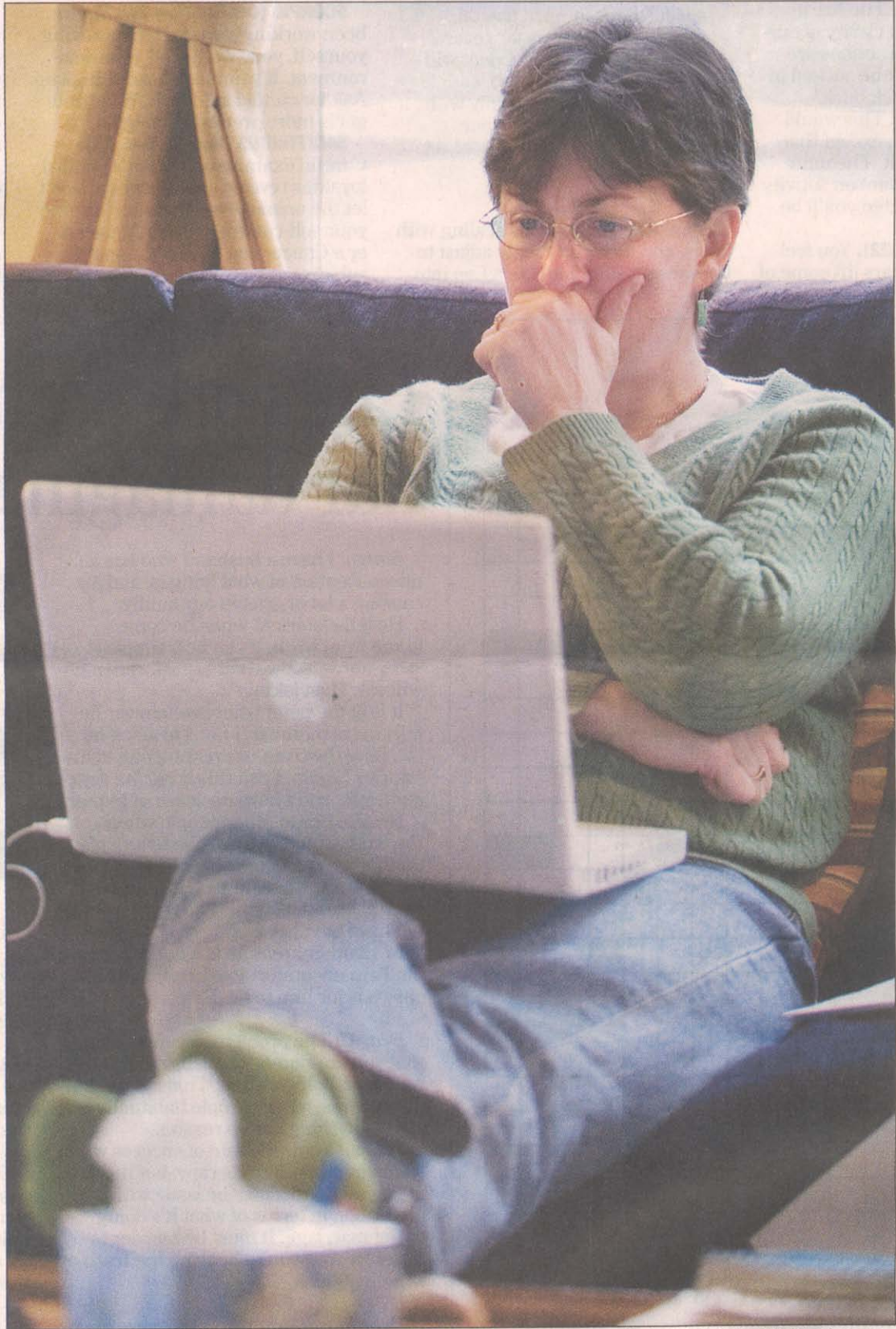




"Behind the silence, I have found a place of more honest love, a place where I am more whole than I was before. I want others to know that such wholeness is possible for everyone."

Healing 'Silence'



Photos by STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Writing her memoirs has forced Gail Robinson to relive several painful memories. But the Clark College English instructor also expects to find healing in the process of creating the book.

Clark teacher uses memoir to come to terms with past

By **TRICIA JONES**
Columbian staff writer

First up for discussion was the popular song about the woman with drops of Jupiter in her hair.

Next, Gail Robinson's creative writing class examined several stanzas in which a small boy waltzes with his drunken father. Lastly, they debated how much poetry, if any, could be found in two prose samples.

