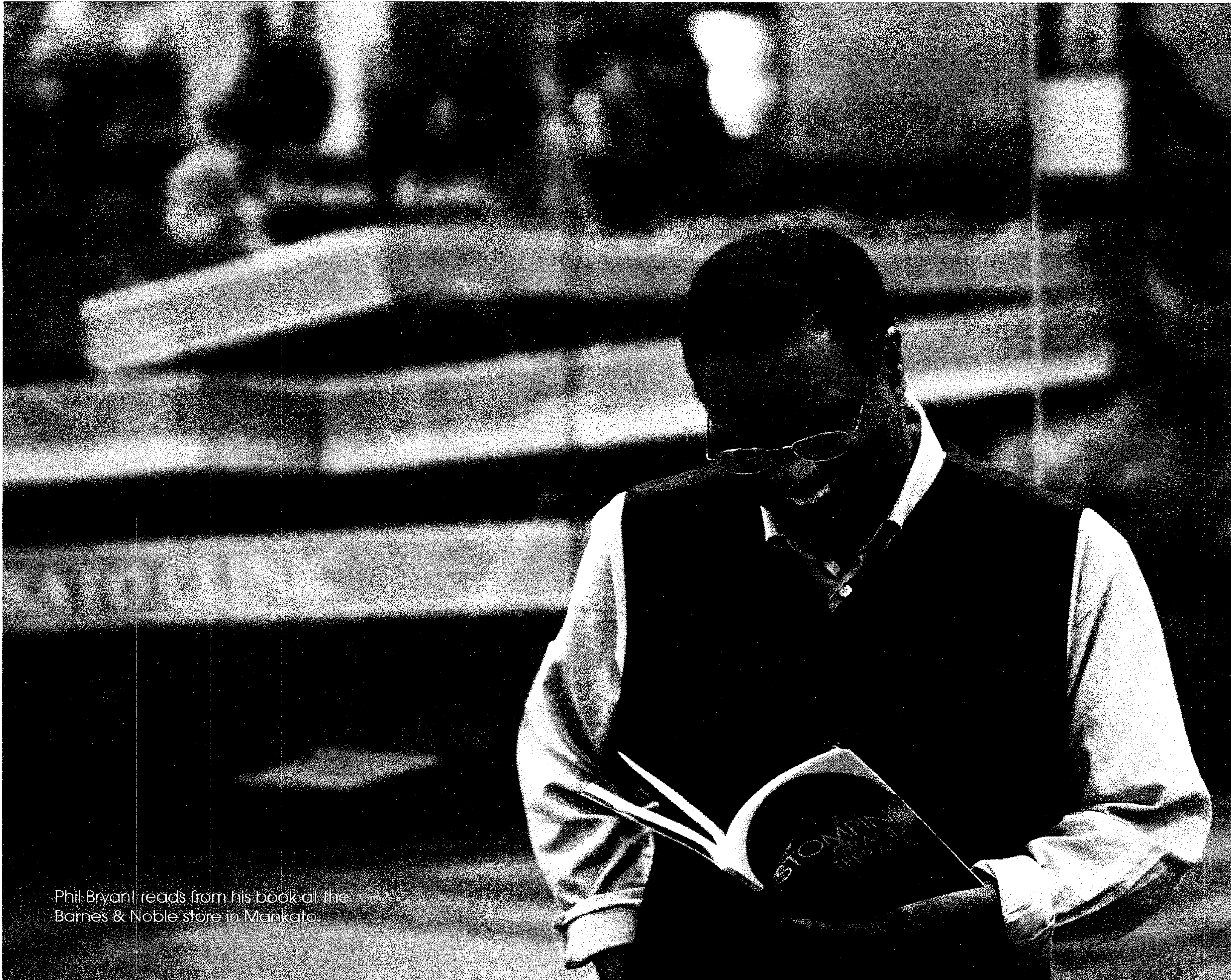




Poetic harmony

Poet Philip Bryant's new book, *Stompin' at the Grand Terrace: A Jazz Memoir in Verse*, has struck a chord on the literary scene. Plus, it comes with a CD to boot.

