

# Poet hid first verses in bottom drawer

"It was difficult for me to open up to other people, to be aware that they could pick me up for \$3.95," says Nancy-Gay Rothstein seriously. "Poetry is such a personal thing, one's own experiences and most intense feelings. You have to be writing about yourself."

So we have to thank two men for the fact that this mother of three, a former high school teacher, now has her second book of poetry, *Taking Off* (Longman Canada) in print.

One was her lawyer husband, Max, who discovered after their marriage that his attractive blonde wife had been keeping a secret from him. In hidden hours, away from prying eyes, she was writing verses and hiding them in a bottom drawer.

The other man was Irving Layton, considered by many to be Canada's outstanding contemporary

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## LOTTA DEMPSEY Inside story

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poet. When Nancy-Gay timidly sought him out at York University, a few poems in hand (at the urging of her husband) he immediately saw the golden thread of lyrical creativity.

Under his tutelage and encouragement over five years, she composed and matured as a writer.

In his introduction to her first book three years ago, Layton wrote of her intelligence, sensitivity, compassion and warmth. "Readers would be wise to borrow her eyes for a while," he noted. "Twenty-

twenty vision, oculists tell me, is quite rare."

As a poetry buff myself, I agree enthusiastically with his assessment of the new collection, when he speaks of its economy and precision, and the widening of her concerns. "Her vision is still 20/20, but she's seeing a great many more things with her optics."

In other words, there's a maturity now, which puts the writer into the first ranks of our poets. And although her canvas is much wider and broader today, the practitioner of this demanding craft has not lost the intimacy and insight into personal experiences and emotions that touch us.

*Taking Off* is well named, for the book is divided into three parts. *Distant Journey*, *Human Journey*, and *Homeward Journey* — travels which



**Rothstein: 20/20 vision**

most of us take in the human situation.

Since her last book, Nancy-Gay and her husband have travelled widely in the Middle East, Europe and the Caribbean. All these are background for the *Human Journey*, in which she searches out well-hidden emotions that unite us all, from life's brutalities to the joys of parenthood.

*Homeward Journey* is

perhaps the most personal, for it traces her odyssey across Canada, and especially her discovery of the west.

And thereby hangs a tale in which that wonderful supportive and proud husband is deeply involved. She smiles about this.

Recognizing the quality and essential root-feeling of this new book, Longman sent their poet across the country to Vancouver, for interviews and book autographing.

"Max was going to go with me part way, but when he realized the demands of the itinerary, he stayed right along," she says. "I had five commitments a day for 10 days, in different cities. That meant 50 newspaper, television and radio appointments. We flew at night — and that's when I wrote and wrote. I realized, especially in the west, how

much of our strength as a people comes from the land."

Her poems (all, by the way, are short) about the Columbia ice fields, glaciers and mountains are among the most beautiful.

"In the United States, you move from city to city. In Canada we have still such vastness, so much that is undiscovered."

We talked about poetry and why, so often, children are denied the joy and richness of its expression, because of faulty teaching.

"Instead of saying, 'Here is a poem, dissect it, analyze it' we should say, 'Here is a book — enjoy it,'" says this woman, who took her master's degree in English and history.

Nancy-Gay Rothstein makes a remarkably good travelling companion, in her book *Taking Off*, and through the lives most of us lead.