

**Shrink Rap Radio #174, September 19, 2008 – Murder Most Psychological
David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Roberta Isleib,
Ph.D.**

(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio by Susan Argyelan)

Excerpt: *This is what drives me crazy is, psychologists in movies and books who are crazier than their patients, or they have no boundaries. When I started out to write these books I said that there is something that I can do better than that. I don't mean make perfect people be the psychologists, but have them have reasonable problems that they're handling responsibly and still doing a good job.*

Introduction: That was the voice of my guest, Dr. Roberta Isleib, clinical psychologist and successful mystery writer. I just finished her latest mystery, Asking for Murder. You can find out more about Dr. Isleib in our show notes at www.ShrinkRapRadio.com. Now, here's the interview.

Dr. Dave: Dr. Roberta Isleib, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Roberta Isleib: Thanks so much for having me join you.

Dr. Dave: Did I say your name right? I wasn't sure how to pronounce it.

Isleib: You came very close. It's "Isleib."

Dr. Dave: "Isleib," okay. I should've asked you before we got started. But I'm delighted to have you on the show. I've read two of your mysteries now, and I've enjoyed them both, but before we get into that, how does such a nice psychologist lady like you get involved in "murder most foul"?

Isleib: (laughs) Everybody wants to know how a nice middle-aged lady got involved with that. It really started with a golf fixation. When I met this guy that I'm married to now, I wasn't a golfer and I wasn't a writer. I was a tennis player, and I had my practice in clinical psychology. But he was a golfer, and you remember what it's like in those first rosy days of a relationship when the person says, "Let's try such-and-such."

Dr. Dave: Oh, yes.

Isleib: And you say, "Doesn't that sound wonderful?"

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Isleib: (laughs) And so, when he said, "Let's go play a few holes of golf," I went – and then I got hooked on both of them, the man and the golf. And, I was such a horrible student – it took me so much time and money to learn to play – that I had to do

something with it. And really, that's the crazy answer, but it's true – that the idea that came out of that eventually was writing a murder-mystery series featuring a lady golfer.

Dr. Dave: What a strange entry into writing! (laughs)

Isleib: I know. It's really very odd.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. And I got the impression from the two novels that I read – which are not part of your golfing series, but are rather part of your Advice Column mystery series – that the heroine didn't much care for golf.

Isleib: No. This new heroine, who is a clinical psychologist very similar to the kind of practice that I had, her name's Rebecca Butterman, and she does not like golf at all. She had a cameo appearance in the second and third books in the golf series, and both she and my first character, who was a lady golfer, were interested in the same guy. And so there's always been some negative feelings, both between them and from this character, Rebecca, about golf.

Dr. Dave: Oh, okay. Yeah. I'm just looking at one of the front pages of your book, and it looks like you've got five of the Golf Lover's mysteries, and this most recent one is the third of the Advice Column mysteries.

Isleib: That's right, yeah.

Dr. Dave: Well, tell us a bit about your background. I'm thinking like where you grew up, went to school – all that good stuff.

Isleib: Okay. I – you know, this sort of explains my odd entrée into writing, because I'm the kind of person who wanders around until I find myself. So, I grew up in New Jersey, with a few years in Michigan. Then I went to Princeton, then I worked in a bookstore for a year, then I went and got a Master's degree in vocational rehabilitation counseling in Tennessee – worked at that for a few years, then went to school at the University of Florida for my Ph.D. in clinical psych, and then came to Yale to do a post-doc, worked here for 13 years, and then this writing thing came up. So, I'm not a "straight shot" kind of person. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: Well, neither am I! You're in good company. (laughs) Now, is there a particular approach to psychotherapy that you're aligned with?

Isleib: My post-graduate training, which was at the Yale Hospital, and then at the Yale Student Services, was psychodynamic. And a lot of the teachers, in fact, were psychoanalysts. So, that's kind of the perspective that I come from as far as therapy goes. For people who aren't big... who don't know a whole lot about therapy, that means really understanding your past and your family history and how that gets

dragged forward into the present and applied to situations where it may not really fit.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Actually, I have a similar training background myself. And since the psychodynamic approach does depend upon the past, let me ask you a little bit of a challenging question: Can you recall anything in your past, growing up as a child – an incident, a memory – that in some way might’ve foreshadowed this writing career or this interest in murder?