*By Lisa Bolt Simons
Photographs by Dave McCandless*



Phil Bryant reads from his book at the Barnes & Noble store in Mankato.

Bryant is a self-proclaimed below-garage-level musician on guitar and harmonica, but when he speaks of music, his expertise emits like harmony. As a native of Chicago's South Side, music is practically a part of his DNA.

"At the South Side, it's so much a part of the fabric of the people expressing, documenting, exploring aspects of who and

what they are through the music: R&B, gospel, jazz, soul," Bryant says. "It's all for various things, not just for listening to be entertained. I just remember growing up, people had music on all the time. The music was loud, too. It was just part of the deal."

Long after Bryant left the sounds of the South Side behind him, he could still hear the music. It played on in his writing and is now featured in his third book of poetry, *Stompin' at the Grand Terrace:*

A Jazz Memoir in Verse. This follows 1997's *Blue Island* and 1998's *Sermon on a Perfect Spring Day*, the latter nominated for both the Minnesota Book Award and *ForeWord Magazine's* Award for the best poetry book. Unique to *Stompin'* is a CD that features original music composed by Bryant's childhood friend from Chicago, Carolyn Wilkins (see sidebar on page 10).

Bryant says, "There is the aspect of poetry coming out of isolation where it's kind of been [and] into popular culture itself, to the wider

culture.” When he read his poems to others, they would tell him he had to set them to music, so that they’d sound like they should be.

“Music has always informed how I write poetry in terms of rhythm and sound and words,” Bryant says. “I’ve always been interested in jazz and music, anyway.”

The book mostly speaks of Bryant’s father, James, and his father’s friend, Preston, both immersed in the working class, though James was well read. These two navigate the world of jazz, mostly through argument. Set in the ’50s and ’60s in Chicago when the blue-collar working class society was in full swing, *Stompin’* recalls a time when good jobs were still possible to get, even with a marginal education, and buying a house was an achievable dream. Now, Bryant laments, there are the very poor and the very rich and no – or hardly any – middle class. He quotes Bruce Springsteen: “The jobs are gone, boys and they ain’t coming back.”

Jazz music is central to Bryant’s poems, but he feels it’s a catalyst to reach other topics and ideas. He speaks of his book not only as a memoir because of his dad but also as a way to tell and preserve James’ and Preston’s story.

“Here are two guys,” Bryant explains, “basically working class guys, collecting thousands and thousands of records and arguing at length about them because they’re passionate about how great this music is.”

Bryant started writing the men’s story well over a decade ago. He has to begin his poems with pen on paper, and then he types them up. He revises a

lot. Stacks upon stacks of his journals sit on a bookcase in his office.

Though his books have taken more than a decade from putting initial words on paper to having those words appear in a book, he is quite thankful for the chance.

“Getting poetry published in book form is very, very hard, unless you’re a poetry superstar,” says Bryant, a two-time Minnesota State Arts Board Literary Fellow. “The publishers aren’t there, and they don’t want to publish it because they aren’t going to make any money on it, right? You queue up with all these other great poets for these small opportunities and small press. It’s a real good opportunity when you do get the chance to publish. That’s your shot. Make it a good one.”

Bringing *Stompin’* to life *Stompin’* got its shot with Blueroad Press, a Minnesota publisher founded in 2007. This is Blueroad’s second book, but it’s the first by a single author. John Gaterud, co-founder of Blueroad, says he had heard of Bryant but only met him two years ago when he read at Minnesota State University, Mankato, as part of the launch of *Where One Voice Ends, Another Begins: 150 Years of Minnesota Poetry* edited by Robert Hedin of Red Wing’s Anderson Center.

“Several of Phil’s poems were included in that anthology,” Gaterud says, “and they knocked me out.”

