

Entertainment

A housewife wordsmith shakes poetry tradition

By Richard Garlick

If you're into stereotypes, you might have a tough time coming to terms with Toronto poet Nancy-Gay Rotstein.

Her well coifed hair and tweedy, suburban good looks don't correspond to any of the popular images of a poet. Her busy life as a lawyer's wife and mother of three young children doesn't suggest a single-minded devotion to writing.

And the fact that her writing career only began in earnest with the publication of her first book — *Through the Eyes of a Woman* — in 1975, when she was 31, could give one the false impression that her efforts lack maturity and needn't be taken seriously.

The fact is, Mrs. Rotstein should be taken seriously, not only because her poetry says something, but because she proves that poets are real people. In fact, it's something of an evangelical campaign of hers to demystify the role of the poet in society.

"I want to conquer the image of the poet as someone set aside from the rest of society," she said during a tour to promote her new book, *Taking Off*. "I consented to do the tour because I want people to go back to poetry."

As a wife and mother, the 2½-week tour — her first since becoming a published poet — is somewhat of a hardship: it's the longest time she has ever spent away from her children.

Her sense of family is one of the strong elements in her poetry, as illustrated in a piece called *Nana*, dedicated to her grandmother:

*Grey hairs frame
silkened face
carved with lines of loving.
A gown drapes
her perfect posture, regal
in that worn-green chair
heirloom from a past
I touch only through
eyes of milked vision.
Ageless hands
caress picture-memories
then clasp mine
meaningfully:
my love-link to the future.*



Rotstein not a stereotype.

Mrs. Rotstein received her first recognition as a poet at 12 when her grandmother sent one of her poems to *Chatelaine* magazine. When it was published, her school principal announced the fact over the school's public address system. From the look of "horror" in her classmates' eyes, she first learned that poets are not accepted as normal people.

The experience made her a "closet" poet. She continued to write, but strictly for herself until the day her husband discovered a cache of her poems.

Saw Layton

He encouraged her to see poet Irving Layton, who was teaching at York University in Toronto.

Layton praised the "intelligence, sensitivity, compassion and warmth" of her first book and advised readers to "borrow her . . . 20-20 vision." Apparently people took his advice: the book sold out in a matter of weeks, one of the few works of Canadian poetry to reach a second printing.

Of her new book, Layton says, "Her vision is still 20-20."

Many of her poems are what she calls

"literary snapshots" — glimpses of places she has visited, sketched in sparsely worded images:

*White-water thrushes
waves over volcanic
stone shore, spilling
over stark-scrubbed soil.*

*Square-cut Cretan homes
slash into Sitian's
slope, Pilion-white windows
wide-angled over sea.*

*Bent black-clad women
donkey-borne, squeeze
between white-walled dwellings
woven baskets carrying wheat,*

*their future
fastened to sides
of shaking
double-bladed axe.*

The key to Mrs. Rotstein's style is economy. "Everything in the poem, every word, every comma, must be working for you," she said. To achieve this stark simplicity can require as many as 50 revisions.

Her style masks the exhaustive research that goes into each poem in order to achieve "poetic realism."

"Before I travel anywhere, for example, I arm myself with all the information I can about the history and geography of the place," she said. Her methods are the legacy of an MA in history at University of Toronto, extension studies and Harvard and York, and her years as a high school teacher.

But despite the emphasis on academia, "my poems are always triggered by emotion."

Mrs. Rotstein has come a long way from the shy closet poet she used to be to the writer whose "inner thoughts can be picked up for \$3.95." She is new to the self-promotion game and much of it "goes against my grain." But she knows she has to do it "just to get someone to open your book."

The refreshing thing about her as a person and as a poet is that she manages to retain the childlike curiosity that must have prompted her to write in the first place.