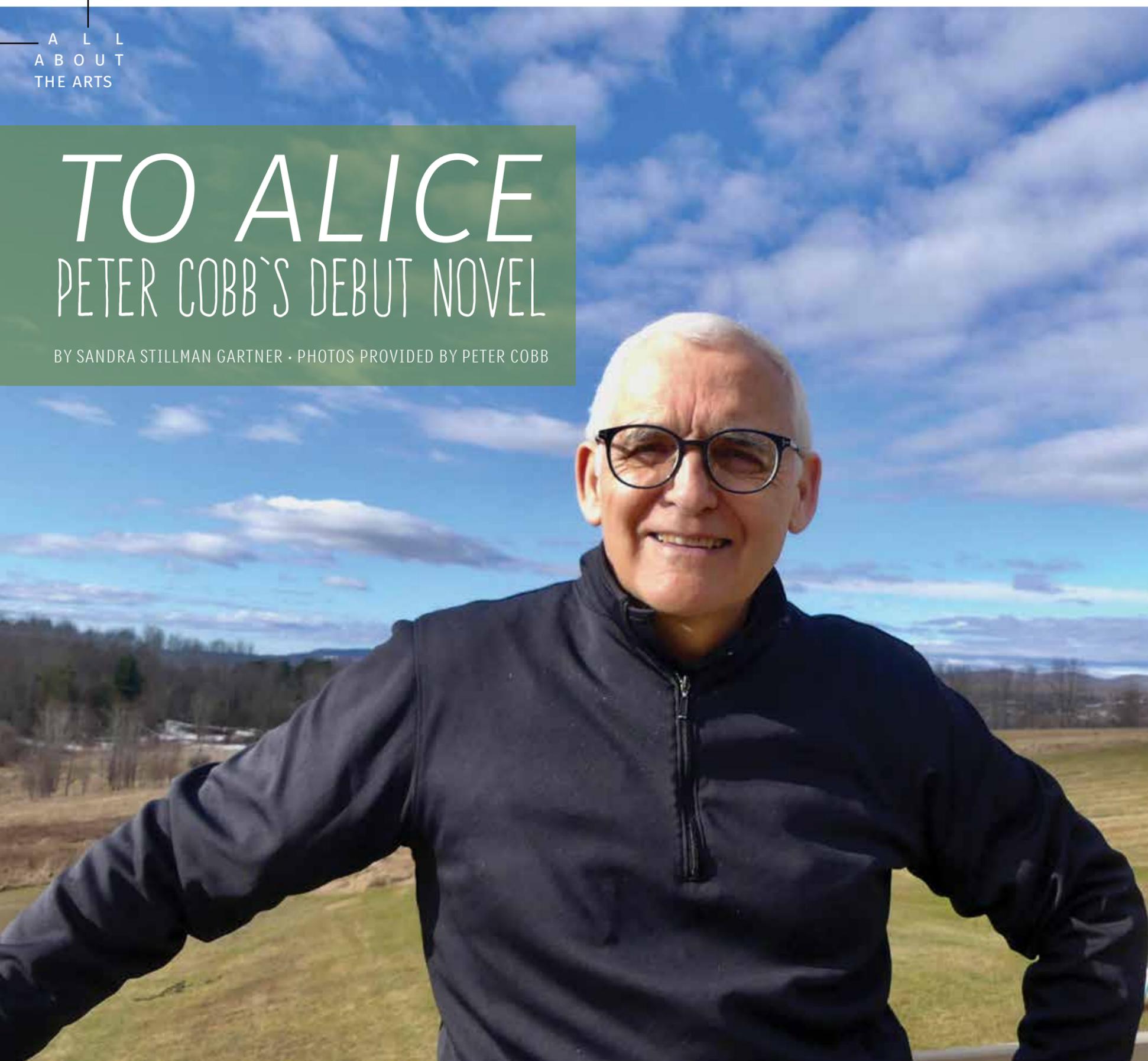


TO ALICE

PETER COBB'S DEBUT NOVEL

BY SANDRA STILLMAN GARTNER • PHOTOS PROVIDED BY PETER COBB



IT'S A SPECIAL DAY FOR ALICE HAMMOND'S PATIENT CLYDE. As a home health and hospice aide for the Providence Vermont Visiting Nurse Association, she has come to help him with his daily tasks of self-care and to celebrate his 55th birthday. But Alice can't get into the house and finally breaks a window for entry. Inside she finds Clyde face down on the floor, his dog Ella standing on his back barking. Alice goes to Clyde and he's not moving. His skin is cold, there is no pulse and she calls 911.

