

Diamond is a gem

*Downton's
memoir
mix of elegy,
celebration*

By Carol Bruneau

Diamond: A Memoir of 100 Days, by Dawn Rae Downton (McClelland & Stewart, 247 pgs.)

DIAMOND IS A place, a farm in the wilds of Pictou County, to be exact.

In Nova Scotian memoirist Dawn Rae Downton's latest book, named after this dot on the map, it's a state of mind, too. No signs exist to point you to this place.

And the world at its centre is one suspended between despair and hope. Mixing elegy and celebration, *Diamond: A Memoir of 100 Days* documents Downton's loss of her best friend to cancer within months of her homecoming from Vancouver, the author's move from city to country.

While rooted in local colour, the book's true territory is the shadowland between what can be explained and managed, and what cannot.

A follow to her first book, *Seldom*, named as one of Amazon.com's Best Books of 2002, *Diamond* charts the short, tragic journey of Downton's friend from misdiagnosis to death, and the vigil Downton keeps.

It's a story intimately and courageously personal, yet expansive in its urge to tell the truth, the objective truth if such exists. And the truth, as we're reminded in these days of war, is all about ambivalence.

Diamond is no Harrowsmith romp through gilded meadows, no honeyed New Age "embracing" of death. It's an effort to finger and attach words to the unspeakable.

"I wrote the book for Carol, for no one else," Downton says in an interview on the first day of spring — the first day of America's attack on Iraq — in a Halifax coffee shop.



Dawn Rae Downton tells the story of losing her best friend to cancer and of her own rough introduction to country life in her memoir, *Diamond*.

Contributed

"She needed to be heard. She'd say to me, 'you can write this.'

"Knowing she'd be OK with everything — that was my standard.

"Writing the book was me talking to myself," Downton admits.

"Someone dying isn't something you can readily talk to other people about."

Carol's struggle against death, against the way many around her appeared to treat it, as if death can be project-managed, the dying faulted for somehow not quite doing it "right" mirrors Downton's losing battle with the bugs and bugaboos of country living.

What begins as the promised land — and what could seem safer, calmer, more welcoming and serene after an urban morass, than Pictou County? — quickly turns ugly for Downton and her husband, known in the book simply as "B." Survival becomes a comedy of errors.

Just as the Newfoundlanders in her earlier work, Seldom, defy the rubber-booted stereotype so

often recycled in books, life in rural Nova Scotia as Downton tastes it defies the pastoral.

"The neighbours weren't exactly Pollyannas in hunting jackets, you know?" she says, with the humour that spikes Diamond's masterful telling.

The Pictou County Downton experiences is a backwoods of hard living, of trailer dwellers, deer jackers, lonely hippies and good ole boys with flats of beer in the front seat.

Trashed stoves and sofas dot the landscape; and the couple's struggles to get potable water and rid their century farmhouse of spiders and its yard of inherited junk are mired in defeat.

It's a kind of Green Acres meets David Adams Richards: and what redeems it all — what makes Diamond so much more than a book about losing — is Downton's humour, her eye for "the little gifts that cheer you up."

Things as tiny as an essay

misspelling, a cryptic message on an Irving sign — absurdities that make you laugh when you're at the end of your rope: evidence of the cosmos slipping on its own banana peel.

Even getting Diamond into print was a struggle, a test of Downton's mettle. Before finding a home with McClelland & Stewart, it was rejected 49 times for being "a death book" — odd, given its humour; testament perhaps to the quirks of publishing.

Though the hardness of living forms its core, it's about redemption too, summed up by B whose presence lights its pages. Life, he says, "is about finding a good woman and a great bowl of soup."

Living well — honestly, consciously, even when suffering and danger are constants — is good revenge; for the writer, finding the right word's the best revenge of all.

Words come easily to Downton, who now makes her home on

the South Shore, and for all its edge, Diamond has the air of a neighbourly chat on the porch.

Its narrative is interwoven with fact and lore, from the mystique surrounding diamonds to the dangers of cat and dog bites to pharmacology and B's engineering exploits in war-era Vietnam and the North Atlantic.

Running through the memoir — like the brook that cuts through Diamond's fields — is Downton's erudition: a love of literature great and small, from Plato to Nancy Drew.

"My background in books through history showed me the trauma lived by everybody, not just us," she says.

If Diamond is about darkness and light, it's also about science and intuition — about what to do when things that "should" be foolproof fail, and how to make the best of a shadowy, fated world.

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