At first, Gaterud was seeking submissions for the press’s first publication, *Stardust and*

Fate: The Blueroad Reader, a collection of short stories, journalism, poetry and art primarily about the road. Bryant lent him a folder with the poems about James and Preston, and Gaterud realized the collection could be a book. Bryant’s “Saving the Trumpet Kings” was published in the *Reader*, and then the two settled on a deal for *Stompin’*. “Saving the Trumpet Kings” is one of the 70 poems in the book.

“The arc of Phil’s poems and prose pieces is sensational,” Gaterud says. “Each poem stands on its own as a beautiful story, yet the cycle of all 70 stories together creates a stunning narrative format about family, history, community, culture and America’s great original art form: jazz.”

Bryant says that when it comes to jazz, one has to be as disciplined and intentional as if he or she is going to play Chopin, Bach or Beethoven.

“It’s strenuous,” Bryant says. “It’s hard.”

That hard work is paying off. Bryant continues to be recognized for *Stompin’*. He’s been featured in *The Free Press* (Mankato) and on *MinnPost* at minnpost.com. In addition, his book has received positive reviews from the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and *Shelf Awareness*. Read more about Bryant as well as reviews about *Stompin’* at blueroadpress.com.

Sharing the music of poetry

Bryant feels strongly about the connection between poetry and music. His office at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, his alma mater as well as where he teaches, is peppered with photos of writers – Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright – and of jazz greats – Lester Young, or Prez, on tenor sax

continued on next page >

Bryant hands a signed book to one of the audience members at his reading.



The CD

Originally, pre-teens Carolyn Wilkins and Phil Bryant vowed to write an opera. It didn't quite happen that way, but a collaboration happened nonetheless, and more than once.

His South Side Chicago neighbor and then friend since she was five, Wilkins first wrote music for a few of Bryant's poems in *Sermon on a Perfect Spring Day*, a winner of Moorhead's New Rivers Press Many Voices Project. The resulting work was performed at Gustavus as "South Side Suite."

When approached to write more music, Wilkins' gut reaction was that it would be a fun and satisfactory experience because of their collaboration on *Sermon*.

"I also loved the poetry," Wilkins says. "It was about the music, people and places I had known as a kid in Chicago."

The CD consists of 14 tracks, two of which feature Wilkins singing. A songwriter by nature, Wilkins says she adapted the poems to fit the lyrical frame of the song she composed. Most of the other tracks were created based on the specific jazz performers. Wilkins says she tried to create music that would remind the reader of the particular song, performer, or style of jazz referred to in each poem.

She wrote the music bit by bit over several months.

She's no stranger to music — her parents were both musical, and her mother has a Master of Musicology from Smith College. Wilkins' formal study of the piano began when she was 8, though she remembers her toddler self sitting at the black and white keys with her mother.

At Oberlin Conservatory, Wilkins played both the piano and percussion, though it was the latter she chose for the next decade. After receiving her Master of Music Performance from Eastman School of Music, Wilkins became a freelance percussionist in Pittsburgh under William Steinberg and Andre Previn and in Chicago under Aaron Copeland and Mitch Miller. Then she was the tympanist with the Singapore Symphony.

Wilkins realized that the world of symphony offered her, an African-American woman, few opportunities.

"After my daughter was born in 1981," Wilkins says, "I decided to return to my roots and study jazz piano."

She has since taught and performed around New England — most recently a solo concert of her original compositions — in between teaching in the Ensemble Department at Berklee College of Music and composing original work for her childhood friend.

and John Coltrane's Blue Train poster above his computer.

He speaks fondly of the musical culture at Gustavus, what he calls choir central.

"It didn't come out of nowhere. This is a culture that was brought over from the old country and kind of manifested itself here in this way, so you have a great choral tradition here in this state, in this region."

Bryant teaches creative writing, poetry, literature, a winter term course on the blues, and the occasional nonfiction writing class. He teaches his students that poems need to be read out loud.

