A Love Less Ordinary

Book review: Into the Wilderness

By Amy Lilly [06.02.10]

The story of Williamsville author Deborah Lee Luskin [1]'s first published novel, Into the Wilderness [2], will sound familiar to many a flatlander who has visited Vermont and, smitten, never left. The book tells of a New York City woman at loose ends who visits her son's rural summer home in southern Vermont and unexpectedly falls in love with the landscape, the small-town vibe and one local man, in particular. By novel's end, marriage bells are ringing, and the woman has found her true home.

But Into the Wilderness, written in the historical-realism vein, comes with a few twists. The year is 1964. The New Yorker, Rose Mayer, is 64 years old, the same age as her beau-to-be, native Vermonter Percy Mendell. And, most significantly, Rose is Jewish — making her the first year-round resident Jew the 290 denizens of Orton, in Windham County, have ever known. Rose was raised by immigrant Orthodox parents and buried two Jewish husbands. In Orton, she starts to wonder, "Was she still part of a tribe if she lived alone among goyim?"

Meanwhile, a different cultural divide seems to imperil the incipient romantic relationship. Rose is a fierce Democrat from working-class roots. Though always elegantly dressed, she lived in a railroad tenement as a girl and left school to work as a seamstress. She's a veteran of both factory work and union benefits. Percy, a Republican, has no such life experience and is adamantly against government handouts. He's just about to retire from a lifelong job with the University of Vermont Extension Service teaching farmers the newest ideas in crop management. People help each other in Vermont, he argues; why let the government interfere? Still, he can't quite endorse the strict conservatism of the Republican candidate for president, Barry Goldwater.

What Rose and Percy can agree on is classical music. Between political arguments they run into each other at the Marlboro Music Festival, then only a few years old. Each has found solace in a Chopin prelude or a Mendelssohn quartet.

Luskin, a Vermont Public Radio commentator [3] who also leads writing and shiva on the Day of Atonement, and her mother swinging a live hen over the family's heads in the repentance ceremony shlogn kapores. She met her second husband waiting on line for a $1 ticket to the Peoples' Symphony Concerts in Manhattan.
Other aspects of the narrative have a more timeless ring, like the occasional anti-Semitic outburst about Jews and money, unavoidable even in Luskin’s friendly Vermont village. As for small-town life in the ’60s, telephone party lines may have disappeared, but many other details Luskin writes about persist today: the general store and its gossip-attuned owner (in this case, the tactful Barrett Greenwood); the library housed with the town office; the yoked oxen paraded at the harvest festival.

Ortonians’ ways — including their unnervingly friendly manner of saying hello to everyone on the street — provide a learning experience to city-girl Rose, who views Vermont as “the wilderness.” In return, she introduces her cultural-religious practices to the villagers. But Luskin tends to want to teach the reader, too. Rose can’t toss out a Yiddishism without the narrator immediately inserting its translation, between commas, mid-sentence. This would be helpful if the author trusted the reader to learn words the first time; instead, each instance of nu? or tsuris is followed by “so?” or “troubles.”

The goy reader can also glean an entire Jewish calendar’s worth of traditions from Rose’s thorough descriptions and explanations. Such didacticism is made bearable by the fact that she is a likable character, a kvetching realist who, when frustrated, slams the kettle on the woodstove and reads the Sunday New York Times cover to cover. But this reader often wished for fewer teaching moments and more narrative risk taking. The book could do without such extended platitudes, for example, as the following paragraph: How “passage” improves on the well-worn “light at the end of the tunnel” is not entirely clear.

As for the cultural and political divides Luskin sets up, there’s never really any question as to whether they will keep the two soul mates apart, inhibit Ortonians’ warm acceptance of Rose, or result in a less than blissful ending; the conclusion is as certain as it is in the Jane Austen novels Luskin wrote about for her PhD dissertation in English from Columbia University. The problem with Luskin’s novel — published through a print-on-demand service — is that it’s so darn heartwarming that one misses Austen’s infallible social skewering. Luskin’s Vermonters are, in the main, exactly as we all want to be seen: friendly, caring, accepting of difference, providing a haven for those in need of finding themselves. In that regard, Into the Wilderness is a perfectly gratifying read.

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