

Valley Vibe

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Local author ties the Deerfield Valley to book Bartleby's to host book signing

By Mike Eldred

WILMINGTON- Local author Laura Stevenson will be at Bartleby's Books from 4 to 6 pm on Friday, to sign copies of her new book, "Return in Kind."

Stevenson, who lives in



Laura C. Stevenson

Wilmington and is an English professor at Marlboro College, has written a novel that combines the elements of mystery and tragedy, but the book also includes criticism and commentary on the state of higher education, and the impact of big-money real estate development on the rural landscape and local economy.

The main character in "Return in Kind," Joel Hendrickson, has just lost his wife. Letty Hendrickson had never talked about her past, and Joel is shocked to find that she has left him a house and land in Vermont — property that she had never mentioned during their years of marriage. Through his effort to resurrect the semi-abandoned property, he learns more about the history of the house, the people who lived and died there (and whose headstones still populate the family plot on the property). He also learns how his late wife's life was intertwined with the house and characters past and present, eventually coming to realize that the inheritance was her way of giving him an understanding of things she wouldn't, or couldn't, tell him while she was alive.

Stevenson chose the Deerfield Valley as the backdrop for the story, and her own town of Wilmington, fictionalized as Draper, provides the location of Hendrickson's property. Although the reader doesn't need to be familiar with Vermont or the valley to fully enjoy the book, local readers will instantly recognize the fictional Westover as West Dover, the local ski area as Mount Snow, the nearby village of Adamsville as Jacksonville, and the lakeside setting of the property as being on Harriman Reservoir. "Joel Hendrickson's house is loosely based on Pete Maynard's mother's house," Stevenson notes, "and Helena's (another character in the novel) house is a house on Valley View Road (in Dover).

Stevenson's choice of the name

"Draper" for her fictional town is rooted in Wilmington's pre-Revolutionary history. Originally chartered by New Hampshire Governor Benning Wentworth under the name "Wilmington" in 1751, it was re-chartered 12 years later as Draper. In the ensuing legal battles, claims of those who purchased land under the Wilmington appear to have been upheld, and Draper was forgotten.

Stevenson says all of the names in the book are fictional, and characters aren't based on real people. But there is also an element of autobiography in the book. One of the characters, Eleanor, whose hearing loss resulted in her termination as college professor several years earlier, is quickly losing the ability to hear and carry on a conversation. Like Eleanor, Stevenson has also struggled with hearing loss as a professor at Marlboro College, although she never lost her job because of it. "But it wasn't because Marlboro is so different," she says. "By the time the decision

Like Eleanor, Stevenson lives in an old farmhouse she inherited. To make ends meet, Eleanor cleans houses and condominiums in the nearby resort community. Stevenson drew from her own experience cleaning houses in the valley when she first came to Marlboro College. "I remember a money manager looking at my finances," she says. "He took one look and said 'You've got to sell the house.' But once you start defining value in terms of cash, you get in the funny situation Joel (Hendrickson) finds himself in." Eleanor is mourning the loss of the rural landscape around her — particularly a parcel of land that used to be in the family. Her brother sold the land, and developers have bulldozed in preparation for construction, destroying an old sugarbush and an ancient path used by neighbors to walk from property to property. Stevenson experienced a similar loss. She and three siblings inherited the property from her father, who bought the house as a summer

place in the early 1950s. Through a series of family transactions, a large portion of the property across the road from the house was sold — it had become too valuable to keep. The new owner bulldozed the property and put in a driveway. "It was done badly and it was very painful," Stevenson says. "It destroyed the path that my kids and Michelle Maynard made to get to my house. There were a lot of paths on that property that went down to Castle Hill and the farms that were (at that time) down on the river."

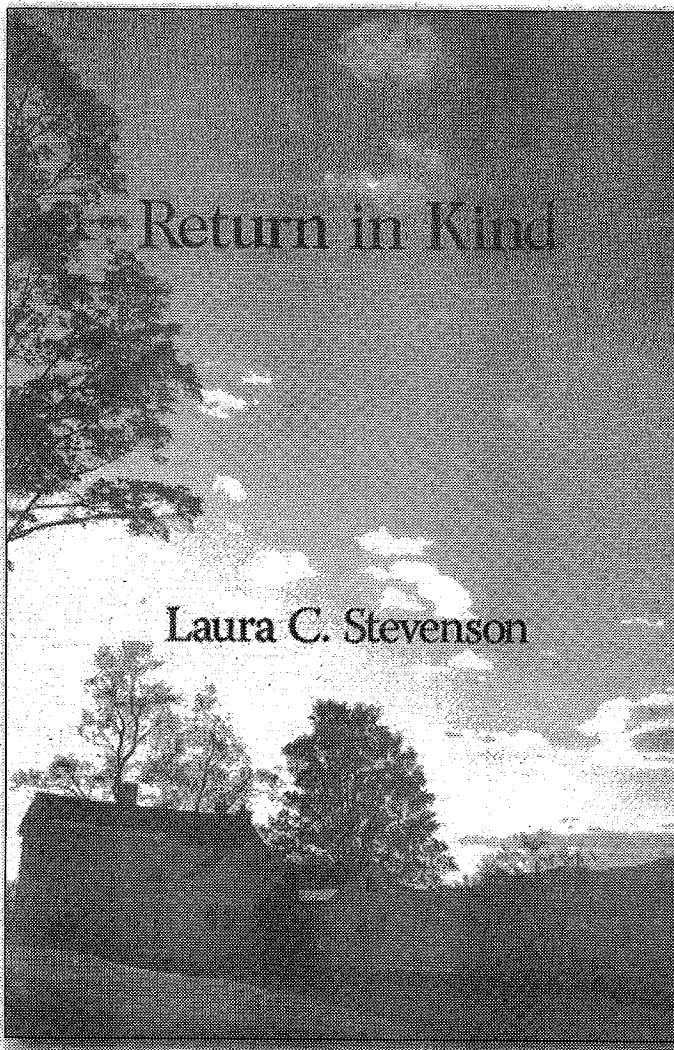
The pain that Eleanor feels for the loss of her pastoral world is connected to the ski area and the influx of money that comes with it. "People came because it was pretty," Stevenson says. "Then they wanted to own its prettiness.

They ended up destroying it.

Boyd Hill used to have eight houses on it in 1980. Now it has 27, all built on former farms that have been broken up."

But, despite the similarities between Stevenson and her character, she says Eleanor is not Laura Stevenson, just a character endowed with some of her experiences.

Stevenson's husband, FD Reeve, will also be at Bartleby's on Friday, signing copies of his 10th poetry collection "The Puzzle Master."



came up for my tenure in 1991, the Americans with Disabilities Act had been passed, and they really had no choice. Before ADA, if you were deaf, you were really stuck." Eleanor was fired in 1985, several years before the landmark legislation passed.

Several years ago, Stevenson had cochlear implant surgery that partially restored her hearing. Although she says hearing is still difficult, even tiring, she can have a conversation without the use of any other aid.