'Sense of Place' Permeates
Short Stories by Mary Bush

By JAMES McKEEVER
The Post-Standard

BACK AT THE FAMILY home-
stead on New Boston Road in
Canastota, Mary Bush did most
of her writing in a tiny cubbyhole off
the kitchen.

The converted closet wasn't big
enough for a desk, so she improvised
with a leaf of a table supported by two
piles of cinder blocks.

Bush has since moved up in the
literary world — she teaches cre-
ative writing and literature at Hamil-
ton College, has a home of her own
outside Syracuse, and a book of short
stories, published this month by Wil-
liam Morrow and Co., Inc.

And she no longer writes on the
leaf of a table held up by cinder
blocks; she bought a door and laid
that across the blocks.

Bush is not one to get too worked up
over celebrity, even if her first book,
"A Place of Light" (254 pages, $18.95),
has received favorable reviews from
Publishers' Weekly, Newsday and The
New York Times, among others.

"People have been asking me,
'Aren't you thrilled? Aren't you
excited?' " Bush said. "I'm real happy
the book got finished and published,
but I didn't think I'd ever get it
polished enough. It seemed to take
forever to get the
damn book done."

Indeed, two stories
in the collection —
"Muskrat" and "Cure"
— are 10 years old.

In 1980, when Bush
was working toward
post-graduate degrees
at Syracuse Univer-
sity, Raymond Carver
read "Muskrat" and
told Bush to "send it
out." Black Warrior
Review accepted the
story and published it
in 1981. A different
version appears in the
book.

Bush, 40, grew up in
Canastota, in what she
describes as "a big
Italian family." (The
family name was shor-
tened from Bucci.) The
center of activity was
Bush's grandmother's
house nearby, where
relatives of all sorts
were in and out all the
time.

While Bush was
writing these and
other stories, she occa-
sionally would start
with a rough idea for a
plot or a character
sketch, and then pres-
et it to a family
member, usually her
mother or her cousin
Patti.

"What happens
next?" she would ask
them, and then try to
incorporate those
ideas into the piece.
In Mary Bush's Stories, Children Are the Stars

My insides go all hollow on me, like I'm floating out in the middle of nowhere, with no land underneath me and no way home. I see a picture of Pa crashing down the shades, and her sitting there in the chair with her big fat face after what she done and it's like I never lived in that house and never had no sisters but this one. It's like I never lived nowhere.

"Mary's always had a good, earthy style, a kind of convincing, local country style," said Sally Daniels, an adjunct professor of English at Syracuse University who has been reading Bush's stories for many years.

"She's certainly tightened things up. When I read the collection, I was struck by how much tense things were," Daniels said.

Much of that tension surrounds the fate of the children.

"The kids come from my own feelings that are still intense," said Bush. "I didn't experience half the things the kids in the stories do, but I have the memory of feelings, of fear and misunderstanding."

Perhaps it is because of Bush's realistic renderings of those feelings that "A Place of Light" has been so well received.

"I didn't expect people to pay much attention to a first book," Bush said. "I like the stories, but it surprised me that people see something in them. One review said that a couple of the stories tended to be melodramatic, which was good for me to hear. I'm catching myself in what I write now."

What Bush is working on now is a massive project that may turn into a novel, a book of non-fiction or another collection of stories.

She spent three weeks last summer in Arkansas researching her family's involvement in a largely unwritten chapter of American history.

After the Civil War, Bush said, white plantation owners in the South found another segment of the population to exploit as slave labor in the cotton fields — Italian immigrants.

In the early 1900s, Bush's grandmother, then age 7, moved with her family to Lake Village, Ark., where they worked alongside blacks on the Sunnyside plantation. The Italians, Bush said, had the same social status as blacks, which made for some unusual group dynamics.

Bush's grandmother is no longer living, so Bush went South during her summer break and interviewed townsmen in Lake Village. She camped out in a tent on what was once Sunnyside Plantation, now a county campground.

