

Arm Cast Show 339

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Armand Rosamilia: And welcome to another exciting episode of Arm Cast Dead Sexy Podcast. As always, I am your host Armand Rosamilia. We've got a really good show this week. Kelly Brakenhoff stops by. She is a mystery author and we have a good time. She was a lot of fun to hang out and chat with, so that's good. I hope everybody is doing well.



Everybody is safe. Nobody is letting down their guard and doing stupid things. You know who you are. Speaking of things that are not stupid, the opposite of what we're talking about. The anti-segued there. I want to tell you about Reapers Brew Coffee. Love it, drinking it right now. Car-themed coffee. They offer single bags, subscription-based, and Ooh, you hear my stomach? My stomach is growling like crazy. They have a collectible mug. Their first series is based on past serial killers, and you can get those mugs with the subscription. If you go that route, which I suggest-- I am a subscriber--I get four bags a month and I burn right through them. I am drinking so much coffee right now.

It is awesome. And *my* life hasn't really even changed. It's just I'm using this as an excuse to drink even more coffee and nobody can say anything. Micro-brewed fresh roasted. Two different flavors. Murder Mud, which is the regular and Electric Chair, which is the high caffeine. I suggest drinking both.

You have to, if you use coupon code at checkout, you get 10% off of new orders, plus you receive a free gift, check them out. Reapersbrew.com. Also want to thank National University and their MFA program, which is a fully online creative writing program with no residency requirement. They are genre fiction, friendly, horror, sci-fi fantasy, young adult. They focus on fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry or screenwriting and all their screen running faculty are active Hollywood professionals. Since 2005, the National University Online MFA program has helped working adults learn the craft of creative writing. Joining an alumni network over a thousand graduates, get the ideas in your head on the page.

National University is an accredited, not-for-profit university. Check them out at www.nu.edu we want to thank our sponsors this week. We want to thank you for listening and we are going to jump into the interview now.

And welcome back to our Dead Sexy Podcast. I got a very cool guest. We've been chatting for a little while. She's an American Sign Language interpreter whose motivation for learning ASL began in high school when she wanted to converse with her deaf friends. She's the author of the Cassandra Sato mystery series and a children's picture book series, the mother of four young adults and two dogs. She and her husband called Nebraska home. Kelly Brakenhoff, welcome to the show.

Kelly Brakenhoff: Hi. Thank you so much for having me.

Armand Rosamilia: I tried to say that as German as I could, even though I got a New Jersey accent, it really didn't work.

Kelly Brakenhoff: I wasn't sure if it was New York or New Jersey, but yeah. What is it with all the people from there that moved to Florida? My father's from New York and he lived in Florida for quite a while.

Armand Rosamilia: Well, you come down here to die, that's pretty much. That's especially for New York, New Jersey, Florida is the next step. It's like purgatory before you go to heaven, so you got to do it in steps. Yeah.

Kelly Brakenhoff: That makes sense. 'Cause we used to bring our kids down there to Disney and it was just full of New Yorkers. And they call it "Flaarida."

Armand Rosamilia: Yes. It's different. We're in Jacksonville, so we're up north here, but it's still the South. We're like 20 minutes from Georgia. But if you go down to Miami that's a world unto itself. If you go down to central Florida, it's really just like New York, South. I mean all the accents and everything else. It's kind of funny. And I've lived in a bunch of places. I've been down here since 2001, and I've lived in places where almost everybody I met was New York or New Jersey.

Kelly Brakenhoff: Well, New Yorkers do travel quite a bit, but not usually to Nebraska. We don't see many of you people here.

Armand Rosamilia: And you know what? That's a good thing. Alright, so let's, let's start with the mystery series. Give everybody the elevator pitch and we'll go from there.

Kelly Brakenhoff: Sure, the first book in the Cassandra Sato series is called *Death by Dissertation*, and the second is *Dead Week*. I'm working on the third right now. The main character's name is Cassandra Sato. She trades her life in Hawai'i where she was born and raised for a dream job. . . in Nebraska. She thinks that if she works at a small liberal arts college, it will help her get experience to someday become a university president. Two months into her job, a student dies and she has to help with the investigation, mayhem ensues, and her job rapidly becomes a nightmare.

