

Tense series of thriller books sees a vet become the hero

By **BILL CASTANIER**

Veterinarian Ron Erskine knows a good story when he hears it. His second book, “Prometheus Scorned,” which features hero Malcolm Cromarty, weaves a complex tale involving greed, an arsonist and the Pennsylvania Amish community.

Erskine, who recently retired from the Michigan State University College of Veterinary Medicine, said his riveting mystery is an amalgam of an arsonist from the ’80s in Hubbardston, Michigan, and an arsonist from Pennsylvania, where he worked among the Amish community as a young veterinarian.

In writing the book, he extensively consulted firefighters and an insurance adjuster who specialized in barn fires.

His research shows in his compelling descriptions of barn fires, which are unlike other building fires in their intensity due to the inflammable contents and the animals that board there. The two dynamics make for a dangerous and often uncontrollable situation.

In one example, he explains how often animals saved from a barn fire will rush back into the conflagration.

It’s in Erskine’s vivid descriptions of the hard day-to-day work with unpredictable farm animals — and their even more unpredictable Amish owners — that the book routinely soars.

Erskine said he learned a lot from writing his first Cromarty book, “Castings Demons Into Swine.”

“I hopefully learned how to write fiction and lose some habits of a science journal writer,” he said.

Erskine said many of the situations in the book are based on real occurrences he experienced working as vet.

“I tried to capture the mayhem of a barn fire in a whole different world. It’s a reflection of what happens when untold forces, this time an arsonist, and how a small community responds,” he said.

Erskine said the book’s drama doesn’t rely on high-tech. “There are no black helicopters circling overhead,” he said.

It does however emphasize the divide between people who live in rural communities and those who live in urban areas.

In doing his research, Erskine said he learned that most arsonists are not pyromaniacs and that most fires are



Courtesy

Author Ron Erskine.

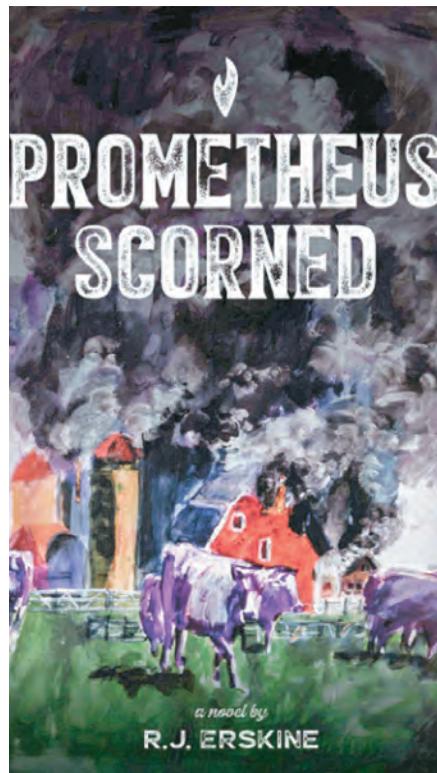
set for reasons of revenge, fraud and family strife.

The strength of “Prometheus Rising” is it pulls the reader into the discovery of the motive for the fires, which will lead to the identification of the arsonist. Its not an easy solution, and Erskine draws it out to a dramatic and dangerous solution.

In his new book Erskine introduces several new characters, including an insurance investigator who becomes his new paramour and an enigmatic teenager who can talk to animals and might be the arsonist.

Once again, the book set in the ’80s, offers tantalizing details about the ways of Amish farmers, including their reliance on hexes.

“My next book featuring the ama-



teur veterinarian detective will delve more deeply into Amish witchcraft stories, which I observed as a young veterinarian,” Erskine said. “There will be bit more magical reality in the next book.”

But Erskine said his next book won’t turn into a “Harry Potter” and will be mostly grounded in the realm of science.

Erskine said he and his spouse, Tina, have enjoyed watching the new seven-part series adaptation of James Herriot’s “All Creatures Great and Small,” which follows a young vet in ’30s Yorkshire England. The original series, which ran from the ’70s into the ’90s, showed the era’s stark political divide between urban and rural areas.

“I absolutely love them. Many vets and myself were influenced by Herriot’s romanticized version of the life of a veterinarian: dropping by a farm, stopping by a pub and having a beer,” he said.

The reality was more akin to getting kicked in the shin by a cow.

As soon as spring comes, Lansing residents might notice Erskine’s 1963 Chevy truck driving around Lansing. It’s painted like a cow, so it’s pretty hard to miss.

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