After a few days, everyone in town knew what Bush was up to and opened their homes and their hearts to her.

The stories old-timers told about the relationships among the Italians, the blacks and the landowners fascinated Bush, who recorded most of her interviews on tape.

But when she returned to Syracuse, she barely had enough time to prepare for her course load at Hamilton College.

"It was an ache, I wanted so badly to work with the material, and I couldn't," Bush said, pointing out about 15 tapes sitting in a box in her foyer.

For now, Bush's first book will have to do.
‘A Place of Light’

Book culminates local writer’s journey

BY GREG BOURKE
Staff Writer

A

break, followed by all the right ones, has brought a
Syracuse writer into the spotlight.

Mary Bush’s first collection of short
stories, titled “A Place of Light,” will
be published Tuesday by William
Morrow & Company. The Canastota
native says she always enjoyed writ-
ing, but it took a little push, rather a
Crash, for her to make it a career.

“I always knew I could tell a good
story,” says Bush, 40, “but I never
thought there would be so many people
out there eager to help you write for
a living.”

After graduating from the State
University of New York at Buffalo,
Bush worked driving trucks and
was a rock and roller before old age.

“I was all set to take a course in
bicycle repair, so I could start doing
that, when I had a real bad accident. I
Crashed two bikes on this big hill
that people hang glides off of,” Bush

Bush broke her back in that 1978
accident in Vermont and was laid up
most of the year.

“Needless to say, I skipped the
course in bicycle repair and decided
that it was time I started using my
brain, instead of my back.”

The would-be author enrolled in a
non-credit course through University
College, where the teacher was Bill
Penn, the first of many writers who
would encourage and influence her
work.

“Bill Penn was the first person who
encouraged me to try to make a liv-
ing as a writer. At that time, I had
never realized that there was such
a thing as a graduate program for
writers. He introduced me to George

Mary Bush.

Elliott, who ran the program at the
University of Michigan, and agreed to
me into the program.”

AFTER ELIOTT’S death, the
writing program was run by Ray-
mond Carver, another talented
writer who found talent in Bush’s
writing.

“Ray Carver really encouraged me
to send my work out for publica-
tion,” she says.

Others would agree with Bush’s
teachers. In 1982, Bush was awarded
the Society of Poets, Essayists and
Novelists (PEN) Nelson Algren
award for the best unfinished collec-
tion of short stories. Some of those
stories appear in “A Place of Light.”

It was that award that led directly
to the book deal, says the story-
teller.

“My editor came to the awards
ceremony and took me out to dinner
after,” she says. “We signed the
book contract right there. I didn’t
even have to prepare a manuscript.
She just believed I could come
through.

“I had to break my back before I
discovered how many people there
were that believed in me and were
willimg to help.”

It’s Bush’s strong sense of place
and character development that
endsears her to other writers — and
readers.

“I love the way she uses the land-
scape of a region and the way that
land effects her characters,” says
Chris Zenowich, an SU English
professor and alumnus of the writing
program.

Bush says she is “a writer who is
evolved by place.”

The place for most of the stories is
the rural landscape of her native
Central New York, although Bush

“There are people I know, who I
have seen for years,” she says. “I
take the way these people are —
how they talk, combined with what
I know about them — and combine
that with their natural setting and
that’s where I get the basis for my
stories.”

Douglas Unger, another noted
Syracuse author and fan of Bush’s,
says — in the jacket notes for “A
Place of Light” — that the book is
a gift, stories of characters who suf-
er and grow told so convincingly
that we can only grow along with
them.

Mary Bush, along with author
Patrick Lawlor, will host a reading
and book signing party from 2 to 4
p.m., Feb. 4 at Community Writers
Project, 920 Euclid Avenue.
Bush’s book, “A Place of Light,”
will be reviewed in next Sunday’s
Stars by Brian G. Bourke.
A Place of Light
By Mary Bush.

