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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Nice piece, Joyce.

—Nancy Olson is wrong. Norman Mailer lived in Jamaica in 1949 (after *The Naked and the Dead* was published) and in Putney in 1950–1951 when working on his second novel.

—Chuck's book is *Burned by Billionaires*, but I'm sure the millionaires are doing their own share of burning in their sociopathic rise to greater net worth.

—I don't think Nancy's comments about the original settlers making the area a haven for writers "from the beginning" will be appreciated by Indigenous readers. I went down a rabbit hole looking for Abenaki literature and then decided to paraphrase the quote.

—How the fuck are there 450 people who can stand going to meetings with Arlene?

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 One county, so many writers

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 Why has Windham County has been a literary hub for so
3 many years? Writers explore what attracts them to the region.

####END SUBHED####

4 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

Credit Royall Tyler or Lucy Terry Prince or even Rudyard Kipling, but Windham County is still full of poets and writers. Tyler, by the way, who lived in both Guilford and Brattleboro, was, in 1787, the writer of the first American theatrical comedy. It played in New York City. Prince, kidnapped in Africa and was sold into slavery before she was freed, settled in Guilford and was the first known African American poet in America.

And Kipling, well, we all know about him. He built a house in Dummerston to write in. His house is still a tourist attraction which can be rented out for weekends and celebrations.

There's even a book about Brattleboro and its long and distinguished history with the printed word — *Print Town: Brattleboro's Legacy of Words* — which tells these and many other literary tales.

Every fall we have the Brattleboro Literary Festival, which was founded in 2002 and has brought more than 900 authors to Brattleboro to speak to its devoted audience. Maybe there are so many writers in Windham County because there are so many devoted readers?

Write Action, a Windham County membership group for writers published and unpublished (yet), was founded in 2000 and has 450 members. Brattleboro's Green Writers Press, founded by Dede Cummings in 2014, publishes books about environmental awareness and social justice.

In this digital age, Brattleboro has six bookstores.

It is hard to know exactly how many writers and poets are living in Windham County today, but even a cursory inspection of the shelves at ByWay Books on Canal Street in Brattleboro indicates that the answer is: a lot.

A banner year, a huge

bookshelf

Just look at 2025.

In poetry, Steve Minkin of Brattleboro published *Moral Oblivion*, Toni Ortner of Putney published *The Vincent Van Gogh Notebooks*, Terry Hauptman of Westminster published *Shattered*, Joanne McNeil Hayes of Brattleboro published *I Am the Prairie*, and Gregg Orifici of Halifax published *Rattle of the Sun*.

In terms of fiction — and again, this is cursory — this year Tim Weed of Putney published *The Afterlife Project*; the wildly popular Ann Braden published her fourth children's novel, *Into the Rapids*; Matt Spencer of Brattleboro published the dark fantasy short-story collection *Chapel of the Falcon*, and Jessie Haas of Westminster, who has written more than 40 books, published a meticulously researched book of historical fiction, *Dearest Blood*.

Then there's memoir. We've gotten *Reviving Artemis* by Deborah Lee Luskin of Newfane and *The Wanderings of Isaac Andre Gedalia* by Sylvie Weil of Marlboro. In the social sciences we have *Bullock: Chronicles of Deprivation and Despair in an American Prison* by Matthew Vernon Whalan of Brattleboro and *Burned by Billionaires: How Concentrated Wealth and Power Are Ruining Our Lives and Planet*, by Chuck Collins of Guilford. And in the spiritual, there is *Peace Within: How I Developed a Relationship with Nature*, by John Cole of Brattleboro.

And that's just this year!

Mystery writer Lynne Kennedy of Brattleboro has published seven books and is coming out with another soon based around Van Gogh. Gail Grycel of Westminster West published a memoir, *Dancing Unabashedly to Mariachi Music: A Woman's Year-Long Journey into Living True*, in 2024, and the word is that she will be publishing another memoir soon.

Castle Freeman Jr. of Newfane has published seven novels and two short story collections, as well as writing a

70 column for *The Old Farmer's Almanac* from 1982 to 2011 and
71 contributing to magazines like *Vermont Life* and *Harrowsmith*.

72 And with the holiday season coming around, how can
73 we forget Archer Mayor of Newfane, who from 1988 to 2022
74 (minus 1989) gave us a new Joe Gunther mystery book for
75 Christmas every year?

76 An entertaining speaker, Mayor would make the rounds
77 of bookshops and libraries, talking and signing the books that
78 would become Christmas presents for his loyal admirers and their
79 friends.

80 That's 33 books written in Newfane about a law
81 enforcement officer who lives in Brattleboro. You can't get more
82 local than that.

83 *The Commons* started wondering: We know Windham
84 County is a haven for painters, sculptors, potters, weavers, and
85 woodworkers, but why are there so many writers here?

