

# ART & LEISURE

The Addison Independent

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Richard Alther is an artist, athlete and author who splits time between California and Ferrisburgh. He recently published his fourth novel *Roxie & Fred*.

## Local writer confronts ageism, gender norms

**T**hough he was born and raised in suburban New Jersey, Richard Alther considers himself a lifelong Vermonter. Since childhood, he summered at his grandparents' home on Lake Champlain in Ferrisburgh. He made the permanent move from New York City to Vermont when he was 27 — a decision he still credits for his success as an artist. Alther, 77, co-founded and owned Country Home Products in

BY **EMMA COTTON**

Vergennes until 2006, and now, he splits his time between his home in Palm Springs, Calif., where he lives with his husband, Ray Repp, and the Ferrisburgh property where he summered as a child. Aside from his writing and painting, Alther is a competitive swimmer, having won several gold medals at the Gay Games in Chicago, and

he writes for Huffington Posts' Gay Voices blog. His fourth novel, *Roxie & Fred*, is based on its two namesake characters. Fred, a 48-year-old painter, is separating from his wife and ready to live the unstructured life of an artist. He meets Roxie, a mindful, 88-year-old artist, and a friendship begins. Alther confronts bold questions about sexuality and aging as their relationship turns into a love affair. *Roxie & Fred* became available on Sept. 17. Details are available at [roxieandfred.com](http://roxieandfred.com), and readers can pick up a copy at the Flying Pig Bookshop in Shelburne or at The Vermont Book Shop in Middlebury.

***Roxie & Fred* challenges ageism and gender norms, and confronts mid-life self-doubt and end-of-life grief. What are the origins of this story?**

Roxie & Fred came about for two reasons: I've been a serious painter all my life, and I wanted

to delve into the psychology and creativity of it. Writing is cerebral, but painting is from the gut, and I wanted to take a snapshot of someone like myself, and ask: What really goes on inside and outside of that character, in the making of art? That was one goal. I also wanted to create a character who was considerably older than me and delve into end-of-life issues. I wanted a character who was of sound mind and body, but was still at the end of the road and confronting the inevitable. I wanted to picture what that process was like and get into the heart and soul of that. Then I decided to make the character a woman, because that represented an even greater leap of my imagination. So Roxie came about, and she became kind of a fantasy figure for me, like a role model. She meditates, she's composed, she's simplifying her life by living alone, but her world is still very large. She

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Chris Caswell rehearses a scene from "The Metromaniacs," opening tonight in Middlebury. INDEPENDENT PHOTO / TRENT CAMPBELL

## 'Metromaniacs' takes the stage at Town Hall Theater

Don't miss "The Metromaniacs" at Middlebury's town hall theater. Middlebury Actors' Workshop adapts Piron's 1738 French farce filled with mistaken identity, misplaced ardor and the fight for true love. Opening night is tonight, Thursday, Oct. 19, at 7:30 p.m. The show runs Friday, Oct. 20, and Saturday, Oct. 21, 7 p.m., and Sunday, Oct. 22, 2 p.m. Tickets, adults \$22/Students \$12, available at 802-382-9222, townhalltheater.org, at the box office Monday-Saturday noon-5 p.m., or at the door.

### WRITER

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spends time looking at the different play of clouds shifting about, and all the wildlife around her. It's just totally different from her earlier life, with men and children, and stressful urban work.

#### Can you tell me about your creative process? I understand it was a bit different from your earlier work.

I had the thrill of my characters leading me. I gave them birth, so to speak, but they really led me along, and I'd never had that experience before. In my prior work, I outlined each chapter very carefully: here's chapter one, chapter two, for twenty-some chapters. Not so with this book. I started, and I just went through the whole first draft, without pausing, for over a year, and I had the thrill that my characters, they led me.

#### That's interesting — it seems like a big theme in this book is letting go of control. When Fred is painting, he's trying to let go of structure. It seems like that's what you did in the writing process. Do you feel that way?

Well, that's interesting. I'd say I wanted to

delve into questions with a lot less control. I'm not a woman, and I don't know anything about a woman's — especially a much older woman's — intimate sense of herself, and the physical side of life. When we're older, do we still miss touch? The physical side of affection? It's kind of a taboo subject. After I had written the first several drafts, I said, "Richard, you are writing something that people don't necessarily talk about." But my college classmate, Jane Brody — she's the New York Times Health & Science editor — just this spring, she wrote one of her weekly columns on senior sex, saying it's a subject that needs to be talked about. She raised all these questions that I think I have touched on in my book. It was a total coincidence, and an interesting little twist.