Armand Rosamilia: Nice, so obviously you're a mystery fan. Two things come to mind when I think of fun mystery, I guess if you were to call. My wife is a huge fan of the Lifetime and Hallmark, you know, those mystery ones. And so I've been forced to watch these. It's funny because she watches all the Christmas ones and all that. And those are just utter garbage, let's be honest.

But I'm on the couch reading, and then all of a sudden Aurora Teagarden or whatever it's called. She's watching those. Then of course, I find out that Charlaine Harris wrote those. I'm a big fan of hers and I've met her a couple times. And, so I get sucked in watching it. She's watching this other one I can't remember the name of. It's a whole series of it. And, I'm like, all right, I know who the killer is. No, this guy helped, but it's the agent is the one who killed him. I get sucked into those! And I'm like, "Oh, turn these off." These are awful.



Kelly Brakenhoff: It's funny that you mentioned that because, we have Dish network and during the quarantine they've added a bunch of channels. We have the basic tier, and they've added all the Hallmark channels for free.

I never had gotten to watch the Hallmark mystery channel before, and I am totally addicted. I'm down there almost every night catching up. I've watched all the Aurora Teagardens I've been able to, and I've started several other series too. And it's funny because I'm now stuck in my

house all day. And I usually would be interpreting, but now I'm trying to write. And then at nighttime, I'm watching these. I'm calling this research.

Armand Rosamilia: Well, yeah, see, Mystery 101 that's a good one.

Kelly Brakenhoff: Okay. I taped that, but I haven't watched that one yet. Is it good?

Armand Rosamilia: I mean, yeah, I guess.

Kelly Brakenhoff: Okay. I suppose for you, *good* is on a sliding scale there, right? If it's on the Hallmark channel,

Armand Rosamilia: it's much better than anything else I've ever watched on Hallmark.

Kelly Brakenhoff: I do think it's true though. You just kind of get sucked in. I mean, that's the whole thing of the mysteries is they kind of suck you in. Yeah, mine are very similar to the Aurora Teagarden ones. I'm trying to think. I can't think of any that might take place on a college campus, and I don't know that there's any on TV.

Armand Rosamilia: Were you a big reader of mysteries growing up?

Kelly Brakenhoff: Definitely. That was probably, I mean, I read just about anything. Also love like fantasy, like Lord of the Rings, and C S Lewis and gosh, just about everything. I read all kinds of stuff, but my favorites are the mysteries. I love the Sue Grafton ones with the alphabet series and Janet Evanovich from your native New Jersey. She's pretty awesome too. So yeah, they're definitely my idols in the writing world.

Armand Rosamilia: My wife has a huge, still is a Janet Evanovich fan. When I did my Dirty Deeds crime thriller series, it was something like, "Hey, you could actually, I think you'll really actually liked this" because it's kind of in that, same vein of lot of humor and a lot of fun. So that's how Amazon promoted it too, which was really nice.

Kelly Brakenhoff: Oh yeah. If you can get Janet Evanovich anywhere near your name, that's a great thing to have. Definitely. I think it's funny because my mystery is classified as a cozy mystery. I've been talking with other writer friends about this lately. There's a huge variety of cozy mysteries. You know, the, you get the ones with the cats and the baking and everything. And then mine's kind of more on the traditional end. And, those Janet Evanovich books are actually just traditional mysteries. They're not classified as cozy, but I love how hysterical they are. The humor, I mean, to me that's the big draw.

Armand Rosamilia: And that's for me too. I've read a ton of thrillers. It's the character and it doesn't matter the situation. It's really the interactions of the characters and stuff. I always joke around, there's a great author I praise all the time. Don Lee McKenna, who does, thrillers.

And I would say if you put her characters, 'cause it's set in Apalachicola, in Florida. I say if you put her two main characters on a shrimp boat for 200 pages and have them interact and talk. I would give that book five stars, because I love the characters.