By David Leavitt

The damaged children stand at the heart of many of the stories in "A Place of Light," Mary Bush's first collection. They are children acclimated to a degree of pain and domestic violence that most people would find unendurable, children for whom pleasure is a dream as distant as infancy. In the story called "Underground Railroad," the narrator is a boy whose wretchedly poor mother has just killed, for the third time in a row, her infant child. As the boy's father begins the desperate business of burying yet another baby, the boy takes his sister and flees, seeking the only person he thinks might help them: an old woman who bought chickens from the family a few years earlier. The boy's sense of responsibility for his sister is heartbreaking, as well as characteristic of the children in these stories: "She is a little girl," he tells us, "but she will go anywhere if I tell her it's okay and then that awful feeling comes back, that I am supposed to know things and I am supposed to keep them from getting hurt, but I don't know nothing and they are hurt to death anyway."

Eventually the children find the old woman, who, in a remarkable scene, offers them pie, something the boy hasn't tasted, he tells us, in "a year, maybe more." "Pie," his sister says, "real quiet, like she's in church and some holy words just come out her mouth." The pie, like the rolls offered by a baker to a grieving couple in a famous story by Ms. Bush's teacher Raymond Carver, is "a small, good thing," a taste of redemption. It prophesies salvation, for as they eat, the old woman tells the children that her house is near an old station on the underground railroad, something the boy becomes convinced is literally a railroad. "I'm free," he observes as he and his sister leave the old woman in search of what they imagine to be a vast subterranean network. "I can feel them tunnels under me, running through the hills like a good road to somewhere."

The title story is told by a girl on the run from "trouble" with her sister, her mother and her stepfather, who has gone deep into debt. The sister, after too much psychological and sexual abuse at the stepfather's hands, has stopped talking; the mother, fearful of being alone, endures her husband's habitual beatings. Then their car breaks down and the girl, sent in search of help, steps from this grim domestic scene into "a new place... an open place, full of light."

This "place" turns out to be the home of a vigorous girl named Hyacinth who, along with her equally vigorous mother, fixes the family's car, disarms the violent stepfather and offers the family the first kindness they have known in years. As in other stories, the women reveal themselves to be possessed of mysterious capacities, close to magic, which allow them to challenge the brute bullying of violent men. One senses more than meets the ear in this grumbling complaint from a male character in a story called "Outlaws": "Everything in the world," he tells us, "is female trouble."

The influence of Raymond Carver is everywhere in these pages. Here, once again, is that landscape of blue-collar America that Carver mapped so expertly: the cheerless houses, the dead-end jobs, the violence so constant it has become banal. The ghost of Flannery O'Connor lingers as well, especially in the stories that turn, like O'Connor's, on odd details: a recalcitrant mule, a plastic flamingo, a trapped muskrat that refuses to die. There are encounters with backwoods oddballs, some sinister, some redemptive; episodes of cruelty stared at squarely, never shied from; humor mixed mercifully with horror.

In "Glass," a middle-aged woman, seeing that her "sullen child was not running off to a bright future like other girls, but was going to meet some new kind of misery," suddenly finds herself flooded with 20 years' worth of pent-up rage, most of it directed toward her chatterbox sister-in-law. Then the sister-in-law, scraping for a nickel, gets her hand stuck in a mayonnaise jar and, after a weekend of fruitless effort, finally asks the narrator to set her free by breaking the jar with a hammer. The sister-in-law, her hand encased in glass, babbling about the nature of language; her leering brother, overseeing the whole business, a man who "talked to himself and talked to the dead and needed somebody to see that he washed"; the narrator herself, holding the delicious possibility of vengeance — the hammer — right in her hand: these elements combine to form a story that is at once comic, cathartic and refreshingly bizarre, as well as exemplary of what Mary Bush can do when she's going at full speed.

