Local author honored for first (published) book

Born Writer

On Monday, May 27, Deborah Lee Luskin traveled from her Williamsville home, down Route 30 to I-91, on and on, until she reached Manhattan. She was there to receive the Independent Publishers' Gold Medal for Regional Fiction for her first published novel, "Into the Wilderness."

The book is a love story set in a small Windham County town in 1964. It is a love letter to Vermont, to the classical music, to the forces of history, to the resilience and resurrection of the pinched and weary heart.

And it is the work of a woman born to write, rich in the fullness of her powers.

A few days after the award ceremony, Deborah is back at home, ensconced in her new, beloved writing studio, with her large black dog, Bonnie, waiting lumpy to go for a walk. "I wrote the book in 2002," she says, taking a break from the studio and settling on a porch sofa. Spats, her black-and-white cat, rests nearby, his head shoot ing up occasionally in suspicious alertness.

"But it's actually a sequel to a book that's not yet published, that I wrote between 1995 and 2001," she explains. "Percy Mendell, the leading man in 'Into

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Luskin works in her writing studio.

Deborah Lee Luskin stands in the doorway to her writing studio at her home in Williamsville.
the Wilderness,' is a really minor character in this earlier book that's set in Vermont in 1958, a dark and tragic love story, set against the building of the Interstate.

"I really liked Percy, though. He was the extension agent. Then I was up north, and I stopped for dinner at a New York friend's summer house, whose mother was visiting from Florida," she says.

As befits a fiction writer, Deborah is a loose and buoyant storyteller, in love with precise detail, sensitive to the currents of narrative and emotion running invisibly through any given moment.

"It was her 80-year-old mother, named Rose Mayer, who had just been widowed. She said, 'Why get married at my age? At my age, all a man wants is a nurse or a housekeeper! I'm done with that!'" Deborah smiles at the memory and the smile widens as she talks.

"I tell you, on the rest of the way home, I felt like Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse! I was thinking, plotting, 'What would happen if I got Rose Mayer and Percy Mendell together?'"

The spark was real and it was big. The character Rose Mayer turned out to be a Democrat, Jewish, urban, outspoken, intelligent, and lonely. And Deborah already knew Percy to be Republican, rural, nominally Christian, kind, and also lonely.

She found that both were approaching 64, which in the mid-20th century was a fairly advanced age. And both Rose and Percy were at points of serious reckoning, both suffering the loss of the familiar, both pulled uncomfortably forward by an inchoate but irresistible longing for beauty, and music, and passion, and home.

"I'd done all this research about 1958 but at that point there were only nine miles of Interstate, so I set this book a little later, when the highway had progressed and more people like Rose, people from away, were starting to come to Vermont," Deborah explains.

"It turned out that 1964 was this fabulous, interesting year, because it was the first time Vermont elected a Democrat, LBJ, for president in over 150 years," she continues. "And the Marlboro Music Festival was about 10 years old, and I discovered that the Guarneri Quartet made their debut there on Aug. 2, 1964."

Deborah herself came to Vermont for the first time in 1965 to visit an aunt and uncle who had a summer house in Williamsville. She came back nearly every summer, and in 1984, when she needed to leave her apartment in New York City to begin writing her first book, she rented a house in Townshend.

"I was 28 years old, I bought my first car, and I moved here. My friends marveled at me, saying I was the only person they'd ever met who left New York for a smaller place, with a smaller kitchen," she grins.

Deborah never moved back to the city. She met her future husband, Tim Shaffer (a Jane Austen devotee, she has called Tim her Fitzwilliam Darcy, the romantic lead in "Pride and Prejudice"). Together they started a small medical practice in town, with Deborah running the office, and in time they had three daughters, Miriam, Naomi and Ruth.

Life became immeasurably hectic for Deborah, but she didn't stop writing, though that first novel's rejection did set her back for a while. Not writing, however, was not an option.

"I can't not write, particularly fiction," she says. "I tried once. It didn't go very well."

Over the years, she wrote for local newspapers. She took on medical writing assignments. She wrote magazine features. She became a Vermont Public Radio commentator. She taught writing. She nurtured her novels.

She dug in to Vermont as deeply as she could, too, collecting stories from treasured friends and old-timers, until her sense of regional history stretched back as far as 1900. "This is home," she says, after taking a quick break to supervise a delivery of enormous logs that her husband will chop for the next few years' firewood. "It felt like home when I came in 1984. It is where I love to be."

She smiles. She is luminous. "Home."

As Deborah begins to talk about "Into the Wilderness" once more, it is as if Rose and Percy join her on the couch, making room not only for Spats for all the stories that keep company in her complex and generous mind.

Soon, she'll return to her writing studio to shift and jumble and guide them into new arrangements of characters, scenes, revelations, hopes. She'll go into the wilderness that lives inside home, and she'll bring back to us what she finds there.

Becky Karush is a regular contributor to the Reformer. To suggest people for this column, write to her at reformer.ourneigh-
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