April 28, 2016

• Quick picks

Free books

WILMINGTON- On Saturday, April 30, from 10 am to 3 pm, some 2,500 books from the library of the late Franklin Reeve and his widow, Laura Stevenson, will be offered free to neighbors, friends, colleagues, and bibliophiles of all stripes.

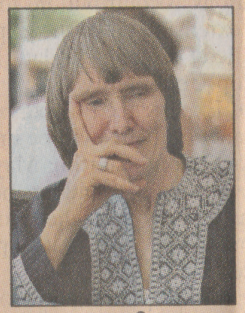
The books are in the loft of the barn just past the house at 256 Boyd Hill Road.

Bring your own bag or box. Everything from the obvious to the arcane, fiction, philosophy, history, drama, poetry. All interesting, and most slightly shabby.

No dealers. Permission is required to take more than 10 books.

A celebration of exit ramps

"Vermont Exit Ramps II," by Neil Shepard and Anthony Reczek, Brattleboro, VT: Green Writers Press, 2015



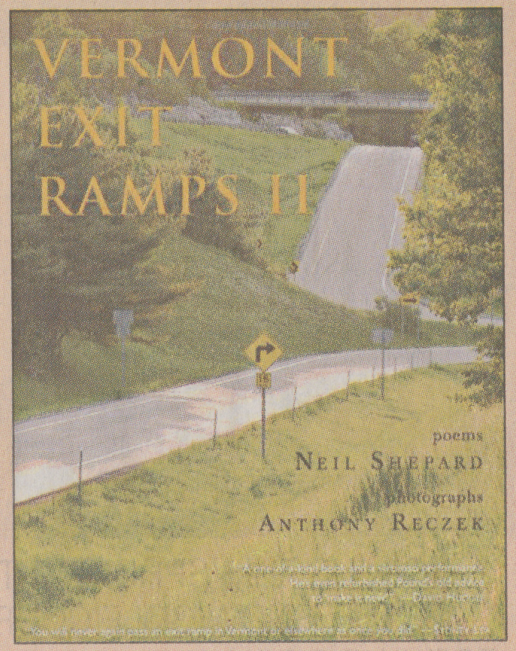
One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson

Picture yourself driving north in Vermont along Interstate 91, absently noting the exits as you pass them: Putney (#4), Bellows Falls (#6), and so on up to the White River Junction nexus, and then either continuing on I-91 toward St. Johnsbury (#21,22) and beyond to Canada at Derby Line, or taking I-89 toward Montpelier (#8), Stowe (#10), Burlington (#14,15) and up to Canada along Lake Champlain. As you speed along the highway, it blends so well into its beautiful vistas that it's easy to forget that it has existed for fewer than 60 years, and that building it (at a time when many Vermont roads, including Route 100, were still unpaved) effected the greatest change in Vermont's topography since the ice age.

That change – destruction in the name of progress, followed by the recovery of what poet Neil Shepard dubs "ramplands" – is the subject of this wonderful collection of poems. It's the fruit of five years of Shepard and Reczek's springtime drives along the 321 miles of Vermont's interstates, reflecting upon every exit ramp and its environs, and (not incidentally) portraying the immense cultural change the interstates have brought to Vermont. The collection begins with an invocation to the forgotten territories of change: "Who will claim the kingdom of exit ramps and cloverleafs/on the hillsides of I-89, these realms of birch and pine/ rippling in mountain wind on a spring day, domains of quiet/forgetfulness, places ravaged and recovered." Then, starting at Stowe (#10), the poems meditate on one rampland after another, with occasional sorties into neighboring towns. Each poem is accompanied by photographs whose ethos is familiar to even casual readers of Vermont Life – and with good reason, since Anthony Reczek's photographs appear frequently in the magazine. In several of these, most notably those accompanying the first and last poems in the collection, the beauties of the flowering May ramplands are juxtaposed with a blurred, speeding vehicle, in a way that makes interstate travelers visually irrelevant.

Shepard, for many years a teacher at Johnson State's Creative Writing Program, is the author of several other poetic collections, including the 2012 chapbook "Vermont Exit Ramps." The first 13 poems in "Vermont Exit Ramps II" also appear in the chapbook. As denizens of southern Vermont will immediately notice, poems celebrating exit ramps south of White River Junction are not included. There are two exceptions, however. One is pictorial: the picture accompanying the poem on St. Albans (I-89,#19) portrays not that exit, but #3 off I-91 in Brattleboro, with a vista under the "I love rust" railway line toward the double bridge over the Connecticut River on Route 9 to Keene. The other is an elegy for Romaine Tenney, the Vermont farmer who, rather than watch I-91 engulf his house and farm, burned it down with himself inside: "Self-immolation was his only protest./The hillside burned for a night and a day. Afterwards, the road crew worked/in a stupor. The surveyor drank." The setting of this tragic tale is just off the I-91 Weathersfield exit (#8). (If you're driving north and should want to tip your cap, turn right off the exit ramp, and in a few yards you'll find yourself at Tenney Hill Road.) Most of the poems in the collection, like its gorgeous pictures, are not tragic. They're stories of change, reflections on loss and renewal, portraits of the Vermont that takes interstates for granted. Once you've looked at the collection, you'll never think of Vermont (or of exit ramps) in quite the same way again.



"Vermont Exit Ramps" is published by West Brattleboro's Green Writers Press, in conjunction with Sundog Poetry Center.

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