Deborah Lee Luskin, 54, does everything: she teaches, writes, hikes, skates, cross country skis, rows, keeps bees, moderates town meetings in Newfane, managed her husband's medical practice for many years, provides commentary on Vermont Public Radio, serves as a visiting scholar at the Vermont Humanities Council, writes a column for this newspaper, is mother to three daughters, cooks, cleans, and she has a Ph.D. in English from Columbia — thesis subject: Jane Austen.

And now she's Jane Austen. Not exactly, but in the Williamsville author's first published novel, Into the Wilderness (White River Press), Luskin gets to the heart of the matter with similar intensity, precision and wit, but with a little less surface and a little more grit.

Into the Wilderness is a tender love story about how the brain and the heart advance love in the face of natural and contrived obstacles.

It is a story about small towns in Vermont, Jews in small towns in Vermont, friendship, gardens, food, landscapes, local politics, family life, houses, July Fourth parades, and music, especially music. All this happens in the transformative mid-60s to a man and a woman in their mid-60s, each at turning points in their lives.

Many of these subjects are covered in the book, serving two purposes: metaphor, and mini-master classes, sometimes humorous and sometimes lyrical.

Rose Mayer, 64, is an immigrant from what she still refers to as "the Old Country" some 55 years before, a veteran of factory work and a union maid, a Democrat, twice widowed after two 20-year marriages and weary of the labors of Jewish mourning rituals. ("She couldn't keep her dead husbands straight.")

She finally agrees, after many entreaties, to visit her son Manny, his wife Jeannie, and their two kids at their summer place in Orton, a village of 290 in southern Vermont.

Percy Mendell, also 64, a native Vermonter from a farming family, has lost his one great (and only) love some 40 years before when she was brutally ejected from a speeding car driven by someone he couldn't stand then and still can't.

Percy is about to retire, not from farming, but as a farming science agent for the state extension service, passing on new agricultural information to farmers in the hope of
improving their lot in life. He's contemplative in the way that Rose is not, although their speculations are about the same things. Now what?

As Rose sticks her big toe into Vermont, whether it's at a fair, a quilting bee, a crash course in canning tomatoes, a parade, or bewildering encounters with a population that doesn't know from Democrats, she notices, nevertheless, and is attracted to, the very same qualities that at the time drew the recently affluent to Vermont. Harvard professors, dreamers with trust funds, and other pioneer spirits were falling in love with the land, the beauty, the possibility of independence and the enduring fundamentals of daily life.

Here is part of Rose's introduction to gardening from her daughter-in-law Jeannie near the beginning of the story:

"Here are the early crops," she begins, as they walk around the spinach, leaf lettuce, carrots, beats... "And there?" Rose gestured toward several rows of thick, stumpy leaves emerging from hills of soil.

"Those are potatoes. Eating potatoes, as opposed to Vermont potatoes."

"So what's a Vermont potato?" Jeannie bent over and picked up a spud-sized rock. "They multiply by magic. The more I improved the soil, the better my crops of rocks." Both women laughed. Then they continue walking "past the pea fence, the towers of pole beans, the neat columns of broccoli, sunflower and cabbage" as Jeannie goes on to explain about cutworms and deer and raccoons, and finally he hot-weather plants.

But before the tour, Rose, who was dressed all wrong for gardening (open-toed shoes and her purse), silently reminisces about how awful she felt in her first American school, like an outcast, and she begins to cry. Jeannie asks what's the matter.

Rose looked up, tilting her head birdlike. "[It's] all because I dressed in the wrong clothes this morning, and I answered the phone when it rang, but it wasn't the right ring. How was I supposed to know? So, here I am, an American citizen, already, but here, in Vermont, I'm a greenhorn all over... what do I know from seeds? All I ever grew was some nasturtium in a cheese box."

Percy lives alone now for the first time in years, ever since his sister died. She was a woman of doilies and lace and her own dining and living rituals, not exactly Percy's style, so she accepted his offer to build an extension on the house so she could live among the refinements she craved.

On weekends, Percy built the addition, a mirror image of his own Cape, connected by a narrow story-and-a-half corridor; the building looked like Siamese twins joined from shoulder to hip.

Percy ruminates a lot, about how he doesn't like the double sink he put in for his sister, about why he never married and had children, and about how he would fill his retirement days.

These speculations, combined with self-doubt and vague plans for the future, preoccupy the thoughts of Percy and Rose, even as they go about their daily lives. Rose in a constant state of amazement at almost every aspect of Vermont life, and expressing her wonder in Yiddish vernacular so that every observation becomes a question, interspersed with oys and gevats.

"They go outside at night?"
"You say hello to just anybody?"

Sometimes Rose comes off a little Molly Goldberg, an early radio and television Yiddish mama, but her rich and curiosity-driven character keeps that from mattering, just as Percy's cookie cutter Republican voice (intrusive taxes and government) fades into insignificance as he nurtures his mysterious attraction to Rose, someone he barely knows in any way at all.

Music plays a huge role in the lives of Percy and Rose, again as metaphor, and also as actual information. Percy is taking piano lessons, in part in deference to his musically gifted and now dead fiancée.

Percy and Rose meet up accidentally at the Marlboro Music Festival. Rose favors live music over records and had subscribed to the People's Symphony concerts in New York.

"It's a series for workers who can't afford uptown prices," Rose explains, causing Percy to think that maybe there's more to city life than he knew.

For three months, now, Percy has been working his way through Beginning Piano, learning not only the names of the notes, but also their kind: whole, half, quarter, eighth. He learned legato and staccato, pianissimo and forte, the figured bass and the single, treble clef. In three months, Percy had learned everything Beginning Piano had to teach about the craft of playing music, everything but making music itself.

Other, even more detailed passages, reveal his frustrations with his clumsy fingers and mirror his mixture of frustration and anticipation when it comes to Rose.

From their first meeting at Greenwood's, the general store (which Rose can't help calling Greenberg's), where the two argue about FDR, to their second accidental meeting at Marlboro, where, during intermission they banter about music and politics, the Rose and Percy narrative, tentative though it is, creates the familiar tension of a developing love story, set against the verities of Vermont. Their relationship is also a sign of the times: the year before, Vermont elected Phil Hoff governor, the first Democrat in 110 years.

Soon enough, in subsequent encounters, accidental and on purpose, in neighbors' kitchens, in the library, at the Guilford Fair, the space between Rose and Percy continues to shrink until it's so confined their words and gestures are nearly all substitutes for declarations and embraces.

Part of what makes their story so absorbing, of course, is the context. The book is a complex love letter to Vermont (not an advertisement—the autumnal kaleidoscope plays only a gentle role), and nearly everyone appearing on the pages is whole and even familiar, not there just to advance the story.

When Rose informs her son that she's not going back to the city with the family for the winter and intends to stay in their un-winterized summer house, he becomes exasperated by the impracticalities she will face and reminds her she can't even drive.

"I'll call a cab."
"Mom! This is Vermont! There are no cabs."

Luskin's agility with language, imagery and motive enrich the story at almost every turn. And wit is everywhere.