

LEISURE & ARTS

Poet Faces Demons and Squabbling Publishers

By AMY GAMERMAN

Ann Arbor, Mich.

"If you're going to call a demon, you have to call it by the right name," says Thyllias Moss.

She ought to know. Calling up demons—and kinder spirits—is something this 40-year-old poet does for a living. Her latest book of poems, "Small Congregations" (Ecco Press, 158 pages, \$22.95) is full of them: from her childhood tormentor "Blondell who stole/my innocence and couldn't even use it in her gang," to a nameless African ancestor traveling the "Water Road" to slavery.

Recently, Ms. Moss's poetry raised a bunch of unwitting demons: lawyers. "Small Congregations," a book with sales under 1,000 according to its publisher, touched off the closest thing to poetry world has to a slugfest. Ms. Moss's previous publisher, Persea Books, objected to Ecco's inclusion—without its permission—of three poems that incorporate chunks of verse from poems first published by Persea. It also took issue with Ecco's listing of other poems published by Persea (which Ecco did have permission to reprint) on the book's acknowledgments page, and not on the copyright page.

For these outrages, Persea demanded the recall of "Small Congregations" and sued Ecco in federal court for damages. After dragging on for months, the case was recently settled out of court.

The poet behind the ruckus is a tiny black woman with a silvery voice and a fondness for pink ballet slippers. She chooses not to discuss her book's troubled legal history.

"I'm a writer," she says, in the living room of her home here, where she teaches English at the University of Michigan. "I limit myself to what I know."

What she knows radiates from "Small Congregations," in poems that read like fragments of an extraordinary

life story: a life saved by poetry.

Ms. Moss was born in Cleveland in 1954, the only child of a tire recapper and a maid who had joined the great migration from the South. The family lived in the attic of a house owned by an older Jewish couple named Arnstein.

Ms. Moss's early childhood was idyllic. Her mother played elaborate games with her. Her father, who was part Cherokee, took her for walks, bought her books, and talked to her about the soul. Her name was his creation: "He decided I needed a name that hadn't existed before." Mrs. Arnstein looked after Thyllias when her mother went to work, and included her in celebrations of the Jewish holidays. And Ms. Moss still has the working toy stove that Mr. Arnstein made her, which she evokes in her poem "Toy Stove."

"I feel as if I was born into a household of privilege, even though I was not. Many writers come from more educated backgrounds," she says. "I had a little oasis of perfection in the middle of horrors."

The horrors began when the Arnsteins sold the house to a new family. A daughter, Blondell, became Ms. Moss's babysitter and tormentor. The poet climbs on a chair to retrieve an old photo album, and turns to a picture of her fifth birthday party. It's hard to believe that this blond-faced girl in a blue party dress—is the one who orchestrated sadistic games and punishments, once dragging Thyllias's nails over another girl's face. As she writes in one poem, "Blondell, who engraved Bridgett's face with my nails, looks cherubic in photos from my five-candle party."

Blondell was just one of the terrors that now seemed to wait for Thyllias when she left the safe confines of her home. As she walked to the library one day, she saw a truck crush a boy on his bicycle. Another time, she watched a boy jumping on an empty crate unknowingly hammer a nail into the head of another boy inside. When her friend Olivia leapt to her death from a window rather than

be raped, Thyllias saw it happen.

"I always seemed to be present," she says, delivering this catalog of horrors in a soft, even voice. "I seemed to attract horrible things."

She never talked about what she saw. Instead, she retreated to the haven of her home, where in her neat script she wrote stories and poems that never hinted at the disturbing world outside.

When she was nine, her family moved. But silence had become a habit by then. When the violin lessons that had begun in her old school stopped, she said nothing—despite her secret dream of becoming a concert violinist.

When a bully entered wrong answers in her notebooks, she said nothing—permitting her teacher to think her unintelligent. As a shy adolescent with a newly sprouted 32D bosom, she began attracting older boys "who were mean verbally and strong physically." She felt powerless to tell them to get lost: "I would always be in a situation where I needed to act, and I couldn't. I was paralyzed."

