

Excalibur profiles Miriam Waddington

York's magical poet fills verse with music

By TED MUMFORD

There is a woman on the seventh floor of the Ross building who writes magical poems. She is one of the top woman poets in Canada. Her name is Miriam Waddington.

This is Waddington's eleventh year with the York English department (last year she was on sabbatical as poet-in-residence at the University of Ottawa). Her name belongs to a long list of great Canadian writers who have been associated with York, including Irving Layton, Margaret Atwood, Dennis Lee, Michael Ondaatje, Eli Mandel, Mavor Moore, Frank Davey, Graeme Gibson and Desmond Maxwell.

Miriam Waddington (née Dworkin) was born in Winnipeg and raised there and in Ottawa. She started writing poetry at the age of ten, but did not pursue

writing professionally because, "In 1940 a woman couldn't get a job teaching English... neither could a Jew."

The alternative she picked was social work, gaining degrees from U. of T. and the Pennsylvania School of Social Work, and working as a case worker at hospitals and prisons in Montreal and Toronto.

During the 40's Waddington contributed to the Montreal poetry magazines (First Statement and Preview), which were to become "the germ of all that came after in Canadian poetry." Other writers involved with the Montreal poetry scene included Louis Dudek, A.M. Klein, Irving Layton, and John Sutherland, whose First Statement Press published Miriam's first book in 1945, Green World.

Seven more volumes of poetry, and many critical articles, short stories and book reviews have followed. Waddington has also edited books by and about A.M. Klein and John Sutherland. In the works is a new collection of poems, The Price of Gold, a book of criticism and a play.

Waddington points out that it hasn't been easy being a woman poet in Canada, "You have to be three times as good. You get nowhere unless you fit in with the masculine reviewer's ideology."

After teaching social work at McGill for three years, she moved

to Toronto, but was unable to land a job in her field. With two sons to support after a divorce, she decided to change careers by getting her MA in English from U. of T. and finally teaching at York.

Waddington writes in calm musical rhythms not unlike Yiddish, in which she is fluent. The lyricism in her writing has inspired two composers (Morris Surdin and Edwin Haines) to put her poems to music. In a project that was a first in Canada, her poems were paired with the work of 45 different photographers in the 1968 book, Call Them

Canadians.

Between teaching, writing, lectures and readings, Waddington has little spare time. She teaches three courses for the English department, but will likely not have any part in the budding creative writing programme.

"I don't believe in creative writing courses. I advise students to avoid them," she says.

Although her status as a critic, poet and teacher might indicate otherwise, Miriam Waddington is not the grand old lady of Canadian poetry—she's getting better every day.

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