

Ghost sat next to author

Grandmother's presence helped memoir writer

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Special to The Gazette

Saul Bellow once said that "a writer works in isolation." But the whole time Dawn Rae Downton was working on *Seldom*, her courageous, moving memoir of life in an early 20th-century Newfoundland outpost, she couldn't help feeling she was not alone. Ethel Wellon Wiseman, Downton's grandmother, whose harrowing story *Seldom* recounts, was always with her.

"I was 4 months old when my grandmother died," Downton said by telephone recently from her farm on Nova Scotia's North Shore. "When I wrote *Seldom* I certainly felt visited by ghosts. I loved the ghost of my grandmother, however - hers was a warm and cushiony presence I could wrap around me. Ethel, the friendly ghost.

"I had her portrait right by my keyboard. In it, she was 18, innocent, unravaged by time or the hard place she lived. ... It was odd to have her, 45 years dead, sitting on my shoulder while I wrote about her, putting the words in her mouth as I sometimes had to. Would I get them right?"

The answer to that question is clearly yes. Downton has worked more than two decades as a freelance writer and critic, but *Seldom* is her first book. Still, it doesn't feel like a debut. It's also a work of personal history that is, at the same time, a triumph of the literary imagination - a testament to a



writer's capacity for creative, conscientious guesswork.

The real life characters she recreates – Ethel, her grandfather Sidney Wiseman, her aunts and uncles and, perhaps most movingly, her mother Marion as a young girl – are pitch perfect. Even the things Downton couldn't possibly know, she somehow does.

Like how Ethel – and her children – endured so much torment at the hands of her brutal husband Sidney Wiseman, better known as Skipper Sid. Or how Marion gradually came to realize that her father's abuse had to stop and she'd have to be the one to stop it.

"A writer makes guesses. In some ways a memoirist makes more guesses than a fiction writer does," explained Downton, who is readying a short-story collection and working on a novel. "The memoirist has some 'facts' to start with. But what in the world do they all add up to?"

"The fiction writer, on the other hand, decides on motivations and causes and connections for her characters. ... Ironically, the memoirist or biographer doesn't have the luxury of such certainty."

But Downton's done her research in Seldom, too. With an ear for the rugged lilt of Depression-era Newfoundland

Ethel Wellon Wiseman, who died 45 years ago, was the author's grandmother.

English and an eye for the unforgiving corners of the landscape, Downton brings the place as well as its people to life. In *Seldom* – the title refers to the name of the outpost where Ethel and Sidney were married – geography is destiny.

"It was cold, so what? This was Newfoundland; everything was cold," Downton writes. "Rescue, now. Rescue was what mattered. There was salvation from without – or there wasn't. You couldn't save yourself."

Downton's grandmother certainly couldn't. Ethel's marriage to a man whose brutality is fueled by self-pity is a disaster from the start. Skipper Sid is violent the way a Newfoundland storm is – without rhyme or reason. He is, Downton writes, "like doom, always coming."

As a child, Downton remembers hearing stories about her grandfather – like the time he shot the family dog in front of his family – but they sound-

ed like fairy tales, with Skipper Sid cast as a kind of bogeyman. When Downton got older she realized the stories were true and that the terrible pain her grandfather had inflicted on his family had never gone away. She also realized that pain was part of her.

But if *Seldom*, which will be published in spring 2003 in the U.S., now feels like the story Downton was meant to tell, for a long time she couldn't imagine herself telling it. Instead she wrote another memoir, *Diamond*, about the Nova Scotia farm she moved to a few years ago, and the death of a close friend.

Diamond was rejected 49 times by Canadian publishers and 18 times by Canadian agents – yes, she counted. (Perseverance is obviously a family trait.) But when McClelland & Stewart passed on the manuscript, they were impressed enough with Downton's writing to ask if she had any other ideas. She had *Seldom*. (Incidentally,

M&S is also publishing *Diamond* in November.)

Even then, Downton wasn't sure she could write the book, mainly because she knew how hard it would be for her mother to relive her childhood. But finally she convinced herself – and her mother, who Downton calls her "north star" in the book's acknowledgements – that telling the story would honour Ethel's memory and her suffering.

"I told my mother that it's about time her mother was allowed to speak and be heard, not be silenced any more, not shut up and beaten down by her husband and her times and her small-town life," Downton said. "I told her it's time we went home again. We did. *Seldom* is where we went."

❖ *Seldom*, by Dawn Rae Downton (McClelland & Stewart, 292 pp, \$34.99)

❖ Dawn Rae Downton reads from *Seldom* at the Double Hook bookstore, 1235A Greene Ave., April 16, at 7:30 p.m.

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