Isleib: (laughs) Tell that to... That’s a hard question. I’ll give you an easy answer, which is, I was a bookworm, and I read every Nancy Drew that came out – and so that’s a natural connection. There is – in the first book in the Advice Column series, there is a theme about suicide. I’m not going to say too much about it because someone might want to read the book, and I don’t want to spoil it.

Dr. Dave: Sure.

Isleib: But there was in the neighborhood, which is a very nice, normal suburban neighborhood where I lived, there was a woman down the street who committed suicide, leaving her two toddlers alone with her in the house. I might’ve been nine or ten years old. That had a big effect...

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm...

Isleib: ...with questions of, how could a mother do that? What was she thinking and feeling, and what kind of effect might it have had on those children? So, that is a theme that comes all through this first book, Deadly Advice.

Dr. Dave: Okay. Yeah, that makes sense – and thanks for being willing to rise to the bait of that question.

Isleib: Sure.

Dr. Dave: Now, I have the impression that you’re no longer in private practice. Is that right?

Isleib: That’s right. As I’ve gotten busier with writing and with the volunteer jobs that I’ve been doing along with that, the therapy just faded out as the writing got bigger.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Does that mean that your writing career has taken off sufficiently that you no longer need the income from private practice? I mean, are you like, cleaning up with your books?

Isleib: No, that doesn’t mean that. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Isleib: If I didn't have a perfectly nice husband who had an income, I'd be getting another job.

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Isleib: It's a tough business to depend on for your full-time income.

Dr. Dave: Well, that's my impression, and so that's partly why I wanted to ask that, because I think you have to extraordinarily successful in a writing career for that to begin to happen.

Isleib: Right. And I consider myself to be relatively successful, with eight books published by a major publisher...

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Isleib: ...but still, the money is not there, unless you really make it to another level.

Dr. Dave: Yes, yes. Well, we will keep our fingers crossed...

Isleib: Thanks!

Dr. Dave: ...and wait for you to jump up to that next level. Now, before we leave the topic of your own kind of history as a psychotherapist, what did you find to be the joys and the challenges of being a psychotherapist? The parts that you really loved and the parts not so much...

Isleib: The part that I really loved was seeing people begin to understand themselves and move out of the quagmire that they often came into my office, settle into. And, that would take some time, and some people who I saw for months and others for years. So that was the thing that I loved, was seeing people really change their lives and become happier people. The part that I didn't love was the always being tied to it. So, if you're in private practice by yourself, you are always on call. And so, if somebody had an emergency in the night, they called you.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm...

Isleib: If you wanted to go on vacation, well, you had to set up back-up with another therapist, and then you had to go through people being angry because you were leaving and then people being angry when you got back because you left, and all of that – that was hard.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Yes. That certainly makes a lot of sense to me. Are you by any chance a fan of Robert B. Parker, of the Spenser novels?

Isleib: I've read a couple of his novels. He certainly knows how to write something that moves along, lickety-split. I admire him.

Dr. Dave: Yes – me, too. He's one of my favorites, and I thought I saw a bit of his influence in your work, so that's why I asked.

Isleib: Well, that's interesting.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. (laughs) Well, that would be a compliment. (laughs) Who are your favorite mystery writers?

Isleib: Some of the ones that I like that I really enjoy – and I read a lot, because I have a lot of friends now who are in the mystery business – but, I think Michael Connelly is a master.

Dr. Dave: Oh, yes. I've read some of him.

Isleib: Yeah. In fact, his series is set in Los Angeles, and he has this very, kind of, dark police detective, who has a wonderfully difficult back-story himself. And he carries that through all his books, the fact that this man had such a tragic history. It helps to explain why he's so intense about the work of being a detective. I think he's a wonderful writer. There's another dark guy whose name is Arnaldur Indridason. He's Icelandic, so it's hard for me to pronounce that, but he also has one of these very depressive detectives, and because it's set in Iceland, it's always dark and cold. And, he's just a wonderful writer. Julia Spencer Fleming is a woman writer who writes a series that's set in the – I think it's in the Adirondacks. And she has an Episcopalian priest who's a woman, who works with the small-town police detective. The tension between those two characters is really masterful. So, those are a couple of the ones that I really enjoy.

