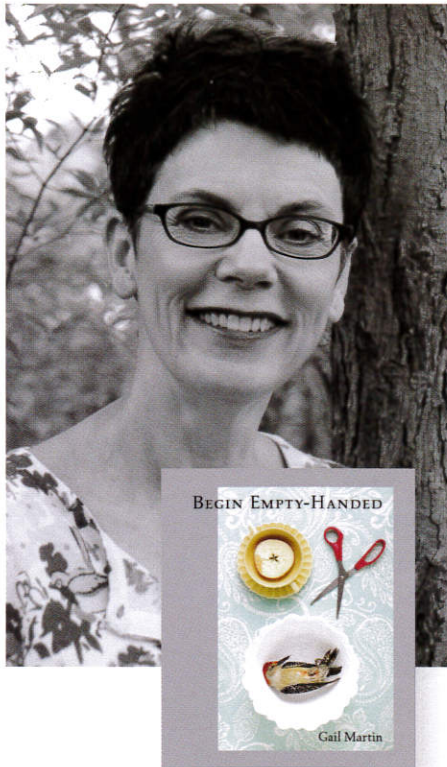


The Poetic Psychotherapist

Gail Martin's new collection wins Perugia Prize

BY MARGARET DERITTER



Martin will read from her new book at 6:30 p.m. Oct. 3 at the Portage District Library. She'll also read with Sean Thomas Dougherty at 7 p.m. Oct. 12 at the Kalamazoo Book Arts Center.

Since her first collection was published 10 years ago, Kalamazoo poet Gail Martin has been working as a licensed psychotherapist. That professional experience informs the work in her new book, *Begin Empty-Handed*.

The new collection, to be released Sept. 15, won the Perugia Press Poetry Prize, competing against more than 500 entries by other women poets. While many of the poems in the book explore personal and family concerns, some deal directly with the stories of grief and loss that Martin hears on the job. In "The Therapist Watches Birds," for example, the narrator writes of her casual interest in birds compared to the weight of responsibility she feels for her clients. The poem includes these lines:

*Today the nuthatches are in freefall,
everything pitched to survival. And while
this is also true for some people, mostly now,
I do not see them in my office. And mostly
that is a relief.*

What I do is dream about them.

*The man who cut his hard cherry trees to pay
his hospital bills—a man whose father, drunk,
had lined them up in pajamas for Russian roulette,*

*whose mother hung him up on a hook in the barn
for two days to calm down...*

"It's amazing what people walk around with and how resilient they are," says Martin. "I want to bear witness to that and be present to that, but sometimes I just want to flee."

In Martin's poem "First Session," the narrator confesses to wandering off into her own thoughts as a new client talks of her daughter's death. Martin says a friend remarked to her about that poem, "I appreciate how you're not afraid to let yourself look bad." But Martin says she thought, "Really? I think I just look human."

"I think it is so relieving for people to know that we all struggle," she says. "When we're honest, that really helps other people."

Martin became a therapist at age 51, after raising three daughters with her husband, George. She's a Kalamazoo College graduate who returned to school in her late 40s, earning a Master of Social Work degree from Western Michigan University in 2003.

As a therapist, she notices how we all create our own narratives about our

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Gail Martin (continued from page 36)

experience, our own myths. "Part of the job of a therapist," she says, "is to gently push on that and ask, 'Well, is that really true? How might your life look different if you created a different narrative?'"

Similarly, in her poetry, Martin aims to acknowledge and explore life's complexity — its beauty and sorrow, its joys and losses. Martin's first book of poetry, *The Hourglass Heart*, dealt primarily with a daughter's struggles with depression. Her new book ranges more widely in its subject matter, but it is clearly the work of a woman who knows how to hold happiness and gratitude in one hand, pain and disappointment in the other.

"I'm not interested in writing poems that are not connected to the heart," says Martin, now 61. "I like the voice to be complicated, with a little bitchiness, a little edginess, some heartbreak.

"I hope this collection is an exploration of both the great abundance we have just walking through our ordinary days and the awareness we have as human beings that we're all going to lose it, that it's all going to be taken away, that it's all transient." 📍

Holly Hughes (continued from page 37)

old and this is kind of a return to the central role that animals have played in our life as a species (throughout) most of civilization."

Despite that academic-sounding analysis, *The Dog and Pony Show* is not an academic piece, she says. "It's comic, it's a rant, it's a satire, it's poetic."

Hughes' performance is just one of the many cutting-edge programs planned for the Festival Playhouse's 50th anniversary, which kicked off in May. The season will also include a revival of one of the first Festival Playhouse productions, *The Firebugs* by Max Frisch, as well as two famous but seldom-performed modern dramas, August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* and Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. In addition, two of the original actors of the Playhouse's 1958 and 1963 presentations of *Waiting for Godot* will return this year for *An Evening of Kalamazoo College Theatre Alumni Scenes* during the college's homecoming celebrations. 📍

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