

# U of A homecoming for writer-in-residence

Interview by Elaine Ostry

A few weeks ago, the glass wall of Leona Gom's office was plastered from the inside with newspapers, taped to the wall/window was a note saying: "Neurotic novelist at work."

Now, however, the writer-in-residence's office wall is decked with green curtains of a rather old-fashioned design. "The Building Services people must have found these in a storeroom somewhere," Gom says, laughing. "I'm glad, because it's just like a fishbowl in here."

For Gom, coming to the U of A this year is a trip down memory lane. She studied here from 1964-71, obtaining a Bachelor of Education and an M.A. in English.

Gom has fond memories of this campus. She grew up in an isolated community in the Peace River area. "I had a very primitive childhood," she says, "with no radio, no TV, no newspapers. When I came to Edmonton as a student... wow, it was very exciting."

"For the first two years, I was in a state of shell shock," Gom concentrated on her schoolwork, but, as she says, "when that's all you do, your life is somewhat impoverished."

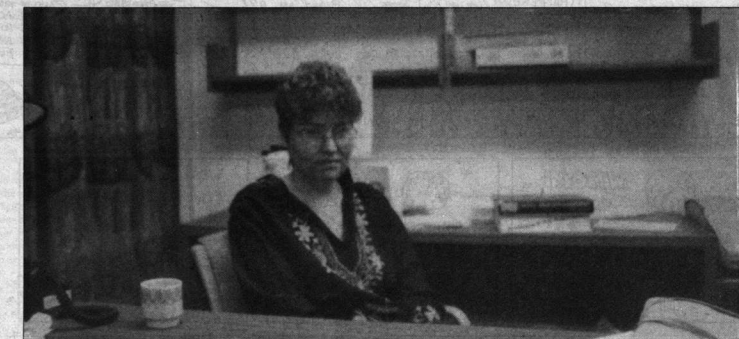
## We kept adopting these draft dodgers and various political refugees...it was quite romantic

But then Gom joined *The Gateway* writing as a news volunteer for three years. "I learned a lot — about writing, about people. My courses probably suffered, I spent so much time at *The Gateway* office." She also edited a literary magazine called *Inside* at this time.

Also cited as an important university memory is the creative writing course Gom took. "Up to then, I had read only nineteenth century works and Shakespeare.... I didn't know anything of twentieth century literature. It introduced me to the modern fiction style."

"The sixties were an 'exciting time' on campus. 'I wish I could do it again — and pay attention this time,' Gom says with a laugh. "I was sleepwalking through the first two years of university."

It was through *The Gateway* that Gom enlightened herself about the politics of the times. "I just encountered all these new ideas, all these crazy people — misfits — at



The writer-in-residence, Leona Gom.

Photo: Elaine Ostry

the paper. There were people of all political stripes there." Apparently, draft dodgers, upon arrival in Edmonton, were often referred to *The Gateway* office. "They'd drift in and one of us would just have to take them home. We kept adopting these draft dodgers and various political refugees...it was quite romantic."

During the sixties, there was a protest organization called Students for a Democratic University (SDU) comments Gom: "It consisted of a minority of students articulating ideas that a number of us probably would have agreed with, but we didn't have the background to understand them." The SDU protested the War Measures Act as well as the Vietnam War. At this time, says Gom, "I had to deal with things where there didn't seem to be a right answer."

"What is it like to return to the place of your student days? "You like to think you're still young, and these people in HUB Mall are your contemporaries," Gom says, smiling. "I have to remember I'm not a student anymore, but one of the old fogies."

Gom is enjoying her year so far as the writer-in-residence. This position does not entail the teaching of courses, which is a relief to Gom. She teaches in English at Kwantlen College in Surrey, B.C. "There I have a very heavy teaching load, which doesn't give me any time for writing at all," she states.

Her present position allows Gom to concentrate on her writing, although "one quarter of my job is dealing with the people coming in to talk to me about their own writing. A lot of people come from outside

the university itself."

Gom is an established poet. She started to write for publication in 1971, "a time when there was this enormous burgeoning of literary magazines." Gom's first poem was published in *The Canadian Forum* for two dollars. "It whetted my appetite," she says.

But, Gom sighs, "it's much harder to get published now. There are so many other good writers out there." Gom edited the literary magazine event for ten years. "I've seen how difficult it is for new writers to get published," she says. "It's heartbreaking as an editor to reject what should be encouraged, and rejection is so hard for people when they're starting to write."

Gom has written five books of poetry. *Land of the Peace* won the Canadian Author's Association Award for the best book of poetry in 1980. Gom recently published her first novel, *Housebroken*, which was "an entirely new thing. I was starting right as a beginner again."

"But I found it really fun to write. It was wonderful to be able to write a character (Susan) that was just a little mad. She was a student here at the U of A, which probably explains it," Gom grins.