Alice Hammond is a troubled soul. She dropped out of medical school when one of her professors made it too stressful to stay. As a health aide, Alice has blurred some of the lines of care. She has made her patient's lives her life...a problem for both of them. When one of her patients dies and leaves Alice all of his property and \$125,000, his brother is furious because he received nothing and had been Clyde's caretaker for five years.

Peter Cobb's debut novel *To Alice*, published by Touch Point Press, came out in January 2022. "At what point does a caregiver cross the boundary between providing professional, compassionate care or crossing the line and caring too much?" said Cobb. "That question stands at the heart of *To Alice*."

Cobb is no stranger to the Visiting Nurse Association of Vermont. In the summer of 2016, he retired from a 33-year career as director of the VNAs of Vermont, the trade association that represents the VNA in Vermont and nationally. Following his retirement, he decided to write a novel. "I had written two earlier novels years ago, but they were awful. I had so much to learn about the process of creative writing and fiction," he said.

Cobb was born in Rutland and lived there until he went off to college at the University of Vermont. Some of his positions after he graduated included working with adults with autism for Washington County Mental Health. He was also a reporter for the *Times Argus* in Barre and the *Black River Tribune* in Ludlow.

Cobb and his wife Cindy settled in Barre Town where they raised their children. Cindy was the director of the Respiratory Department and the Cardiac lab at the Central Vermont Hospital in Berlin.

After retiring, Cobb had time to focus on his novel. "It required a lot of discipline. I decided I needed to kick my own butt and set up a schedule." He blocked off at least 12 hours a week, with four hours a day on three different days. Sixty percent of the book was written pre-Covid and the rest was completed in the time of isolation during the pandemic.

"I don't do an outline for my writing," Cobb said. "Instead, I write from chapter-to-chapter and soon the characters direct me where I need to go and show their own voices." The characters in the book are a composite of people from his family and friends he grew up with and those he knows now. The character of Alice Hammond is named after his granddaughter. "Alice is totally fictional but my granddaughter's spirit inspired the main character," he replied. Other people are composites of his own mother and grandmother. "I grew up with very strong women from an Italian background."

Cobb had his own experience with his 98-year-old mother who lived alone, fell several times and ended up in the hospital. He and his siblings felt she would be better living in a care facility where there was consistent monitoring. Two days before her hospital discharge, a woman from the residential care facility came with brochures and a friendly smile to welcome his mother Alice. Cobb's mother knew what was up, looked at the woman and said "Tell my son to shove it."

Instead, Alice returned to her three-bedroom apartment in the Parker House in Rutland where she was able to remain at home, because of the home health aides from the Rutland Area Visiting Nurse Association. On July 4, 2012, his mother died in her sleep and was discovered there by the health aide. "Obviously I should not have made plans without

