

# IN PRINT

## READERS AND WRITERS

# Home Is Where the Hurt Is

*Canadian author Nancy-Gay Rotstein takes on the guilt shared by mothers everywhere — how to have a successful career and still be a good parent.*



Nancy-Gay Rotstein calls "Shattering Glass" the "book of the century" because it deals with juggling career and family, single parenthood, domestic violence, a hint of child abuse. I wanted to show women they weren't alone in any of these things."

**N**ancy-Gay Rotstein is a lawyer, published poet, businesswoman and member of several Canadian arts boards. So she's had firsthand experience with the working-mother's guilt that is at the heart of her new novel, "Shattering Glass." "I was 39 when I went to law school and, although my children were teen-agers then, I always had them on my mind," said the 40-something Rotstein during a recent Twin Cities visit.

"I enjoyed the challenge of law school, but I was constantly thinking that I should be at home instead. In talking with other women, I realized my feelings of guilt were not unique. I believe this preoccupation with how to have a successful career and still be a good parent is the most pressing and unresolved issue for women of our time."

Which is why Rotstein decided to write a novel about three women of the "undervalued generation, women born too late to be appreciated for child rearing and volunteer work and too early to reap the benefits of the women's liberation movement."

It is these women "on the cusp" who are coming to what the author calls the "shattering glass realization."

"This is a realization that, although we have career achievements outside the home, we continue, as did our mothers and grandmothers, to think of ourselves as failures when we have any problems with our children," she says. "This sabotages our lives, ruins our self-confidence and limits access to happiness."

Rotstein says she chose three protagonists "to show the universality of our experiences in different situations and to show the strength of the bond between parent and child."

The fictional trio includes Judy, Dede and Barbara.

Judy becomes a successful corporate lawyer after she finds herself close to poverty when her husband maneuvers her into an unfair divorce settlement. While she's studying hard and spends time with a new man, her son is arrested for theft and marijuana possession. Dede's wealthy family gives her husband the political career he craves and she leads a glamorous life, but she raises her sons alone and is tormented about whether a tutor sexually molested them. Barbara is the wife of a promising lawyer who places her husband's career ahead of her own need to write. When her husband's career stagnates and he becomes physically abusive, she turns to writing best-selling novels. She, too, senses that something terrible may be happening to her teen-age daughter.

"This is a book of this century," Rotstein says. "It deals with juggling career and fami-

ly, single parenthood, domestic violence, a hint of child abuse. I wanted to show women they weren't alone in any of these things. I'm a poet, but a novel seemed the best vehicle for evoking real-life situations for maximum impact on the reader. I wanted this book to be a provocative and intense read."

Rotstein's personal story is as interesting as her fiction.

She's reticent about her early years, and her official biography begins with the 1979 publication of her first poetry collection, "Through the Eyes of a Woman," which was followed by "Taking off" (1979) and "China: Shock Waves" (1987). All three collections were praised in Canada and the United States, with the Canadian Press reviewer saying, "She uses words as if they were diamonds."

While Rotstein was establishing her literary career, she was also serving as a director of a financial services company she and her husband founded.

In 1980, when China was still virtually closed to Westerners, she was able to travel on a literary visa to see "the real China." That trip led to her writing "China: Shock Waves," and she got her first taste of creating prose when she wrote the book's foreword.

"Readers told me they started with the prose and read the whole book before they realized they were reading poetry," she says happily.

She also conducted and wrote a major study on how lawyers should represent children's legal rights, a project that grew out of her law-school specialization in family law.

After being admitted to the bar in 1985, Rotstein was appointed by the government to the board of directors of the Canada Council, becoming the first poet asked to join this national arts body. She's been an appointee to

the National Library advisory board and is a director of the Canadian Film Development Corp., the federal agency responsible for developing Canada's film and television industry. She's also a founding member of the Public Lending Rights Commission of Canada, the government agency that oversees payment of royalties to writers for use of their books in libraries.

Rotstein, who lives near Toronto, started writing "Shattered Glass" seven years ago, after graduating from law school, and it took her much longer to complete than she'd supposed because her "passion for language" drove her to write every sentence as poetically as possible, and because she felt that "everything had to be true in every way to have emotional effect."

That's why she visited every place she mentions in the plot, from Washington and New York to Toronto and Lake Como, Italy. When she was refused admittance to a juvenile-detention facility outside of Washington, D.C., which she needed to see to write a scene involving a child's arrest, she "went underground," using her credentials as a children's legal-rights advocate to get into restricted areas.

"The first thing I thought of was how young and vulnerable those children looked," she recalls of that disturbing visit. "They could have been anyone's kids."

Even though writing the book took years, Rotstein knew she'd chosen the right topic when "Shattering Glass" came out the same month Time magazine's cover touted a story about the stresses on working women.

Best of all, women readers are saying to her, "How did you know? This is my life."



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