When she was 16, a newly discharged Air Force serviceman spotted her one Sunday at a service in a storefront church. The two married when she was 19. Even though the marriage has been a success, with two sons and a 21st anniversary this July, Ms. Moss says she made a mistake.

"It was wrong to get married when I could not tell this man, or any man, 'I want to do this,'" she says. "I have been allowed to transform in the marriage."

That transformation began when Ms. Moss enrolled in Oberlin College, after an unhappy two-year stint at Syracuse University. She commuted 45 miles to campus every day, and learned to make comments in class by writing them down first. She

graduated first in her class, and won the Academy of American Poets College Prize. But her poems were bleak, reflecting "a devastated world."

That changed when Ms. Moss met the poet Charles Simic at the University of New Hampshire's graduate writing program. He assigned her to write a critical study of Sylvia Plath—a poet she admired. It was a breakthrough: "I concluded that ultimately, this poetry was unsatisfactory because it denied the existence of joy."

A period that she describes as her "recovery" followed. She began to speak up for herself. And she began to speak—through poetry—about her childhood; the Arnsteins, her parents, Blondell, Olivia, the boy on the bike. She came to see it as her responsibility to account for her experiences in a way she never could as a child: "One must always be aware, to notice—even though the cost of noticing is to become responsible," she says.

That gift of seeing—and that sense of responsibility—have produced poems that look beyond the boundaries of race and gender: "The writer in me can look as far as an African-American woman and stop," she says. "Often that writer looks through the African-American woman. Race is a layer of being, but not a culmination."

In her poem "Water Road," Ms. Moss looks through layers of time to capture the voice of a slave ship's "cargo": "I smell too much us," the speaker says. "And am close as love on two sides of me/but feel none." In an even more powerful act of imagination, the voice in "The Lynching" belongs to a Klansman's daughter: "My father/baptizes by fire same as Jesus will,/Becomes a holy ghost when he dons his sheet, a clerical collar."

Although they testify to much that is terrible and unjust, the poems reject rage. "Anger becomes limiting, restricting. You can't see through it," she says. "While anger is there, look at that, too. But after a while, you have to look at something else."

In "Nigger for the First Time," Ms. Moss takes a word that is drenched in anger and turns it into "a musical instrument." One stanza reads:

Hearing it, I became aware of all the reverences, the beats of full lambs saying it too. And my mother's feet anointed with that word, resting on the lavender-cellophane of Easter baskets for which she'd dipped pears in chocolate.

"If you can divorce the word from all the associations and just hear it, there is prettiness," Ms. Moss says now. "The power of a massive river of brown water. There is a majesty in that word at that moment, separate from meaning."

Ms. Moss sees such poems as the truest form of recovery. "The word itself is a victim," she says. "This is therapy for the word."

Why Washington's Stalled

By TIMOTHY J. PENNY

In his very topical "Demoscerosis" (Times Books, 260 pages, \$22), Jonathan Rauch describes how special-interest groups thwart all reform efforts by demanding ever more from the federal government in programs and policies that clog government channels.

It's a political disease with a wide patient base. Consider the 1994 congressional agenda. Once again the nation's political leaders (with strong backing from a myriad of interest groups) are promising that the federal government can do even more though shackled by a \$235 billion deficit. Our legislative agenda includes health care and welfare reform, an expensive new crime package, a Goals 2000 education initiative and an innovative re-employment program.

Obviously, we cannot finance all of these proposals without making cuts in other areas. But because of descrocrosis, the cuts will be resisted and the new programs won't achieve much.

"One of the main goals of this book," writes Mr. Rauch, "is to refocus attention away from the quantity of motion in Wash-

Bookshelf

"Demoscerosis" By Jonathan Rauch

ington and toward the effectiveness of results. The central issue is not 'Why does Washington get so little done?' It is 'Why has Washington's activity become so ineffective at solving problems?'

That reality was on display recently as the Congress first enacted my amendment to implement President Clinton's proposed 10% cut in the federal work force (the resulting budget savings were eyed by many legislators as a way to finance the president's crime package). But under pressure from the military veterans' lobby, Congress voted for a bill to exempt the huge Department of Veteran's Affairs from the personnel reduction.

