

Coming of age

by [Thomas H. Schmid](#) in the [May 23, 2001](#) issue

*The Virgin of Bennington* by Kathleen Norris

Those who have been attracted to Kathleen Norris's spiritual writings may be surprised at this departure from her previous work. *The Virgin of Bennington* is a memoir of her emergence from Bennington College into the literary world of New York City between 1969 and 1975. The sexual revolution was in full swing, and her title, of course, relates to her sexual inexperience as an undergraduate. Norris chronicles her sexual initiation during her senior year and her sexual encounters in New York. She has chosen to be candid about this part of her life because it is an integral part of her story of coming to maturity at a revolutionary time in history. However, the main focus of her book is on her employment at the Academy of American Poets and her relationship with her boss and mentor, Elizabeth Kray.

Kray was not herself a poet but what we would today call an arts administrator. She had begun her work at New York's 92nd Street YMHA (I've always heard it called the 92nd Street Y and had assumed it was a YMCA) by scheduling public appearances and readings by contemporary poets. In the late 1950s she became the executive director of the Academy of American Poets and began major efforts to put poetry before the American public. She managed to get foundation grants to fund public readings and appearances, typically held at the Guggenheim or the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In addition to finding well-known poets, such as W. H. Auden, she searched out young, unknown writers for these appearances.

It was Kray's idea to make readings and workshops by working poets available first to the New York City schools, and then to public schools across the country. Norris speaks of how she and the man who was to become her husband left New York to move to her grandparents' home in a small town in South Dakota and there in the 1980s joined the poets-in-the-schools program run by the South Dakota Council for the Arts--a spin off of Kray's original program.

As a (junior) assistant at the Academy of American Poets, Norris helped with the poetry readings by chauffeuring the poets, trying to quell their nervousness, testing

microphones and acoustics, sobering up one, getting a hot meal for another. During those years her first book of verse was published, and Kray helped her through the postpartum depression that writers so often experience following publication. Norris recalls wonderful details about the ways in which Kray encouraged her development as a poet, writer and human being. "I like the person you are becoming," Kray told Norris toward the end of Kray's life. The reader will, too.

Not everyone who found Norris's previous books so meaningful will like this one. It is a book for poets and would-be poets, for those interested in the development of contemporary literature and, especially, for those intrigued by what it was like to come to maturity in the late '60s and early '70s.