Robinson wrapped up the winter's day session at Clark College with a final observation.

"Language ultimately is such an inadequate container for expressing our feelings," she said. Often, however, "it's all we have," she added in a conversation after the class.

Robinson is prepared to make the best of the limitations of language. She's begun a project that will test not only her skills as a writer, but also her willingness to confront years of pain and secrecy.

The Clark College English instructor and Portland resident is writing a memoir with a working title of "Into the Silence." Its name is a reference to what she describes as the long-held silences within her family, which she has chosen to break in a quest for healing.

Robinson's proposed book has earned a vote of confidence from Literary Arts, a Portland-based nonprofit group that awards fellowships to Oregon writers and publishers. Robinson was one of 21 recipients this year; she received a \$500 fellowship in the category of literary nonfiction. This year's awards totaled \$25,000.

"The fellowship is not a lot of money at this point, but it's a great boost for writers and lets them know someone believes in their project as well as them," said Kristy Athens, Literary Arts program coordinator.

Did you know?

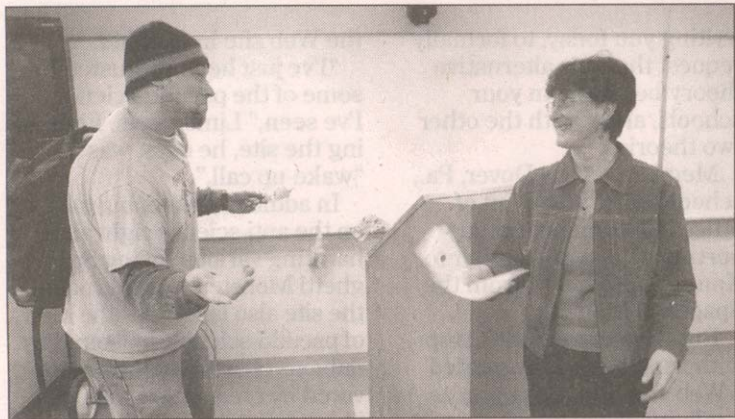
■ Until the past two decades, memoirs primarily were written and published by people with some degree of fame. More noncelebrities have tried the genre since the critical and commercial success of "Angela's Ashes" and "The Color of Water," according to Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia.

■ Literary Arts has given fellowships to 491 different Oregon writers and publishers since 1987, and has distributed more than \$500,000 in awards. The nonprofit group received nearly 300 applications for the 2005-06 award year.

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Inside

■ Writing teacher's introspection inspires students to write about tough subjects. **Page D8**



Several of Robinson's creative writing students, including Joe Jenkins of Vancouver, left, say they appreciate her efforts to hear what they have to say about different types of literature.

Memoir:

From page D1

Howling Dog Press editor Michael Annis of Berthoud, Colo., was one of three Literary Arts judges evaluating Robinson's work. He praised her submission for its compassionate control and humility.

"It would be anticlimactic to describe Robinson's 'Into the Silence' as a wise, perceptive, well-written and grammatically competent account," Annis wrote. "She carried me ... into a full, visceral understanding of the deep loss and grief (that) she has broken through a lifetime of walls to faithfully retrieve."

'It forces me to be clear'

The fellowship won't pay Robinson's bills as she completes her first book. But she said the award is a powerful affirmation that inspires her to continue a long, difficult journey.

"It forces me to be clear with myself that I want to be public with this story," said Robinson, 44. "It's a strong way of pushing me out of my shell, and outside a small circle of friends and writing people."

Details of her story demonstrate why Robinson needed courage to go outside the comforting circle. Her narrative will take on subjects such as her brother's troubles with the law and her younger sister's debilitating depression and early death. She also expects to write about the effects of drug addiction and alcoholism on the Robinsons, as well as sexual abuse by someone outside the immediate family.

Writing the book also compels Robinson to visit an 18-year-old event with which she says she has come to terms, but will never understand.

Robinson writes in her fellowship application that her younger sister, Carol, died at age 22 after setting fire to herself "without ever revealing to anyone in the family just how desperate she was."

Gail and Carol Robinson were the two closest of four siblings. As a preschooler, Carol had been a vivacious, mirthful imp who tried to teach herself to fly. She later

kept eight motherless bunnies alive through multiple daily feedings with an eyedropper.

The Robinsons lived for a time on a ranch in eastern South Dakota. But Robinson's father changed careers a few times and the family moved several times over the years.

Robinson, three years older than Carol, was blindsided by her sister's death in 1987.

Carol had graduated from college with a degree in advertising and had moved back in with her parents in Illinois. Robinson remembers that her younger sister hadn't been able to find a job and was "at sea." But no one anticipated what was about to happen.