In spite of all the talk about new priorities, Americans are going to see new programs underfunded while special interests successfully protect existing programs. Much of Mr. Rauch's book explores this paradox of American democracy: As politicians respond to voter demands for new programs, many of these same voters become increasingly cynical about the government's ability to do anything right.

Partly the problem is that politicians will never agree, it seems, on the best treatment for descrocrosis. We Democrats are as good at dispensing snake oil as the Republicans. We seem hopelessly attached to old programs, though as Mr. Rauch's telling comparison with the private sector reminds us, Ford doesn't keep

producing all the old models it ever designed. We fiercely defend entitlement programs like veterans' benefits, Social Security and Medicare—even though they constitute 50% of the budget and much of the benefits go to wealthy senior citizens who do not need hefty government subsidies. My party insists that we can have it all by simply taxing the rich and eliminating Pentagon waste. Well, with the Clinton budget we did just that and the deficit remains and will get worse as we approach the turn of the century.

Why do both political parties avoid the truth on the budget? Because interest groups too often reward us. These organizations provide the money, energy and volunteers for political campaigns. Standing up to these groups requires considerable courage. As former Sen. Henry Ashurst of Arizona once said, "When I have to choose between the people and the special interests, I always stick to the special interests. They remember. The people forget."

Still, our own recent history shows that a strong president can often make us put aside our most selfish interests. In my 12 years in Congress, I have watched as presidents have set an agenda and mobilized the Congress and the nation in pursuit of shared goals. Ronald Reagan, for instance, eliminated or consolidated many local government grant programs and provided leadership on controversial tax, immigration and welfare-reform legislation. And President Clinton pushed the North American Free Trade Agreement through a reluctant Congress. Earlier, a bipartisan effort helped salvage the Social Security system by gradually raising the retirement age from 65 to 67 despite limber protests from senior citizens' lobbies.

On the closing page of his book, Mr. Rauch rhetorically asks, "Who will repudiate the politics of blame and tell the people the truth?" He knows that there are no easy answers and that in today's political environment the truth is not always rewarded. Case in point: Texas Rep. Craig Washington recently suffered defeat in the state's primary election in part for having the audacity to suggest that perhaps Texas projects (like the B-2 bomber, the supercollider and the space station) had something to do with the federal deficit.

Even so, I think the voters who in 1992 sent 110 new legislators to Washington are wanting to see less partisan bickering and more cooperation on the important issues that face our country. Mr. Rauch closes his book with a quote from President Clinton: "I have to say our government has been just great at building programs. The time has come to show the American people that... we can not only start things, but we can actually stop things." As Mr. Rauch notes, dryly, "That job remains ahead of us, in its entirety."

Rep. Penny, a Democrat from Minnesota, is quitting Congress at the end of this term.

Spike Lee's Memories of a Simpler Brooklyn

By JULIE SALAMON

"Crooklyn," Spike Lee's new film about growing up in Brooklyn 20 years ago, is filled with evocative fragments of family life and street life. At times it seems like unfiltered memory, the vibrant exaggerations of a child's recollection.

For a very long time Mr. Lee (who wrote the screenplay with his sister and brother, Joie Susannah Lee and Cinque Lee) simply moves from vignette to vignette, laying out the chaos and fun and strain of living in a family with five children and not enough cash. His fondness for that family as well as the movie's time and place—which parallel the time and place of his own upbringing—are evident throughout the film.

The family is black and middle-class (in values and standard of living if not actual income). Their home is a spacious brownstone on a nice street in what is clearly a more innocent time. A sign on the street warns: "A cleaner block is up to you." The big crimes among the neighborhood kids are shoplifting ice cream bars at the local grocery store and tossing garbage on the stoop of the local oddball. There are no drug dealers or users except for a couple of guys who sit on a stoop sniffing glue from paper bags. It's peacefully exciting. A 10-year-old can gaze at the transvestite dancing in the aisles at the corner store, for example.