The weaker stories in the collection, unfortunately, are clustered near the beginning. Especially when compared with Ms. Bush's best work, they have a glib, prefabricated feel about them, like tract houses; they lack the tautness, the sense of urgency that suffuses "Glass" and "Underground Railroad." And though most readers will probably want to judge this writer on the basis of her best work, not her weakest, they will have to get through a trio of forgettable stories before they have the chance to see her working at the height of her abilities. Not all, I fear, will have the patience.

For those willing to endure a certain amount of frustrated page-flipping, however, the journey to the dazzling last two stories — "Glass" and "Underground Railroad" — will have been worth the effort. Here one has the sense that Mary Bush knows too well the dark and hopeless habitations of her characters; she speaks with a sincerity that bypasses the vagaries of literary ambition, opening a clean, direct line of communication, heart to heart. No sentimentalist, she celebrates the smaller victories, the paniced bravery, the bitten lip, the child's valiant and terrified effort to keep disaster from touching another child. When salvation does come, it is ardent and gratifying: the carved soap animals given a terrorized girl in the title story, another "small, good thing" like the pie tasted by that boy who has not eaten pie in a year — "blackberry maybe," he tells us, "so sweet it hurts me."

When Things Got Really Bad

I remember when Robert came to live with us, after our father died. I remember, too, the story Ma would tell about when I was born, how I looked so dark... she thought they had given her the wrong baby. "She looked just like an Indian," she said. Robert heard that story, and he started calling me Injun and saying how someday he would find an Indian family to send me back to... Ma heard him talk like that to me, but never said a word...

When things got really bad with Robert, though, Ma said she felt like he had a temper. Sometimes he'd slap her for it... He'd gone after us just once and Ma lit into him... Then afterward, because we were scared and crying, she came into our room. She stood in the doorway, like a caught animal... "You'll be all right," she said. She didn't come any closer.

From "A Place of Light."
Local author shows readers ‘the light’

A PLACE OF LIGHT

BY BRIAN G. BOURKE
Staff Writer

Y oknapatawpha, Conifer Prairies, Wineberg-Flaxbox.
The history of American literature is the history of a land and its effects on people. In many cases, the land becomes as famous as the fictional characters who inhabit it.

Syracuse’s Mary Bush doesn’t name places, nor does she make up names for them. But her setting is unmistakably the rural regions of Upstate New York. And the confines of that land, the peculiarity of its terrain, is as crucial to character and plot as Faulkner’s wild Mississippi, Updike’s suburban New England or Anderson’s Ohio.

The Canastota native won 1985 PEN/Nelson Algers award for the best unfinished collection of stories. Well, now it’s finished and it’s a real beauty of a collection.

“A Place of Light” introduces us to a land and its people. We walk with them, talk with them, grow and learn with them — even suffer and die with them.

Bush introduces small-town and rural characters coping with everyday problems, but those characters are anything but simple or ordinary. The lively, usually quick-paced tales in this book follow Bush’s characters on their journeys of discovery.

The mother in the title story gets the courage to dump an abusive lover only after an automobile breakdown forces them to seek help from strangers. In “Hunters,” a young couple faces their feelings for each other, or lack thereof, only after their lives are threatened by armed intruders.

Life’s struggles through the eyes of children appear to be a particular strength of Bush’s writing. Her young girls discover their sexuality, find love — even physical and sexual abuse — without compromising a child-like innocence.

PASSAGES

“...Then I parted some branches so I could pass on, and I stepped into a new place.

“It was an open place, full of light. The grass was short, growing right down close with the earth. Stones and small boulders cropped out from the wide, rolling field. A few clumps of tall weeds with bright purple and yellow flowers stood out against the pale grass and the white rocks. Farther out was a run-down house, and next to it a shed of the same weathered boards. One tree shaded the house, and under the tree was a rusted barrel with red chickens strutting around it.”

—-From “A Place of Light” by Mary Bush.