86 So we made some calls.

87 **Community draws people with** 88 **like interests**

89 Let's start with Write Action and its 450 members. The
90 writers' group began as a fundraiser when a local writer had her
91 computer stolen. Poet Arlene Distler was one of the founding
92 members.

93 "Our thing is giving the opportunity to people to read
94 their work and to get feedback," Distler said. "They may
95 eventually publish, if that's what they want. But you know, unlike
96 the Literary Festival, we're not all about publishing. Our desire
97 has always been to have the group be very open and supportive
98 and democratic. And we've had some wonderful success."

99 Distler believes Windham County's literary history "does
100 infuse the atmosphere here," but she feels that one writer draws
101 another writer until there is a community.

102 “When a particular geographic area has a lot of people
103 from China, say, and if it is welcoming, they bring family and
104 friends. In the case of writers, it would be bringing friends who
105 are also writers. There’s a whole bunch of independent
106 bookstores. Writers like that. There’s enough interest to have a
107 literary festival.

108 “But I’ll tell you, I’m here in large part because my
109 husband came,” Distler continues. “He rented a cabin in the
110 1950s somewhere near Norwich, Vermont. And when he left, he
111 just always wanted to come back here to Vermont. First we went
112 to Readsboro, and that was so isolated.

113 “We wanted people with like interests, and felt like
114 Brattleboro was the place. So we moved to Brattleboro.”

115 **A multigenerational literary** 116 **tradition**

117 Writer Nancy Olson of Putney, the retired head of the
118 English Department at Brattleboro Union High School, points out
119 a multigenerational literary tradition here.

120 “I also think this area has a tradition of acceptance,”
121 Olson said. “Live and let live as long as you’re not hurting
122 anybody else. So people can have a contemplative life here.
123 People will leave you alone, or you can be involved. It’s really a
124 personal choice.”

125 Putney itself has a tradition of scholarship, Olson said.

126 “We’ve got Carmelita Hinton founding The Putney
127 School,” she said. “You’ve got the Greenwood School, you’ve got
128 Landmark College taking over the Windham College campus
129 [after] Windham folded.”

130 Norman Mailer lived in Jamaica in 1949, fresh off the
131 publication of his acclaimed novel, *The Naked and the Dead*,
132 and in 1950–51, he briefly lived in Putney while working on a
133 second novel, *Barbary Shore*.

134 “And of course, John Irving was in Putney when he was
135 teaching at Windham,” says Olson.
136 She adds that writers support each other here.
137 “I’ve just always found people really encouraging of each
138 other,” Olson said. “And the beauty of the place is really helpful.
139 People can take long walks in the woods or in a field or look at
140 things. It depends on the on the individual, how much of a
141 stimulus a person finds in the environment here. I, personally,
142 would not like to live anywhere else. Having lived other places, I
143 much prefer to live here.”

144 Writing ‘in connection with 145 other people’

146 Ann Braden, author of young-adult novels, grew up in
147 Connecticut but always wanted to live in Brattleboro.

148 “Brattleboro felt like the antithesis of Connecticut,” she
149 says. “Connecticut had a more material, focused, competitive
150 vibe that I was trying to get away from. I just really like how it’s
151 human-based here. We’re just regular people being regular
152 people, and there’s not a competition for whose lawn looks the
153 best.”

154 For similar reasons, that is why she writes here.

155 “I chose to write where I really like that connection with
156 other people, sometimes in the abstract, sometimes more
157 concretely,” Braden says.

158 “I think Vermont is a place where you would go if you
159 could work anywhere. And writers can generally work anywhere.
160 I think also Brattleboro and Windham County have a bent
161 towards the arts and creativity. Windham County has sort of this
162 human-to-human connection. That’s part of small-town
163 communities, and I feel like books are often an extension of that
164 human-to-human connection.”

Creative energy abounds

Poet and writer Diana Whitney has been in Brattleboro for 20 years. Her latest book of poems, *Girl Trouble*, is coming out next year. She praises Brooks Memorial Library, the town's many bookstores, and the Brattleboro Literary Festival for creating a sense of community around books.

"Our literary festival has loyal local readers and audience members and also people who come from a long ways around to see the wonderful writers that are at the festival," Whitney said. "We've got great bookstores here."

She said her mentor, former Vermont Poet Laureate Sydney Lea, once told her that Vermont has more poets per capita than any other state.

"Vermont is a wonderful place to write, [...] for the solitude, the natural beauty and communities that are close-knit and value the arts," Whitney said. "I lived in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom for six years, and that's actually how I came to Vermont and where I wrote a good deal of the poems that were in my first book.

"But the Brattleboro area of Windham County is really rich with artists and cultural events. There is a sense of creative energy here in our corner of southern Vermont that is really special.

"So I think the combination of both a quiet and peaceful life and the natural inspiration of natural beauty that's all around us gives us a thriving community of artists and writers," she says. "I was at two book events at the Brattleboro library just last week."

