

On the Town

A poet and a teacher

Margaret Hasse brings two new books to press, one her own poetry and the other an anthology of her writers group's



Poet Margaret Hasse at home in Macalester-Groveland. PHOTO BY BRAD STAUFFER

By JAMES MCKENZIE

It has been a busy autumn for Margaret Hasse. The Macalester-Groveland writer will celebrate the publication of her fifth collection of poetry, *Between Us*, with a public reception and reading at 7 p.m. Thursday, November 17, at Open Book, 1011 Washington Ave. S. in Minneapolis. She and the students in her writers group will then launch their new chapbook, *A Little Book of Abundance*, with a reading at 7 p.m. Thursday, December 1, at ArtStart, 1459 St. Clair Ave. in St. Paul.

Hasse's writers group calls itself Ginger, after the spice that flavors the tea, cookies and other treats members bring to their biweekly meetings at ArtStart. The group had its origins in a poetry class Hasse taught at Minneapolis' Loft Literary Center in 2009.

"We kidnapped her," Highland Park poet Joan Johnson said. The class had come to an end, but most of its members were willing to pay to see it continue, she explained. For Johnson, the class was a return to an old love after a career in teaching, real estate and raising a family. "I've always loved words," she said. Her goal was never publication, but like two other members of the group who have published chapbooks, she has her own coming out in early 2017.

Johnson's new chapbook, *An Alphabet of Aging*, has 26 poems, one for each letter in the alphabet. They all follow an American style of haiku known as the cinquain, five-line poems that grew out of an exercise

Hasse assigned the writers group. Johnson described her cinquains as "meditations, finding grace in the moment at hand." She was clearly thrilled at their publication and at the publication of *A Little Book of Abundance*.

"Ginger brought focus back into my life," said member Don Brunquell, a psychologist and recently retired director of the Office of Ethics at Children's Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota. "It's not a social group," he added, but a regular workshop of poetry exercises and readings, meetings with outside writers, and the requisite production of a chapbook by the end of what Brunquell called "the semester."

Brunquell has written poetry all his life, and he finds the workshops "a combination of challenge and support.

Nobody is mean or ruthless," he added, and the poetry they share has helped him in his professional career and brought "balance, joy and reflection that the everyday hospital world doesn't allow."

Hasse's long-time friend and collaborator, Carol Sitrine, founder and director of ArtStart, compared the atmosphere at a Ginger meeting, in the minutes before Hasse shows up, to a rehearsal or a symphony tuning up before a concert. "They have some kind of a ritual," said Sitrine, who is a French

horn player in the St. Paul Civic Symphony. "Margaret gives the downbeat."

Hasse has been writing poetry all her life. She credits her mother, a teacher, for helping her discover early on that "you have a voice inside you," she said. Her first poetry collection, *Stars Above, Stars Below*, contains a poem about dandelions that she wrote in 1955 at the age of 5. "I dictated it to my mother," she said. "It became more powerful seeing it in her hand."

Readers of Hasse's books will find in *Between Us* familiar subjects and themes that made two of her previous poetry collections finalists for a Minnesota Book Award and one of them the winner of a 2009 award from the Midwest Independent Publishers Association.

Joyce Sutphen, Minnesota's poet laureate, describes *Between Us* as "a moving blend of eclogue and elegy, sweeping from the island of Patmos to a cemetery in South Dakota."

Hasse is just as proud of her poem that is anonymously stamped in a public sidewalk near her home, her contributions to the annual *St. Paul Almanac*, and the poems that she has had read aloud by Garrison Keillor on his "Writer's Almanac" program on National Public Radio.

However, her artistic vision is broader

than that. Poetry, she said, is not memoir: What occurs in a poem is not necessarily something that has happened to the poet. "But it's the job of the poet and the reader to make it true," she said.

Between Us has references that will resonate with local readers, including ice houses, ice-out and Lake Nokomis. "Missing" is a poem about Jacob Wetterling that she began writing years ago after finding her Jacob's Hope button in a drawer. She had to revise the manuscript after it went to press when the killer subsequently confessed and revealed the location of Jacob's body in a shallow grave in central Minnesota.

Hasse and her husband have two sons, both African-American, now adults and graduates of J.J. Hill Elementary School where Philando Castile was on staff. Her poem "Come Home, Our Sons," refers to Castile's killing last summer at the hands of a policeman in Falcon Heights. It focuses on both the personal and cultural impact of the killing. The poem was written "for Philando Castile," it reads, and "for the policeman (whose) voice broke like a frightened child."

"You feel things as you grow older that you didn't feel before," Hasse said of her concern for both Castile and the policeman who shot him. "I am invaluablely enlarged."

Though Hasse is busy these days with what she calls "the whoosh" of promotion, with two new books appearing at once, she remains focused on her poetry. "My cupboard is bare now," she said, "and I'm getting back to writing."

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