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Wonderstruck

A new novel from the visionary Main Line creative **George H. Rothacker** reimagines a revered holiday classic.

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photography by **NINA LEA PHOTOGRAPHY**

George H. Rothacker's compelling new novel, *It's a Wonderful Life 2060*, traces its provenance to a classic holiday film starring Jimmy Stewart. The influence should come as no surprise to those who know Rothacker, who has deep ties to the late actor.

Rothacker, a 74-year-old Main Line author, artist, and advertising agency head, has had a nearly 20-year working relationship with the Jimmy Stewart Museum, located in the actor's birthplace of Indiana, Pennsylvania. At the museum's request, Rothacker has created vivid paintings and prints pertaining to Stewart and the film, including a 2002 painting of the Indiana Theater; naturally, the title of the classic film blares on the theater's marquee. Rothacker has also produced a documentary of Stewart's life for the museum, as well as one of the composers who scored for Stewart's films.

So, it seemed natural that Rothacker's novel would incorporate his love of the classic Frank Capra film, which celebrates its 75th anniversary in December. As

filmgoers around the world well know, *It's a Wonderful Life* stars Stewart as George Bailey, who for reasons of family and finance has given up his dreams to help others in his small hometown of Bedford Falls. George's attempt to end his life on Christmas Eve brings about the intervention of his guardian angel, Clarence Odbody. For the rest of the film, Clarence reveals how George, through kindness and personal sacrifice, has transformed the lives of his nearly everyone who lives in Bedford Falls, including members of his family, and how bleak the world would be without him.

In Rothacker's novel, set in the year 2060, Juniper Blakely is a fact checker for artificial intelligence who dreams of building the most complex model train layout ever imagined in the small town of Indiana. Along the road to realizing his dream, Blakely veers off in a direction that weaves robotic technology into the classic film to reinvigorate Stewart's legacy and the small town in which the actor was raised. *It's a Wonderful Life 2060* is the story of how humans might deal with the world of tomorrow, and how the universal guideposts of hard work, moral courage, and dedication to duty can lead all generations to a sense of purpose, dignity, and fulfillment.

"The book is written in the spirit of *It's a Wonderful Life*," says Rothacker. "The character of Juniper is based on George Bailey, as well as my own personality. Although some of the story is similar, some is different. My concept in 2060 is what will this model railroad look like ... and what purpose will it serve? Juniper has a concept; he knows somebody who has a company that can create micro-bots to create animated characters that will provide greater insights to the film and enhance the value of the museum as an attraction in Indiana County."

Rothacker suggests the story grew out of his main character, Blakely, having grand ideas beyond being a fact checker, and wanting to accomplish more with his life.

"I was originally working with an editor on a book called *100 Years From Today*," he adds. "Then the Juniper idea and the Indiana idea just merged, to build a model train railroad in Bedford Falls and mix it in with *It's a Wonderful Life*—a way to better serve the struggling museum now, as well as in the year 2060."

Rothacker has addressed futuristic themes throughout his writing career. Examples: artificial intelligence striving to understand its place in a world dominated by humans; traveling to a planet light-years distant; and communicating with bacteria. Memorable characters in previous books include a woman born with no arms, a humanoid who believes he's a human, and the mysterious Man in the Yellow Suit.

"Some of my stories are way out there," Rothacker admits. "My futuristic themes developed from my philosophic perspectives. I am not fearful of the future, and try to convey that to my readers. I choose to embrace the positives since I believe we can fix many of the problems that humans and technology create."

"In each of my books, I speculate where we might be in 20, 30, 50 years," he continues. "Sometimes I use characters such as ALS patients flying into outer space, or America-born Zulus searching for their past lives. I don't believe that artificial intelligence will take over; it isn't human. There's a human need for productivity, because virtual life isn't satisfying to human needs."

Rothacker has been a Delaware County resident since his family moved from his birthplace of Port Allegheny, Pennsylvania, when he was two and a half years old. Creativity, both in writing and painting, has been a lifelong passion. He began painting in the late 1960s, experimenting with pastels, charcoal, and watercolors, before settling on acrylic on canvas as his medium of choice. Since 2005, he has held 10 one-person shows and created more than 300 paintings.

"I've also recently built a gallery in my neighbor's barn that's behind my house," he says. "I have 150 works there, and will have a gallery opening in early December."

What does Rothacker hope readers will take away from *It's a Wonderful Life 2060*?

"I think they'll read it and look at the original movie in a slightly different way," he says. "And they'll see that the Jimmy Stewart Museum is valuable. That Stewart not only grew up in Indiana, Pennsylvania, but was a war hero who flew missions in World War II and also promoted the war effort. That Jimmy Stewart is the real George Bailey."

Rothacker says the actual Jimmy Stewart Museum has supported his novel project and all he's doing to bring attention to Stewart's legacy. Later this year, Rothacker will be visiting the museum to sign copies of his book.

Just as George Bailey had troubles, so, too, has

the Jimmy Stewart Museum. The museum has experienced a drastic attendance decrease from when it opened in the late 1990s. Coupled with the issues of COVID-19, reductions in funding, and the aging of Stewart's fan base, the museum is at a critical juncture of survival. Rothacker hopes his new novel can help change the museum's course.

"I kind of see myself like Clarence in the movie," he says. "Without me helping the museum, maybe it wouldn't exist if I didn't exist, the same way that Clarence being there at the bridge helped George." ■



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—GEORGE H. ROTHACKER,
AUTHOR OF *IT'S A
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**Visit GeorgeRothacker.com for more
information about Rothacker and his works.**

**Visit Jimmy.org for more information
about the Jimmy Stewart Museum and
information and access to Rothacker's novel,
It's a Wonderful Life 2060.**