

Tribune books

Breath of fresh air from the woods

North Country Notebook

by George Vukelich
North Country Press, 202 pages, \$17.95

Reviewed by Ron Grossman
A Tribune writer

George Vukelich is the Damon Runyon or Mike Royko of the land of sky blue waters.

Like all great reporter-poets, Vukelich finds little human dramas that other eyes overlook—not on big city streets but in the shady groves and reed-filled lakes of his beloved Wisconsin. "North Country Notebook" collects two decades worth of Vukelich's essays, many originally written for the state's newspapers and public radio network.

Outdoor writing is a tough genre because it isn't particularly controversial. Who among us, after all, is not for Mother Nature, or against pollution and the rape of the landscape?

Vukelich's genius is his ability to reinvigorate those issues, by bringing them down to the ground-level reality of a country bait store and stream-side philosophers.

"Life," notes Steady Eddy, Vukelich's backwoods equivalent of Slat Grobnik and Nathan Detroit, "is what happens to you while you're waiting for the bulldozers."

Indeed, Vukelich has been trying to keep one step ahead of the bulldozers all his life. Born and reared in Milwaukee, he learned to shoot a .22-caliber rifle in the basement of his father's tavern. He was taught to fish by Bohemian uncles and the other immigrants who crowded the city's piers hoping to put something on their family table. "In those Depression days, you fished," Vukelich recalls, "as much for food as for sport."

Eventually, his family moved to Three Lakes, a migration that stamped Vukelich with the city-boy-in-the-big-woods mentality that distinguishes his writing. "You can't go home again," Thomas Wolfe used to warn us when we were growing up," Vukelich observes. "And we always figured it was because the Greyhound Bus never even had our town on the line."

Unfortunately, Three Lakes and too many other crossroads hamlets have long since lost the isolation that once protected them from civilization's side effects. Tourists and urban refugees litter many of Vukelich's hunting and fishing grounds with patios and picture windows, subdivisions and shopping malls.

Yet pernicious as those developments are for the environment, they also inspire some of Vukelich's best writing. The more poignant pieces are reveries prompted by his indignation at what human greed has done to the land. Others, like his encomium to the earthworm, remind us that compared to Mother Nature's elegance, human invention is a crude and cumbersome thing.

Sticking his pitchfork into a compost pile one day, Vukelich uncovered a mass of worms. Their ancestors, he notes, were patiently going about their task of recycling the Earth's bounty eons before Du Pont or Monsanto even dreamed of making a buck out of the same process. Unless human chemists blow us and the worms to kingdom come, those tiny, organic bulldozers will still be going about their appointed rounds a hundred centuries from now.

"You start thinking about that," Vukelich notes, "and, as Steady Eddy says, pretty soon you can't stop thinking about that."