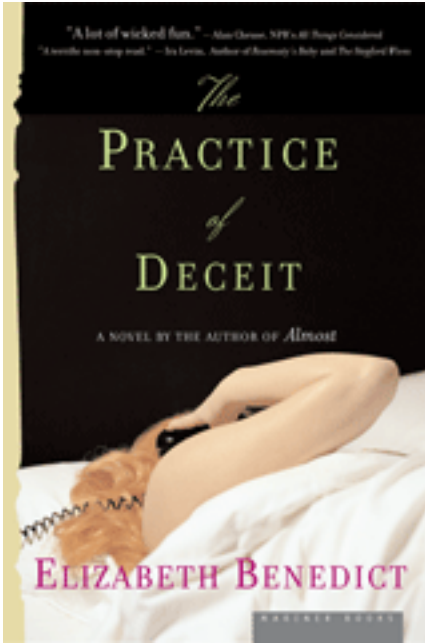


## Press Release



# The Practice of Deceit

by Elizabeth Benedict

- [About the Book](#)
- [About the Author](#)
- [A Conversation with Elizabeth Benedict](#)
- [More Praise for \*The Practice of Deceit\*](#)

Selected as a Book Sense Pick and a St. Louis Post-Dispatch Best Book of the Year — Now in Paperback

"A lot of wicked fun." — Alan Cheuse, NPR's *All Things Considered*

"A psychological thriller . . . filled with ulterior motives and insights on complicated relationships." — *New York Times*

"*The Practice of Deceit* is a nail biter of a psychological thriller." — Susan Isaacs, author of *Any Place I Hang My Hat* and *Close Relations*

"A terrific nonstop read." — Ira Levin, author of *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives*

## About the Book

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From the author of the New York Times Notable Book *Almost*, *The Practice of Deceit* (Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin; May 8) is a psychological thriller about a nice guy who runs afoul of a ruthless divorce lawyer — who happens to be his wife.

When Eric Lavender meets Colleen O'Brien Golden, his cherished life as a Manhattan therapist and bachelor suddenly loses its long-standing appeal. Colleen is a stylish lawyer in the suburb of Scarsdale, and Eric, to his own amazement, is besotted. He moves his practice to Scarsdale to marry her and quickly settles into blissful suburban domesticity with their new baby and his adorable stepdaughter. He even becomes a local hero when the police turn to him to resolve a hostage crisis.

But Eric's transformation comes to an abrupt halt when the police come knocking on his door again — this time with handcuffs. He and his lawyer-wife are caught up in an explosive conflict of interest involving their clients. When Eric discovers that Colleen has

gone to extreme lengths to conceal a secret past, she retaliates with horrendous charges against him. Eric must uncover the truth before his children, his career, and his freedom are taken from him forever.

As she did in her bestseller *Almost*, Benedict navigates the turbulent waters of love, law, psychology, and ethics with wit and penetrating insight. *The Practice of Deceit* is a gripping thriller and razor-sharp novel about marriage — and divorce — gone awry.

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## About the Author

**Elizabeth Benedict** is the author of *Almost*, which was selected as a New York Times Notable Book, a Washington Post Book World Book of the Year, a Newsweek Best Fiction Book of the Year, and a Best Book of the Year by National Public Radio's *Fresh Air*. She is the author of three other novels, as well as *The Joy of Writing Sex: A Guide for Fiction Writers*.

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## A Conversation with Elizabeth Benedict

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### Where did you get the idea for this novel?

It seems I spent the first half of my life hearing stories of the hardships women and children suffered in divorces — and the second half hearing stories about the injustices men endure when a marriage ends. That doesn't mean the tables have turned for everyone, but changes in divorce law over the years and women's increasing financial independence have given us more complicated narratives — and disturbing new possibilities for the roles of villain and victim.

Several years ago I heard the story of a very decent man I knew who had lost everything in a bitter divorce — children, property, most of his income. His wife had turned the children against him so she could claim in court that he was an alienated father and get the judge's permission to move out of state. As the story unfolded, I kept remembering the hard-bitten woman lawyer I'd consulted when I was getting divorced, who had urged me to sue and demonize my husband to get a better settlement. (I didn't take her advice.)

These stories and memories swirled around in me for a few weeks and came to a head one night after I read, by coincidence, Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." A few minutes later, I found myself writing a story in a man's voice, from a jail cell, explaining how he got there. He was there because of a charge his wife made against him. That was all I knew then, except that I felt I was beginning something large.