#### Do you find that there are reoccurring themes in your novels, and art, or are you dealing with new subject matter every single time?

I've never thought much about the link between painting and writing, because I've been painting since I was a child. But they really are linked, because I feel the need to express myself. I would tell my political activist friends in Vermont, 'I'm a political

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# FALL ROCKS

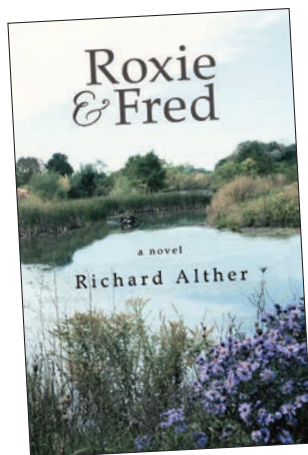
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activist in a way, because when I put a watercolor exhibit up there, I'm saying that this is what I think and feel. This is what represents me. Not violence, not cruelty, not a statement, but an honest reflection that I want to share and put out there. I feel the same way about my novels now. I think they ring in a plea for tolerance of diversity, and being open minded about even things we might not agree with.



lived in London, and Doris took an interest in me as a friend. She was so celebrated, and so famous throughout her life, and especially when we were first in London. But she and I would go on long walks together. And, of course, I've read everything she's written. She inspired me because she showed me that you could be an ordinary person even if you were a celebrity writer and world-famous. She made the craft accessible to me. I got to know somebody who I'd otherwise put on a pedestal and I realized that I, too, could write. I wanted to write. So I have to cite Doris.

With that said, I'd have to put John Updike at the top of the list. Updike was white and privileged like I was, and he wrote about men and women, and relationships, basically. A white, privileged man getting on in the world in spite of being privileged, which can be a hurdle and a handicap.

**Do you identify with the characters in most of your novels, and in Roxie & Fred?**

Absolutely. I feel that they're a part of me. Roxie helped launch me into thinking that gender doesn't matter. Yes, I'm writing about some sexual issues and ideas, but really, there's far more that connects us than separates us. I do yoga, I try to meditate every day, but I'm nowhere near as composed in my stage of the journey as Roxie is in hers. She's expressing a part of me, and I can very much identify with Fred as a struggling artist who is trying to get out of his very conventional, commercially successful background and stretch himself in new directions. When I write fiction, I can have a character be just a slice of me, whereas in real life, I'm a composite and I have to juggle all of this. [Laughing] It's much harder.

**I hear you're also an athlete.**

I've lived so long that I've had a chance to fully explore several things. I was an egg-head intellectual and a nerd, and I didn't begin a serious sports career until I was 44 in Master's Swimming, and by the time I was 50, I was in the top 10, nationally. I used to tell loved ones that it's letting the body lead the mind for a change. I called it 'revenge of the nerds,' and I'm still a very serious athlete. I've retired from competition, because it just was almost the dominant thing for me for many years. And again, I feel so grateful to whoever I was all those years ago for getting my butt out of the New York area and up to Vermont. I was able to really immerse myself in all these different careers.

**Which artists and writers inspire you most?**

Doris Lessing, who died several years ago, she won the Nobel Prize when she was 88. My ex-wife and I

**Do you have any advice for other creative minds?**

Not every twenty-something is open to a mentor. I think you want to be like Fred in my novel, challenged, wanting to break loose, but be open to a helping hand, and somebody older and wiser. And allow one's self, apart from work, marriage, everything, just a little time to explore that creative urge — making music, writing poetry, whatever it is — because our world in the U.S. really goes against that grain. Living in Vermont gave me the flexibility to become an artist. I don't know how I was so smart, at 27 years old, to get myself out of the New York rat race, and have a garden, and the whole bit. People ask me, "Richard, how have you done all these things?" And I say, "Soon after college, I moved to Vermont."

*Richard Alther had lots more to say; read the full interview online at [addisonindependent.com](http://addisonindependent.com).*



Paintings by Richard Alther.

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