

# Self-publishing debut, *Reconciliation*, takes precise aim at well-visited theme of crumbling relationships

## **Reconciliation**

Dorothy Speak, \$18

PAUL GESSELL

No one writes about disintegrating marriages and ungrateful children like Ottawa's Dorothy Speak.

The author of two much-praised short story collections and the novel *The Wife Tree* has explored those themes in her previous writing. Now, she takes even more precise aim at these situations in her debut attempt at self-publishing, a collection of short fiction called *Reconciliation*.

Don't be alarmed by the "self-published" part. It's all the rage. And, besides, *Reconciliation* is driven by talent, not vanity. Indeed, this is a well-crafted addition to CanLit, although the plot lines are frightfully similar in some of these intense, probing stories of crumbling relationships.

Collectively, these stories are an insightful commentary on the precarious state of the nuclear family in Western society. Consider the title story *Reconciliation*: A wife gets bored, finds a new younger lover and leaves without warning.

Of course, there is pain all around. But pain subsides, and the kids, with their own strong instincts for self-preservation, find ways to cope.

Speak does not seem to celebrate or lament this collapse of the traditional nuclear family. Instead, she seeks a silver lining, as her various protagonists rise from the wreckage of the family home to pursue a new life offering more, often solitary, fulfillment.

The *Citizen* interviewed Speak by email about her new collection. What follows is an edited transcript of that conversation.

### **Why did you decide to self-publish *Reconciliation*?**

With the current disarray in the industry, it seems that fewer publishers are willing to take a risk with short stories, which generally are not profitable. At the same time, readership for short stories, though small, is dedicated. I believe in the genre and had no hesitation in undertaking publication myself. Print-on-demand options and the e-book make self-publication more viable for individual writers. I am lucky that followers of my three previous books have been looking forward to these new stories.

**Many of these stories are about disintegrating marriages and thankless children. We have seen these themes in your previous books. Do you feel the traditional nuclear family of mom, dad and kids just does not work any more?**

I think that my view of marriage corresponds with current statistics and surveys, which tell us that roughly 50 per cent of marriages end in divorce, and that, of those remaining, many are unhappy. It seems that choosing a partner for life, especially when we are young, is a challenge. The moment of separation always seems to catch one party by surprise. This of course makes for good drama and conflict in a story. With respect to children, because of their dependent state, they are self-focused and incapable of seeing their parents as human beings with desires and vulnerabilities. I think that women — and women writers — talk about these issues because we are the custodians of the family and of relationships in general.

**Do you think of yourself as an optimist or a pessimist? Many of your characters sadly experience broken relationships**



LYNN BALL/OTTAWA CITIZEN

**Dorothy Speak says fewer publishers are willing to take a risk with short stories.**

**but nevertheless seem to emerge stronger and happier.**

I think of myself as a realist. The themes of loss and betrayal in relationships figure large in my work because they seem to me to be seminal and inescapable. At the same time, I think human beings have an amazing capacity for healing, enlightenment and recovery following a loss.

**What does the work "reconciliation" mean to you and why did you choose it as a title?**

The simple answer to this question is that it was the story title from the collection that best suited the cover photograph. On a deeper level, I see reconciliation with or acceptance of the events in one's life, and more importantly, with one's own shortcomings as a human being as central to all of the stories in this book.

**Who are the authors you most admire and have influenced your own writing?**

I cut my writing teeth on the stories of Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant and Elizabeth Spencer. They are probably still my biggest influences, though I don't reread them much anymore. But I also admire the short stories of John Updike, Dorothy Allison, Andre Dubus, Ethan Canin, Lorrie Moore, Ellen Gilchrist and many others. Some of the best short story practitioners today are American.

*Reconciliation* is available at Collected Works on Wellington Street and at Singing Pebble Books on Main Street. It is also available online at Chapters and Amazon.