

Searching for love in distant places: Long-time Asheville author returns to unveil new novel

by Rob Neufeld

There comes a time—maybe many times—in one’s life when one must manage one’s own rebirth. For Henry Dorn, the hero of Jeffrey Lent’s new novel, “After You’ve Gone,” the turning point is the automobile death of his wife and son. But even as his future blooms, his past operates underground.

Lent is one of many stellar authors speaking at Western Carolina University’s Spring Literary Festival, Mar. 30 – Apr. 2. Lent made Asheville his home from 1985 to 1999, writing four apprentice novels, and then publishing “In the Fall,” a national bestseller. He and his wife, an Asheville native, moved north, where he’s written four more novels, including a new, unpublished one, which he’ll unveil at the festival.

Henry steams off

After his family tragedy, Henry finishes his academic career at an Elmira, New York women’s college, boards an ocean liner, and heads off on a solitary sojourn to Amsterdam, the land of his ancestors. On the ship, he meets Lydia Pearce, another intelligent lost soul, and they make a quick connection.

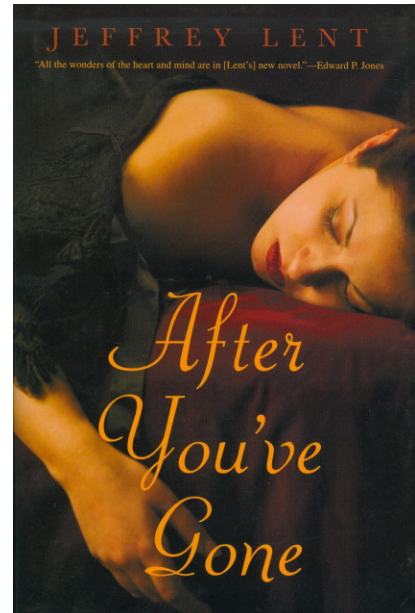
“I’ve always been intrigued,” Lydia says, “by the old idea, Plato’s wasn’t it? That we’re only half-beings, that male and females were once one and we spend our lives seeking that missing half.” She adds, “Can there be more than one?”

It is one of Lent’s talents to balance ideal reality with doubtful undercurrents. Lydia and Henry slowly reveal themselves to each other, maintaining the romance. How long can that go on? Henry, despite the purity of his new life—or maybe because of it—keeps returning to memories, expressed in chapters with alternating time periods. One of those memories is of his romance with his late wife, Olivia.

Liking love

The opening chapter of “After You’ve Gone” reveals young Henry and Olivia attending a string quartet performance, “their moist hands clamped.” “I’ve never truly heard music until this afternoon,” he tells her on their walk above the Chemung Valley afterward. He wants to hear her play the piano in their parlor, and overcomes her modesty by asserting, “Everything about you is beyond compare.”

Here’s how I read a novel. When I learn of sudden accidents and swept-away romances, I wonder if it’s emotional stage-stealing; or stage-setting for truly involving human drama. No doubt about Lent’s art: relationships are an “unfolding adventure,” Lent said in an interview with the Citizen-Times, confirming the never-stay-still complexity of his fiction. I applaud.



“One of the things that is constant in my thinking,” Lent said, “is the capriciousness of long-term relationships.” Consequently, Henry has many pre-Lydia and even pre-Olivia relationships to maintain: with his father, who’d died young, an unfulfilled artist; with his Uncle George, his surrogate father, a Nova Scotia merchant, whose generosity Henry did not return; and with his third child and only son, Robert, who had returned from World War I a lung-and-leg-damaged psychological invalid.

Where to, Dad?

Does Henry honor those relationships? He frequently visits Robert in his memories, which include some stunning conversations. Henry also carries with him the only survival of his father’s drawings he’s found—a still life of cod—which, at one point, he tells, “You ask too much.” Part of Henry’s mission is to fulfill a family legacy.

So, there are three solutions that Henry seeks (shared, in her own way, by Lydia). One: new love, unspoiled by any instinct to nail it down. Two: appreciation of beauty, represented by Henry taking up the cello, the instrument that had spoken to him at the concert attended with Olivia. And three: self-fulfillment through family ties.

Lent undergoes the last process in his fiction and life. Henry roughly mirrors Lent’s grandfather. (It’s the first and last time, he’ll draw on his own family in his novels, he says). Lent is also aware of the genetic and cultural traits he has inherited and passes on.

Family traits

“When people ask me how I write,” Lent revealed, “I say, well, I hear voice and I see visions.” His writing is cinematic, and he has recently completed a film screenplay for “Lost Nation,” his 2002 novel about a New England pioneer.

A sense of dark irony is another one of his traits. “Irony is a fine thing but demands a light touch. Or it becomes sarcasm,” Henry tells Robert during a difficult communication. Lent has a playful way with his older child. He has joked with her, “We’d only really planned to have one child, and then, after you were born, we sort of realized we really needed to try again.” She gets it—not just the humor, but also the heritage.

Lent had been having trouble determining his characters’ fates when he was writing “After You’ve Gone” in 2002. Then he wrote the other book in his two-book contract with his publisher—“A Peculiar Grace”—and figured it out, for the two novels connect in a five-generation story. Read “After You’ve Gone” first. Then go to the previously written sequel.

BOOK REVIEWED

After You’ve Gone by Jeffrey Lent (Grove Atlantic hardcover, Mar. 2009, 256 pages, \$24)

MORE ABOUT THE FESTIVAL

- WCU’s seventh annual Spring Literary Festival feature A. Manette Ansay, Brian Brodeur, C.S. Carrier, Robert Conley, Jan DeBlieu, Pam Duncan, Scott Huler, Jeffrey Lent, Ron Rash, Jewell Parker Rhodes, and Steve Yarbrough, March 30-April 2, 2009, in the UC Theatre, Western Carolina University. All events are free and open to the public. Jan DeBlieu’s reading on Thursday, April 2, takes place in the Coulter Auditorium. Call 227-7264 or visit www.litfestival.org.