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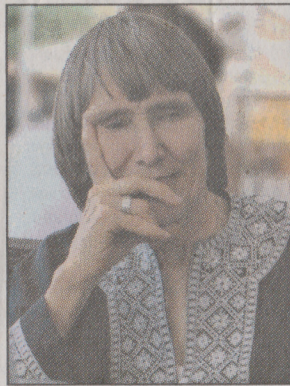
# Great Montpelier setting and fascinating courtroom drama

## "Uncivil Liberties: A Novel"

by **Bernie Lambek**

**Rootstock Publishing, 2018**

Kerry Pearson, a Montpelier high school girl, is found dead at the foot of a cliff in Mahady Park. A scrap of paper in her purse reads "I can't go on anymore. I'm sorry." Everybody is shocked, because Kerry is a mature, brilliant student, a fine lacrosse player – and the daughter of Vermont Deputy State's Attorney Francine Loughlin. Very few people know she is also gay. As the school and the town grieve, Kerry's distraught mother opens her daughter's computer and finds a Facebook post from her fellow senior Ricky Stillwell, a born-again Christian, that says homosexuality is a sin and that maybe Kerry should be outed to the whole school. Though Ricky didn't post his message at school or even on a school computer, Principal Gayle Peters and the school board expel Ricky. Ricky's aggressively Christian mother brings the case to attorney Sam Jacobson, a close family friend. Though he has known and liked Ricky for years, Sam is horrified by the post. He is also, however, convinced that the school has violated Ricky's First Amendment rights, so he takes the case. It's the second First Amendment case in which he is involved; the first is his defense Lucy Cross, a 90-year-old resident of Jefferson, Vermont, who insists that the practice of opening the yearly Town Meeting with a prayer is a *de facto* establishment of religion in her town. Sam's religious beliefs are nil, but he's a passionate believer in the First Amend-



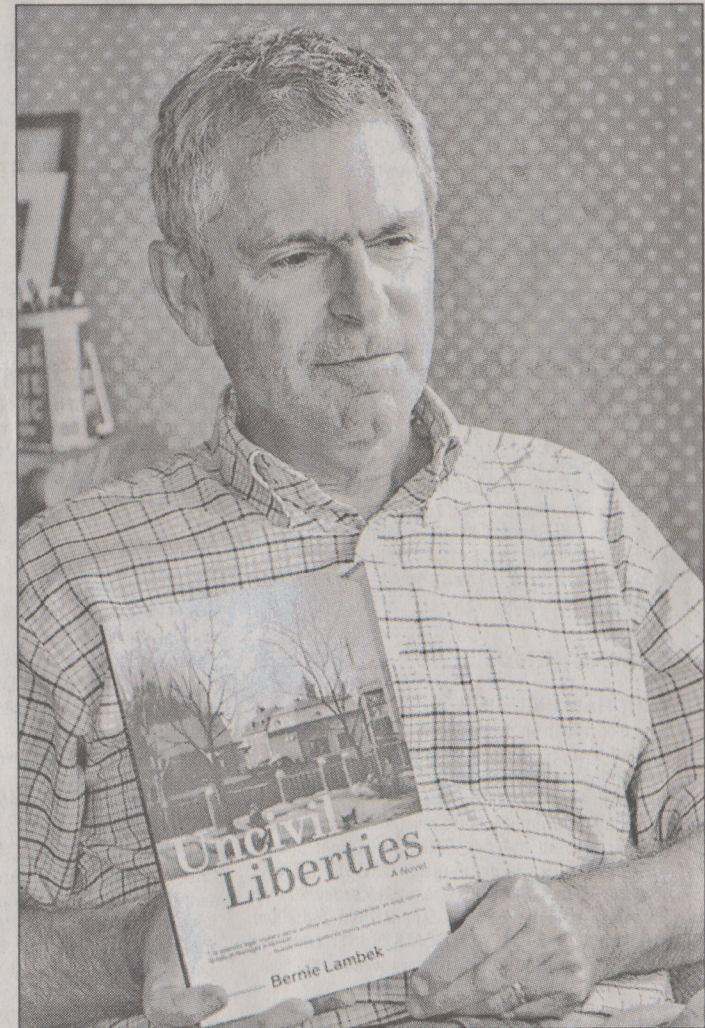
### One-Minute Book Reviews

*Laura Stevenson*

ment, and as readers follow his arguments in court, they learn a great deal about the legal precedents and nuances of argument that affect the amendment's applications.

During the court case that deals with Ricky's expulsion from school, Principal Peters is obliged to testify that she knew not only that Kerry was gay, but that she had talked with Kerry extensively about the problems facing gay women. The school, deeply disturbed by the revelation, fires Gayle. She argues that her firing implies that heterosexual discussion between staff and students is accepted (if not approved of), but homosexual discussion is not, and she takes her case to Sam's legal partner, Alicia Santana, a specialist in discrimination cases. Alicia, whose wife Barb Leval is Gayle's assistant, manages a settlement out of court – largely because Ricky's mother circulated a hate email to select members of the board in an attempt to influence the case. By the end of the 18 months covered in the book, it seems that Sam and Alicia have seen justice done on all counts – until a sudden revelation shocks lawyers and readers alike.

This is a debut novel, and while that occasionally shows – mostly during characters' discussions of moral issues in which the dialogue feels forced – it leaves readers hoping to hear more about Sam and his adventures. Its Montpelier setting is delightful, and the relationships between the many characters ring true. Sam Jacobson, who always feels things are about to go wrong just as his arguments devastate his opponents, is a particularly engaging hero, and the determined Alicia is also very well done. As for the law,



Lambek has been a Montpelier lawyer for 25 years, and he writes with real authority about legal argument and the relationship between law, lawyers and judges. It is infinitely to his credit that his courtroom drama is not the stuff of TV

or thrillers, but an interesting, intelligent, and engaging portrayal of the law in action.

*Laura Stevenson lives in Wilmington and her most recent novels, "Return in Kind" and "Liar from Vermont," are both set on Boyd Hill Road.*