

Pyle's debut novel a tonic for dark days of winter

While Pacific Northwesters like to claim Robert Michael Pyle as their own, the Grays River resident, award-winning author, lepidopterist and founder of the Xerces Society (which champions conservation of invertebrates and their habitats) originally hailed from Colorado, and it is Colorado that Pyle uses for the primary setting of his first novel.

From the opening page, it is immediately clear that “Magdalena Mountain” seeks to appeal to all of the senses — Pyle saturates paragraph after paragraph with zesty colors, aromas, textures, tastes, sounds and perspectives not regularly shared.

He salutes bards and thinkers (some of them fictional) from other times and places — casually seasoning conversations with their bon mots or lines of verse, and in other cases quoting them at length.

He pays fond homage to the rigors and peculiarities of academia (particularly Yale, where the author earned his Ph.D., focusing on butterfly eco-geography).

But mostly, Pyle seduces his readers into pondering the world around them.

He crafts this story around three fascinating but elusive Magdalenas: in the Colorado Rockies, there is the stony prominence of Magdalena

“Magdalena Mountain”
By Robert Michael Pyle
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Mountain — too massive to comprehend in toto; then there is the rare Magdalena butterfly, which undergoes its miracle of metamorphosis on that peak’s highest, harshest slopes; and finally there is Mary, a woman in crisis, who yearns for a place to find herself.

Pyle doesn’t stop there.

James Mead is a young graduate student in search of a research subject and love (not necessarily in that order) — he’s a central character. There’s also an aggregation of sincerely pantheist pseudo-monks squabbling over the idea of expanding their community to include women. And there are vanloads of entomologists taking advantage of the short glorious summer in the mountains to net butterflies and quaff beer.

This tale is sprawling and captivating and occasionally befuddling. There is a phone book’s worth of characters to keep track of, and there are some pretty highbrow conversations, too. While the author is fairly deft about juggling story

lines, readers will need to exercise patience before they are rewarded with seeing where all of these lead. But over the course of these 400 pages, motivations and revelations gradually take shape, and all the dots begin to connect.

It may be his excellent training as an ecologist that compels Pyle to demonstrate how all life forms are interrelated. While this may be a great universal truth, it is also the thing that most obviously pegs “Magdalena Mountain” as a first novel. There is a chapter near the end that tries too hard to explain all things to all people. It is unwieldy, perhaps even downright comical — there are so many characters crowding into the scene that I half-expected a fire marshal to come in and shut the place down.

But isn’t this what we’ve come to expect of Pyle’s writings and insights? Generous, joyful, a tad eccentric and a ton exuberant.

If the end-of-year doldrums are beginning to get you down, “Magdalena Mountain” is a surefire tonic.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlinc.com.



Grays River author Robert Michael Pyle.