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POETRY IN HARRISVILLE: A CONVERSATION WITH REBECCA KAISER GIBSON

Rebecca Upjohn Snyder (RUS): You started a poetry-reading series, The Loom, Poetry in Harrisville, in 2019 with the goal of bringing contemporary published poets and their work together with a local audience. How did that come about? And you live in Marlborough, so how did you choose Harrisville?

Rebecca Kaiser Gibson (RKG): In a way, Harrisville chose me. I taught at Tufts and I hardly knew anyone here. I didn't have a community except for my yoga people. I'd just come from a poetry manuscript workshop, and the person leading it suggested that I start a [local] reading series. And then two days later I was talking to Eleanor Drury, and she made the connection and said, "Why don't you do it here?" Then Chick Colony said, "How about using St. Denis Church?" Each piece fell into place.

I love the notion of the community being here. People can just show up to an event and have it be in their backyards. Also [I like] the idea of bringing poets to an audience that is not a group of competitors. [Typically] people who go to poetry readings are other poets. But here is a group of local people who are interested in lots of different things and who want to come. That is really exciting.



Rebecca Kaiser Gibson with her new novel at the Harrisville General Store.

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RUS: As part of The Loom reading series, you also run an annual Favorite Poem event where community members bring a poem (by another poet) and share what it means to them.

RKG: One of my teachers was Robert Pinsky, and I based our program on the Favorite Poem project which he created when he was Poet Laureate. He set it up so that people don't take notes; they read their poem because they love it and just talk. [*www.favoritepoem.org/*]

RUS: What drew you to writing in the beginning? And what made you stick with it?

RKG: I don't know what drew me to it. I just seemed to do it. I dimly remember two poems I wrote

some time before age ten. One was . . . There was a cinnamon jar. I stole the cinnamon jar—it was empty. And I wrote a little poem in turquoise blue ink and put it inside this cinnamon jar and closed it up and put it back. Who knows why? What a weird thing. Did anyone ever find it? I don't remember anyone finding it.

The other poem . . . I lived in Chevy Chase, Maryland. I went out one fall day. There was something in the boxwood hedges around the house. I thought, that's a partridge. How I knew it was a partridge, I have no idea, but I wrote a poem about two partridges, a cat, and a squirrel. I think that was the title of it. The journal at school printed it.

I don't know how [the writing happened]. It doesn't feel like I stuck with it. What it feels like is I didn't notice I was doing it. For years and years. I'm especially conscious of it because I've been trying to go through some of my boxes of journals. I think, why did I write so much? What compelled me to do that because I was just doing my life? It was apparently part of what I did, and I don't quite know why.

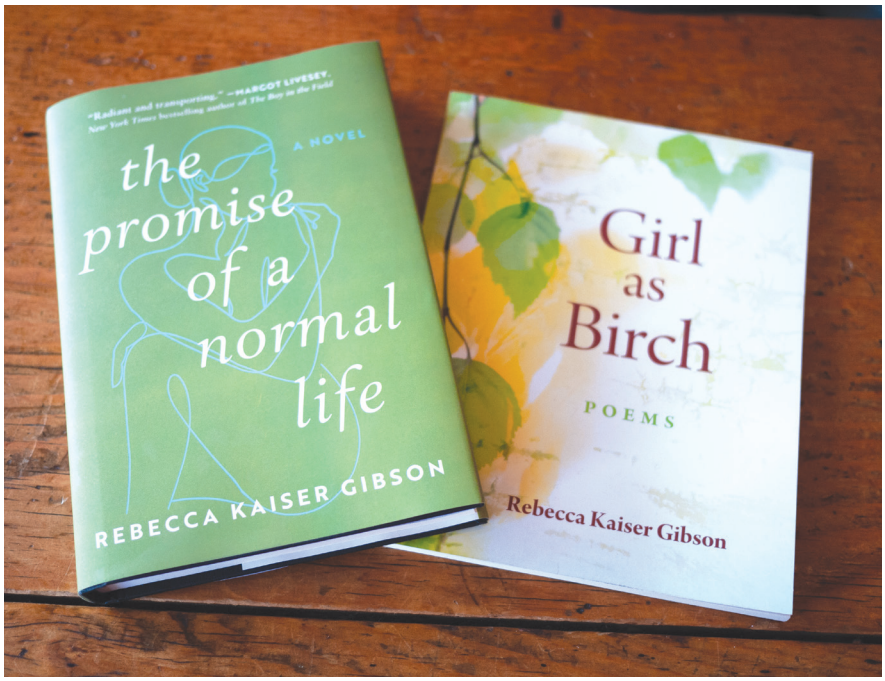


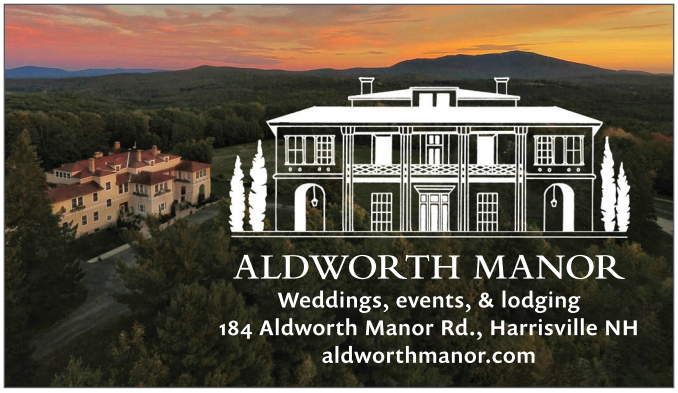
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Rebecca's latest books.