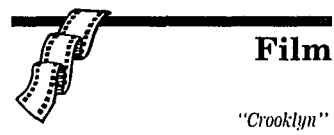
The mother (Alfre Woodard) is a strong woman, a school teacher, constantly haranguing her kids about their behavior, like a sitcom mom. She runs after them screaming, "I will slap the black off you" and "This ain't no plantation." (Their crimes are petty—watching "The Partridge Family" and Knicks games instead of doing their homework, not cleaning up.) The father (Delroy Lindo) is hapless and sympathetic, a dreamy musician who slips the children candy when Mom isn't looking and drifts around the house searching for a quiet corner.

They rent the top floor to a Vietnam veteran with a "nervous condition." Next door there's a "weirdo" with a houseful of

dogs, thick glasses and a hatred of the neighborhood kids who torment him with taunts and banana peels. Mr. Lee, always good with atmospherics, presents a fully comprehensible vision of life on that street and in that brownstone as it must have seemed to a child growing up there.

It's all very poignant and amusing but then starts to seem jokey and precious as you wait for an adult sensibility to start filtering these bits of memory and giving them some structure. The film feels in danger of turning into nothing more than an accomplished home movie.

Who is the movie about? The children?



Film

"Crooklyn"

The parents? Does this collection of warm-hearted scenes ever get pulled together?

I think it does. Eventually Mr. Lee stops trying to give a panoptic view of black family life and starts focusing on the individuals. Halfway through the movie he finally clues us in to the movie's point of view and lets us know that we are seeing this world from the perspective of 10-year-old Troy, the only daughter among the five children. She's played by Zeida Harris, most recognizable from her appearances on "Sesame Street." The young Ms. Harris, no cutesy child actor, has a nice straightforwardness.

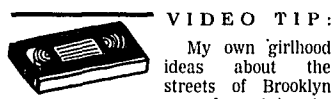
Mr. Lee has had structural problems in other films. It may be part of the burden he feels he carries as the country's most prominent black filmmaker. He's always juggling a lot—social responsibility as well as drama—often, it seems, without much external guidance. Yet there's so much artistry in what he does—and tries to do—that the movies are almost always interesting to watch, even a mess like "Mo' Beter Blues."

If anything, his films suffer from trying to do too much. "Crooklyn" has this problem, too, but technically. In one segment of

the movie, the little girl Troy is sent down South to spend the summer with well-to-do suburban relatives. Mr. Lee decided to show how strange this world seemed to an urban visitor by shooting these scenes with an anamorphic lens, which distorts the image to make everyone look squeezed together, like cartoon characters. To many viewers, it may seem as if something happened to the projector.

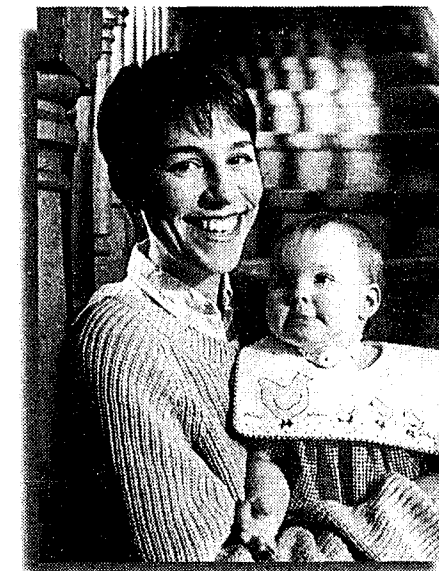
Whatever the failings of "Crooklyn," it isn't a mess—it's too moving to be dismissed like that. Once Troy emerges as the carrier of the film's memories, they become substantially clearer. We start to see Carolyn, Troy's mother, not as a harridan but as Troy starts to see her—a woman fraying under the pressures put on her by her family and by herself. She has high aspirations for her family but she's married to a musician with big aspirations, too. He doesn't want to work as a hired hand but to play his own compositions, yet there isn't enough money to pay the electricity bills.

Ms. Woodard is a powerhouse as Carolyn, finding every nuance—tough and tender—in this overwhelmed and overwhelming presence. Even before Mr. Lee starts pulling it all together she's a unifying force. You sense her presence even when she's not there, the way her children must have. Mr. Lindo is a good match for her as the children's father, Woody. He projects a gentleness that's especially surprising—and endearing—in a big man. He makes you see why Woody's children would adore him, even if he didn't load their lemonade with sugar and slip candy under their pillows at night.



