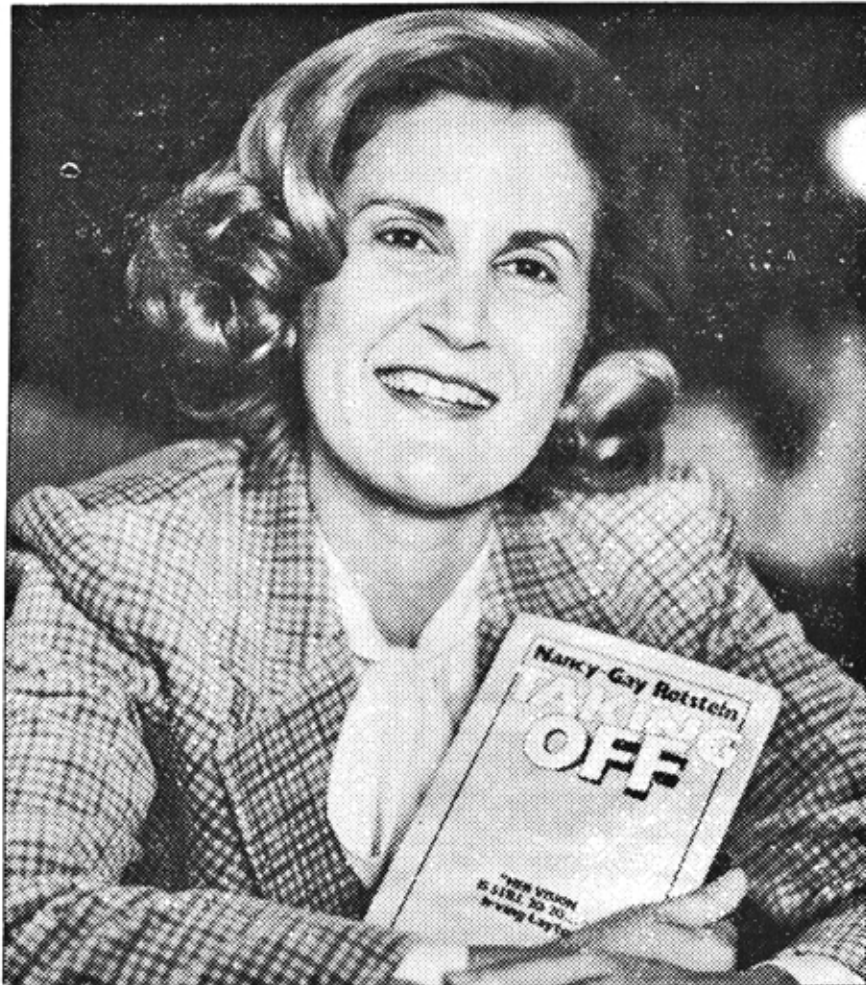


Rotstein's poetry aims for economy of language



Nancy-Gay Rotstein has published her second collection.

By Stephen Gauer
JOURNAL REPORTER

Describing Nancy-Gay Rotstein's first collection of poetry, Irving Layton said the Toronto poet showed "20/20 vision". Describing her second collection, *Taking Off*, Layton said "her vision is still 20/20, but she's seeing a great many more things with her optics".

Those are high words of praise from one of Canada's most popular and prolific poets. Layton has taken a personal interest in Rotstein since the day five years ago when she first sought him out at York University with a few poems in her hand.

With encouragement from Layton, Rotstein went on to get *Through the Eyes of a Woman* published in 1976. Her first book went through two printings and sold 6,000 copies.

The new book, published in May, promises to further the career of a poet who combines popular appeal with mastery of craft.

Music and rhythm

Rotstein's work is sparse and intense, offering sharp vignettes drawn from her home life as a mother of three children and from travels in Canada and Europe. She talks about "economy of language" as though it's a guiding principle in her work.

"There shouldn't be one word in a

poem that can be taken out without changing the meaning," says Rotstein. "You use as many words as you need to say what you're trying to put across.

"A good poem should be musical, and flow. The cadence should work with the content of the poem so that music and rhythm fit in with the subject."

Many of the poems in *Taking Off* were written during Rotstein's trips. "I travel especially to write," she says, "because at home I'm busy with my family. And I'll do two months of research before a trip so I know the history and culture of the country I'm going to visit.

"The more I travel, the more I appreciate the special quality of Canada, the feeling of the land, the feeling of vastness and uniqueness of the different regions."

Rotstein calls her writing style poetic realism. She goes to great lengths to research the material in her poems. But at the same time she tries to capture the special feeling that inspires a poem by writing it immediately, waiting until a later time to go back and revise.

"You start with an idea, a feeling, a sentence. You never know how it will end. For spontaneity and intensity of feeling, the writing must be done at the time to capture the

magic that inspired the poem. The poem has to be written; it cries out to be written."

Rotstein has been responding to that "cry" since she was a young girl writing secret poems she kept to herself. Her early work was so personal she found it difficult to let other readers share it.

"It was hard to let someone pick me up for \$3.95 at a bookstore," she says. But Layton's advice that publication would help her grow as a writer proved to be sound.

"So many people identified with the first book because it was readable. I've had letters from people telling me that the poems express what they think and feel too.

"The second book is more mature and deals with more interesting things but it has the same style and readability as the first book."

Books take time

Rotstein's work is readable without being sentimental or simple-minded. The short lines pack a density of description that creates moods and pictures. She talks about "literary snapshots" and that sums up many of the poems very well.

Rotstein's poems have a modern feel without falling into the trap of obscurity. "Many people are turned off by modern poetry," she says. "But my work seems to have a wide

appeal, and from more than just traditional poetry readers.

"My books take time because each one represents a total experience and it takes time to accumulate experiences worth writing about."

Rotstein used to teach high school and she has strong opinions about how poetry should be taught to students.

"Students should enjoy a poem, not dissect it," she says. "Poetry has been freed from the restrictions of form so there's a greater responsibility on the writer to say something to the reader.

"The onus is now on the writer to do something to make the poem work, rather than make the reader work. And a teacher should say: 'Here's a poem, enjoy it.'"

If the poems are Nancy-Gay Rotstein's, the students will enjoy them.

Checklist for
winter driving
/32