

Feb 4, 2016

Mephistopheles comes to Vermont

"The Devil in the Valley" by Castle Freeman Jr.

In the late middle of his life, Langdon Taft sits on the peeling porch of his Vermont house and reflects with dissatisfaction that he is a backpacker in the Dark Wood. An "ex-gentleman, ex-teacher, ex-scholar, ex-householder, ex-abstainer," he has money enough, friends – but he needs material, content, plot. A guide.

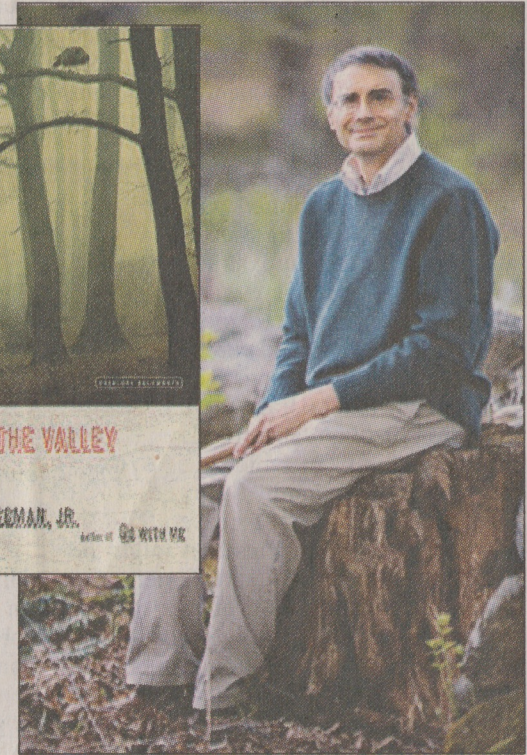
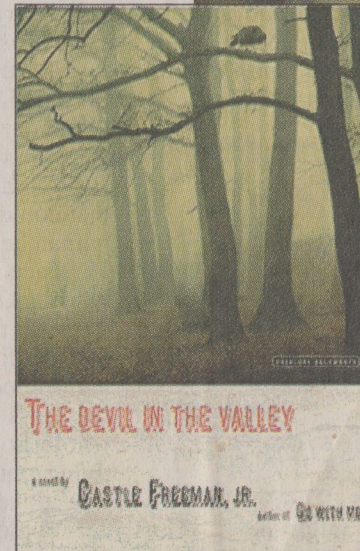
He gets one. Not Virgil (right Inferno, wrong plot) but Dangerfield, a nattily dressed, 21st century Mephistopheles who offers him a contract: seven months of anything his heart desires, in return for his soul. It's a good contract, Dangerfield adds suavely. It lasts through Columbus Day -- "you won't

have to miss the foliage." And it's for real: challenged to prove that he can deliver on his offer, Dangerfield gives Taft what he asks for – four new tires on his truck so it can pass inspection. So begins the Faustian bargain, proceeding in chapters that alternate tales of Taft's unorthodox use of his unlimited power with the shrewd, incisively humorous commentary of his friend Eli and the nonagenarian Calpurnia Lincoln, who is ending her life in the hospice rooms of the local clinic.

The dust jacket of this wonderful book says it is a tale of "temptation and greed" set in "dark, moody, rural Vermont." Don't judge this book by its front flap; there's nothing dark or moody about it. Temptation and greed appear, but in the context of wry humor. It is, for example, suggested that Taft is a second-

generation Faust; either that, or his father's acquisition of all the real estate along the Route 91 corridor years before the highway's construction was a matter of amazing good luck. No, intricately woven into a landscape where everybody is related to everybody else and "if your tractor's paid off, you're rich," "The Devil in the Valley" changes Dante's Dark Wood into Thoreau's woods and turns the tragedy of Faustian over-reaching into a tale of wants and needs. Its humor is an unending delight; its dialogue, structure, and characters open out with deceptive simplicity; and its conclusion (don't skip to the end!) is a piece of artistic mastery.

Castle Freeman is the author of three other novels – "Judgment Hill" (1995); "Go With Me" (2008 -- soon to be a movie starring Anthony Hopkins and Julia Stiles); and "All That I Have" (2009). A fourth novel, the luminous "My Life and Adventures" (2003), doubles as a local history of Ambrose [aka Newfane]. He



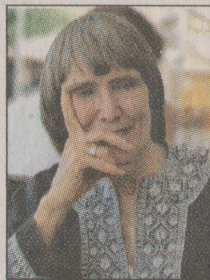
Author Castle Freeman Jr. Freeman's latest, "The Devil in the Valley," was released in 2015.

has also published two collections of short stories: "Bride of Ambrose" (1987), and "Round Mountain" (2011).

"The Devil in the Valley" is available through Wilmington's Pettee Memorial Library, Dover Free Library,

Whitingham Free Public Library, or Bartleby's Books in Wilmington.

Laura Stevenson lives in Wilmington, and her most recent novels, "Return in Kind" and "Liar From Vermont," are both set in Wilmington.



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson