By CHRISTINA GIBBONS  
BRATTLEBORO — When Deborah Luskin read from her novel, “Into the Wilderness,” at Brooks Library in March, she commented that she particularly loved her character, Percy Mendell. So, trading on a long standing acquaintance, I asked her if I could talk to her more about the writing of her novel. I was very curious to find out more about her relationship to Percy among other things.  
“He’s so decent,” she observed. “He tries to remain self-contained.”  
Deb told me Percy had appeared as a minor character, an agricultural extension agent, in a previous novel that has yet to be published. For that book, she had spent weeks researching the condition of Vermont agriculture in the 1950s. She read Extension Service pamphlets. She interviewed Ray Pestle, the longtime extension agent in Windham County, and she read his columns. She talked to other farmers as well. She imagined Percy living a way of life that she found fascinating, and she wanted to spend more time with him.  

Percy is one of the two main characters in “Into the Wilderness.” The other is Rose Mayer, a widowed woman from New York City who comes to Vermont to visit her son. Deb told me that Rose sprang from a chance question made by a Vermont visitor she didn’t know: “Why would I want to get married again?”  

As Luskin developed her, the character Rose took on many characteristics of her grandmother and her great aunt, or at least that is what her mother and aunt think. Rose is urban, opinionated and worldly wise. She is a fountain of Yiddish expressions.  

Rose and Percy are about as unlikely a pair as you could imagine, and both of them have good reasons for not marrying, but Deb seems to have taken this as a challenge. She places them in a series of chance meetings in locations around Windham County to see what will happen.  

“I’ve been living with these characters so long, I’m thrilled to have other people live with them,” Luskin observed.  

Having her fiction published has been a very long process. Percy appeared in the first chapter of a novel which Deb wrote between 1995-2001 while raising her daughters and running her husband’s medical office. That novel received a series of “splendid rejection letters,” and caused Deb to wonder if she had mistaken herself as a writer.  

“I decided to be a writer like Anne Frank when I was 9 years old,” she explained. She had three brothers and felt “very unlistened to” in her family.  

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So she began a journal in which she wrote daily to “Dear Kitty.” The journal continues to this day.  

When Deb graduated from college, she imagined herself combining teaching and writing, so she spent seven years at Columbia getting a doctorate in English. Her dissertation was on the use of letters in Jane Austen’s fiction. In the middle of this period, she spent 10 days at the Breadloaf Writers Conference and the following summer, she lived in Vermont and wrote her first novel which is now “hopelessly dated.”  

Instead of becoming an academic, Luskin married, moved to Vermont and had three daughters. During those early years, in addition to fiction, she wrote essays and a column on parenting for the Reformer. When her children
became more self-sufficient, Deb branched out herself, becoming a teacher for the Vermont Humanities Council and a commentator on Vermont Public Radio. She also does medical technical writing. "It sounds like you multitask," I observed.

"I do a lot of different things," she responded thoughtfully, "but I only do one thing at a time. I decide each day on my daily walk what it is most important to work on for the day. I get up early, sometimes 4:30 or 5:30 (a.m.) It really helps to have vast amounts of time to concentrate."

She opened her arms wide to illustrate. "I'm never not writing in my head and if I appear distracted, that's what's happening," she concluded.

Deb has started a fourth novel, but it is on hold for the rest of the year while she puts her considerable energy into the promotion of "Into the Wilderness." Her publisher, White River Press in Amherst, Mass., is a micro publisher who loved the book and agreed to print it on-demand but expects Luskin, as author, to do her own publicity. She has been engaged in a number of readings and book store signings. Several hours after I left her house, I heard her interviewed by Neil Chernoff on a Vermont segment of "All Things Considered."

One of Deb's brothers helped her set up a Web site where you can go to read more about her life and work.

All this activity and attention feels very rewarding to someone who has been yearning to be a fiction writer for decades. More than yearning — practicing, experimenting, overcoming self-doubt and discouragement, being persistent. It makes you want to cheer: Brava, Deborah!

Luskin admitted that she would like to see her second novel published and that she looks forward to getting back to work on her fourth. Meanwhile, she is excited to see "Into the Wilderness" take on a life of its own in the minds of her growing readership. You can read the book and then let her know what you think in the Contact section of her Web site at deborahleeluskin.com.

*Interview by Christina Gibson, a frequent contributor to this column.*