Finding fulfillment in the hills of Vermont

Love blooms among differences in Deborah Lee Luskin’s ‘Into the Wilderness’

By JON POTTER
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BRATTLEBORO — Times of transition — personal, political and in a particular place — are the tectonic plates whose tremors shake loose the story at the heart of Deborah Lee Luskin’s tender and touching first published novel “Into the Wilderness” (White River Press).

Set in Vermont in 1964, “Into the Wilderness” introduces readers to Rose Mayer, recently widowed and a long way from her familiar city surroundings when she comes to visit her son at his summer home in Vermont.

There, at a time of great political foment nationally (the Civil Rights Act juxtaposed with the rise of the Goldwater Republicans), and of great change closer to home (the arrival of the Interstate and the rise of Democrats in Vermont politics), she comes slowly to the conclusion that she will make her new home in Vermont. There, an unlikely romance blooms.

With her book hot off the presses — the first copies arrived Tuesday afternoon — Luskin will read from and sign copies of “Into the Wilderness” at Brooks Memorial Library on Friday at 7 p.m. “I’m very curious to know how people respond to my fiction,” said Luskin, who may be familiar to local audiences for the parenting column she used to write in the Reformer, writing does for The Commons, commentary for Vermont Public Radio and work as a visiting scholar for the Vermont Humanities Council.

“Into the Wilderness,” her first published novel, grew out of work on a previous and still unpublished novel, a darker story based on the changes wrought by the arrival of I-91.

“I started reading about 1964 and Vermont in 1964, and it is a pretty watershed year,” Philip Hoff had just been elected governor in 1962,” Luskin said. Hoff was the first Democrat to be elected governor in Vermont in 108 years.

“I’ve lived here now for 23 years, and I wanted to know what it was like before,” Luskin said. In that earlier book, she created the minor character of Percy Mendell. As the years passed, she wanted to get to know him better. “I just liked him so much,” Luskin said.

Here’s hoping you will too. Mendell is a 64-year-old ag extension agent and native Vermonter, who has never married and never voted for a Democrat. He is the polar opposite of Rose.

“Rose doesn’t understand life without sidewalks. She doesn’t understand Republicans,” explained Luskin.

Predictably, their first meeting doesn’t go well, but over time, things warm between them. One of the things they share is a love for music. Concerts at the Marlboro Music Festival provide common ground.

“The discover their love of music. They go to see the debut of the Guarnari (String Quartet) at Marlboro,” Luskin said.

Through other ups and downs, Rose and Percy grow close, and readers become absorbed in their story — both for its own sake and because it’s set against the background of the other forces of change.

“Life doesn’t end after adolescence. Middle age is a really rich time of life,” Luskin said. “It’s about the human ability to change… It’s also very much my love song to Vermont.”

It’s a love song eight years in the making. The first draft of “Into the Wilderness” “literally sang out of me in 2002,” she said.

The tough part was getting it published. “I had so many of those rejection letters,” she said.

With the encouragement of many people, especially published authors Karen Hesse and Castle Freeman, she kept plugging. At the advice of author Philip Baruth, she sent her manuscript to White River Press. In January 2009, “I got the letter I’ve been waiting for.”

The early response has been encouraging. Filmmaker and Marlboro College professor Jay Craven called it “an absorbing, affectionate, and often funny slice of early 1960s Vermont life.”

UVM professor Frank Bryan called it “a poignant description of a specific place — but it is also a timeless story of human fulfillment.”

In addition to Friday’s event at Brooks Memorial Library, Luskin will also be reading at Misty Valley Books in Chester on Sunday, March 14, at 4 p.m.; at the Moore Free Library in Newfane on March 24; and at the Dartmouth bookstore on March 27.

For more about the book, visit www.deboraheelaluskin.com. The book is also available on Amazon.com.