"Poetry is sound," Bryant explains. "It is patterned sound, and it creates sense. It creates emotion. You're supposed to feel a line of poem rather than

just read it like you're reading a newspaper. That's how you get the poem. That's how it comes into your consciousness, into your body. It's a very physical thing. It's like music where tones, vibrations and harmonies are coming into you."

Diversifying Minnesota's literary scene

Bryant's next project is about Minnesota and living in St. Peter for two decades, which include memories of the 1998 Tornado, when it looked like a bomb, a small tactical nuclear warhead, went off on campus, when his and his neighbors' houses were wrecked, when tens of thousands of trees were lost.



Stompin' at The Grand Terrace: A Jazz Memoir in Verse, Blueroad Press, blueroadpress.com, \$18.95.

Upcoming Readings

OCTOBER 7, 2009

A Stompin' Suite
The Arts Center of Saint Peter

OCTOBER 8, 2009

A Stompin' Suite
Good Thunder Reading Series,
Minnesota State University, Mankato

OCTOBER 9, 2009

A Stompin' Suite
The Loft, Minneapolis

Bryant credits this state for its vital literary community. For one, he is thankful for the opportunity to publish his book of poems, since there are far more good poets than there are small presses. For two, it was the February 2009 passing of his friend Bill

“People like me can come from someplace else and write their story, and that becomes part of the larger Minnesota literary story,” Bryant says. “And it’s getting more diverse.”

Bryant believes that if a writer moves to New York or Chicago,

if the story is about here or there. It becomes inclusive. It’s something of a gift,” Bryant says. “The ethos of it is the community is built as an odd

collection of people who are foolish enough to live here 12 months out of the year.” Then he lets out a hearty laugh, a sort of music all its own. **M**

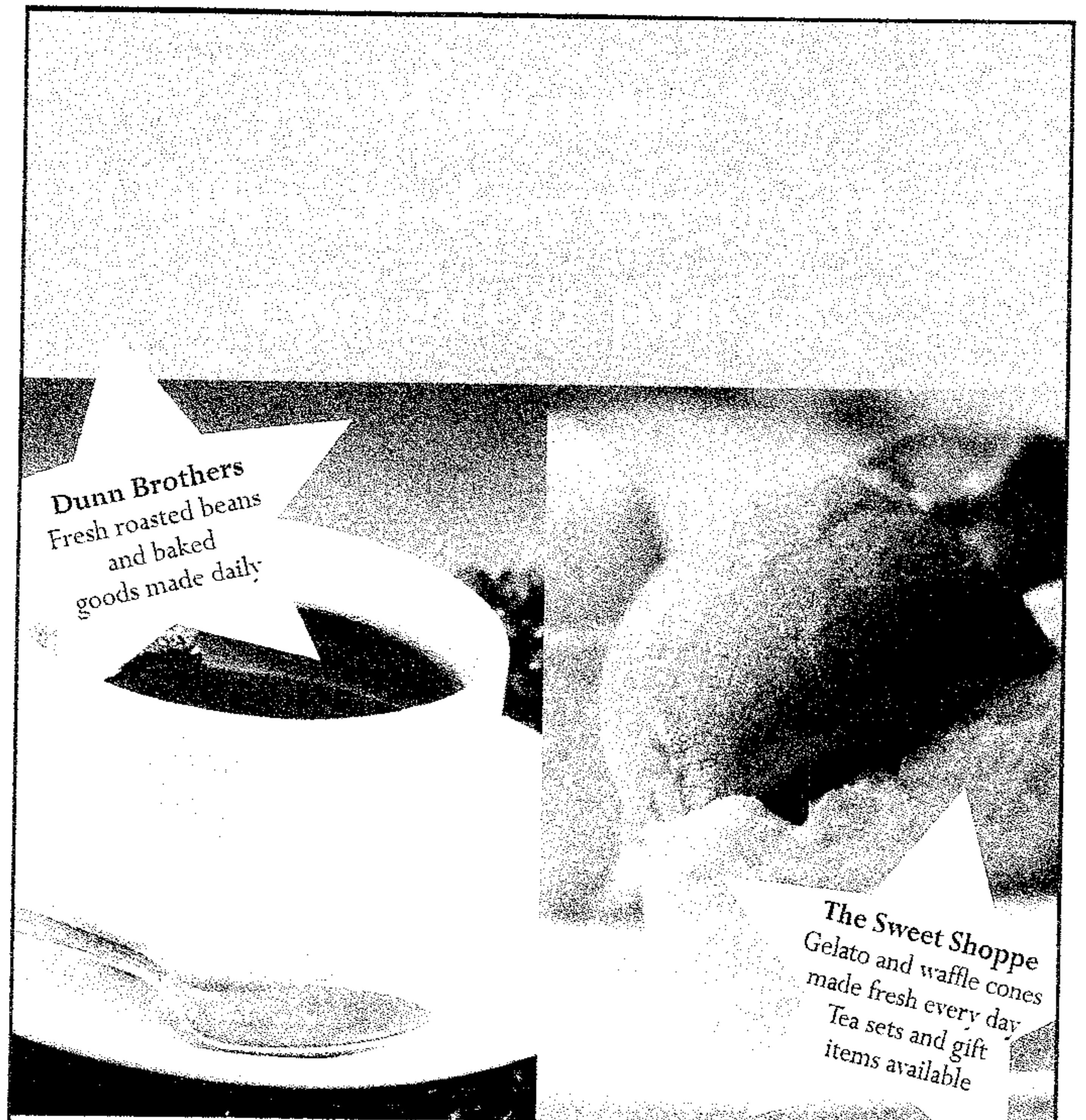
“People like me can come from someplace else and write their story, and that becomes part of the larger Minnesota literary story. And it’s getting more diverse.”