Gom wrote the first draft of *Housebroken* very quickly — in two months. Says she: "I was writing about ten hours a day. I was afraid to stop. I thought if I stopped to think, I'd tell myself 'oh, who're you kidding, you're just a poet.'" It took her two years, however, to revise the work for publication. "I'm sorry I hadn't planned it better," she says, "but on

the other hand, it allowed for spontaneity."

Now Gom is working on her second novel. "It's hobbling along. I still feel I should be doing more with it," she says. Half of it is set in Edmonton, and the main character is a student at the U of A. Gom is writing from her own experience, "yet finding it hard to remember that that was 20 years ago." Things have changed, she says. For one thing, "Edmonton doesn't have winters anymore. What am I going to do with all the horrible winter scenes?"

Writing from one's own experience, however, can be "limiting," Gom says. "Some of the fun of fiction comes from writing about people wildly different from you."

Gom cites Margaret Laurence as a literary figure who influenced her. She wrote her M.A. thesis on Laurence, under the supervision of Rudy Wiebe. Says Gom: "It was perhaps the first one done in the country. Canadian writing was not really popular then. But it excited me to death — for the first time I was reading something set in Canada, by someone born here."

"(Margaret Laurence) made me see it was possible to write about growing up on a farm, and to think that other people would want to read about that."

Writing a novel has obviously been an involving process for Gom, but, as she says, "once it's published, it becomes less yours." She is interested in criticism of her work, although negative comments "still hurt. It's still something generated from your heart and soul."

## Chalk Circle on the circuit

By Tracy Rowan

Chalk Circle, one of many innovative recording artists from the progressive Duke Street record label, finishes up their brief prairies tour of mostly universities and colleges here at Dinwoodie lounge on Saturday night.

Since the release of their first full length LP, *The Mending Wall* in 1987, the quartet has had a hectic touring schedule, playing a variety of venues from St. John's to Victoria. Reaction so far has been very favourable, especially on the college circuit.

"The Mending Wall was the right kind of step for us" relates drummer Derrick Murphy. The band seems intent on not falling prey to the "overnight success" story, preferring rather to take things one step at a time. Part of this strategy has included successful openings for irrepressible Crowded House across Canada last summer and a number of Maritimes dates with Rush in the fall.

"The Rush shows were a good challenge for us. I think we won over some new fans who otherwise might not have given us a second look" offers Murphy.

Their most recent video, *N.I.M.B.Y.* (Not In My Back Yard), was actually filmed during the Rush tour, enroute from Halifax to Moncton between shows. Unfortunately for the musicians, most of it was shot at the ungodly hour of 7 a.m., but the end result proved worthwhile. According to Murphy,

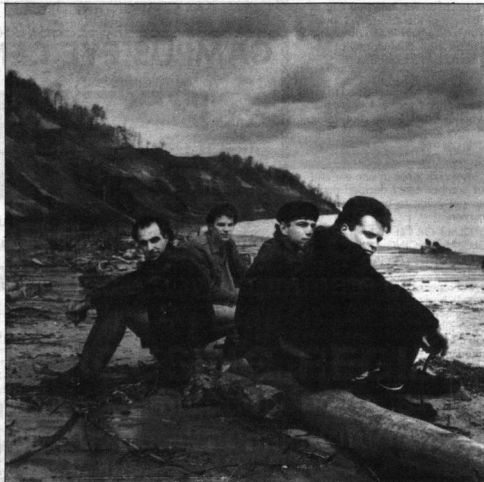
the backdrop of the Maritimes (the coast, the factory etc.) really fit the mood of the song, which deals with environmental concerns and specifically refers to the N.I.M.B.Y. slogan used by protestors of the Love Canal incident in Niagara Falls, N.Y.

The band's last live performance before this Western swing was a packed Dec. 22 show at Le Spectrum in Montreal. This was filmed by MuchMusic for a Big Ticket special which will air on that network in late February. Although the experience was "weird" in the sense that the film crew's presence affected the audience, it went over "better than we expected," said Murphy.

After this tour, Chalk Circle heads back to Toronto to rehearse and work on some new material for an early summer recording session. "We're in the process of getting the pieces together," Murphy said. "There's no overall picture yet but we'll hopefully have about 25 songs to choose from."

Murphy and bandmates Brad Hopkins (bass), Tad Winklarz (keyboards, saxophone) and Chris Tait (guitars, lead vocals) are hoping for an American release with this upcoming project, but stress that it's important to do it right the first time and not blow "what might be the only chance we get." "Longevity is the key factor here," they add.

Opening for Chalk Circle at Dinwoodie Saturday night are local bands the Groovy Resources and This Fear.



Chalk Circle looking cool by the Pacific

Photo: Deborah Samuels