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## **UM GRADS MEMOIR ON HOME-BASED LEARNING**

### **RECEIVES NATIONAL ATTENTION**

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When Kathleen Melin was in the creative writing program at the University of Minnesota (MFA 1998), she was also raising three children and teaching them at home. “People had and still have all kinds of stereotypes around home-based learning. I guess that’s understandable, but a wide variety of people take on the lifestyle. It was a match for me in part because of my respect for the uniqueness and individuality of people -- in this case, my own children,” says Melin.

The book that came out of that experience, *By Heart: A Mother’s Story of Children and Learning at Home* (Clover Valley Press, October 2008) has gained national attention in the months following its release. “I thought it would be of interest to parents and educators, but it seems to resonate with people of all kinds, which in fact, makes perfect sense. We were all, 100 per cent of us, children at one time. We have all been both nurtured and hindered by the educational system chosen on our behalf,” says Melin.

*By Heart*, an intricate and sublimely beautiful book, examines home-based learning from a cultural context, and as such, touches on things like the history of education, the economics of co-parenting, and cultural dominance, meanwhile telling a story with a deeper truth about one family.

The book is published by Clover Valley Press out of Duluth, a feminist press now in its third year. “Sometimes it’s hard to put home schooling and feminism together, but both are inherently part of *By Heart*,” says Clover Valley publisher Charlene Brown (MA 1998, UMD).

“Our family began home schooling in 1992,” says Melin. “We thought we’d home school for one year, 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.”

Along with home schooling, came the inevitable stereotyping and generalizing and categorizing. “That was another one of the shocking things about becoming a home school family,” says Melin.

“I submitted a chapter for a workshop with a guest instructor when I was at the U. The instructor said one thing: ‘There’s got to be something seriously wrong with someone so that they teach their kids at home.’ That was the end of the critique. It was another moment for me that affirmed how important it was to write and publish this book. We all have areas of understanding and areas where we lack of understanding, but we also have certain pieces of knowledge in common. Home-based learning was definitely not in that last category. I felt passionately about the care of children and how they learn and I wanted to add as much understanding to the public debate as I could,” says Melin.

Melin believes home-based learning offers the potential for a progressive education. Endorsements from Eric Utne (founder of the *Utne Reader*, publisher of *Cosmo Doogood’s Urban Almanac*, and currently a fellow at the University of

Minnesota's Center for Spirituality and Healing) and John Taylor Gatto (author of *Dumbing Us Down* and *Weapons of Mass Instruction*) confirm that possibility.

While pursuing her MFA studies, Melin had been working on a novel and a short story collection with the intention of using one of them as her thesis project. "But the urgency of home schooling and all the controversy surrounding it was swimming around in me. 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. 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.

The idea of writing about the experience as a memoir was nurtured by her work with one of the seminal memoir writers of the recent past, Regents Professor and McKnight Distinguished Professor Patricia Hampl, whose first book, *A Romantic Education*, helped revolutionize the writing of memoirs. Writing in the autobiographical voice had been almost exclusively the domain of public figures with glorious pasts – generals and presidents. Hampl's literary non-fiction on her Czech heritage, published in 1980, announced a sea change. Since then, writing about the experience of a common life has become common.

According to the most recent data from National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), there were 1,500,000 home school students in the United States in 2007, more than 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 has

growing rapidly and continually over the past two decades is home-based learning.” The NCES and others agree that home schooling continues to grow at a phenomenal rate, currently estimated at 7 per cent 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 would be 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. She signed a contract with Clover Valley Press from Duluth in February 2008, and the book was published in October.

“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.”

Melin’s desire for the book to be a part of the national debate on the care of children and how they learn is becoming realized. Reviews have appeared in *The Washington Times* and *Home Education Magazine* among others. In May, she’ll be the keynote speaker for the Organization of Virginia Homeschoolers in Richmond, VA. “It’s gaining momentum,” says Melin. “But Oprah hasn’t called – yet.”

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