Dr. Dave: Oh, that's great. I think my wife may have read that Icelandic author that you referred to. She's a much more prolific reader than I am, and she sometimes turns me on to books. As a matter of fact, she was the one who brought Robert Parker to me once when I was sick, and she brought me a stack of his books, saying, "I think you'll like these." And I got hooked. I'm not sure if you know that I interviewed two other psychologists who write mysteries – Stephen White and Dennis Palumbo.

Isleib: Yes, I listened to both of those interviews.

Dr. Dave: Oh, great.

Isleib: In fact, then I stole Dennis Palumbo from you, and we interviewed him on our group blog, which is Jungle Red Writers. Because he works with writers who are stuck, which is just fascinating to me.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Yeah. I hope you won't take offense, but I thought I saw a lot of growth between your 2006 *Deadly Advice* and your new 2008 *Asking for Murder*. Does that fit your own sense of things?

Isleib: Oh, if you said I went the other direction, I would take offense. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Isleib: But I love hearing that I've improved. It's what I aspire to, is just trying to learn more and be a better writer, and also a better plotter, and a better understander of character. I had no training in writing fiction, so I feel like I'm learning on the job.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that – whether you have attended writer's workshops, retreats – those kinds of things.

Isleib: I have. I have done all of the above. I joined the mystery-writing organizations that are important in the field, which are *Mystery Writers of America* and then *Sisters in Crime*, which, in fact, I'm the national President of, this year. So, through those organizations, I've gone to quite a few conferences. And then I've taken just classes in anything. I don't know if you've heard of *William Zinsser*.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Isleib: He wrote *On Writing Well*. So, I went to a class of his in New York, which had nothing to do with fiction or mysteries, but just writing. And then, I took a class in children's books just trying to get the writing part down and the fiction part down, because as I said, I knew nothing about this. Probably, the thing that maybe helped me the most was hiring an independent editor – it was like a private tutorial.

Dr. Dave: Aha.

Isleib: And she was really wonderful. She really just focused on every aspect of my writing – using words, to grammar, to illogical plot points, to trying to shove characters into a plot because I wanted them to go somewhere, when it really didn't make sense. I mean she was very, very helpful.

Dr. Dave: Oh, that's interesting. Getting back to your most recent one, *Asking for Murder*, it felt more sophisticated to me – somehow, more sophisticated, more complex, more compelling to me as a man. The other one that I read felt a little bit more like – you know, they say “chick flick.” Well, it's not a flick, but what's the corresponding thing? (laughs)

Isleib: Chick lit. Chick lit, yeah.

Dr. Dave: Chick lit, yeah. It had a bit more of that feeling for me as a man. This one, I think, moved a little better, a little faster. You mentioned that about Robert Parker's books, so I think you're on the right trajectory.

Isleib: Oh, good!

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Isleib: (laughs) You know, but one of the differences, or one of the changes that I've seen as I've written eight books is, people often ask, "Do you outline where the book is going ahead of time?" And, I have gotten better at doing that, because I think that for me, it works better to know where the story's going. And of course, there's always room for a lot of changes as you start to fill the story out. But it's an interesting thing about writers is, I have a couple of friends who don't outline anything and wouldn't even consider it, because they like to find out what's happening as the reader is...

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Isleib: ...whereas for my work, it seems to go better if I spend more time really forcing myself to know what the story is first.

Dr. Dave: Uh-huh. I wondered about that. Do you have a particular routine for your writing? Like, are you a morning writer, evening writer? Do you do it every day?

Isleib: I'm a morning writer – definitely no good in the evening. And, I pretty much write every day; it's a full-time job. I take the deadline that the book is due and then work backwards to figure out how many pages a week have to get done in order to get it sent in on time. And, I build in time for my writer's group to read and critique, and I have a couple of other friends who are readers, too. And so, that's an extra couple of months in there. And then, say it's 15 or 20 pages a week that has to get written. I sit down in the morning, and if I get – if I, by some act of God, got 15 done in a day, then I wouldn't have to do anything the rest of the week. But if I do nothing a whole day, then I have to get busy for the next couple of days. So, that's the way I keep myself going.