I don't think most writers sit down and say, "Now it's time to write a new novel. Where shall I begin?" It's something that creeps up on you or takes a swipe at you from out of nowhere. It was quite surprising and delicious to find this man's voice trickling out of my pen.

Once the novel was under way and I began talking about it, I became a magnet for horrific divorce stories — one searing tale of injustice and loss after another. The pattern was that the women lost financial security and the men lost their connections to their children.

## **The narrator, Eric Lavender, is a psychotherapist. How did you choose his profession?**

I knew early on that he had to be a psychotherapist. It was the only male voice I felt confident I could sustain throughout a whole novel — a man whose business is people's emotional lives. It took a while longer to decide that his wife should be a tough, unsentimental lawyer who specializes in divorce. That gave the story a lot of potential for conflict and exploring the places — public and private — where law and psychology collide.

The sensitive shrink husband and the ruthless lawyer wife are a disaster waiting to happen. It was great fun to play with all the role reversals and psychological and legal land mines that such a marriage offers.

## **Did you have to work at the male voice, or did it come naturally?**

It took a long time to find Eric's voice. Early on, I knew I was in trouble when I showed the first two chapters to an editor who had published my work before and he politely declined them. I realized the voice was too placid. I did what I often do when I come to an impasse: pick up all sorts of books, looking for something that shakes me up. I remember being in a bookstore and reaching for Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity*, which I had tried to read before, but it hadn't appealed to me. That day it did. It somehow opened up this energetic, angry, funny male voice that gave me the new, improved Eric.

Once I had the foundation for his voice, I looked for books that would help me know how Eric might think and experience the world. I read Robert Bly's book *Iron John*, about how men struggle with their feminine and masculine sides, and this became something that Eric referred to as he grappled with his situation. I thought about having him consider standard psychology texts, which he would be familiar with, but I didn't want to turn the novel into a lecture or study of competing theories.

There were moments when he had to describe how people or rooms looked, and I was very aware of how differently men and women notice the physical world. When he first sees the infant who will become his stepdaughter, I knew he wouldn't notice her features the way a woman might, so I have him say something like, "I'm a bachelor, what do I know about babies? She looked like a baby, soft and drooly."

In an earlier draft, he noticed Colleen's breasts excessively. The woman editor who read it kept writing in the margins, "Too much with the breasts already!" but I'm not convinced I had that wrong.

## **The story is set in Scarsdale. Why Scarsdale? Have you lived there?**

Scarsdale is probably the most famous suburb in America, a place that conjures up privilege and exclusivity and the personal stereotypes — take your pick — that we associate with that. The novel is about appearances and reality in a marriage, about what's behind the seductive surfaces our partners project. The beautiful houses and manicured lawns of Scarsdale seemed the perfect setting in which to explore that drama — a real place on the map that looks something like John Cheever's made-up suburb of Shady Hill.

In the early 1960s, as a young child, I lived in the next town over, Hartsdale, before my family moved to Manhattan, when I was eight. Scarsdale has always been in my backyard and in my consciousness, though I never lived there. In the years I was writing *The Practice of Deceit*, my mother and aunt lived in nearby White Plains, in an assisted-living setting, and when I went to visit them, I frequently stopped in Scarsdale to do research. Sometimes the research was reading the local newspaper, sitting in a courtroom, or talking to people in a coffee shop. Once it was sitting in the police holding cell from which Eric tells his story.

But how I picked Scarsdale for the setting is another story — and says a lot about the unpredictability of the creative process. After reading Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and scribbling the first pages of what became Eric's voice from jail, I said to myself, "I could call this 'Letter from the . . . what jail'? Jail, jail, what rhymes with jail?" Scarsdale leaped to mind. As soon as I said it, I knew it made sense for the story. For several years, I called the novel "Letter from the Scarsdale Jail" — until I called the town hall and learned there is no actual jail there, just a police holding cell where people stay for a few hours or overnight.

I loved writing about a small town, especially one where people often go to escape the perils of the big city. It's hard to keep secrets in a small town, though people try all the time, and people's lives overlap and rub up against one another in ways that are good for novelists. And a small town close to New York City created a whole new level of tension.

***The Practice of Deceit* is much more plot-driven than your other novels. Do you think of it as a departure, a new direction?**

I felt these characters really demanded a strong plot and the high stakes that emerge in the story. But I've always been fascinated by the intersection of psychology, law, ethics, and the eternal strife between men and women — which is invariably about power, intimacy, and money. Here they're brought to a feverish pitch — and maybe the high pitch is what's different. The book is more of a thriller than anything I've written before.