Kelly Brakenhoff: I agree. Especially the ones that continue for more than a few books. The longer series where you get to know the people, and then each time they make a new one, it's like kind of going on vacation where you get to go hang out with your friends for 300 pages. That's the best kind.

Armand Rosamilia: Do you have a number of books in mind in the series?

Kelly Brakenhoff: I do, for sure I have at least five mapped out, and then I'm gonna take stock from there and see if I want to keep going. The plot operates on the school year. The first one is right around Halloween time. And then the next one is dead week. That's the week before finals week where everyone's studying for exams. And right now, I'm working on the one that happens during winter break. I have a whole school years' worth mapped out and then I'll decide from there how far I'm going with it. I love the characters, and I have had so much fun writing them. You know, the funny sidekick and all the extra people. They are what make it fun to write.

Armand Rosamilia: It's fun as a writer to get immersed in that world 'cause it's like you said, they're friends, they're people. You want to know what's happening next.

But then there's the business side of this. You still have to make sure you're making money and as much as you might love certain characters. Well, this isn't, you know, paying the bills kind of thing. So there's that part of it as well.

Kelly Brakenhoff: Right. And you are a lot more experienced in that than I am. Actually, tomorrow is my book birthday of *Death by Dissertation*. So tomorrow is a year from when I publish that. I can't believe how much has happened in a year and how much I've learned in a year by doing this. Definitely, this is sink or swim on the job kind of training.

Armand Rosamilia: Was it a big learning curve for you to figure out, especially getting to that first book?

Kelly Brakenhoff: Yeah. It took me about five years. The first book was a NaNoWriMo project in 2014 where I just had always wanted and talked about writing a book and being an author and you know, talking about it only gets you so far.

At a certain point, I had to challenge myself to actually sit down and do it. I found NaNoWriMo was the best way for me to do that. And then I kept working on it. It took me five years to get it from 50,000 yucky first draft words to an actual thing that I could publish

and be proud of. Ever since then, I've had this crash course in marketing, promotion and all the behind the scenes and everything.

Like you said, now I'm kind of trying to be realistic. I love these people they're like my family now. But at a certain point, if your family's not making money, then you have to lay them off and make another series.

I haven't gotten to that point yet, but I guess you do have to decide if you're going to keep going or not.

Armand Rosamilia: Yeah. So at what point did you realize, the writing is probably the easy part of all of this.

Kelly Brakenhoff: I actually work still at my day job. Luckily, I work for myself as an interpreter, and I can set my own hours. At the beginning, I was still working all of my interpreting hours. I work at the college here in town. In the last six months, I've had to kind of cut back on my interpreting time because the book thing is taking so much time. I have like three full-time jobs.

Armand Rosamilia: Yeah. That's part of the fun. So obviously you work at a school, and your series is set. So are a lot of people who work with you or family, friends, that kind of thing say, "Hey, that's me." Or, "Hey, I remember that conversation."

Kelly Brakenhoff: I tried really hard not to do that too much. I take this person's personality and this person's looks. I'm at an actual university most days. My job is to stand in the classroom next to the teacher and interpret everything that happens in the classroom. I hear really good professors, and I hear some professors who probably should be doing something else. And then I get to, you know, do class discussions. I see the students, I kind of experience it from their side too.

It's a really interesting job because you are just kind of the fly on the wall. I overhear everything. There's honestly sometimes when I rush out of the classroom and write something funny that someone said. Like, "Oh wait, that was good. I gotta use that."

Armand Rosamilia: Yeah, and that's the weird part about now. We're recording this, obviously we're all in quarantine and as a writer, you need that. My wife yells at me all the time, 'cause I've been full-time for about eight years now. I'll go a week or 10 days and she'll be like, "go put some pants on and we're going to leave the house." And I kick and scream. But then when we're out, we're at Walmart or we're at, you know, McDonald's, wherever I start eavesdropping and listening in. I think, *oh wait, I realized I need this*. I need the interaction to create these. Cause all these people at some point are gonna be killed in a horror book that I'm writing. But like you said, this is like, *Oh, here's something great to add to something*.