– Philip Bryant

Holm that made Bryant think about the way writers – no matter where they’re from – are celebrated in Minnesota for having a good story. To Bryant, Holm proved to be a great example of a writer who chose to write about his birthplace, but who also helped welcome those not from this region.

that person has to become like everyone already there. Stories generated from that location have to be similar to that location, even if a person isn’t from there.

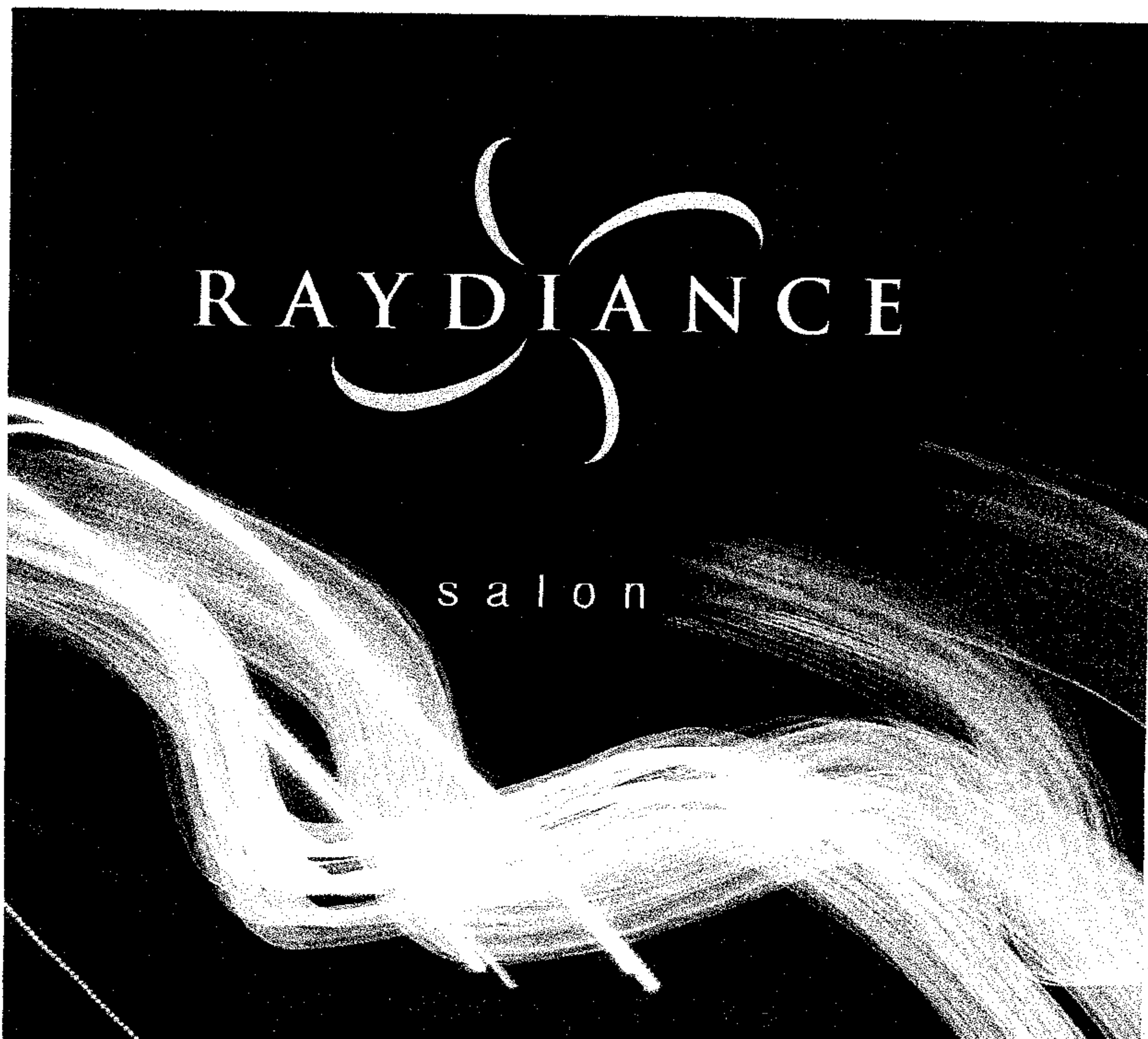
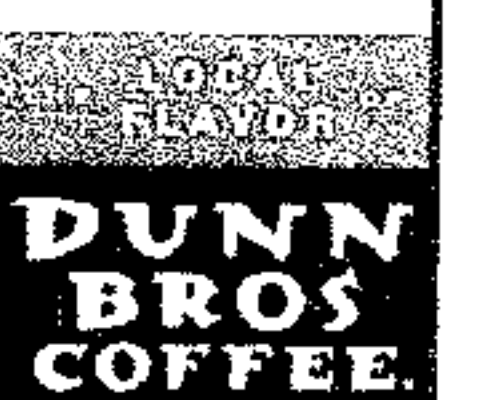
“What’s so wonderful about Minnesota is that if you got a story that’s a good story, people want to hear it. They don’t care



Satisfy your caffeine craving and sweet tooth at **Dunn Brothers** and **The Sweet Shoppe** on Madison Avenue. Make sure to visit **Dunn Brothers** in North Mankato, too.

Mankato
1854 Madison Ave
507.345.3866

North Mankato
1745 Commerce Drive
507.345.1334



Who does your hair?

Raydiance Salon’s clients respond with joy...

“I recommend Raydiance to everyone I know, and they have always been happy. Word of mouth is huge and Raydiance is top notch.” - Victoria B.

“It’s clear to see why this is Mankato’s best salon, not to mention the most fantastic salon I have ever been to!” - Kristin L.

1st time clients receive 10% off services.

www.raydiancesalon.com

Mankato • Minnesota • 56001

11 Civic Center Plaza Suite 101