"With hindsight, we now ... see things we weren't able to see before she died," Robinson said. "In looking at that, part of what I'm trying to unpack is the shame and the guilt and the taboo that surrounds suicide, and our cultural inability to talk about it."

Carol's death eventually became the lens through which Robinson focused "Into the Silence," as well as the spur to write the memoir. Robinson said the idea of telling family stories first surfaced some 15 years ago, after she had fulfilled a longtime desire to move West, near mountains and the ocean. But it took a long time to brace herself to tackle potentially explosive subjects.

"I grew up being very careful about what I said or didn't say. There was a real feeling of danger in choosing to speak," Robinson said.

Healing wounds

Eventually, Robinson decided that a penetrating look at her past could help heal old wounds. And not just her own.

"Behind the silence, I have found a place of more honest love, a place where I am more whole than I was before," she affirms in her Literary Arts application. "I want others to know that such wholeness is possible for everyone."

Robinson's confidence might be misplaced if she were writing an accusatory tell-all to strike back at those who hurt her. But she's not intent solely on exposing family hurts and disappointments.

She credits her parents, now divorced, with having taught her "amazing things"

about love, friendship and respect.

"When I think of my childhood, the first thing I think of is the joy and love and the many ways in which the family was healthy," she said. "(My parents) had a sense of all the richness that life has to offer, and that was very much what shaped my childhood, along with the silences and the hard stuff that didn't get talked about."

Strengthened ties

Robinson said her relations with her surviving sister and brother have deepened as well.

"In the last 10 years, we are learning to know one another as the people we are, as opposed to the construction we created as a family growing up," said Robinson, the only one of the five who lives in the Pacific Northwest.

That doesn't mean Robinson needs family approval or permission for "Into the Silence," although she said she is seeking each relative's awareness and understanding. Nevertheless, she still isn't sure what the contents will include.

"I feel it keeps teaching me, as I keep writing ... my understanding of the story keeps growing all the time,"

she said. She hopes to have a working draft within a year.

Clark College has agreed to allow the full-time instructor to take a reduced class load to concentrate on the book.

Robinson also may be doing less teaching temporarily at The Salmon Street Writing Studio, which she founded to provide space for "writing from a place of kindness and a desire to honor your own voice."

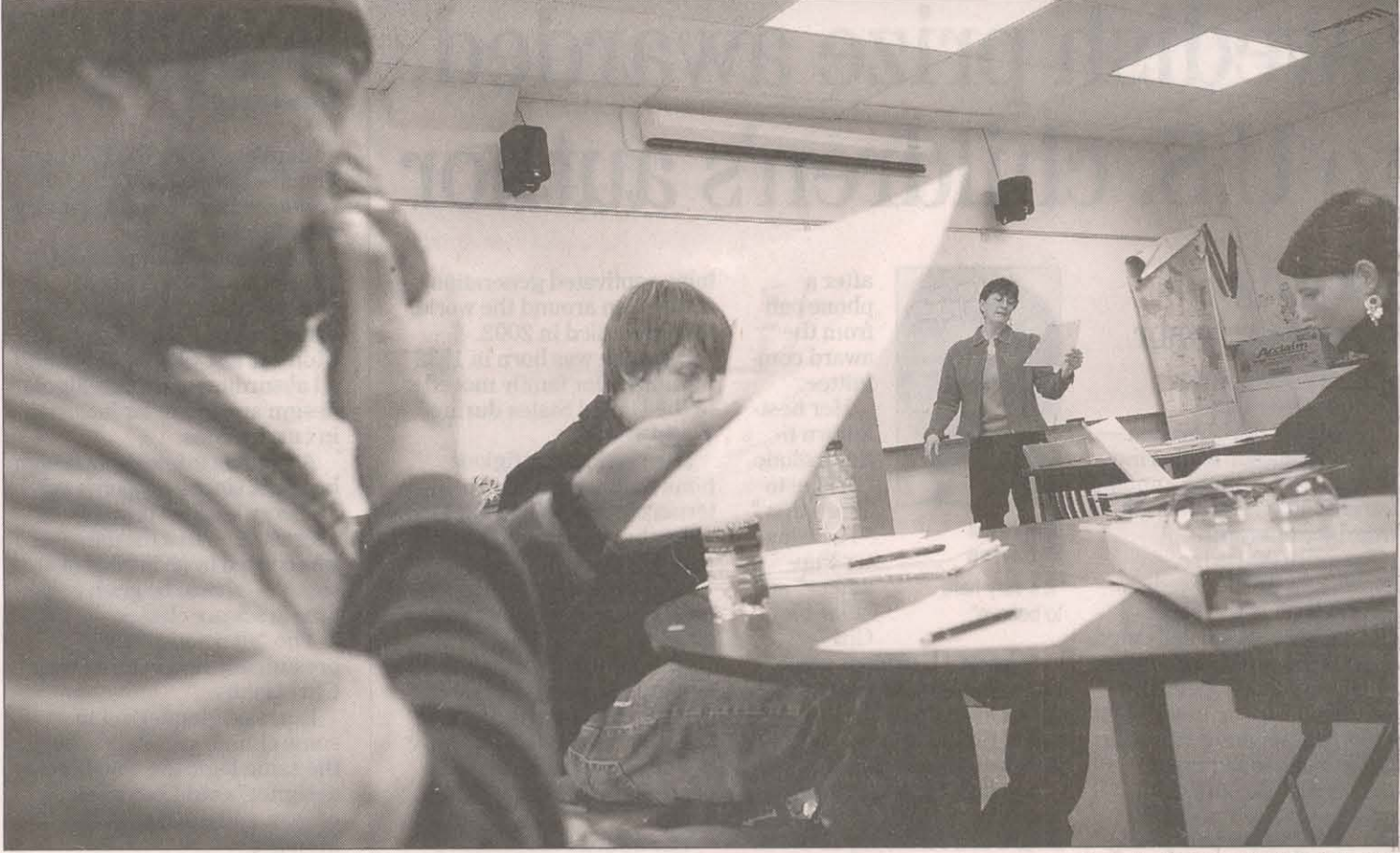
Most participants are from Portland; the venture is not related to Clark College and is not intended as an academic setting. Writers and aspiring writers meet in the second floor of the home she shares