Kelly Brakenhoff: That's the thing that surprised me the most in the last year. You know, for the first few years when I was writing it, my family never took me very seriously. They kind of rolled their eyes like, "okay, mom's having her midlife crisis, whatever. We'll just kind of

humor her.” But now that I've been doing this for quite a while and they actually see real books and real things happening, they've kind of started taking me more seriously.

But now we'll be out doing something or talking or whatever, some interaction, and I'll be like, *Oh, that would be a great story idea* or *Hey, what if, that person died?* So now everyone's kind of on the bandwagon.

Armand Rosamilia: That's good. So you get that support, which is always needed.

Kelly Brakenhoff: You know, it comes and goes, right. 'Cause you know, they're in their twenties so pretty much my IQ isn't super high. Maybe in another 10 years, I'll be smart again. We'll see.

Armand Rosamilia: My kids are that age too. They are way more intelligent than dad or mom will ever be, right?

Kelly Brakenhoff: Yeah. I went through a period when they were in high school where my IQ had shrunk to the size of a walnut, but now it's slowly coming back up as they get into life on their own and trying to cook, do laundry and that kind of thing.

Armand Rosamilia: Well, as they do all the dumb things you told them not to do. Now they're going, right now one of your kids is going, “yeah, oh mom told me not to do it this way. That's why.”

Kelly Brakenhoff: It is nice. It is gratifying when they give you the phone call of how did you do that again?

Armand Rosamilia: Yeah. Or, “Hey mom, you were right.” Yeah.

Kelly Brakenhoff: I haven't heard that.

Armand Rosamilia: I haven't heard those either. I got three. I've got a 24-year-old, 23-year-old and a 19-year-old, so I still have probably a few more years until they admit anything we said was right.

Kelly Brakenhoff: Yeah. My oldest is 26 and they have two kids and he is probably the only one who occasionally will go, “Oh, yeah, right.” You know, he sees how hard it is.

Armand Rosamilia: So are you working on one book at a time or do you work on other things as well?

Kelly Brakenhoff: I am mostly working on the third book, and I think you mentioned I have a children's picture book series. And so that one, it's a picture book. There's only about 300 words. My part of it is super quick and super easy. I just write my little 300 words and then give it to the illustrator who slaves over it for about five months. So, yeah, I kind of try to space those out so that I'm not working on two things at once.

I feel like my creative process has really suffered during this quarantine. It took me a couple of weeks when I first was home all day to kind of get my act together. So, I just don't have the bandwidth to do more than one project. I mean, I was totally wrong, but I thought, *Oh,*

I'm going to be home all day. I can knock this book out in two weeks. This is going to be great.



James Breakwell, Exploding Unic... 
@XplodingUnicorn

Armand Rosamilia: Well, that's what everybody thinks.

Kelly Brakenhoff: Six weeks later. .

Armand Rosamilia: Yeah, I mean, there's the meme that's around. It says. "Oh, I'm on quarantine. I can write this book." And then it says "Narrator: the author did not write the book."

Kelly Brakenhoff: Yeah, I need that meme too, cause yeah, I mean, honestly, I stared at a blank cursor for several days and just kind of felt all the feelings and whatever.

And then they had all those plans that were going around for your student, you know, like, okay. A half an hour of recess, a half an hour of reading, a half an hour of math, lunchtime, nap time, snack time. And I thought, okay, I'm going to need a schedule too, because I'm not doing very well with this wide-open day where I think I can just write all day. That is not happening. So yeah, now that I've been on a schedule, I've gotten a lot better at it.

Armand Rosamilia: Yeah, I've done that over the last few months where my wife, cause she's the smart one. She's giving me a Monday through Friday schedule. You know, do email, but you can only do it for an hour a day and, and BookBub and you know, Amazon ads and you got to write three times a day and it's worked.

I just write it on a post-it note. From 9 to 10 I'm doing this from 10 to 10:30, I'm doing this. And I try to stick with that instead of just, ah, let me figure out what I'm doing. And then I realize I missed something.

Kelly Brakenhoff: I'm trying to do social media. Like I said, this has been a huge learning curve, this whole author life thing. I've tried to do social media and then, you know, two hours later you realize you did nothing except a few things. And then you were just talking about ads. I've been kind of dipping my toe in some of that, but first you have to make the ads. So that takes me like an hour or two on Canva. I think it's going to take a short time, but it takes four times longer.

