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Book Review: Vermonter's debut plumbs emotional depths

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"LEARNING TO SWIM," by Sara J. Henry (Crown, 2011, 293 pages, \$24 hardcover)

Take a gulp of air before diving into Vermonter Sara J. Henry's new mystery, because you're likely to hold your breath for the whole first chapter.

The Newfane author opens her debut novel with heroine Troy Chance doing the unbelievable in response to the unthinkable: On her way to Burlington, she dives from a ferry into the chill waters of Lake Champlain to rescue a boy she has just seen fall from the passing New York-bound boat.

Miraculously, she locates him underwater and manages to drag him to shore. What she sees in the water — sweatshirt sleeves tied like a straitjacket around his small body — and at the Port Kent ferry landing — no frantic parents, no police mobilizing for a rescue — forces her to admit that he didn't just fall, he was thrown.

At first, she doesn't even know who the boy is. A stoic child of 5 or 6, he speaks only French and won't tell her his name, let alone what happened on that ferry or how he came to be there.

And after emerging from the water, Troy hardly knows herself anymore either. The hallmarks of her life are impermanence and indecision, which to her represent freedom: the freelance feature-writing jobs; the relationship that's not quite right but is allowed to continue anyway; the rambling home in Lake Placid, N.Y., full of temporary housemates.

Little in her life suggests she would take the kind of bold risk required to dive into such unknown waters and pull out a child, then decide to keep him. For that's what she does, fearful that going to the police could send the boy, who eventually reveals his name is Paul, back to parents who may have been involved in his attempted drowning.

"I hadn't known you could form an attachment to a person so quickly, so atavistically," Troy tells the reader. "Had my sisters experienced this when their children were born? I realized I would do anything to protect this child."

Her version of protection means a risky solo gambit to track down his father and determine whether it's safe to hand Paul back, once the boy reveals that he lived in Montreal and was

snatched one day by some men. Her next step is to find those men, a dangerous search that leads her back to Burlington.

She is aided by an assortment of skills and knowledge, including passable French that she learned because she lives so close to Montreal and a familiarity with computer security measures and obscure provisions of Quebec marriage laws. She can even cut hair and true a mean bicycle wheel.

Troy's resume closely resembles that of the author, who lived in the Adirondacks and has worked as a newspaper writer and editor, Web designer and bicycle mechanic. What may be plausible in life can come across as improbably convenient in art.

Indeed, the reader sometimes must not just suspend disbelief but string it up from a hot-air balloon. How does Troy, not at all a strong swimmer, manage to free Paul from his sweatshirt straitjacket and perform CPR while afloat in Lake Champlain? And would no one really take notice or action when a child and an adult disappeared?

It's not hard to make this leap, though, thanks to the author's storytelling skills.

Henry has created a heroine who is convincing as well as likable. Troy operates largely on instinct and perceptiveness, and her savvy goes far enough to land her in danger.

Henry is also a convincing observer, through Troy's eyes, of the North Country, its pretensions and humble realities and its sometimes uneasy relationship with the rest of the world.

She wonders, for example, how many of the tourists who flock to Lake Placid know that the 1980 Olympic village is now a prison and that being a guard there is a desirable job because it pays so much.

Running beneath this surface of gripping plot and vivid setting is the story of Troy's metamorphosis as she finds herself in unfamiliar waters. With the encouragement of a sophisticated Canadian businessman, she learns she can negotiate social situations she never encountered in her former life. Most of all, she learns to take chances and to open her heart.

Troy confides, "... I felt desperately lonely, with an ache deeper than I'd ever experienced. This was, I supposed, what happened when you let people into your life — when they were no longer there you felt an aching, grating loneliness."

While she rescues Paul from the death intended by his captors, he helps free her from her self-imposed emotional confinement. We can expect a new Troy in the next book in this series.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Sara J. Henry will present her new book, "Learning to Swim," at Northshire Bookstore in Manchester Center on May 21 at 7 p.m. Other Vermont appearances are in the works.
