

IDYLIC SETTING NURTURES HER VERSE

Reason behind the rhyme

*When I die build for me no memorial.
But if there be more when all has passed
it's in a book or half-opened drawer;
there someone will find my image
etched on yellowed paper,
perhaps an idea affirmed or truth yet to be learned;
for always, ideas are life.*

— *The Legacy from Through The Eyes Of
A Woman* by Nancy-Gay Rotstein

As lawyer, teacher, wife, mother and member, for an unusual second term, on the prestigious cabinet-appointed Canada Council Board of Directors, one would think Nancy-Gay Rotstein would find the exacting task of writing poetry tough to fit in.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Rotstein is first, foremost and always a poet. She was 11, when, on a train trip through the southern U.S., something happened to her.

"I remember for the first time seeing the incredible poverty of the blacks. I just picked up a pencil and the words started tumbling out. It was as if someone else was writing," she says now, at 44, as she glances out at the sloping lawns and graceful trees surrounding her Shanty Bay home, sequestered on a quiet stretch of Kempenfeldt's Bay, on Lake Simcoe.

A year later and unbeknownst to her, her grandmother submitted one of her poems to *Chatelaine*. She discovered it months later when her principal read her poem to the school over the P.A.

"I was so embarrassed," she recalls. "I wrote only for myself. For poetry to have passion, you have to write about yourself and that's so hard to share. It's so hard to let yourself be seen. The poetry's so much a part of me. It's an illogical passion."

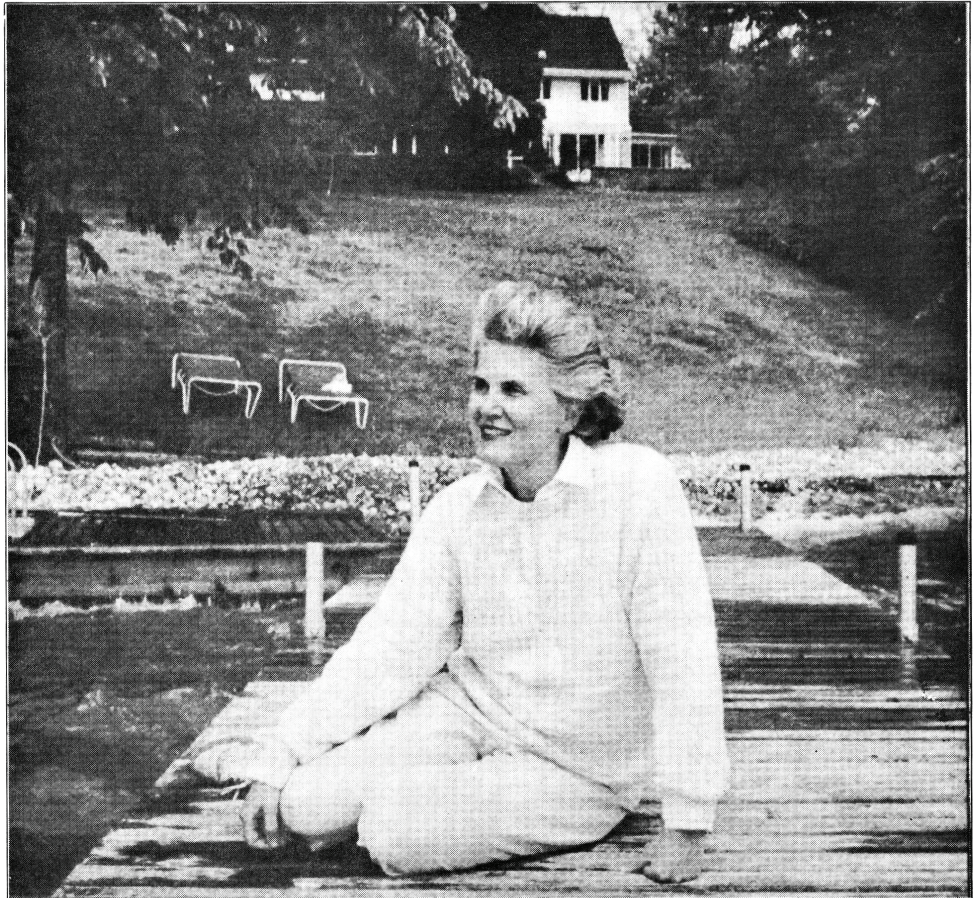
She secretly kept writing until Irving Layton, with whom she studied in the late '70s, pushed her to publish. "He said, 'You have to be exposed to critics. You can't grow unless you're published.'"

Since then her sometimes piercing, sometimes playful poems have been published in three volumes by four respected houses. Last year, *China: Shockwaves*, inspired by her travels in the People's Republic of China, was published by McClelland & Steward in Canada and by Dodd Mead & Co. in the U.S.

In 1980 Rotstein was one of the first outsiders to enter China on a rare literary visa, "probably because it was felt I would write favorable things."

Why, China? "It was inaccessible then," she answers instantly. "Closed. And I was curious." With two degrees in history, Rotstein brings an historical perspective to all her writing. When she entered law school five years ago, she did so "to add an extra vantage point to my view of the world and to my poetry."

Her China adventure was "a window in time. China is an explosion of images; staccato of bicycle belts; volumes of people; swirling dust everywhere." She was one of the first foreigners allowed in after the Chinese Revolution. "Maybe it was because Mao was a poet," she muses.



— sandy naiman, sun

Sandy
NAIMAN



SOLITUDE AND natural beauty inspire poet Nancy-Gay Rotstein, here enjoying a moment on the dock at her Shanty Bay home on Lake Simcoe.

the Rotstein household, but there are brand new trees.

This trade-off underscores a value system as refreshing as the sight of a book of modern American poetry lying open beside her 19-year-old daughter's bed. (Her mother remarks, "That should be modern Canadian poets.")

It's as refreshing as the working relationship Nancy-Gay has built with her 13-year-old daughter Tracy. "I share everything I write with Tracy. And if something doesn't work for Tracy, I throw it out."

And as refreshing as the pervasive Jewish themes that haunt her verse. However, her Judaism is anything but haunting. It's vibrant and living. All three Rotstein children, against all odds living in a community with no synagogue, celebrated their bar or bat mitzvahs at Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto.

She and her financier husband bought this once-crumbling, now-elegant country home "for the view of this uninterrupted landscape." Her poetry is inspired as she sits at a pristine desk looking out from her second-floor bedroom window, "where the trees and lake are forever changing."

As a Canada Council board member, she's not only promoted and encouraged emerging artists, she's been a major force behind federal legislation that ensures Canadian publishers be controlled by Canadians.

"My priority is my family. My writing is part of my family and I write a great deal about them." Yet her youthful embarrassment, her awkwardness at exposing her poetry, ergo herself, remain with her still.

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*I dance with demons, upon a jut of stone;
harnessed by furies, to twist in torment
and lured by ledgered taunts
until soul-forsaken, sightless, I collide with death.*
— *Bargain from China: Shockwaves*



CHINA REVISITED: Nancy-Gay Rotstein renews old friendships on 1987 return trip.