**In *The Practice of Deceit*, you've written about men who are victims of ruthless divorce lawyers, whereas in real life, it's often women and children who are shortchanged in divorces.**

Absolutely — women and children are usually the victims because of inequities in the workplace and the realities of child rearing. That truth, that harsh reality, is represented in the novel. It would have been safe to write about a woman who is shortchanged in her divorce, but I didn't want to do the predictable thing. Our first instinct is to assume the man is the villain — that he gets what he deserves in a bruising settlement — but that isn't always the case. I wanted to ask, What happens when the man is victimized? *Kramer vs. Kramer* is as gripping as it is because the father, not the mother, is forced to be the child's caretaker.

These are incendiary subjects, and everyone comes to them with a suitcase full of intense feelings and unique personal history.

## **Did you do much research to write the novel?**

Yes, a great deal. I have no formal legal training, so I had to learn all the legal talk and maneuvers. I interviewed a great many lawyers, a judge, and several police detectives. There would be periods when I had no idea what would happen next because I didn't know what happened, say, at an arraignment. I'd find a lawyer to help me figure out what would have to happen in court that would cause the characters to end up where I wanted them to be. I also interviewed a prominent professor of legal ethics at NYU, Stephen Gillers, who helped me resolve the professional conflict-of-interest issue at the heart of the book, as well as several divorce lawyers and an elder-care lawyer who gave up her divorce practice because she hated being a party to the vindictiveness of her divorcing clients. I almost never watch TV dramas, but I happened to see *Law and Order* once, and I realized I could have learned some of the legal stuff by watching it.

I read a great deal about personality disorders and asked a seasoned male psychiatrist to read the manuscript to make sure that both central characters — the male therapist and the disturbed female — were credible.

I read postings on divorce Web sites, spent time in family court listening to divorce hearings and trials, and toured the Scarsdale Police Department holding cell where my narrator begins his story. I visited the Scarsdale courthouse and the Westchester County prison in Valhalla.

Eric's sister, Pru, is a pediatric cardiac surgeon, and I read several books by surgeons about their training in order to write her character. At one point, Eric describes the hearts of the babies his sister operates on. I wrote to a surgeon I know and asked how big infants' hearts are and what fruit or object, in terms of size, they resemble. He did some research, consulted a colleague, and told me they are the size of a small plum.

## **How did a pediatric cardiac surgeon find her way into your story?**

Sibling awe. Pru, Eric's sister, is my own invention, but her career was inspired by the professional lives of two people. One is my sister, who is a gifted pediatric physical therapist and works with infants and children with severe problems, such as cerebral palsy. She's bilingual, and for many years she did home visits all over New York City and spoke many dialects of Spanish with the kids' parents and grandparents. The other inspiration came from a comment a friend made years ago about his brother, who is a pediatric surgeon, expressing his admiration for his brother's work. He felt there was no work he could ever do that would come close to his brother's in importance. I was very touched by that, and I gave Eric that awe of his sister. I also like the role reversal, that the sister does the manly thing of being a surgeon and the brother does the womanly work of helping people talk through their problems. Beyond the career inspiration, Pru is a made-up character.

## **There are a good number of interesting careers in this novel.**

I'm hugely interested in people's work lives, especially those whose careers are integrally bound up with their psyches, whose work is an extension of their most private psychological material. I love talking to people about the work they do and what it means to them. I love thinking about people who are dedicated to complicated pursuits, whether it's learning acupuncture, playing the violin, making movies, or running businesses.

**Your narrator, Eric, is a psychotherapist. How did you come to know enough to write so authoritatively from a therapist's point of view?**

My parents were both from religious Jewish families, but for a variety of reasons they gave up religious activities and sent us to therapists instead. There was a lot of unhappiness and chaos in the family, and they were wise enough to know it and to understand that we needed help. We were suffering from what Freud calls "common unhappiness," rather than more serious kinds of mental illness. I've had trillions of years of therapy, with all sorts of therapists. It's very routine for me, the way it is for a lot of anxious city people who like to talk about themselves. Recently, I've done some body-oriented psychotherapy, which I hint at in Eric's work, but I don't do it justice in the novel. I love the body stuff.

I've never written about it in my fiction because I could never figure out how to depict it in an original and dramatically satisfying way. And it would be hard to compete with what Philip Roth did in *Portnoy's Complaint*, Daniel Menaker did in *The Treatment*, and Robertson Davies in *The Manticore*. I think I was resigned never to write about it, until Eric Lavender moved into my life. And I always imagined that if I did write about psychotherapy, it would be from the patient's point of view, so it surprised me that I was writing from the therapist's. I guess I've had so much therapy that I've internalized it enough to write from inside the shrink's head.