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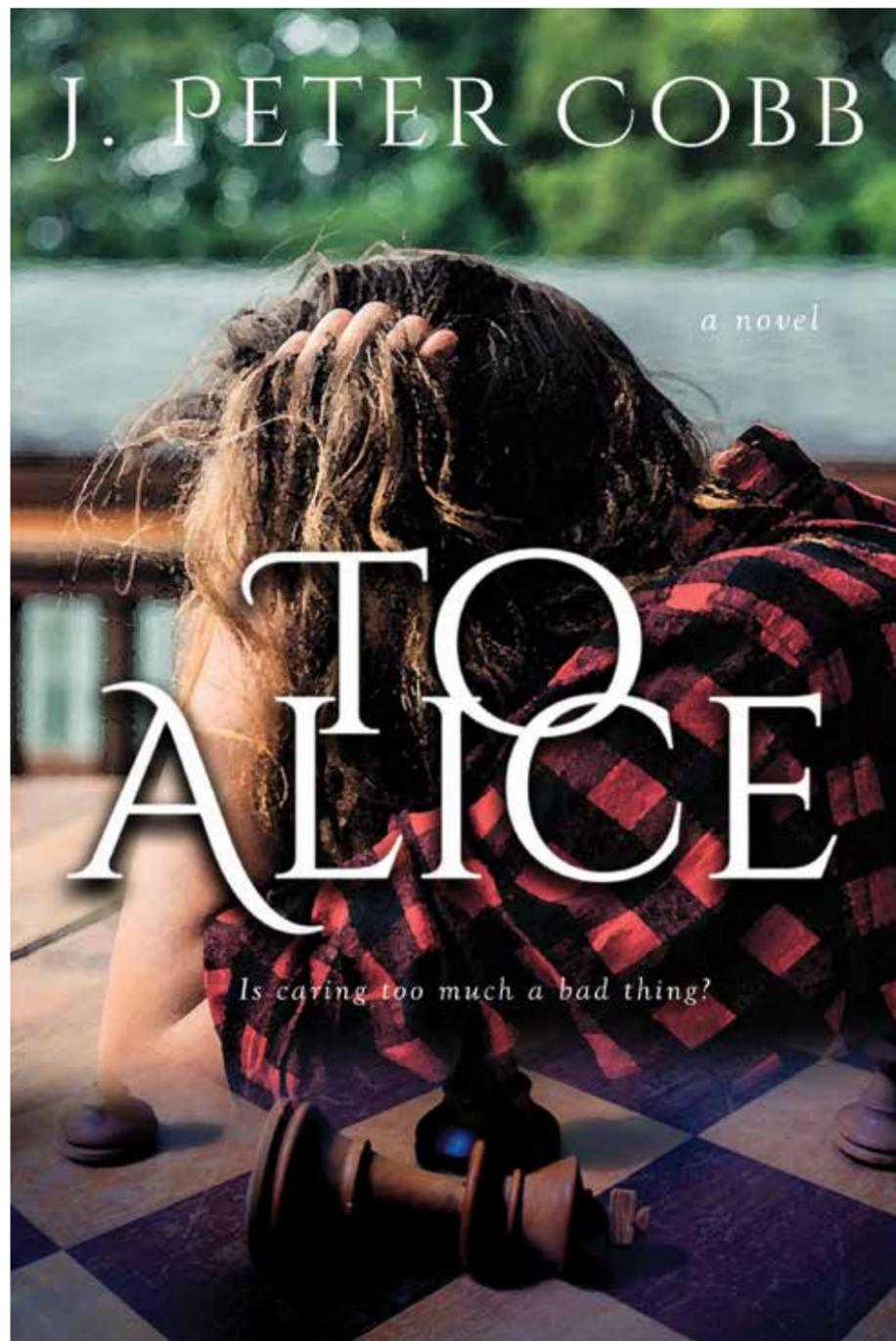
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consulting her,” Cobb said. “Fear makes me stupid and impulsive. I didn’t want her to die alone, but I lived in Barre and my sisters lived in Washington, D.C. and London and none of us could be there. In the end she died peacefully in her sleep. Her decision was probably the right one.”

His years as director of the VNAs of Vermont helped him to write the book. Cobb was not a direct care

worker, but learned from working with the nurses, aides and therapists from the agencies. “I met several times a year with the clinical directors and learned from them as well. I also made 10 to 15 visits a year with the nurses and therapists. I did that to remind myself why home care and hospice are so important in people’s lives.”

Some of the stories in the book are

loosely based on the patients Cobb met. “On one visit I accompanied a male physical therapist whose patient was a tiny, 95-year-old woman. His task was to help exercise her legs. The PT put on music from the 1940s and he did the exercise by dancing with her. I turned that memory into the dance scenes in the book with Alice and her patient Tim Rogers,” he recalled. The events in the book are ones that Cobb experienced or heard about. Alice’s patients are a former logger, a woman in hospice, a feisty 100-year-old woman, a former ballroom dance champion, a wheelchair-bound young man and a man whose wife left him 30 years ago.

“I hope that by reading *To Alice* people rediscover it’s the small things that matter,” Cobb said. “The novel is also about the grace of simple care—a bed bath, companionship, meal preparation, wound dressing, house cleaning and toenail clipping. For many home-bound patients, assistance with the simple tasks of daily living can make the difference between staying in their own home or living in a nursing home. The frail elderly and people with a disability don’t need a hero, what they need is someone to help them get through their day.”

Cobb left reporting in 1981 to get a Master’s degree in Special Education and did not return to it until his retirement. “Now I’m back at the *Rutland Herald* and *Times Argus*, as a freelance correspondent and an occasional essayist.” He has also completed his second novel and it has been sent to his publisher. His hobbies include hiking, skiing, kayaking, photography, reading and writing.

To Alice can be purchased at all Phoenix Bookstores, Next Chapter in Barre and Bear Pond Books in Montpelier. It is also available on Amazon in both print and a kindle version. You can see more of Cobb’s work and background at petercobb.com



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