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EILEEN POLLACK WENT FROM WAVELENGTHS TO WORDS

by Colleen Newvine

IT MIGHT BE an understatement to call Eileen Pollack a contrarian.

Pollack, a member of LSA's creative writing faculty and an author with a lengthy list of publications to her name, developed an interest in writing as a child, but didn't initially consider it as a career. "People thought that writing was a cute thing for a girl to do, and I found that patronizing," she says.

As someone who makes her living as a storyteller, Pollack spins a colorful tale of growing up in the Catskills, where her grandparents owned a hotel on the Borscht Belt entertainment circuit and her parents took a laissez-faire attitude to her headstrong notions.

This includes the truth-is-better-than-fiction story of her high school prohibiting her from taking the few advanced science courses the curriculum offered on the premise that girls didn't go into science so it would be a waste of a seat. Subsequently she virtually stopped attending high school, taught herself science at home, and demanded to take the Advanced Placement tests.

A mix of hard work and fearless ambition landed Pollack at Yale in 1974, where she became the first woman to major in physics. Being one of only two women in a 110-person introductory level physics class, in a program with no women as professors, Pollack stood out.

Her gender wasn't the only thing giving her a different perspective. While many of her male classmates had taken years of advanced science classes at prep school, Pollack's do-it-yourself science education had never included classroom experiments. She learned those skills for the first time in a highly competitive environment.

"They had no idea how hard it was for me," she says of the faculty. She nearly electrocuted herself in the lab one time, clueless about how to properly execute the experiment.

After she scored a 17 on her first exam, she went to her handsome, charming professor and announced her intention to drop the class. He talked her into sticking with it by encouraging her to ignore the other students and focus on her own learning. She asked questions in class when no one else would, and she found she had a keen sense for comprehending theoretical problems, which required a vivid imagination rather than hands-on practical experience with physical reality.

By the time Pollack was a senior, she had a nearly perfect average in her science and math courses and thought that perhaps physics would be her life's work. She asked a professor for a recommendation for graduate school and he agreed on one condition — that she take a class outside physics.



Robert Ramey

Pollack said at first she couldn't think of anything else she was interested in. He pushed her to think about what she used to like before relentless science homework took over her life, and she remembered her pleasure in writing.

She enrolled in a nonfiction writing class taught by John Hersey and loved it. Then she took a fiction workshop.

Soon she was juggling an intense physics senior thesis and a massive writing project profiling a neonatal doctor.

"That was sort of the pivotal moment," Pollack recalls. "I liked them both, but the fact that there

Pollack eventually enrolled in the University of Iowa's M.F.A. program in creative writing. Her father, who had been against her majoring in physics, also wondered whether choosing the potentially impoverished life of writing was such a good decision. He told her she would give up her writing dream the first time she wanted to buy a new tennis racket or go skiing and couldn't afford it.

"It was a really good challenge," she says. "After my dad read one of my stories, he said, 'I'm glad you didn't listen to me.'"

After graduating from the University of Iowa in 1983, Pollack moved to Boston, where she married

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were people involved in one made me realize how isolated I would be for the rest of my life in theoretical physics."

So after graduating with honors, Pollack walked away from physics. Literally.

She scheduled an interview with the chairman of the graduate physics department at University of California-Berkeley but when she arrived on campus and walked into the physics building, she felt a sense of dread so strong she couldn't bring herself to keep the appointment. She went home without speaking to anyone in the department.

Fortunately, Pollack was awarded a Marshall Fellowship to study English literature at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England, but after she got back to the United States, she didn't know what to do next. She got a job washing dishes in a Greek deli in a rundown suburb of Chicago and tried to write in her off-hours, but all her stories were rejected.

"It was a chance to remake myself as a writer," she says. "It was a long road. I was really lost for a while."

A friend helped her get a newspaper feature writing job, sight unseen, in New Hampshire. She loaded up her car to start on a new path and aimed northeast.

"From that moment on, I knew I wanted to be a writer," she says.

and had a son. In 1994, when her husband was offered a job as a geneticist at UM, Pollack moved with him to Ann Arbor to serve as the director of the Undergraduate Creative Writing Program.

"There were only a few places I would agree to move and Michigan was one," she recalls.

She gradually got more involved in the M.F.A. program, in part through training graduate students how to teach in the undergraduate program, and landed a tenure-track faculty post in 1999.

"Once I got that position," Pollack jokes, "you couldn't get me out of here with a crowbar."

Michigan's M.F.A. program is a great place for a writer, she says. "The students I work with are just so talented. You have to stay a step ahead of them so you have to work really hard. You can't coast."

Meanwhile, as a steady stream of great, influential writers comes through town as part of a highly regarded program, Pollack gets to spend lots of time talking to them about their craft.

Pollack's collection of short fiction pieces, *In The Mouth*, was just accepted for publication. She expects it will be out in about 18 months. One novella from that collection is due to be published in an upcoming issue of the literary magazine *Subtropics*.

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