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CONTACT:

Hope College, Office of Public Relations
Tom Renner, Director of Public Relations
Office Phone (616) 395-7860; E-Mail trenner@hope.edu

Memoir Reflects on Face Blindness, Family and Forgiveness

HOLLAND – In her newly published memoir “You Don’t Look Like Anyone I Know: A True Story of Family, Face Blindness, and Forgiveness,” Dr. Heather Sellers of the Hope College English faculty explores how an apparent handicap turned out to be a remarkable gift that allowed her to “see” people as they truly were and gave her unexpected insights into the nature of family, forgiveness and love.

The book is being released on Thursday, Oct. 14, by Riverhead Books. The publication will be celebrated locally with a book launch party on Saturday, Oct. 23, from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. at the Washington Square Art Gallery, 453 Washington Ave., in Holland. Hosted by Literary Life Books of Grand Rapids and Pereddies Restaurant, the event will feature musical entertainment by ThreeFiveFour, a duo of Hope students Charlie Walter and Colin Hoogerwerf.

The public is invited to the reception. Admission is free.

Sellers has a highly unusual neurological condition known as face blindness, or prosopagnosia. The disorder, which is believed to affect about two percent of the population, prevents the brain from interpreting the information that it receives from the eyes, with the effect specific to the section or process that deals with face recognition. The eyes function correctly, but the brain can’t make sense of what is being seen.

“I have failed to recognize my step kids, my best friends, even my then-husband,” said Sellers, who has taught at Hope since 1995. “I can’t even recognize myself in a photo or video unless I remember what I was wearing that day, although my huge hair helps.”

The book is about her experiences coming to terms with the disorder, which was undiagnosed until about five years ago. In the memoir, she describes her childhood in Florida, and how the strange circumstances of that upbringing made it impossible for anyone to realize she had the bizarre, troubling condition. She was working about a memoir about her family when she discovered she had the condition after coming across the term “face recognition” in an article.

She eventually connected with the Prosopagnosia Research Center at Harvard University, where researchers confirmed that she had a severe degree of face blindness. Simply having a diagnosis was an enormous relief that profoundly affected her life. But as the researchers also confirmed, to her disappointment, there is no cure for face blindness.

To help others who suffer with the condition in silence, Sellers has appeared on NBC’s “Today” show and on ABC’s “Primetime.” In 2007, she gave a presentation about face blindness during the Winter Happening event coordinated by the college’s office of public and community relations. Every time Sellers speaks on the topic, at least one person in the audience approaches her and tells her they believe they are also face-blind.

As she has reflected on her condition, she has found, unexpectedly, that face blindness has provided her with a perspective that she might otherwise have missed--a way of looking at people, and life, which she hopes will help others.

“I’m isolated by this condition,” she said. “And at the same time, it’s what connects me so deeply to other people: we all have this experience of trying to love others and that is basically a process of attempting to ‘see’ someone, know which person they are.”

“Love is recognition,” she said. “My whole life—while it was a very odd childhood—turned out to be this kind of school in vision, in knowing, in some other kind of recognition. A deeper kind of knowing.”

She hopes that others who read about her journey may find help in their own.

“In some ways, we all are keeping part of ourself even from ourselves,” she said. “I hope that it helps someone who is struggling to fit together parts that maybe don’t all fit. That’s my hope, that it’s a positive story.”

Sellers is the author of several other books, including three volumes of poetry, a collection of short fiction, three books on the writing process and a children’s book. She has had poems, short fiction, memoir and creative nonfiction appear in journals, anthologies and magazines around the country. In 2000, she was one of only 41 writers nationally to receive a National Endowment for the Arts grant for 2000-02 to create original work or translate work; the resulting volume, “Georgia Under Water,” was named a finalist in the 2002 “Paterson Fiction Prize” competition and in 2001 was recognized in the “Discover Great New Writers” program of Barnes & Noble bookstores.

Copies of “You Don’t Look Like Anyone I Know: A True Story of Family, Face Blindness, and Forgiveness” will be available through the college’s Hope-Geneva Bookstore as well as through other area book sellers and online.