

Novel spoofs leisure class in wacky island idyll

Evan James may have been born in Seattle, but in peripatetic pursuit of his writing career he's roamed from the Iowa Writers' Workshop to fellowships in Bulgaria and the state of Georgia, a teaching gig in New Zealand and side trips to Southeast Asia.

Although now settled in New York, James chose the Puget Sound region for the setting of his debut novel, "Cheer Up, Mr. Widdicombe."

This modern comedy of manners focuses on a wealthy family that has just relocated from the Bay Area to Bainbridge Island.

Carol Widdicombe hopes that this move will do her husband good — she believes Frank is depressed. (In fact, he has been sulking some because an annual retreat with his guy pals at a country home in France had to be called off this year.)

For her part, Carol engages in a lavish interior renovation of their new island place to achieve just the right note of rustic elegance, and she hires Marvelous Matthews, a recovering alcoholic, to supervise the

THIS WEEK'S BOOK

"Cheer Up, Mr. Widdicombe" By Evan James

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overhaul of the garden.

Over the course of the summer she also welcomes in an assortment of guests to cheer up her husband.

Their gay artist son is back from a year spent abroad — inconveniently, however, he is moping, too, having left an Albanian amour behind. ("If this is survival, give me extinction!" he laments with hyperbolic flair.)

Carol's friend, New Age author Gracie Sloane, comes for an extended stay to immerse herself in the carefully curated bucolic atmosphere and to work on a new project about living authentically.

Michelle is the Widdicombe's efficient, live-in assistant. And Bradford, Frank's tennis partner and an aspiring, substance-abusing screenwriter, also seems to be a fixture.

This cast of characters

offers plenty of opportunity for alliances, romance, misunderstandings and comic melodrama. But to be honest, the stray cat that moves in probably has the most impact on Frank's improving attitude.

James' writing is a stylistic mashup — there are notes of Noel Coward's archness and Maria Semple's madcap mania, and maybe a dash of Jonathan Evison's humanity.

Readers will wade through an awful lot of internal dialogue, undertaken by all of the characters at various points. There are some laugh-out-loud revelations, but the self-indulgent reflection can also become tedious. This is the leisure class, and the pacing is sedate.

The author makes some gaffes that will be obvious to Northwest readers.

At one point he writes that the summer sun sets behind Mt. Rainier —

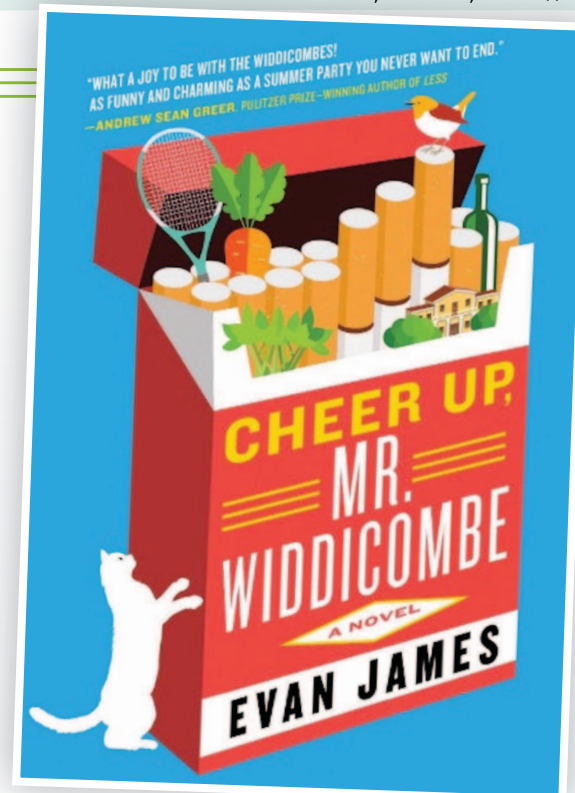
although that iconic volcanic cone is to the southeast of Bainbridge Island. And his characters discuss how marijuana is legal for medicinal purposes — although Washington was one of the first states that legalized its recreational use.

There are other errors, too, that made their way into print.

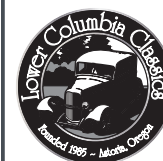
While this novel has plenty of eccentric charm, that cannot mask the weaknesses that sometimes crop up in the story.

"Cheer Up, Mr. Widdicombe" traces a veritable rainbow of character arcs. Ultimately, this zany summer on Bainbridge Island proves to be a transformational experience for all.

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@nwlink.com



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