Three women in Vermont navigate the challenges of late middle age and love

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"The Opposite of Never" by Mary Kathleen Mehuron, Spark Press, 2018

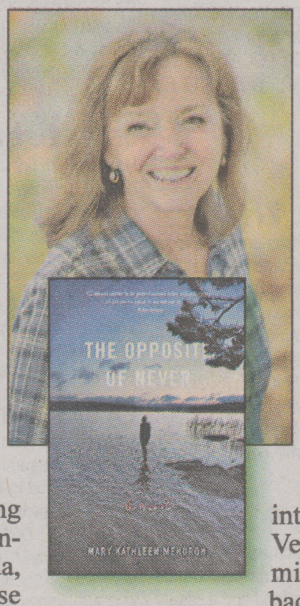
Note: Laura Stevenson is featuring Vermont authors. The Vermont series started in April.

In an unusual love story, Mehuron portrays parallel Vermont romances of two generations: one of Kenny Simmons (age 62) and Georgia Best (late 50s), and another of two 20-somethings, Zelda (Kenny's stepdaughter) and Spencer (son of Georgia's close friend Yvonne Paquette). Lurking behind both romances is an event five years earlier in which Spencer, high on drugs supplied to him by Zelda, was the driver in a serious car accident. She escaped with cuts and bruises, but he suffered a serious head injury and lost an arm. His slow recovery has deeply affected Yvonne, her husband, and, by extension, other friends in DeGranit, the small Northeast Kingdom town in which they live. Zelda, who in the meantime has been in and out of rehab at Kenny's expense, is now pregnant by a lover who abandons her on hearing the news, and Kenny, in one last attempt to save her, has bought a lovely house and property overlooking the idyllic Millhouse Pond. Having established the back story in the first six chapters, Mehuron starts weaving the complicated double love story when Kenny meets Georgia (a widow with three grown kids), Yvonne, and their friend Dr. Linda Kingsley as they come to hike near Millhouse Pond. The meeting sets up a weekend party, increasing friendship, and from there, the "introduction" of Spencer and Zelda, as Kenny wants to buy her a horse and the Paquettes have horses that Spencer cares for. Though their respective parents have forgotten the names of the kids injured in the accident so long ago, Spencer and Zelda recognize each other, fall in love, and decide to start a horseback glamping business. Yvonne is furious when she finds out who Zelda is, and one outcome of her melodramatic reaction is a barn accident in which Zelda is injured. The pain of the injury puts Zelda back on prescribed opioids, and she and Spencer once again are sent to rehab – for the last time, the reader is assured. Meanwhile, Kenny takes Georgia to Havana just after it is opened to Americans, a trip which, while something of an afterthought, provides some interesting cultural investigation.

One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson

Behind the coincidences and occasional melodramas of the plot is a compelling portrait of professional couples in late middle age. The Kingsleys, a retired medical couple, have no children, but the others do, and the effect of grown children on their parents' lives is all the more interesting for being a rarity in fiction. Georgia's daughter, her deceased father's favorite, is disgusted by her mother's romance; Spencer and Zelda have dominated their parents' lives for many years. The portrait of families dealing with addiction and permanent disability is sympathetic and nonjudgmental; Mehuron pulls no punches on the pain Zelda has caused Kenny, but she also creates a young woman who was deeply hurt by her mother's long illness and death, and who sincerely wants to conquer her problem.



The greatest strength of the novel is the scenery. The book assumes good health and exercise in people in their 50s and 60s; hiking, kayaking, and horseback riding bring the three couples together, and the descriptions of Millhouse Pond and the Northeast Kingdom mountains are beautifully done. Readers interested in contrasting aspects of Vermont culture might find it illuminating to read this book back to back with Robin MacArthur's "Heart Spring Mountain," which came out earlier this year.

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