Of course, novelists and shrinks have a lot in common: we love to think about why people do what they do. If we're lucky, we have our offices at home and never have to leave the house.

**In addition to your novels and *The Joy of Writing Sex*, it seems you write a fair amount of journalism. You've also contributed to a humorous collection, *The Dictionary of Failed Relationships*. Do you prefer writing fiction or nonfiction?**

I began writing with the idea that I would write only fiction, that I could write only fiction. But I learned to support myself, such as it was, by writing journalism, mostly book reviews, travel pieces, issue pieces, and personal essays with a touch of literary criticism. I used to freelance for *USA Today* and write pop-psych pieces on etiquette for children and the meaning of New Year's resolutions. For two years, I wrote a sex column under a pseudonym for Japanese *Playboy*. I have on occasion wanted to write something substantial and ambitious about an issue that gnawed away at me. When my elderly mother and aunt lived in assisted living, and I kept track of their money and fretted over how many more months they could afford to live where they were living, I decided to write a piece about what lies ahead for baby boomers when we get to our seventies and eighties and need help. I was lucky enough to research and write this article for *The American Prospect*. It's a piece that taught me a lot and has been reprinted often. It's called "When Baby Boomers Grow Old." Another piece I'm proud of is "Searching for Treasure in Las Vegas," a literary psychoanalysis of Las Vegas and the movies and books that are set there. I taught at the university there for a semester and wanted to figure out the place after I left. (Both pieces are on my Web site: [www.elizabethbenedict.com](http://www.elizabethbenedict.com).)

I've come to like writing more personal nonfiction a great deal, and I love reading it. I've taught a few courses at Harvard Extension in creative nonfiction. It was a great change after so many years of teaching fiction writing.

## More Praise for *The Practice of Deceit*

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"A terrific non-stop read." — Ira Levin, author of *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives*

"Addictively entertaining . . . her wit is as sharp as her eye, and twice as fast." — Janice Nimura, *Newsday*

"Wickedly funny . . . at times heartbreaking, always smart and entertaining." — Hallie Ephron, *Boston Sunday Globe*

"A nail biter of a psychological thriller." — Susan Isaacs, author of *Close Relations*

"A lot of wicked fun." — Alan Cheuse, *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio

"A psychological thriller . . . filled with ulterior motives and insights on complicated relationships." — *New York Times*

"A literary page-turner, as suspenseful as it is smart, rich in surprising twists." — Stephen McCauley, author of *The Object of My Affection*

"A rare find: a psychological thriller with plenty of spot-on psychology in addition to the usual thrills. It's smart entertainment by a very smart writer." — *Chicago Tribune*

"Benedict's psychological thriller will make for the perfect read . . . The genuine suspense is a bonus." — *New York Daily News*

"A smart, sexy, subtle, suburban thriller." — *Book Sense*

"Entertaining . . . [a] clever reworking of male-female roles." — *USA Today*

"This tightly woven psychological thriller is a journey for the reader . . . with plenty of surprises and insights along the way." — *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

"Benedict specializes in the subterranean currents of modern relationships, the secret motivations and betrayals . . . her wit is as sharp as her eye, and twice as fast. She writes the hard, horrifying truth about human nature, and it is addictively entertaining . . . Benedict doesn't let the blistering pace overwhelm her powers of description — her takes on privileged parenting, as well as the delicate dance of therapist-patient dialogue, are funny and acute . . . If movie rights haven't been optioned yet, doubtless they will be soon . . . The breathless denouement . . . is satisfying. A rare find: a psychological thriller with plenty of spot-on psychology in addition to the usual thrills. It's smart entertainment by a very smart writer — the best kind of summer reading." — *Newsweek*

"Benedict has written a subtle literary novel that is also a psychological thriller. It is an exploration of marriage, divorce and the facades that people maintain. Eric watches as his life collapses, trying to make sense of a wife he doesn't really know, a scorched-earth divorce lawyer out to destroy him. To survive and keep his upper-middle-class life, Eric must uncover the harsh secrets from Colleen's past that she has hidden from him." — *New Jersey Star-Ledger*

"Highly recommended, and sure to make any bachelor think twice about marriage, this is a suspenseful and provocative look at the intricacies and dangers of intimacy with the wrong person." — *New Mystery Reader Magazine*

"Intelligently written and briskly plotted update on the femme fatale story makes an absorbing beach read." — *Publishers Weekly*