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# Lawyer-poet's first novel a study of a contemporary social dilemma

## REVIEW

► **Shattering Glass**, by Nancy-Gay Rotstein, published by McClelland and Stewart, 373 pages, \$19.99

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**B**een there, done that. This could be the motto of Nancy-Gay Rotstein, Toronto lawyer, internationally acclaimed poet and first-time novelist, as she weaves the intricate yarn of *Shattering Glass*, an insightful study of a contemporary social dilemma.

Rotstein has drawn heavily on her own life experiences in creating her principal characters, three bright, ambitious and determined women who attain successful careers. But at the cost of a guilty conscience.

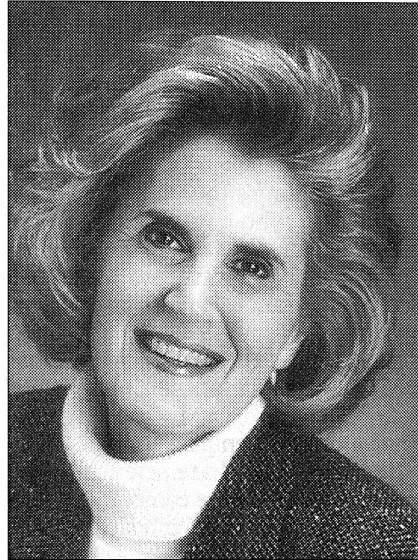
Rotstein had first-hand experience from her time as history teacher, law student and struggling writer. Then there was time in power politics, serving on the boards of the Canada Council, National Library and Telefilm Canada.

The parts she didn't know, such as the inner horrors of a juvenile detention centre in Washington, she researched — with a great deal of difficulty.

Other parts of the novel, including the gloriously luxurious spa in Italy's storied Lake Como district, she made up.

"There is no such place as a spa called Itaro," she says. "I created it."

At first, authorities put up a stone wall when she wanted to have a look around the detention centre where Shane, teenage son of one of her characters, ends up.



**Nancy-Gay Rotstein**  
Used own experiences

"The information office said: 'Nobody goes in there. You don't want to go in there. I don't want to go in there with you.'

"So I went underground. I had conducted a major research study on children's legal rights that gave me the credentials for a special pass."

Rotstein, 52, credits her talents as a poet for her sharp observations as she goes about vacuuming up details. She knows wine, she knows fine china, she knows food and luxury hotels and the feel and aroma of a riding school or a hallowed, panelled board room.

Then, with the precision of an eye surgeon, she places these tidbits just where she needs them in her story. But some readers may find the style too florid at times — "pain knifed her stomach . . . her breath came in quick, short stabs."

Rotstein says that when she set out to write the novel she figured it would take six months. "I knew exactly what I

wanted to say."

Instead it took seven years because Rotstein became a stickler for detail, accuracy and research.

"Like the Washington detention centre. It had to be unmistakably realistic and I wanted to go in as an ordinary mother would and see that place and those kids — it was terrible."

The title is a reference to passing through the glass ceiling, the mythical but often real barrier that keeps women from scaling the corporate heights open to men.

Set in the intriguing worlds of high finance, politics and publishing, the story is played out in the power centres of Toronto, New York and Washington.

The first of Rotstein's three main characters is Judy, left impoverished by a wealthy former husband, who becomes a lawyer to support herself and her son Shane and fulfil a lifelong ambition. As a reward for pulling off a spectacular deal in London negotiations she is given a Lake Como holiday, although she knows she should go home to her troubled son.

Second is wealthy Dede, wife of a rising but promiscuous Canadian politician, who dotes on her two seemingly perfect sons.

Third is Barbara, wife of a battering husband who defies him in following her passion for writing, becoming an international success at the expense of her relationship with her daughter.

All three, who eventually come together at the Italian spa, have in their lives little bits of Rotstein, a mother of three who started law school at age 39.

The most widely acclaimed of her three books of poetry, based on her travels through China, is *China: Shockwaves*. Like *Shattering Glass* it is also published in the United States and was recently published in Britain.