Armand Rosamilia: I'll do the same thing. Oh, I'm going to from one to two, I'm going to do Amazon ads, but then I'm like, well, maybe I'll do a Facebook ad. Well, Canva, which is a great site, except all of a sudden, your hour is over and all you've done is looked at the millions of different ads you can maybe put together. And then I'm like, well, I guess I'll do this tomorrow.

Kelly Brakenhoff: You feel my pain.

Me: Everything in the world is canceled. I can finally get some writing done.

Narrator: He did not get any writing done.

Armand Rosamilia: Unfortunately, I unfortunately, I get it. There's no secret way around that.

Kelly Brakenhoff: I was kind of hoping you were going to tell me some Ninja trick or something.

Armand Rosamilia: No, and this the sad part. I've been doing this for 30 years. I still don't know what the hell I'm doing. So, you're on your own.

Kelly Brakenhoff: No!

Armand Rosamilia: It doesn't get any better. Sorry. So for you, is it a weird switch from doing the mystery series then to do the picture book series?

Kelly Brakenhoff: Actually, I think it's pretty cool because everything has kind of come from this place where it's been 30 years that I've been an American Sign Language interpreter and I hang around with really cool deaf people all day. And I get to work with language all day. And with writing, obviously I get to work with language also. In my mysteries, I have characters that are deaf and sign and I kind of try to put in information about deaf culture and sign language and things like that. Some issues, you know, related to that in a fun way, you know, not really in your face. I put it in there because the characters are in the book. With the children's book series, the first one's called *Never Mind*. And it's about a dog named Duke, and he's deaf. And everyone in his family can hear except him. And sometimes people tell him never mind, and he doesn't really like it.

When I put all of that together, everything I love in one place. Even though mysteries are really different than the children's books, the children's books have become this passion project of mine. It's been really fun.

Armand Rosamilia: Oh, that's cool. So I would imagine it's gotta be a challenge to write deaf characters because you they don't hear the noise necessarily of a car pulling up or that type of thing. Are you cognizant as you're writing that? *Okay. It's maybe sound, it could not play a factor in this.*

Kelly Brakenhoff: Yeah, definitely. And since I hang around with people all day that are deaf, it's second nature to me. The readers that have written back to me have really fallen in love with that and they've mentioned in their reviews or notes that they really like getting to learn what it's like for a deaf student to attend college or what it feels like. I guess it's second nature for me.

The thing that was hard was figuring out how to do the sign language in dialogue. Because I have the main character can hear, and her friend is an interpreter. And then I have deaf characters. Within one page you might have people talking, people signing, people interpreting. I had a mess. During my first draft, a couple of my readers said you can't have italics, bold, and quotes and all this stuff. They said, "You're making my eyeballs fall out." I decided early on just to put everything in quotes. If someone's texting, if someone's emailing, signing or whatever, everything's in quotes. And then I just tell you what it is. You know, so-and-so signed, so-and-so texted. It's a lot more straightforward and people have

told me that it's easier to follow because it's all just conversation. It's just a matter of is it in the air, or is it coming out of your mouth.

Armand Rosamilia: And you want to keep the reader involved in the story. Not wondering, what is it? Is this sign? Oh, it's in bold. So it means this in italics. It means this. You know what though, probably your first draft needed to be that convoluted, just so you could keep everybody straight. Where the conversations were going.

Kelly Brakenhoff: Definitely. It was a process. I'm pretty comfortable with it now and I think it works on the page pretty well. And like you said, as long as the reader realizes this is all a conversation. If you're signing something, it's really no different than speaking English. It's just, you know in the air. It really does make people aware of hey, you might not understand American Sign Language, but they have the same emotions, they have the same responses. People look at them since they don't understand deaf people, we think there's something magical about what they're doing. But when you see it in print, then it's like, okay, they feel the same things. If that happened to me, I would feel that same way.

Armand Rosamilia: Yeah, that definitely makes sense. So are you a plotter or a pantsier when it comes to these mysteries?

