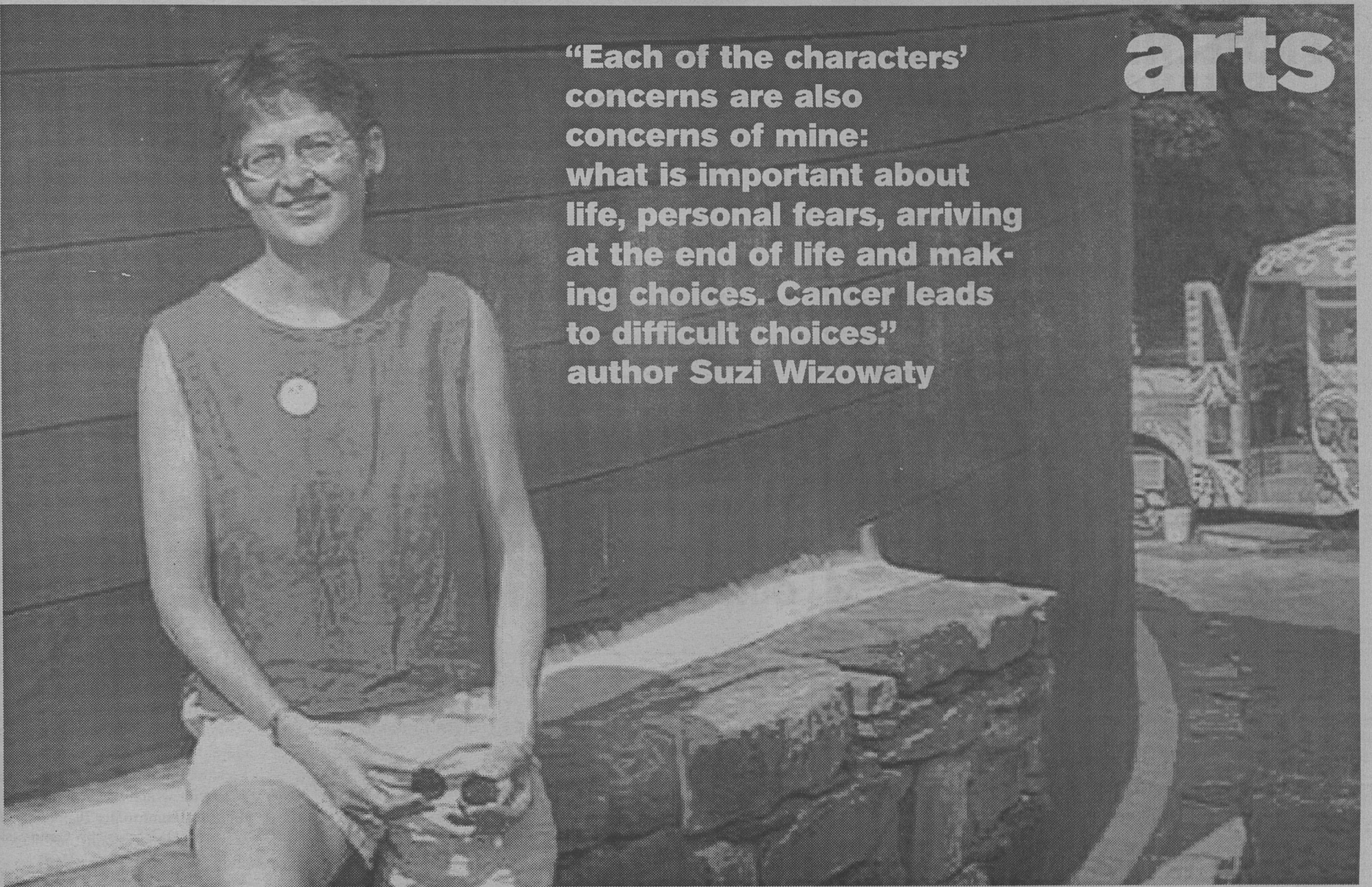


“Each of the characters’ concerns are also concerns of mine: what is important about life, personal fears, arriving at the end of life and making choices. Cancer leads to difficult choices.”
author Suzi Wizowaty



Love, Betrayal, Art and Death.

Suzi Wizowaty Paints a Picture of a Summer in Vermont

BY EUAN BEAR

Beginning with the “something doesn’t feel right” in the air-lifting of the central silo of a round barn from its ancient pasture into its socket at the “folk art/history” museum, *The Round Barn* is a collection of uneasiness, of questions and few answers, of choices and consequences. In her first novel, Suzi Wizowaty doesn’t take the easy way out or allow her characters to, either.

Or perhaps the uneasiness begins even sooner: with the hint that the barn’s builder had “come to an untimely end” soon after the death of the barn’s owner. The interweaving of the lives of a dozen Vermonters are framed by the beginning and end of that story.