Dr. Dave: That's a fascinating way to structure it. Do you ever find yourself just drawing a blank on a given day and sitting there and getting nothing done?

Isleib: I do, but there are some pretty good tricks for how to get past that. One is just rereading what you've done before so you can remind yourself where the story is. Another is to – and I think it was Elmore Leonard who suggested that you always leave off during one day's work in the middle of something so that you're excited to go back. If you end a day at the end of a chapter, somehow it's psychologically harder to get going the next day.

Dr. Dave: Interesting.

Isleib: And I have a lot of buddies who I can call and whine to...

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Isleib: ...and say, "You know, I'm not doing anything." And even there was one friend who, she and I would call each other and then we'd say, "Okay, we're working for the next 45 minutes and then we'll call again." So, just really setting small deadlines is very helpful, too.

Dr. Dave: Those are some great tips. And, you mentioned Elmore Leonard. He's another one of my favorites. He just, he depicts these delicious psychopaths.

Isleib: Yes...(laughs)

Dr. Dave: (laughs) That's the only way I can describe it. I always feel like, hmm... I think I've known somebody like that somewhere along the way.

Isleib: Yes, he's a marvelous writer.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Now, you know, I wanted to be a writer, but I think I discovered that I don't have the imagination or the concentration that's required. Are you able to visualize the scenes? Or, is it more just a juggling of words, if you know what I mean.

Isleib: I would say it's more a juggling of words, and then if I'm really getting into the story, it becomes more clear. I mentioned to you that I had hired this editor for a couple of my books, and what she kept saying is, you really have to try to get into the viewpoint of your character, and if she's going to, say, I have this character who's going to be discovering a dead body. She wouldn't just say, "Oh, my – look what I found." She would have strong reactions. And based on her history and who you've made her, how would she react? And so, the more I can do that is to really get inside the character and then let them lead the way, then the more I can see the story. I do have a friend who describes being able to see it as though it was a movie, which is not how my mind works. That would be neat.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, it would be. I'm afraid my mind works more like your mind works, that somehow, it's putting together words rather than –

Isleib: Word by word, yeah.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, rather than visualizing things ahead of time. What do you think of the way psychologists are portrayed in the media? You've got a psychologist heroine, Dr. Rebecca Buttermann, and I'm thinking of things like Good Will Hunting, Robin Williams; and there's the psychiatrist in The Sopranos; there's

HBO's *In Treatment*, which I discussed with psychologist and psychoanalyst Fern Cohen. What do you think about shrinks in the media?

Isleib: This is one of my pet peeves. Did you see the movie *Tin Cup*?

Dr. Dave: No. I'm not sure – I think I might've avoided that one.

Isleib: Okay. (laughs) It was an entertaining movie – especially if you were interested in golf – and it was Kevin Costner, who I always like. But, he was trying to make a comeback on the – I forget what the tournament was, some big – the U.S. Open, or some big tournament. So, he went to a psychologist to get help. And, she turned into such an idiot! By the end of the movie, of course, she was his girlfriend, sleeping with him. And, this is what drives me crazy, is psychologists in movies and books who are crazier than their patients, or they have no boundaries. When I started out to write these books, I said that there is something that I can do better than that – I don't mean make *perfect* people be the psychologists, but have them have reasonable problems that they're handling responsibly and still doing a good job. It makes me nuts, this subject.

Dr. Dave: (laughs) Yeah. It's kind of a cultural stereotype in a way, isn't it?

Isleib: It is.

Dr. Dave: That psychologists and psychotherapists are nuttier than the people that they're treating.

Isleib: It is, and doesn't it make you wonder why it's that way, and what is it – that there's an unconscious fear of professional mental-health people? So we put them down...I don't know. It's an interesting idea.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, that *is* an interesting theory. Now, speaking of heroes of books who are psychologists themselves, my wife gave me a book titled *A Death in Vienna*, and I have yet to read it, but she raved about it. It's written by a London clinical psychologist by the name of Frank Tallis. Do you know that one?

Isleib: No I don't, but I'm writing it down.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, *A Death in Vienna*. She liked it a lot. It's on my to-do list.

