1960s Vermont has resonance today
Novel tells love story of couple in their 60s, gives deeper look at society

By JOHN S. McCRIGHT

What's a 64-year-old Jewish woman from New York City supposed to do with herself after her second husband dies leaving her stranded in Florida among an uninspiring collection of fellow retirees? New York Jews? In Deborah Lee Luskin's new novel "Into the Wilderness," the answer is: move to Vermont.

Luskin's excellent read tells the story of Rose Mayer and her pivotal move to Vermont, the people she meets, and the life she creates for herself. Although it can be billed as a love story — Rose, a die-hard Democrat, unexpectedly falls for a native Vermonter who is a rock-ribbed Republican — the book is no Harlequin romance.

"Into the Wilderness" is set in 1964 and '65, but readers who live in the Green Mountain State today, particularly in rural areas, will see their neighbors, and maybe even shades of themselves, in the story.

There's the chatty general storekeeper and the laconic ag extension agent; the New York transplant unfamiliar with country life and the chucking hens at the sewing circle; the loud politician who is long on self-congratulatory claptrap but short on real wisdom. And there are a dozen other aptly drawn characters populating the novel.

The story encompasses — or at least references — a wide panoply of Vermont life that includes things tourists and visitors talk about, like Fourth of July parades and quaint country stores. But it also portrays aspects of Vermont living that "flatlanders" don't see, or maybe don't acknowledge, like farmers who work themselves to death to make ends meet and the poor who are forced to walk two miles to town because they don't have a car.

While Luskin clearly loves her adopted home state, the story is not entirely a love letter to Vermont and its people. None of the characters are all good, and at least one of them has serious deficiencies of integrity and decency.

As with many novels set in Vermont by authors living in the state (Luskin lives in Williamsville in Windham County), part of the fun of the book is trying to figure out what real places and people she is basing her fiction on. Is the make-believe town of Orton where the story is set actually Newfane or Putney, is Waterchase actually Brattleboro or Bellows Falls? Luskin says the fictional Rose Mayer shares her birthday and her occupation (milliner) with Luskin's own grandmother, but the comparisons end there.

It's not only the characters that Luskin draws in "Into the Wilderness" that are so familiar to readers, but the themes of the book that are so contemporary: community and one's place in it, immigration and outsiders, what to do with ourselves as we reach old age, the role of government in a modern society, living in a religiously pluralistic society. There are even reflections on parenting and abortion.

One could guess that the author, writing in the last few years, simply responded to the currents in the air around her and grafted these subjects onto a historical period to make contemporary points. Clearly Luskin is an astute observer of her community. She is familiar to many for her reflections and commentary on Vermont Public Radio, which she's been delivering since 2006.

But, although this is Luskin's first published book, she is no newcomer to writing or to Vermont, and this book was not simply dashed off in reaction to some recent pique or fancy.
Luskin spent her early years in Teaneck, N.J. (the town where Rose’s son in the novel resides), and lived for a time in New York City after she graduated from Oberlin College in 1978. Luskin and her husband met while she was living in Vermont in 1984, and have raised three daughters at their home in Windham County. The author came to Addison County in 1983 when she attended the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference, and makes regular trips here to visit a daughter who attends Middlebury College.

Along the way, Luskin earned a doctorate in English Literature from Columbia University (after reading her novel it was no great surprise to discover she wrote a dissertation on Jane Austen) and wrote two unpublished novels, and she writes regularly for various publications and teaches writing.

Luskin says, perhaps half joking, that “Into the Wilderness” has been 25 years in the making. Maybe it takes that long for an author to hone her skill to the point where she can weave together a broad collection of facts and impressions into a work that moves with the speed of Luskin’s novel. In this case, the result is a work that is dense with facts — for instance, how would one go about building the best fire and what species of wood go in, and in what order — but that leaves the reader happily gliding from page to page until the whole thing is over all too soon.

One of Luskin’s skills demonstrated in this book is her ability to take the reader back into a character’s past without bogging down the story of the present. At the beginning, we don’t know that much about Rose or her suitor, Percy. But as the outside world, like the reader, sees them move through their days reading the paper, making dinner, stopping for a moment at the window, the characters’ memories fire and the reader gets scenes from their past that begin to make sense of how they got to this point in their lives.

A crucial motif that is not always handled well in print is music. Music is central in this novel, and if the reader wasn’t moved by the music as Rose and Percy are moved by it then the novel would fall flat. But Luskin is convincing in translating the aural, physical and emotional power of music into words on the paper.

The result is a wonderful novel.

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