

LUCY BURDETTE

KEY WEST FOOD CRITICS MYSTERY SERIES

By *Ellen T. White*



While there are many ways to experience Key West, those who follow the mysteries of writer Lucy Burdette do so from their armchairs through Hayley Snow. On her silver scooter, Hayley zips through Old Town, somehow managing to “troll for trouble,” as her fiancée puts it, wherever she goes. That a food critic encounters so many dead bodies is a mystery in itself — nonetheless, it seems that crime-solving is all in day’s work for Hayley. Through nine novels in Burdette’s Key West Food Critic Mystery series, Hayley’s pace never lags. Readers relish (pun intended) the discovery of Key West’s landmarks, history and personalities, as well as the recipes for dishes mentioned along the way.

“I want readers to feel like they’re there and to see all the sides of Key West,” says Roberta Isleib, the author behind the pen name Lucy Burdette, “not just what a tourist who comes to Duval Street will see, but all the many layers behind that. Through Hayley, readers are basically seeing what I see, the Key West I know.”



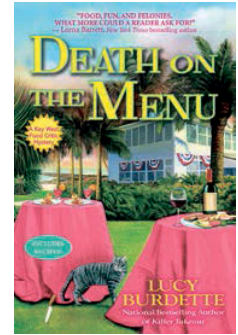
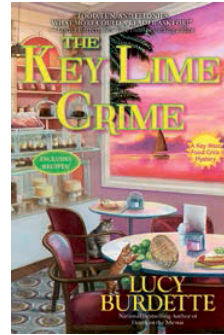
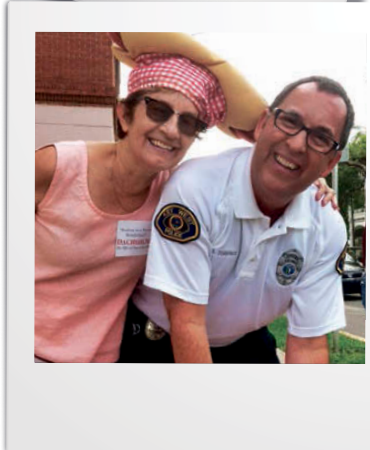
In Isleib’s latest installment, “A Deadly Feast,” Hayley has finally landed Nathan, the man of her dreams, a “ridiculously handsome” detective with the Key West Police Department. They are planning a windswept ceremony on the beach at Fort Zachary Taylor State Park, followed by a reception at the Hemingway House with all the trimmings. But when a woman drops dead at Isle Cook on a food tour that Hayley is covering for Key Zest Magazine, things run amuck. Is the Key lime pie poisoned? Is there a rivalry between ruthless chefs? Will Isleib’s plucky amateur sleuth save the day and her wedding?

“Of course, Hayley Snow has no business solving crimes,” says Isleib. “She’s not in the police. She has no expertise. So, each time, I have to ask myself, ‘What draws her

into this?’” In the first book in the series, Hayley was a suspect because her ex’s new girlfriend was offed. But after that, Isleib had to come up with new characters with personal agendas, deftly mixing truth and fiction. Hayley and her family are imagined, but many of the characters are true Key West. Lorenzo, Hayley’s confidante, actually does practice Tarot readings in Mallory Square, but his name is Ron Augustine in real life.

“If it’s somebody that I’m going to have to kill off, those are not real people,” says Isleib. “Usually the murderer is not a real person, either. But most of the restaurants and other settings exist. It’s the same rule of thumb. If something bad is going to happen there, then I make it up. I’m not out to ruin somebody’s business.”

THIS PAGE: Lucy Burdette has penned nine novels in her Key West Food Critic Mystery series and readers relish the discovery of many Key West’s landmarks, history and personalities along the way. Clearly immersed in the Key West scene, Burdette finds time for photo opportunities with locals, including renowned Rev. Steve Torrence (bottom, left)



A clinical psychologist, Isleib is more interested “in what makes people tick than in the puzzle” in her mysteries. She spent decades practicing psychotherapy in New Haven in an affiliation with Yale University. However, she hit a wall back in the late 1990s when the “gold standard” for health insurance coverage became crisis management. “Getting paid for the kind of work that I was trained to do — longer term psychotherapy — was very difficult,” says Isleib, who began to cast about for an alternative path, at first publishing articles on the psychology of golf, which she had just taken up.

“I’ve read mysteries from the beginning,” she says. “As a girl, the Bobbsey Twins and Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys and all of those were favorites. A friend said, ‘well, you should try writing a mystery.’” So, during a period she calls her “mid-life crisis,” Isleib took several fiction courses and pounded out a mystery about a neurotic lady golfer.

That book didn’t sell, but it landed her an agent and the interest of an editor at Berkley Prime Crime publishers. The subsequent book that Isleib wrote, *Six Strokes Under*, launched her five-book *Golf Lover’s Mystery* series in 2002. This was followed by three mysteries in which the sleuth was an advice columnist whose personal life was fraught with issues.

