

Trauma for a 12-year-old turns up trumps for poet

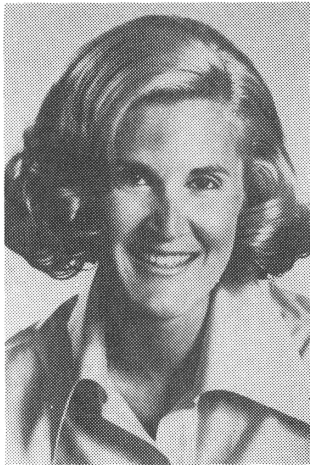
When pretty Nancy-Gay Smith married Max Rotstein she harbored a secret the young lawyer didn't discover until after two of their three children were born. But it wasn't the kind you write Ann Landers about.

From early childhood, the Vaughan Road Collegiate history and English teacher had been composing poems. A traumatic experience in Grade 7, when she was 12, determined her never to tell anyone. She just kept crafting increasingly excellent verses when no one was around, and squirreling them away.

What in the name of the muse could have happened? That's the natural question, as Ms Rotstein's first published volume, *Through the Eyes of a Woman* (Griffin House, Toronto) melts rapidly from the shelves of bookstores like *Classic and Fleet*?

Sensitive age

"You know how sensitive and, well, inhibited you can be at that age?" she said, earnestly, still blanching a little at the memory.



POEMS PUBLISHED
Nancy-Gay Rotstein

"I had shown my grandmother some of my little compositions. Unknown to me, she sent one to *Chatelaine*, and it was published, just as though I were grown up.

"I'll never forget that morning in Forest Hill Collegiate. Our principal had somehow seen the magazine — I hadn't — and broke into some instructions on the public address system to read my poem and tell who had written it. I was devastated. It made me different when conformity is so important. I went home and



Inside story
Lotta Dempsey

cried and never showed my things to anyone again, until . . ."

Secret hoard

It was a little over three years ago that her husband, Max, searching for something in a drawer, came upon the secret hoard. He was amazed and delighted. He knew his wife was a brilliant scholar — she took her master's at University of Toronto in Canadian history. But here was a whole new light on her talents.

Once Nancy-Gay began to come out from behind the barricades, she astonished herself one day by telephoning the Canadian poet she most admired, Irving Layton. She sat in on some of his poetry workshops at York University, and Layton, not a man to encourage mediocrity, decided she must be published.

In his tribute on the back cover of *Through the Eyes of a Woman*, Layton has

written: "Ms Rotstein's poems give pleasure by their display of intelligence, sensitivity, compassion and warmth.

"Her eyes see clearly, and sometimes impishly, what others never see at all or don't wish to. Readers would be wise to borrow her eyes for a while. Oculists tell me 20-20 vision is quite rare."

Sample poem

The poems all are short, some eight or 10 lines, none overspilling a page. I like her comment on *The Age of Aquarius*:

*They gave up on God
Inconsequential, they said,
for their universe.
They gave up on love
replacing tenderness with
honesty;
honesty enough to sting and
bruise the most trusting.
And what's left—
indifference.*

*You can't get hung up on
that
or live either.*

Many of the poems were inspired by watching her children, the countryside and images familiar to all Canadians, if, as Layton said, they had 20-20 creative vision.

Ms Rotstein has divided her book into two parts. The first focuses on woman looking outward in society at the quality of modern Canadian life, specifically at the problems of the urban environment (and possible solution) and the foibles of politics.

The second part is the woman looking inward, at the family, children, herself — the intimate aspects of a woman's existence.

View of life

"I believe my historical conditioning as a student of Canadian history has given me a vantage point in viewing life that I might not otherwise have," she said, thoughtfully. "So I don't write just off-the-cuff stuff.

"My work is done in deliberately short poems. To me, good poetry has an economy of language, takes a good idea and synthesizes

it with the proper use of language."

She has, of course, read poetry, from the Psalms and Shakespeare through all the moderns, all her life.

Ms Rotstein goes regularly to the University of Toronto library where she can read the work of Russian, South American, British and other poets.

"It is good to see the different sensibilities, imagery apart from our own. We are saying the same thing but in different ways."

Love of beauty

Does she read poetry to her children? Yes, indeed, and her 7-year-old daughter already is writing her own small verses.

"We have to instill a love of the beautiful when they are very young, and poetry is one of the major ways of expressing beauty."

And small-world department . . . checking back, the poet and I came to the conclusion I was the villain who accepted her poem for publication in *Chatelaine*, at a time when I was editor-in-chief of that magazine. For once my crystal ball was clear . . . crystal clear.