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## Review: 'Lime Creek' is warmly mischievous, lyrical and enticing

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Monday, June 20, 2011

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 Aspen, CO Colorado

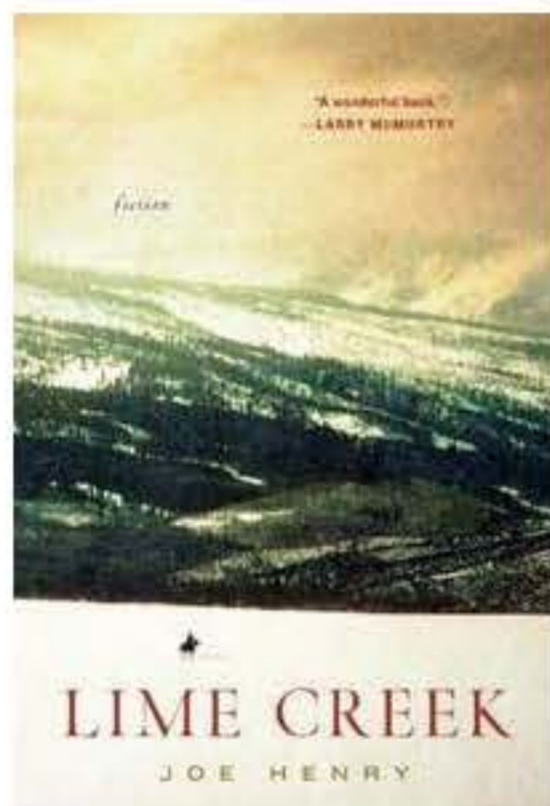
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Woody Creek writer Joe Henry's newly released novel, Lime Creek (Random House, \$24 suggested retail), was at once a welcome arrival in my mailbox and a bit of a surprise in its brevity and slim profile.

That is because I'd been hearing about the book for years as Henry labored on it, and had enjoyed periodic stage productions of "A Lime Creek Christmas," adapted from the book by Henry and his friend, actor Anthony Zerbe.

I was expecting a tome, a much thicker work that would consume weeks of intensive reading.

What I got was a slender volume, eight chapters of glowingly deep prose, sometimes volcanic as it surges from the page and leads the reader through episodes of the lives of a modern Wyoming ranching family in the early 20th century.

The physical aspects of the book are deceptive, though. Easily devoured in a few days of occasional reading, Henry's depiction of the lives and times of rancher Spencer Davis, his wife and two sons is riveting in its sparseness, its emotional gravity, and its blending of pathos and humor.

And it draws the reader back for successive visits, evoking a need to plumb the depths of this family's trials, tribulations and triumphs in the high basins backing up to the Wind River Mountains.

### Aspen Summer Words: Backyard Lit

When: Monday, June 20, from 2:30-3:30 p.m.

Where: McNulty Room, Doerr-Hosier Center, Aspen Meadows Resort.

What: Meet Random House author and Woody Creek resident Joe Henry, who will share stories from his new collection, "Lime Creek," with lively readings by his friend, actor Anthony Zerbe.  
 More info: 970-925-3122.

The opening chapter rolls out at the reader like those very basins, starting with a glimpse of Davis at his favorite pastime, breaking "rough stock" horses in a corral at a neighbor's ranch.

As he gentles and befriends a young colt, the 20-year old cowboy also encounters the daughter of the family that owns the ranch, a year younger than he is. Right there, that day, he decides to marry her, and he wins her agreement later that year while they are both attending colleges in the East.

Before the chapter ends, they have eloped, and wedded in a New York town named Valhalla (it is a real town, by the way) because Davis can't quite absorb what he is about to do and has heard that Valhalla is "where they take the dead heroes."

The wedding is performed by a justice of the peace, who holds up a trial of a trucker who has fatally run over a local woman to accommodate Davis and his bride.

The ceremony takes place with what seems like the entire town sitting as witnesses, and provides an odd but touching counterpoint to the proceedings that have been interrupted, something that the reader grasps along with the justice of the peace and the townsfolk themselves.

From this warmly mischievous beginning, this lyrical and enticing novel moves with Davis and his family through the years, a kind of narrative river that is glimpsed only every now and then by the reader, as if we are traveling on a road running parallel through rolling countryside next to that river.

We catch the two boys, Luke and Whitney, as they mature and change, undergo harrowing moments that occur to all those who live the ranching life, and deal with their inner struggles against the constrictions of their father's love, combined with the fear of losing the feeling of safety that comes with that love.

We observe, with a mixture of sorrow, awe and understanding, as a beloved mare is put down after a full and useful life.

And even as we move with the family as they experience losses and triumphs, we also move with Henry himself as he explores his own feelings about the scenes he is describing and about the lifestyle, the strengths, the pride and humility of the people we encounter.

This is not, strictly speaking, a slice-of-life book. Rather, it amounts to a series of helpings from a strong gumbo of life, endlessly bubbling in a pot warmed by the flames of existence.

It is a very satisfying stew.

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