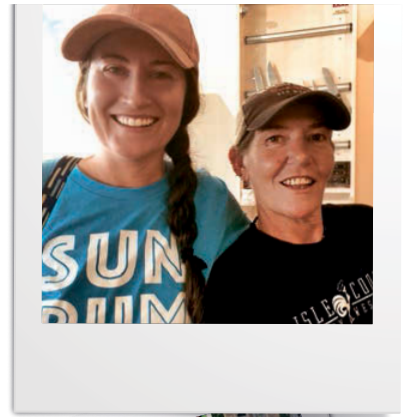
All Isleib’s books fall under a genre called “cozy mysteries,” a term coined in the late 20th century. In a cozy mystery, sex and violence are left off the page, though dead

bodies can turn up in proliferation. The setting is always a small community, with friends, family and neighbors in supporting roles. The sleuth is a person much like the reader — a schoolteacher, a gardener, a reporter with a local beat — but never a cop. In the best of the cozies, dedicated readers think they’ve guessed the solution but find in the end that they are completely surprised.

“You have to have, of course, more than one suspect,” says Isleib. “That doesn’t have to be someone who necessarily would want to kill the person, but maybe they have their own secret that they don’t want to tell.”

The Key West Food Critic Series was launched in 2012. By then Isleib and her husband, John Brady, were residents of Key West, which they “fell for” on a tour of Florida in 2007. “I pitched the series to my editor thinking, well, Key West is just such a perfect location,” says Isleib, “because there’s so many quirky people there and so many stories.” With the publication of the first book in the Key West Food Critic Series, “An Appetite for Murder,” Isleib became Lucy Burdette, in homage to her grandmother whose name she borrowed.

To understand the local scene, Isleib took the Key West Citizens Police Academy course and also enrolled in the Ambassadors program, “which was fun.” But for advice on specifics, she relies on Key West Police Chaplain and Reserve Officer Steve Torrence, who always appears in her mysteries as himself. “He gets a kick out of it,” says Isleib. “I ask him, ‘Would they do



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Analise Smith, a Key West tour guide, and Martha Hubbard, Isle Cook’s chef, who both play pivotal roles in *A Deadly Feast* as fictionalized versions of themselves.

The author Lucy Burdette (aka Roberta Isleib) and Ron Augustine, who “plays” Lorenzo, the protagonist Hayley Snow’s confidante, in the Key West Food Critic series and actually practices Tarot readings in Mallory Square.

Louise Procida, Judy Monahan, Lucy and Lori Tedesco Singley learning to make Key lime pie at the Key Lime Pie Factory on Greene street, which laid the groundwork for a scene in the *Key Lime Crime*, where Hayley Snow does the same, while sleuthing of course.

this? What would happen next?’ He’ll read the book and say, ‘I need more character development.’ Or, ‘In the next one, I want to be more buff.’”

The further into the series Isleib gets, the more Key Westers want to be included and end up as interesting characters. Analise Smith, a Key West tour guide, and Martha Hubbard, Isle Cook’s chef, both play pivotal roles in “*A Deadly Feast*,” contributing some of their own real-life experiences. Hubbard also shared her recipes for Chef Martha’s Sponger Key Lime Pie and Strawberries and Lime Sponge Cake Wedding Trifle, which (spoiler alert) she brings to serve at Hayley’s and Nathan’s wedding party.

Isleib keeps in close contact with her readers through Facebook and Instagram, as well as through her blogs — *Mystery Lovers Kitchen* and *Jungle Red Writers* —

which she maintains with fellow authors. Readers are rarely shy about voicing their opinions. Early in the series, Hayley had a different boyfriend. “One woman wrote, ‘This is ridiculous. There is absolutely nothing between them,’” reports Isleib. “‘If you continue with him as her boyfriend, I’m quitting the series.’ I thought about that, and I said, ‘You know what? She’s right. There’s nothing between them, so let’s move on.’”

In recent mysteries, Isleib has branched out into topical issues, which not all readers wholeheartedly accept. “*A Deadly Feast*” has a #metoo story. In “*Death on the Menu*,” Hayley covers a crucial Cuban/American delegation meeting at the Harry S Truman Little White House for *Key Zest Magazine* — a plot that came about after the boat Isleib’s sister took back from the Dry Tortugas ended up rescuing a group of Cuban refugees. “Some people complained because I had

President Obama come to the Little White House,” says Isleib. “They would rather not know that I have political opinions.”

Through Crooked Lane Books, which published “*Death on the Menu*” and “*A Deadly Feast*,” Isleib will release “*Key Lime Crime*” in July 2020, in which Hayley finds a corpse when she takes her overbearing mother-in-law on the Conch Train tour. In her next book, now in the works, Hayley and Nathan take a delayed honeymoon to Scotland, where things get sticky. You can take the girl out of Key West, but you can’t take Key West out of the girl. In that book, she’ll be communicating with her friends and family through FaceTime. 