Vermont author Luskin tells a heartfelt, heartwarming tale in new book

by Veronica Giannotta
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Editor’s note: We are excited to introduce a regular series of book reviews by the staff at Bartleby’s Books and The Book Cellar.

Deborah Luskin’s novel “Into the Wilderness” begins with ruminations on grief. They belong to Rose Mayer, who has just been widowed for the second time. A 64-year-old Jewish resident of Miami, Rose resides in a corner of the city where most of her neighbors are retired and grieving over a lost spouse. It’s making her feel like an old lady. Stifled by the white noise of bereavement, she pays a visit to her son at his summer home in Orton, a small town in the Green Mountains.

Rose is a firecracker. Raised in New York by orthodox Jewish parents, she worked as a seamstress in factories as a young girl. The New York she comes from is a cacophony of immigrant ethnicities. They are distinguished from one another by their traditions, by their individual and respective “old countries” but united under tenement roofs, all different species of the same genus. She is tough, opinionated, experienced in a way that no other resident of Orton is likely to understand - until she matter-of-factly explains it to them.

We arrive in Vermont with Rose in the summer of 1964. Anyone who has ever been transplanted to Vermont will share in Rose’s exasperation at the initial impracticality of it. At first, the dirt roads seem predatory to those sporting impractical footwear; the winters occupy an unfair majority of the calendar year; and the distance to civilization is, at times, unnervingly far. Rose learns quickly that proficiency in an old New England home is an ongoing negotiation, and she will have to continuously relearn tasks that never claimed the space of her conscious mind before. When her son Manny cautions her not to let the water run, she responds, “What? I’m not washing dishes, right? I’m 64 years old and I don’t know how to do dishes?” Country plumbing will be the least of the many nuances she will have to get used to.
Gradually Rose eases into her new surroundings, which turn out to frequently include Percy Mendell. A native of Orton and a prominent figure in the community, Percy has made a career out of helping his neighbors farm their land as efficiently as possible. He is always helping and has been a referential fixture for many inhabitants of Orton, yet he is largely reserved and generally mild-mannered. This however does not prevent Rose from finding faults in his political ideology, which is predominantly Republican. In many ways, he represents how Rose is not immediately suited to Vermont, and their interactions are fraught with uncomfortable tension. Self-sufficient in wildly different ways, the two initially cannot seem to forge an agreeable coexistence. Yet they seem to linger on each other’s minds.

Enter the Marlboro Music Festival. For the first time, Percy and Rose discover a common interest in classical music. Both have had tremendously formative experiences around it, and their memories are all but wrapped in the music itself. Rose’s first taste of autonomy was going on her own to The People’s Symphony in Manhattan when she was a girl. For Percy, it was first love that charmed him with piano sonatas. The festival itself takes on the quiet catalytic persona of matchmaker, and while it has granted them a reprieve from their bickering, it will take more than a playful sensory nudge for these two.

As their courtship unfolds, the reader is carried in and out of their respective pasts. Luskin’s narrative doesn’t jump from one place to another as much as it floats, guided gently by her remarkable command over her words. The flashbacks occur seamlessly, and it feels so natural to travel through the story in such a way. The reader only becomes aware of it once they have been brought back to the present, the negative space of the previous world still hovering faintly in view.

Much of the novel is a showcase of Luskin’s descriptive talents. She has a way of involving the landscape by allowing it to breathe and pulse around the drama of the story. Percy is particularly in touch with the land in a way that no other character in the novel is, and his silent intuition is Luskin’s playground for illuminating the natural world:

“Did others hear music the way he did? Like the perfect ticking of an antique clock, like the view of the distant hills, the petals of trillium repeating themselves in the leaves, the propellers of the forsythia blossom, the structure of snow crystals, and the mechanical regularity of kernels on a corn cob. The stately delphinium and the plump pumpkin, Percy heard all these shapes in the sounds, miraculously scratched out of black plastic spinning into his front room with its quiet lace curtains and sedate, polished floor.”

“Into The Wilderness” explores the kind of love that can manifest itself later in life, and ultimately reveals to the reader that love is indiscriminate to circumstance. The story of Percy and Rose is a realistic portrayal of love and its
obstacles; as characters they are flawed, and so their courtship suffers in the process of acceptance. They differ ideologically, and their paths converge at a time when Vermont’s political landscape undergoes its own bout of change.

But their imperfections are endearing, and readers will find joy in them as they discover in each other the liberation of being loved for exactly who you are. In that way it is truly a coming of age story; we are never done rewriting ourselves, and our histories will change us for as long as we are alive.

Vermont can be as transformative and euphoric as the seasons, and to it Deborah Luskin’s novel sings a delightful ode.

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