

# THE SALMAN RUSHDIE OF NOVA SCOTIA

## Pictou County residents seething at book's por- trayal

By Graeme Hamilton

Readings at the New Glasgow, N.S. public library are usually tame affairs, but then it is not every day an author appears who has written that the local population acts like it is stunned by chloroform.

When Dawn Rae Downton read from her new memoir, *Diamond*, she was met by about 10 hecklers who did not appreciate her unvarnished portrayal of Pictou County, their rural corner of Northern Nova Scotia.

Ms. Downton never dreamed her book, which is essentially the story of 100 days spent caring for a dying friend, would make her Nova Scotia's own Salman Rushdie. But after being greeted with abuse at what was supposed to be a celebration of her second book and receiving what she considers a veiled threat, the writer is being careful not to disclose her whereabouts or have her telephone number widely circulated.

"I think we live in a world where people's behaviour is not very predictable, and I like my privacy as a writer in any case,"

she said in an interview when asked whether she is concerned for her safety. As for her new home, she would only say that it is somewhere on Nova Scotia's South Shore.

It was last Wednesday evening that one of Ms. Downton's first events to promote *Diamond: A Memoir of 100 Days* turned sour. After moving from the Pictou County farmhouse where she and her husband had lived for three years, Ms. Downton had been looking forward to returning to the community to catch up with acquaintances, and share the writing they had partly inspired.

But a few days before the reading, she got a call from the organizers at the library. "They had been fielding a lot of calls from the locals saying, 'How can you let this woman come in and read from this dreadful book. You shouldn't have this woman or the book on your premises,'" Ms. Downton said.

"I felt the best thing to do was to go ahead and act like a writer in Canada who's not going to be censored. I really feel strongly about censorship, and I just think an attempt by small-minded people to shut anyone down is not good, and I wasn't going to submit to it," she said.

"So I just went ahead and read. Or tried to."

The catcalls were not long in coming. One woman pointed out the farmhouse in the photo on the dust jacket was not the one Ms. Downton had bought in the tiny community of Diamond. "You've never been at Diamond, there's never been a house like this at Diamond, never," Ms. Downton said she was told. An explanation that the publishing house designs the covers would not deter the critics.

Another audience member warned that her writing had crossed the line. "They said something like 'There's going to be consequences. You could be surprised.' I don't know what that's supposed to mean. I take it as a threat," she said.

Ms. Downton, who was born in Newfoundland but raised in Nova Scotia, conceived of *Diamond* as an account of the 100 final days of the life of her best friend, Carol, who was diagnosed with cancer shortly after Ms. Downton moved back to Nova Scotia from Vancouver. But the backdrop is Pictou County, and while she says she also has kind things to say, she did not set out to write a tourist brochure.

Recalling the Westray coal mine explosion that killed 26 men there in 1992, she wrote of Pictou County as “a place of cavalier disregard, of operators and political opportunism, of oblivion.....The drivers on the streets are slow, spaced out at the traffic lights; the shoppers in the town stand and stare and block the aisles of the stores with their carts as if they’re the only ones in the place. It’s as if North America’s first batch of chloroform, produced here a century and a half ago, has hung on in a cloud.”

She marveled at the pickup trucks cruising up and down her deserted country road. “Turns out that it’s a social event. Buddy picks up buddy, they drink and drive. They have to because the wife won’t let them sit and drink at home,” she wrote.

She criticized the drunken deer hunters and recounted a visit from Everett, a neighbour, asking whether he could hunt on her land. She described him as “raised on Canadian Club and chainsaws and looking like he’s not long out of animal skins himself.”

Valerie Sutherland, Everett’s mother-in-law, said the depiction was cruel. “She doesn’t know him at all,” she said, adding that Everett’s children are being teased at school as a result of the book.

“She calls Pictou a garbage dump. It’s not right,” Ms. Sutherland said. “It’s insulting to the whole community.” She said some residents are looking at possible legal action against the author.

Steve Goodwin, a reporter with the weekly *Pictou Advocate*, attended the reading and described an agitated audience. “She has written as an outsider, describing Pictou County, warts and all. People here don’t like that,” he said in an interview.

Ms. Downton said she understands where the virulent opposition to her writing comes from. “My experience as an Atlantic Canadian is that we are very defensive. We realize that Torontonians and Vancouverites see us as poor, uneducated, somewhat cute and bumbling.....I think that we have become defensive and I think that’s brought on some self-censorship. I think now that we are very afraid to talk about ourselves in anything but the tourist-brochure manner, and that’s really unfortunate,” she said. “I think I broke some sort of taboo.”



**“I just think an attempt by small-minded people to shut anyone down is not good,” says Dawn Rae Downton, who was heckled at a reading.**

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