawn of a new day, and things are only going to get better. I mean, this is one thing I learned about complex contingency operations, you have to go through some hell and high water in order for things to get better off sometimes.

[00:53:19] AH: Well, thanks ever so much for your time. It's been great to speak to you.

[00:53:23] AK: Thank you. Yeah, it's been a lot of fun. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[00:53:27] AH: Absolutely. Thanks so much, Alma.

[00:53:28] AK: Talk to you soon.

[END]