RUS: You taught writing—mostly poetry—to undergrads at Tufts University for 23 years. Did your teaching feed your own writing?

RKG: No, I think it did the opposite. It preoccupied me. When I was working with students, we did a lot of one-on-one. I wanted to make each essay or poem be the best thing it could be, and I got all invested in it. Even though it wasn't what I was saying. That's what I wanted to give them. I thought it probably wasn't happening in most of their lives, [to get] really inside their minds instead of superficially. It was satisfying.

RUS: Your poetry collection *Girl As Birch* (2022) shares a close observation of the world. You write about personal moments and experience. You also reference myths, paintings, photographs, TV, books, and other writings. There is a joyfulness as well as defiance distilled in the poems. That's









what came through to me. Could you talk about your process for writing a poem?

RKG: I could talk about a poem if you pick one.

RUS: Basin Wild Rye.

RKG: Process can start with a situation. My sister has a house in Idaho. It's completely barren around her house, but in the distance there are these mountains that have low-lying vegetation, and rattlesnakes, PSS! I was trying to get the sound, partly, like "parched" and "swishing" and "incessantly" and "disaster." All these words, like a little wind, and these low-lying things. And the strange kind of stillness. It's this whole thing of "wild seed at the tip of my tongue and the grasses swishing." She was talking about fires and burning. Her tendency is to see disaster and mine is to not. That's what this poem is about. In terms of process, a lot of it is how do I translate what I was feeling and not saying?

It's not translating exactly. The word I keep coming up with is embodying. It's literally putting it in my body and giving flesh to, I don't know what they are, wispy thoughts? And then there is the whole issue of how the words relate to each other once they get on the page.

RUS: I noticed that there is a lot of sensory description in the poems. It takes you right into the experience of what you're writing about. And I think you're also thinking about the space on the page.

RKG: A lot. The space on the page was done many, many times. I often forget I got a degree in directing and I briefly ran a lunchtime theater through the University of Pittsburgh. I was really aware of placement—like directing—on the page.

RUS: You are launching your first novel next month, *The Promise of a Normal Life*. Congratulations! How was it to write a novel?

RKG: I didn't set out to write a novel. I wrote various sections of this over decades, while I was teaching. At one point I put it together and sent it to an agent in New York, who was a friend of my cousin. He lost it. For about two years. While he was in rehab. And then an intern found it. And he [the agent] sent me a long detailed, interesting rejection letter. He then told me to send it to three other agents who all promptly rejected it. And then it went back into pieces. Things progressed and I wrote more. During the pandemic, I thought, I can't go anywhere, maybe I should go into my closet where all these boxes are and see what's there. Wow, there were a lot of pieces. A friend said something that made me reconsider.

Having done two books of poetry, I had a different notion of how to organize the pieces. Breaking up the chronology was important—moving around in time and space.

RUS: Can you give us an idea of what the book is about?

RKG: It's about an isolated young woman who is trying on her own to make sense of what she's experiencing in her family. She doesn't check her insights with anyone, so she has a perceptive but distorted view of things based on movies and books.

Rebecca Upjohn Snyder

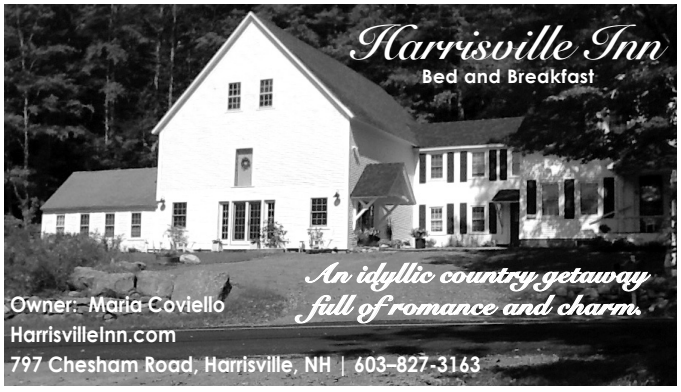
The Loom, Poetry in Harrisville: *theloompoetry.com*

Copies of Girl As Birch *and* The Promise of a Normal Life *will be available in the Harrisville library.*

Rebecca will be reading at the Toadstool Bookshop *in Peterborough, NH @ 11 a.m., Saturday, February 11, 2023. To learn more and preorder* The Promise of a Normal Life: rebeccakaisergibson.com

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