Isleib: Okay.

Dr. Dave: Do you find that your training as a psychologist helps you as a writer?

Isleib: I think it helps me, it helps me construct reasonable characters, or characters that feel real. People often say, "Your books have a very real feeling to them." And, in this new series – the *Advice Column* series – the main character is a clinical

psychologist who has a private practice in therapy. And, it's really very similar to the one that I had. So, I know in a way that I just never was going to, with a professional golfer...because I just was no good. I can understand what a clinical psychologist does; I know exactly what it's like to sit on *both* sides of the couch, as a therapist and a patient. And I feel like I can explain that and have that be a natural part of the story...in a way that was harder with the golf.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Is there some way that a writer is like a therapist? Or vice versa?

Isleib: Let's see...well, certainly people – readers project their own issues onto a book and onto an author. So, I guess that would be a similarity. That one I'll have to think over. That's a good question.

Dr. Dave: I think it was triggered by my own sense of myself – that initially, I had this ambition to be a writer, and then somehow, I gravitated towards becoming a psychotherapist. And, I felt there was a similarity because I felt that both wrestle with the brass tacks of what it is to be human.

Isleib: That sounds good.

Dr. Dave: Okay. (laughs) It was true for me, and I just wanted to check it out with you.

Isleib: (laughs) I'll buy that.

Dr. Dave: Okay. You know, I love the advice-column bits that you throw into your Advice Column series. Clearly, you'd be *great* at that! Did you, in fact, ever write an advice column?

Isleib: No, I'm an advice-column junkie, though...

Dr. Dave: Ah...

Isleib: There's a column in the Ladies' Home Journal called "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" And I would buy that magazine every month just to read the column. They would take a case from a real therapist – I'm not sure how they did this with the confidentiality issues – and then the therapist would present the man's side and the woman's side and then sum up the work they did, and how they worked things out. I just love reading that thing. So, when I was thinking about what would be an interesting hook for this series – besides the psychology – the advice-column angle seemed like fun. Now, I've sent the books to some advice columnists just because you're trying to spread the word about them being out there.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Isleib: Gotten a couple of comments about, that her advice is not very earth-shattering, that it's kind of dull.

Dr. Dave: Huh.

Isleib: So, I don't know – it's made me think (laughs) maybe that isn't the direction I'll be going in! But I think there's a tendency to want to kind of "show off" in a column like that – for the advice columnist to want to show off how clever they are.

Dr. Dave: Yes, exactly. Exactly. Well, I thought you pulled it off...

Isleib: (laughs) Oh, well – thank you!

Dr. Dave: ...but of course, I'm not an advice columnist. But, I thought it worked. Well, as we wind up here, I'm wondering if there's anything you'd like to add that maybe my questions have failed to elicit.

Isleib: I think you did a wonderful job. Oh, I will just say... part of the theme in the new book was about a sand-play therapist, and that was something that I could say a little bit about. It was just, it was something that I made one of my main character's friends; I had her be a sand-play therapist without knowing anything about it...

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Isleib: ...in the first book. And then, when it came time to write the third book, and this character, whose name was Annabelle, was going to be one of the main characters, I had to do some research about it, so I wouldn't make the same mistake of making a therapist look foolish by having errors. And there was a sand-play therapist in Exeter, New Hampshire, who helped me – who walked me through all the details of how it's based on the theories of Jung. And people come in and place figurines in the sand, and then the therapist and patient sit together and talk through what the tray that they've made means.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Isleib: So, that was really interesting. It's just an example of how you're just always learning things as you go.

Dr. Dave: Right, yes. I really liked that part. Actually, one of my interviews – if you go back, you'll find I did an interview with a sand-play, a Jungian analyst sand-play therapist. And, one of my good friends just returned from a training in Switzerland, actually, at the Jung Institute for that very thing. And I thought you did a good job of rendering it.

Isleib: Well, thanks to Sally, who (laughs) straightened me out.

Dr. Dave: Well, okay...

Isleib: It was a lot... it was very interesting, yeah.

Dr. Dave: Okay, well, Roberta, thanks so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Isleib: It was my pleasure! Thank you for having me.