

Surprising twists of phrase give this poetry a punch

MARC HORTON
Journal Books Editor
EDMONTON

Nancy-Gay Rotstein, the Toronto poet whose work is clear, moving and accessible, is not at all an intimidating person as we chat on the telephone.

In fact, she's thoughtful, precise and downright friendly.

However the press kit from her publisher that accompanied *This Horizon and Beyond, Poems Selected and New* (McClelland and Stewart, 170 pp., \$19.99) is just a touch overwhelming.

For one thing, it's 14 double-sided pages with dozens of proposed questions for those interviewers who might possibly be stumped or who have not read the poems contained in the book.

The press kit has bits and pieces on everything to do with Rotstein's career as a lawyer, world traveller, mom, Canadian nationalist, poet, environmentalist

and board member of Telefilm Canada and the Canada Council.

It is daunting stuff, indeed.

But then, it covers an active life that saw Rotstein be one of the first Western writers admitted to China as the Cultural Revolution drew to its close, who wrote a series of poems on her family, who has written on man's inhumanity to nature, who has opinions on the written word in a techno-society, who has expressed profound feelings on what it is to be a Canadian and who has written poems on Italy, Greece, Israel, the Caribbean, Switzerland, China and Japan.

The book is the culmination of a quarter-century of writing poetry, she says, and many of these, including those dealing with her own family, have never been pub-

lished before.

And they are good. There is a gem-like quality to many of them with a precision in language that

somehow makes her poems both specific and universal.

In a flattering introduction to *This Horizon and Beyond*, fellow poet Irving Layton writes: "Nancy-Gay Rotstein's poetry has a distinctive voice. It is not the kind of poetry that is written today, and that is very much in

her favour. It gives her poems a kind of hardness or toughness that makes for permanence, enabling her to take a lonely and significant place that is uniquely her own."

For her part, Rotstein sees a resurgence in poetry as people seek something with a little more

depth.

"I've always believed that poets are the conscience of society.

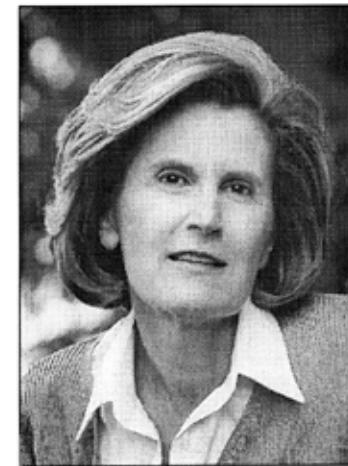
"I write because I have to. The process is extremely personal for me, and what I hope the reader would experience as a result is that they would discover connections that they might not have seen and felt before. Poetry gives us something to hold on to, something to steady us."

Some of this poetry is very personal, most notably the poems on family life.

"As I watched my family grow I found myself capturing in poetry the stages in a family's life," Rotstein says.

Some of Rotstein's poems have an edge to them, depending on an economy of language and surprising twists of phrase that give them a punch.

Certainly the poems written as a result of her trip to China's back country have that quality as she writes of a block commandant



Nancy-Gay Rotstein

with a "slash smile" and she proves herself an observer of detail with the wondrously cadenced poem *Yangtze River Gorges* which has an unerring sense of time and place.

But her best poems, perhaps, are those which deal with her family, and which appear in *This Horizon and Beyond* for the first

time. They are tender and true and will speak to any parent anywhere.

Here's but one superb example, written for Rotstein's daughter Tracy:

she sleeps silently
face white from suspended motion
open lips touching tiny gnawed fist

mouth quivering with dreams;
how I wish rabbit and bunny sentinels

could ever protect you from an age that rapes childhood for competition and success, where dreams waken into nightmare

and change becomes revolution;
sleep, sleep my little one
and when you wake, wake slowly

(Nancy-Gay Rotstein will read from her book upstairs at *The Backroom Vodka Bar, 10324 Whyte Ave., at 7 p.m. on June 5.*