

# 2 family histories in poetry form

AS IT might seem, two family histories in poetry form have recently come across my desk, and it seems odd still that they are both extraordinary books.

The first, "Octavia and Other Poems," comes from Naomi Long Madgett, editor and publisher of Lotus Press Inc., in Detroit and professor emerita at Eastern Michigan University (where she was professor in the Department of English Language and Literature for 18 years).

In Part One, Madgett tells the story of Octavia Cornelia Long (1885-1920), her father's sister, dead of tuberculosis three years before Naomi Cornelia Long is born. Family photos show a striking resemblance between Octavia and Naomi, and, indeed, in the prologue, Naomi writes: "When as a child I wore your face, Octavia (three years returned to earth), and christened with your name, set forth on my own odyssey."

"I had no clothing of my own, only depressive hand-me-downs, frayed remnants of someone else's outgrown legacy. My father dressed me in your skin, and such a garment, woven of his fabrication of a second chance, was not discarded easily."

Through letters and imaginings, Madgett traces Octavia's life from her beginning in a middle-class black family in Texas and the Oklahoma Territory, to her graduation from the University of Kansas, to her short teaching career, to the mysterious ending of her marriage, and finally, to her slow death under appalling circumstances.

In a section called "Homings," Madgett visits Guthrie, Okla., Octavia's hometown ("You look a lot like her. She was about your size and color. You have her eyes. I touch your ring of tiny pearls that fits my finger still and feel your hand close-



book break  
Mona Grigg

ing over mine.") and finally her grave-site in Richmond, Va. ("Now be at peace. Rest. Rest now. And so will I.")

In Part Two, "Other New Poems," Madgett displays her award-winning talent in 24 tough, touching, funny poems, including "Letting It All Hang Out" (Gladie: Don't need this nose anymore. Won't choke myself with someone else's brand of rope).

"Octavia and Other Poems" can be ordered through Third World Press, P.O. Box 720, Chicago 06019, or Lotus Press, P.O. Box 21607, Detroit 48221. Send \$8 plus \$1 postage and handling.

THE SECOND POETIC family history, "An Afternoon in Waterloo Park," by former Detroiters Gerald Dumas (Wayne State University Press, softcover, \$9.95), is a reprint of the highly acclaimed 1972 edition originally published by Houghton Mifflin. Dumas is an author and writer for the "Hi and Lois" and "Beetle Bailey" comic strips. He lives in Connecticut, but grew up on Dumas' east side and still visits relatives in the area.

"Waterloo" begins in 1968, when Dumas returned to the family home on Dickerson Avenue to attend his mother's funeral: "I am sitting now at the dining room table. In the house where I was a boy. Here last night my mother died upstairs, at two in the morning

On that old thin rug on the Bathroom floor. My father heard her fall. He scrambled from his bed And went to her and held her head Until she died. Or so he hopes."

It is a bittersweet trip as the man — once the boy here — leafs through photo albums and remembers his baffling boyhood; remembers life in this house, with a mother who could not be happy, no matter what.

He remembers Opa and Oma, his maternal grandparents, and his visits to their home in Conestogo, Ont. This is Opa, his German-born grandfather: "He had a long white beard, a black eye patch, five-inch heel on his right shoe, and a collection of canes. On Sundays he used his glass eye and his gold-head cane and in his black clothes went about his gardens as slowly as a king. He both frightened and fascinated children and although he had taught Greek, he seldom spoke English and never spoke to me."

Still, Dumas discovers that Opa wrote poems — volumes of love poems — to a long-ago love named Marie. An unrequited love — not Opa — and Dumas wonders: "Did he want the story passed? If not, I think, these volumes would have vanished long ago."

Oma is the serene one, the mellow one who loves them all, and Dumas is startled when, as a man, he real-

izes that, though he had known her for 25 years, "Two weeks each summer is all I saw of her and Opa, those visits and a few they made to Detroit . . . And what is two times 25? A year, more or less, is that all I knew of her and she of me? A generation of bright moments are what I have to show. We sometimes touch those close to use more briefly than we know."

At his kitchen table in the house on Dickerson, Dumas also remembers good times in Detroit. His days at St. Phillip's and his beloved, feared Carstens School.

About baseball, so much a part of Detroit's life, he says: "Strange wealthy teams would arrive in complete uniforms from unknown neighborhoods; they would be grim, talented, hard to beat. Ragging teams with no uniforms would make an appearance and they would light-heartedly inept. Most teams wore caps, any old pants, and two-color softball shirts with advertising on the backs. My first shirt said: MOE'S BILLIARDS."

Dumas evokes a complex dream-portrait of a Midwest family growing up in mid-century, and of the now-grown boy coming to terms with his childhood. And finally, in a touching epilogue written in October 1987, a month after his father's death, Gerald Dumas can say, "That's the big picture. But the small picture is the one we gaze at most, and it is a picture of lovely and infinite variety."

(My apologies to those readers who went out searching for Elizabeth Klein's "Reconcillations" on my recommendation. Unfortunately, the book is now out of print. Try the library or a used book store. It is in both hardcover and paperback.)

Mona Grigg is a freelance writer who lives in Westland.

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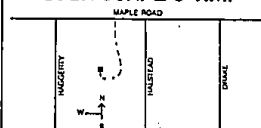
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condo queries  
Robert M. Melsner

Q. I am selling commercial real estate-rand but have been approached by a condominium developer to joint venture with me. The real estate broker wants a 10 percent commission on the sale of the land if I sell it to the condominium developer or I can joint venture alternatively with the developer and the broker. Do you have any suggestions?

A. If you are going to be a developer of a condominium be sure you understand all your potential liabilities and responsibilities as well as, of course, the potential profit you may garner. Being a joint venturer as a developer in a project where you have not had experience in developing real estate, may pose additional problems for you. You must thoroughly investigate the potential co-joint venture as well as the economic liabilities attendant therewith. You should also familiarize yourself with the details of developing a condominium, both from a legal and practical aspect. A couple hours of keen analysis may save you tens of thousands of dollars or potential headaches. Also it is a good idea to know your potential partners before you do business with them.

Q. I have some raw land for sale and the realtor found a purchaser; however, the purchaser wants to enter into a land contract and build a strip center on the land and pay off the

land contract with a balloon payment. I'm a little nervous and have not consulted with an attorney. Do you have any suggestions?

A. If you must enter into a land contract as opposed to retaining a second mortgage plus a substantial down payment, make sure that you have an indemnification and hold-harmless from your purchaser concerning mechanic's liens and other incumbrances which may be placed on the property. Make sure that you have provision that a default in the land contract gives you an irrevocable right to foreclose on the land contract even if it is reinstated. Make sure that the land contract you enter into protects you adequately via a-virtuall insurance and taxes and third parties coming on the premises. Careful analysis of the liability of this transaction is mandatory.

Robert M. Melsner is a Birmingham attorney specializing in condominiums, real estate and corporate law. You are invited to submit topics you would like to see discussed in this column, including questions about condominiums, by writing Robert M. Melsner, 30200 Telegraph Road, Suite 467, Birmingham, Mich. 48010. This column provides general information and should not be construed as legal opinion.

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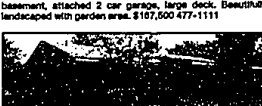
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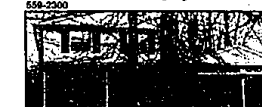
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