with partner Molly Twohy, their two Labradors and a cat.

Robinson is grateful for the understanding Twohy has shown, giving her time and space to write as well as being willing to accept that less money will be coming into the household for a time.

Robinson said she'll probably use her fellowship to finance a short writing retreat to the coast or mountains. There, as elsewhere, she is likely to feel Carol's presence as she gains more insight into the pains and joys of the past.

"I have a sense of her that's constant," Robinson said. "I feel like she's right there and supporting me."



Photos by STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Gail Robinson's students ponder samples of prose and poetry in a recent creative writing class. Robinson was awarded \$500 by an Oregon nonprofit group to encourage her to complete her memoirs.

Students inspired to test creativity

Clark College student Darnice Kiesser admits that she probably would shy away from reading a memoir by her math or biology teacher.

But because the author is her creative writing teacher, Kiesser expects the book to be inspiring.

"I think it would be wonderful to read," said Kiesser, 33, a Washougal resident who hopes to earn a teaching degree. "I think Gail is an honest writer, to the best of her ability, and I really appreciate that."

Taking Robinson's class has motivated Kiesser to investigate her own past as book material. Both Kiesser and another student of Robinson's, 18-year-old Kandis Shaffer of Vancouver, said the instructor helped them decide such introspections could be beneficial.

Shaffer, who plans to go into pediatric nursing, said she's gained confidence in her ability to write about tough subjects based on

class experiences.

"My mom passed away three years ago, and I felt it's OK to share my story," she said. "Even though it's hard, (it's possible) to open up and talk about it and grow from it."

Creative writing student Peter Thornton of Vancouver says it's laudable to take on personal topics for print. But he wouldn't be likely to pick up such a book, because his interests lie elsewhere.

"I don't want to say I'm disinterested, but the student-teacher relationship is such that I wouldn't think it necessary to be privy to personal information about my professor," Thornton said.

This is Thornton's third class with Robinson, whom he said he admires in part because "when we hold a debate in class, you don't know her opinion." An aspiring professional writer, Thornton leans toward science fiction-fantasy stories. He said he hasn't given

much thought to autobiographical material.

"At 21, (I wouldn't have) much of a memoir," he said.

Classmate Joe Jenkins says he's known teachers who "babble on" about their personal lives. Robinson is not in that category, Jenkins said.

"What she expresses in writing — I think there is some power behind putting that to paper," he said. He also believes students should feel good about having a teacher who achieves recognition in any field, as Robinson has through Literary Arts.

Although Vancouver's Jenkins, 35, wants to study environmental biology rather than literature, he said he is interested in using what he's learned in Robinson's creative writing class.

"I'm not saying my life is totally spicy. But it definitely has a lot of character in it," Jenkins said

— Tricia Jones



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