Writers supported by a

community of readers

Writer Deborah Lee Luskin moved from New York City after she decided she could not face another summer in the city. She chose Newfane because she knew people there.

“I came to Windham County because I knew people here, and I was coming up as a single woman, and I wanted some infrastructure, as it were, some support,” she said. “I wanted to go to a beautiful place and write. And I thought that summer I would write both my dissertation and a novel. And I wrote a novel that will probably never be published anyway, water under the bridge, and I’ve continued to write. But I would write anywhere. I am physically incapable of not writing, or emotionally incapable of not writing. Even my grocery lists are organized.”

Luskin said writing is how she makes sense of the world.

“And I write all the time, but being grounded or rooted is really important to me,” Luskin said. “It’s just about living locally. I love that I can say hello to people in the post office or in the grocery store, and if I want to, I can extend the relationship, and if I don’t, I still have these wonderful casual relationships.”

Luskin believes that Windham County’s community of readers is a big part of the supports for writers here. Libraries help create and support this community.

“Vermont has more public libraries per capita than any other state,” Luskin said. “There are somewhere between 180 and 190 public libraries in Vermont.”

Like-minded writers form a

long bond

Eileen Christelow has written and illustrated 32 children’s books in her long and illustrious career. She recently moved from her longtime home in Dummerston to Brattleboro.

225 Last week, she and two long-time friends did a book
226 signing at ByWay Books. All three women have been in the same
227 writers group for decades.

228 Joining Christelow was Brattleboro's Karen Hesse, who
229 has won both a Newbery Medal and a MacArthur Fellowship for
230 her children's and young adult books. The other is Liza Ketchum,
231 who now lives in Massachusetts and who has published 17
232 children's and young adult books. The reunion-cum-book signing
233 had an eye towards Christmas.

234 Christelow and her husband, sculptor Ahren Ahrenholz,
235 came to southern Vermont "40 odd-years ago" after living in
236 California for seven years.

237 "Vermont seems like a good calm spot to move to after
238 being in California," she says. "But also, my family goes way back
239 from various parts of Vermont. I was very familiar with the state
240 because we would visit my grandparents up in Windsor a lot."

241 It was hard to find a place to stay or to rent, she says.

242 "We finally found one in Marlboro and we stayed for five
243 years, and then finally found some land at Dummerston, where
244 we built our place, which we recently sold," Christelow says.

245 "And in the process of all that moving around, I met other people
246 doing kids' books, and we started the writing group, which was
247 Liza Ketchum and Karen Hesse. I'm not sure how we met, but
248 anyhow, we did."

249 Having a long-standing community of like-minded
250 writers helped Christelow's creativity, she said.

251 "For me, the Children's Book Group was a pretty
252 interesting way to go," she said. "We were looking at each other's
253 illustrations and also reading each other's stories. I've learned a
254 lot, so that was a perfect pairing for me."

255 'It's my craft'

256 If the choice is New York City or Windham County, then
257 Windham County is a good place to live and write, said writer
258 David Blistein.

259 “Here we can do what we want to do, and we aren’t
260 subject to the pressure or budget as much as we would be in the
261 city,” he said.

262 Blistein owned an ad agency, wrote some books, and
263 wrote many scripts for Ken Burns films. Now he is publishing a
264 novel, *The Man Who Woke up the Buddha*, in podcast form
265 [online on Substack](#).

266 “It’s so brutal to make a living as a writer,” Blistein said.
267 “I can’t speak for other people, but It’s been great for me. I do a
268 lot of writing at Amy’s Bakery in Brattleboro — a lot of writing. I
269 was at Amy’s this morning. And I’ve been saying that I want my
270 table at Amy’s to be on our Words Trail.”

271 Blistein said he writes “because I’m good at it.”

272 “It’s my craft,” he said. “Why is someone a woodworker?
273 I’m a writer for the same reason.”

274 Community is important to Blistein.

275 “Community is a good word for me,” he said. “My wife,
276 Wendy O’Connell, does [a local show on BCTV](#), and we’ve been
277 here for a long time. I raised our daughter here. I’m not sure that’s
278 why I came here, but community is why I stayed. I think maybe a
279 lot of people would say that. It’s not the writing community, it’s
280 the community in general.”

281 **Tranquility, plus a ‘little urban** 282 **core’**

283 P.J. Melton of Brattleboro is a freelance writer who writes
284 mainly about the green building world. She believes that the
285 tranquility of Windham County allows the mind to access “the
286 writing part of you.”

287 “You need to be able to find space and peace in your
288 mind to access the writing part of you, to let it flourish,” Melton
289 says. “So I think that’s part of it. There are other beautiful places,
290 but you have to compare how many writers per capita there are
291 to others in other rural areas.”

292 And yes, Windham County is rural, she says, “but also
293 there’s this little urban core.”
294 “Brattleboro doesn’t really feel like a small town,” she
295 says. “It feels like a small city more, even though we’re only
296 12,000 people.”

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