There’s Mary Bailey Daly, one of those practical, down-to-earth, competent women you’d love to have for a friend or neighbor. She’s trying to decide whether she’s really found “it” — the one true calling or purpose for her life. “It” wasn’t making sexy sandwiches for her husband’s small-town general store, but “it” might be dousing, listening for the currents of life and water beneath the earth. She struggles toward resolution and self-forgiveness when her body betrays her.

There’s Tuesday Bailey, the director of museum security, in love with his cousin Mary since she was six, but never confident enough to act on it, uneasy with himself, frustrated by the repeated vandalizing of the

review

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Round Barn displays, always a little awkward, a little late in recognizing his feelings.

Tuesday’s colleague public relations director Didi Jamison feels uneasy about her lover Maude’s being away for the summer at an artists’ workshop because of her growing feelings for Adrian, the local reporter who is gently pursuing her through their professional interactions over the sale of some paintings from the museum’s collection.

Didi’s 18-year-old nephew is visiting for a few weeks, on the cusp of becoming, conscious that he is gay, looking for his first lover, enrapt with the energy of the Round Barn and fascinated by — though, yes, uneasy about — Dean Allen, an eccentric member of the museum’s board, possibly brilliant, definitely flawed, and with uneasy secrets of his own.

Recently widowed Frieda Maxwell is another member of the museum’s board, a well known art collector visiting for the summer from New York with her maybe born-again 20-year-old daughter Lucy, with whom she has a distant and often antagonistic relationship that is anything but easy. Frieda’s affair with Charles Hopper, the museum director, happens surprisingly easily, and

leads to a re-examination of her life.

I suspect that this description makes the book sound like a soap opera plot. It is anything but. How all these threads come together is the art of the storyteller, and Wizowaty’s touch is almost always deft, occasionally compelling, rarely awkward or obvious. Her handling of the push-pull of ordinary people’s lives, of the small and large questions the occupy our minds consciously or not, of the intersections where the reader knows so much more than any of the characters individually gives depth and reality to the story that make *The Round Barn* a book worth spending time with.

Wizowaty, who lives with her partner of more than 23 years in Burlington, said in a phone interview that the characters came to her “one by one — and each one led me to the next.” She started with Mary Bailey Daly, a woman experiencing “that sense of urgency when facing mortality about whether she’s been living the ‘right’ sort of life.”

The first-time author continued, “Each of the characters’ concerns are also concerns of mine: what is important about life, personal fears, arriving at the end of life and making choices. Cancer leads to difficult choices.”

It was Tuesday Bailey’s character that led her to setting the novel in the fictional equivalent of the Shelburne Museum. And once the setting was in place, the other characters arrived.

Asked whether she had faced any of the dilemmas in the

book, Wizowaty cited another Vermont author, David Huddle: “Someone once asked him whether a piece he had written was ‘true.’ And he took one tiny scene, one paragraph and broke down every phrase and sentence and explained what was ‘true’ about it and what was invention. I know what it is like to have incestuous feelings,” as does one character in the novel, “but I don’t know what it’s like to act on them. I know what it’s like to have the feelings of all my characters in their various transgressive situations, but it may or may not resonate as accurate for any individual reader.”

Wizowaty has lived in Vermont with her partner since 1985, following a well-traveled childhood (Europe, Connecticut, Texas, New Jersey, among other locales). She spent 5 years writing *The Round Barn*, fitting it in around teaching at St. Michael’s College, her associate directorship of Northern New England Tradeswomen, and a stint on the board of the Samara Foundation.

Hardscrabble Books, publisher of the novel, is the fiction imprint of University Press of New England, the publishing arm of Dartmouth, Brandeis, the University of New Hampshire, Middlebury, and Tufts. Wizowaty is in good company at Hardscrabble Books, with the likes of Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Chris Bohjalian, Joe Citro, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, and Sara Orne Jewett, among many others.

The hardest part of writing the novel, she said, “is in the introductory stages where you’re making

tough decisions about characters, settings and plot that don’t come organically. And maybe three months down the road you realize you’ve made some wrong decisions and you have to start over from scratch.”

Wizowaty was a little concerned that the LGBTQ community might say, “This is not a very gay book.” But just as there are no true “gay ghettos” in Vermont, the novel reflects the matter-of-factness of life and interactions here. “My experience is pretty matter of fact. There are deeper issues here of love and betrayal — who cares in some way who you’re sleeping with. When you’ve been in a community and in a relationship for so long, life is very rich.”

And while Didi is in a long-term partnership with Maude, “she wouldn’t say she’s a lesbian. She had relationships with men before, and she’s attracted to this man. For her, words are very powerful. She would be reluctant to hang a label on herself.” And thus Didi is not in that difficult place of being a self-identified “lesbian who occasionally sleeps with men.”

Wizowaty is working on a new novel, but she’ll take a break to celebrate the launch of *The Round Barn* at a party co-sponsored by the Shelburne Museum in the Round Barn on Thursday, September 5 at 5:30. ▼