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An Onion Ring tour of Vermont

**Kevin Stone, "The Onion Ring Lovers (Guide to Vermont)"
Garrett County Press, 2021**

As the book opens, Jim Sutton, an attractive high school teacher from the Bronx, has returned to Vermont, where he spent a year of his childhood. Now in his 30s, he is doing research for a hip, trendy travel book he has tentatively entitled "The Onion Ring Lover's Guide to Vermont." His aim is to interweave information about Vermont's history and culture with places to find good onion rings; his book is thus to be "about onion rings, but also not."

The trip becomes decidedly "not" when Jim's brakes give out and his car smashes into a handsome sign that welcomes travelers to the town of Strawberry Falls. Riding through the village in the tow truck that's pulling his car, Jim is overwhelmed by its quintessential Vermont beauty. A few minutes later, as he arrives at the village's only garage, he is also overwhelmed by the village's super-competent mechanic: Cassie, a beautiful young woman in a jumpsuit covered with oil and grease.

All seems ripe for a romance—except that he finds everybody in the village, including the owner of the hotel where he stays, unaccountably hostile.

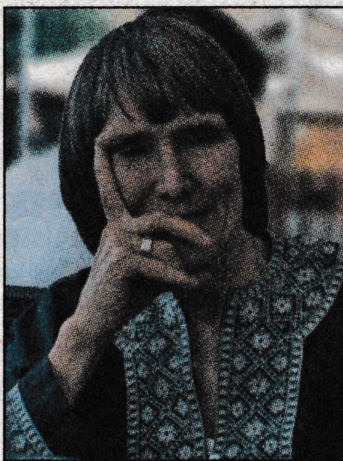
Jim has returned to Vermont in 2000; the story of his trip is interwoven, chapter by chapter, with the story of the year (1977) in which he and his family lived in Vermont. His father Bob, looking for adventure and a chance to be his own boss, bought (sight unseen) the lunch stand of a year-round, Christmas-themed park on an island in

Lake Champlain, accessible by ferry from Colchester Point. When the family arrives there, they find that Christmas town's train ride, fake North Pole, Santa's Workshop, and chipping plaster and cement creations still attract a few customers; but everything needs work, and the only friendly person on the premises is Nick, a handyman descended from the dwarfs who were brought to the park by the commercial owner to serve as living, breathing Santa's elves. For Jim and his 3-year-old sister Lyndsey, the island is a dream of perennial Christmas—but they are only marginally important in this story. The reader sees the realities of the situation

from the points of view of Bob and his wife Linda; for them, the situation is a nightmare of incessant labor and repairs that ends in heartbreak.

Stone's book is set so firmly in Vermont that it takes the reader a little while to realize that both Christmas Island and Strawberry Falls are fictitious. Stone goes to great pains to give them both convincing histories: the first as a rich man's fantasy, sold, then commercialized and slowly degraded; the second as a mill town retrieved from ruin by a wealthy young couple but imprisoned in its secrets. The double plots are skillfully interwoven, the tragicomic

characters (with the exception of Jim, whose weakness is almost too convincing) are well drawn, and as the clever dual title promises, the tone is often sardonically witty. What gives the book its power, however, is the autobiography that resonates behind every page. Stone has clearly harnessed deeply-felt memories in his book, and redressed them in fictive form. His descriptions of Vermont at its most beautiful, and later, at its most dangerous, merit reading again and again.



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson