

Poet vividly captures sights, sounds of China

CHINA:SHOCKWAVES

By Nancy-Gay Rotstein
Dodd, Mead & Co.; 80 pages; \$12.95

Review by Stephen Jones

A poem lives or dies by the poet's power to see clearly the nuances of life and select the precise words to evoke that vision.

Few have a sharper eye for detail than Nancy-Gay Rotstein, a Canadian poet whose new book, "China:Shockwaves," takes us on a vivid trip through China.

"China is an explosion of image," Rotstein said in a recent interview. "There are volumes of people and swirling dust and I wanted to portray all of this."

The book chronicles Rotstein's visit to China in 1980, when that giant nation was just beginning to open its doors to the West. She was granted a special literary visa that allowed her to travel without restriction to places normally forbidden to foreign visitors.

In the poem "Yangtze River Gorges," for example, she describes a journey on one of the ferries that serve thousands of Chinese villagers, a trip few Westerners have been allowed to take.

The poem is a cauldron of sight and sound and smell, like the ferry itself, a thrilling but discomfiting confrontation between a modern Western individual and an ancient Eastern society.

"No matter how prepared you are for China, you're never fully prepared," Rotstein said. "Going to China you have to throw away all your preconceived ideas. . . . You have to throw away all your points of reference."

Rotstein's clear eye and sharp images provide an exciting perspective on that culture. About the only drawback is her reluctance to inject herself into the poems.

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