

Jan DeBlieu comes from the coast to Cullowhee with a message of hope from the cosmos

by Rob Neufeld

It's been a few thousand years since civilized people considered the universe a part of their beings, but Jan DeBlieu, author of "Wind" and "The Year of the Comets," is leading a return to that form of spirituality. Living on Roanoke Island in the Outer Banks has made her particularly alert to the elements. "Think of wind as God and God as wind," she writes.

From the land where wind rules, DeBlieu travels to the land where water begins, as she gives the keynote talk at Western Carolina University's Spring Literary Festival, 7:30 p.m., April 2. The festival runs from Mar. 30 through Apr. 2, and features a stellar group of writers.



Writer's path

DeBlieu's life and career comprise a remarkable phenomenon. Not feeling pat about winning the John Burroughs Medal for Distinguished Natural History Writing for "Wind," she confounded her publisher by spending several years writing "The Year of the Comets," focusing on the night sky, astrophysics, and the progress of her husband's clinical depression.

In 2003, she became Cape Hatteras Coastkeeper for the North Carolina Coastal Federation, working with generally conservative fishermen, farmers, and hunters on environmental protection. The essay from which she'll read at the festival involves a new concern, the rise of homelessness that has beset the Outer Banks in the wake of real estate speculation and rising sea levels.

"This is a weird time in our existence," she said in an interview with the Citizen-Times. "What can an individual person do? The answer is to look to our own communities. My kind of activism starts at the personal level."

Sadness to the stars

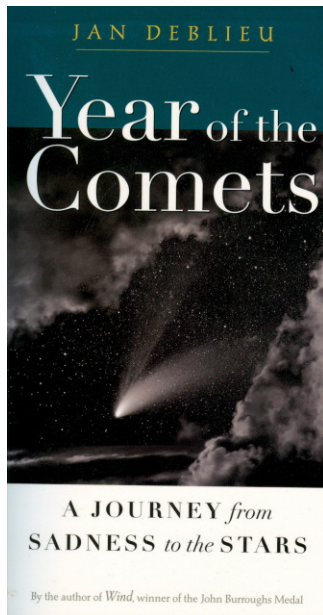
"The Year of the Comets" weaves a narrative that moves from the imagined reaches of the universe to conversations that reveal how her husband, Jeff, circled his own black hole of despair. Her focus on the personal and the mystical harkens back to her original writing impulse, which was to create fiction.

"I started writing non-fiction," she said, "because I couldn't write stories as amazing and interesting as real life." Yet, she needed to represent matters of the heart, and turned to fictive

techniques. She'd been inspired by John Gardner's "The Art of Fiction," which talks about creating a fictive dream in storytelling, so rich and compelling that the reader is immersed in the tale.

"Comets" begins with two events: DeBlieu's feeling of timeless wonder observing the passage of the comet, Hyakunate, on Jan. 30, 1996; and visits to her mother-in-law, dying of cancer after a life affected by manic-depression. "I haven't done much with my life, and now it's about to end," Mom tells Jan. DeBlieu writes to know God's way, and finds positive messages in even the universe's "dark energy."

Star-gazing



Few laypeople dare to take on Hubble, Einstein, and modern theory-makers. Few endeavor to follow the paths of constellations and discern the blurry patches that indicate galaxies and star action. But star-gazing is an ancient practice that deserves renewal.

On a camping trip on the Virginia shore, DeBlieu focused on the constellation Cygnus, the "front windshield" of an expanding universe, and thought about the research of Margaret Geller and John Huchra, who together discovered that galaxies formed a honeycomb. Arches and spheres of stars surround dark voids, much like bubbles in a boiling pot.

At home she latched onto Sagittarius A*, "a swirling combination of light and dark, a vortex of sparks falling toward an iris as black as anything known to humankind. At the center of our universe...is a galactic black hole." She comments, "Darkness is a necessary part of our lives, the hub that drives us."

Her book concludes with Jeff's recovery and the 1997 appearance of the comet, Haley-Bopp. Haley-Bopp carried chemicals that may have brought water and the building blocks of amino acids to Earth. She remains confident about the surprising and regenerative nature of existence.

BOOK REVIEWED

Year of the Comets: A Journey from Sadness to the Stars by Jan DeBlieu (Shoemaker Hoard, 2005)

Wind: How the Flow of Air Has Shaped Life, Myth, and the Land by Jan DeBlieu (Shoemaker Hoard, 1998; edition with new preface, 2006)

MORE ABOUT THE FESTIVAL

Western Carolina University's Spring Literary Festival, free and open to the public, presents the following events, all in the UC Theatre, except for DeBlieu's reading, which is Coulter Auditorium:

Monday, March 30

12 noon, Robert Conley, author of "Cherokee Thoughts: Honest and Uncensored"

4 p.m., poets C.S. Carrier and Brian Brodeur

7:30 p.m., A. Manette Ansay, author of "Vinegar Hill"

Tuesday, March 31

4 p.m., Jeffrey Lent, author of "After You've Gone"

7:30 p.m., Steve Yarbrough, author of "Prisoners of War"

Wednesday, April 1

4 p.m., Scott Huler, author of "No-Man's Lands"

7:30 p.m., Jewell Parker Rhodes, author of "Voodoo Dreams"

Thursday, April 2

12 noon, Gilbert Chappell Distinguished Poetry reading (student poets)

4 p.m., Ron Rash and Pam Duncan

5:30 p.m., Reception (in Illusions Cafe)

7:30 p.m. Jan DeBlieu