VIDEO TIP

My own girlhood ideas about the streets of Brooklyn were formed by the Betty Smith novel "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn," about a smart girl who overcomes the hardships of turn-of-the-century tenement life. Elia Kazan made his Hollywood directing debut in 1945 with a very strong adaptation of the book.



Delaney Sanderclock, patient, and her mom, Angela

“Home health care brought our baby home. Our family is together.

The Fruits of Competition Ripen in Ontario

By EVE M. KAHN

Toronto

There's a fierce streak of insecurity among Canadian architects. One told me he considered the entire architectural scene in Toronto a "Petri dish of New York City wannabes." Another boasted that Toronto possesses no less than "the best second-rate architecture in the world." A third complained that just one architect of Canadian background can be considered a genuine celebrity: Frank Gehry, born in Toronto. In his native land, so far, Mr. Gehry has designed only the interiors of an advertising agency's offices.

But unconstrained by any star system, Canadian architecture seems to be flourishing. In the past year, in the Toronto area alone, an urban park and a provincial city hall have come from noncelebrities who won architectural competitions. Few public spaces of this caliber have been built in the U.S. in the past 20 years.

The park, in downtown Toronto, is a half-acre glide between battered 19th-century brick buildings and a moribund construction site. The architect, Baird/Sampson, and landscape architect, Milus Boltenberghe Topps Watchorn, won a 1990 contest with a proposal to give the park three rough-edged stripes: a forest along the construction site with serpentine paths; a slash-topped greenhouse beside the 19th-century walls; and a formal semi-circular lawn.

A 57-story tower called Bay Adelaide Centre was supposed to rise on the construction site. The real-estate market collapsed after the developers agreed to fund

the \$5.4 million open space, known as Bay Adelaide Park; construction of the tower stopped with the elevator core, an 80-foot-tall hunk of concrete that looms beside the lush park. Can you envision a developer fearing the ire of, say, the City of New York enough to finish off promised public amenities even when a project is dying?

It's equally difficult to picture an American community constructing a civic heart anything like the one in Kitchener, an in-

dustrial town of 170,000 an hour southwest of Toronto. It needed a new city hall because in 1973 it tore down its 1925 beaux-arts pile to make way for a mall. The mall developer kindly leased rooms to the government in a brown-brick office tower with Tootsie Roll columns and no assembly space. Citizen nostalgia soon welled up, predictably, for the old city hall's dignified proportions and lawns for gathering.

Kitchener's new city hall, designed by a young Toronto firm called Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg for a 1989 competition, is horseshoe-shaped around a black-granite plaza and an ice-skating rink. A 10-story silver-aluminum office building rises at one crook of the horseshoe; at the other, a three-story matte-white-aluminum cube with a wavy roof holds the council chamber. In between, Red sandstone covers a three-story cylinder containing a public atrium with a skylight for a ceiling and paneling of warm oak.

Two council votes nearly squelched the 65-million-Canadian-dollar (\$47.2 million) project. Now it draws praise locally for its street presence and its symbolism of Kitchener's ethnic diversity (Mennonite and German original settlers, recent influxes of Asians and Caribbeans). "Intimate monumentality," says critic Kenneth Frampton, "is the building's overall effect."

Architecture

New Canadian buildings

One reason American cities have built nothing comparable to Kitchener's city hall or Bay Adelaide Park for so long is that Americans have no fair for competitions. In Canada, professional associations and government agencies encourage and strictly regulate competitions; winners generally deserve their status and get built. In America, associations and government are blasé and powerless over competitions, and they often stumble. Witness, for instance, the winners of recent contests in Washington for the Korean War veterans' memorial and the National Peace Garden that won't be built.

Not all Canadian competitions are risk-free and end happily: a 1976 plan for the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa was futile, for instance. Nor does a design-committed and competition-friendly government come cheap (Kitchener's search process cost 383,000 Canadian dollars). But when you imagine what might have emerged if, say, Stamford, Conn. (my own hometown), had sought a custom-made civic symbol in the mid-'80s rather than shoveling government into a silver-and-white office box bought from GTE, suddenly, the Canadian model seems purely enviable.

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