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MEMOIR EXAMINES HOME-BASED

LEARNING IN RURAL AMERICA

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“I never intended to home school my children,” says author Kathleen Melin commenting on her book *By Heart: A Mother’s Story of Children and Learning at Home* (\$14.95) just released with Clover Valley Press. “We began home schooling in 1992. We thought we’d home school for one year,” says Melin. But the experiment became a lifestyle.

What came with the lifestyle was a great deal of questioning, even to the point of hostility, from those who were opposed to it, and on the other end of the spectrum, a tendency to glorify the home school choice by those who were in favor of it. “I was quite surprised by people’s strong reactions to what seemed to me a natural choice,” says Melin.

The idea of writing about the experience came about when Kathleen was working on a graduate degree in creative writing at the University of Minnesota. “I thought I’d write children’s books. I still love them,” says Melin. But she had the opportunity to work with one of the seminal memoir writer’s of the recent past, Patricia Hampl, whose first book, *A Romantic Education*, helped revolutionize the writing of memoirs. Memoir writing had been the domain of very public figures with glorious pasts – generals and presidents. Hampl’s literary non-fiction on growing up in Saint Paul and going to a

catholic school published in 1980 announced a sea change. And now, writing about the experience of a common life is common.

Melin had been working on a novel and a short story collection with the intention of using one of them as her thesis project. “The urgency of home schooling and all the controversy around it was swimming in me constantly. I had my own internal questions and tensions. And the societal feedback was very challenging. I wanted to resolve some of those questions, inside and outside. I wanted to live a holistic life and so for me, that meant living what I was doing; doing it; studying it, and writing about it. My life was raising children with the extension of home-based learning, working creatively and studying creative writing. Writing the book was a way for me to put my life together and make it whole,’ she says.

Rules vary state by state, but in Wisconsin, home-based learning is categorized as private education. According to the most recent statistics from National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), there are 1,096,000 home school students in the United States in 2003, twice as many as in charter schools. “Charter schools are tremendously important and many of them are innovative, visionary, child-centered, every teacher’s dream,” says Melin. “I just find it curious that they get so much public attention when what is really growing rapidly and continually over the past two decades is home-based learning.” Many of those in the home school world consider the NCES estimates controversially low. But regardless of the numbers, the NCES and others agree that home schooling is continuing to grow at a phenomenal rate. In 1998, Stephen Brougham from the NCES said that the data hasn’t been able to keep up with the numbers. Home schooling is currently growing at about 7 percent per year.

Melin began sending *By Heart* out to potential publishers as a work in progress in 1998. It was picked up by an editor at St. Martin's Press whose marketing department vetoed his selection saying it was too hard to market. An editor at Viking held it for almost a year. It eventually took a back burner in Melin's life and stayed there until fall of 2007. That year, she started sending out book proposals again and completing the book. She signed a contract with Clover Valley Press from Duluth in February 2008 and the book was published October 1, 2008.

"The marketing department at St. Martin's was right in a way," says Melin. "The audience for the book is very diverse. Yes, it is a book for home-school families. It's also a parenting memoir. It's rural Midwestern with a bit of the Alaskan Bush tossed in. It's a book for the educators and policy makers who want to know about the number one educational phenomena of our time. It's also a book for memoir readers."

What is clear is that a book like Kathleen Melin's *By Heart* has appeal to readers of all kinds. "I'm getting the loveliest fan mail from people who say they couldn't put it down, that it's beautifully written, that they want a sequel. It's so gratifying. By nature, writing is a solitary business and to have this level of interaction and dialogue with readers is really satisfying," says Melin.

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