Kelly Brakenhoff: I really, really want to be a plotter. I have tried every single outline method out there. I tried snowflakes. I've saved cats. I've done four acts, six stages. But you know what? Third book, I'm just going to admit it. I'm a pantsier. I do the outline. I know the beginning, the middle, the ending, but once I start writing and everything, it just veers off the path. It's horrible. Like right now, I'm at about the three-fourth stage and I have this middle part and this end part, and I'm trying to figure out how they're going to get there.

Armand Rosamilia: I don't even do an end part anymore. I am total pantsier. I just come up with a few scenes. I write down not in any particular order a lot of the time. Or I think they're in an order and then I just fill in from there. Then I write the third act from there. I cannot do an outline. I feel like I've already written the book.

Kelly Brakenhoff: I like organization. I'm a control freak. If you look in my house, I love labeling things, everything organized and in its place. I thought I should be that kind of a writer, and I've really tried to do that. I understand the value of doing that. But like you said, if I do too much of that, I feel like I've already written the book. When I start, it doesn't go the way I thought it was going to go. I get frustrated like, well, geez, why did I do the outline?

Armand Rosamilia: Yeah, you know, and that's the fun of this is we all have our own system. We all have our own way of looking at it, and it takes that time to figure out what's the best way. I mean, I wasted years and years fighting with it and writing outlines and trying to fight it and writing horrible stories because it had to end this way.

Kelly Brakenhoff: Yeah. I guess I thought, and this is just probably my naivete, but I thought. The third book, I should be faster at this. I shouldn't have to go through eight drafts to get this thing right. I should be able to do it faster, but that's not the way it's working out, like the first draft. I thought, okay, if I am really careful as I'm writing the first draft, I won't have

to keep rewriting this. But you just have to slog through it and write this horrible first draft so you can get to the end, go back and start revising.

Armand Rosamilia: Yeah. So you thought this would get easier. You're so silly. That's, yeah, that's so cute.

Kelly Brakenhoff: I'm starting to see that. I thought experience would actually mean something, but not at all.

Armand Rosamilia: All right, so where can people find you out there?

Kelly Brakenhoff: My books are all available on Amazon. The mysteries are in Kindle Unlimited, so people like me who are laid off their jobs and want to read free books should get one of the two months free memberships they're handing out at Kindle Unlimited. All the paperbacks are available anywhere you buy books. The children's books are available widely anywhere.

Armand Rosamilia: Well, it was awesome talking to you.

Kelly Brakenhoff: I really enjoyed talking to you.

Armand Rosamilia: Good luck with the third book and beyond. And when you get that one out there, send me another message. I would love to have you back on.

Kelly Brakenhoff: I'd love to come back. Thank you so much for having me.

Armand Rosamilia: I'll talk to you later.

And there you have it. Another great interviewer, another great interviewee. And good times. Check out her stuff. It is pretty cool. Also want you to check out National University and their MFA program fully online creative writing program. No residency requirement. They've been around since 2005, they've helped working adults learn the craft of creative writing. Check them out. National University is an accredited not-for-profit university. www.nu.edu

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Check them out. And Yeah. Got a bunch of really cool interviews coming up in the coming weeks. And, hopefully you will continue to listen to the podcast and, I don't know. Do your thing. You know what I'm saying? Just do your thing, people, that's all I'm asking you to do.

Alright, I'm not going to chit chat. I'm going to get another cup of coffee because I have maybe a sip or two left on this one. Less than that now, because I just took a sip. My stomach is making some crazy noises. I'm going to go make some French toast because why not? I'm in quarantine. It's not about losing weight anymore. It's about eating all of the bread before it goes bad. Alright. Everyone be safe.

Announcer: Every person's story has something to teach us how others view life, how obstacles are overcome, how joy has been felt, how fears are faced, how love is expressed. The Matters of Faith podcast explores individual stories of people's lives and how faith plays a part. It may not be your story, but it may help shape yours. Matters of Faith podcast with Jay Wilburn is on Project Entertainment.

This transcript was edited for filler words and clarity.