

Rejection queen

>> Dawn Rae Downton survives Newfoundland and 136 snubs to publish *Seldom*

by JULIET WATERS

It takes guts to accumulate 87 rejections for short stories and 49 rejections for a novel. Dawn Rae Downton has acquired enough experience being rejected that she recently wrote an article for the *Globe & Mail* comparing the rejection styles of editors, publishers and agents on both sides of the border, ocean and planet (Australian and New Zealand rejections are the most cheerful). What drives her?

“I’ve been competitive all my life and I thought, if I’m going to get all these rejections, I want more rejections than the next guy. It was really a matter of saying, I’ve got this many, how many have you got? And people would be really impressed. Writers risk rejection all the time—and it’s a rejection of their very inner self—there’s nothing worse. But a true writer will use it as material.”

After reading *Seldom*, Downton's first published novel/memoir, there's no arguing she's a true writer. An *Angela's Ashes* for Newfoundland, the title is the name of the outport where Downton's grandparents were married. But the word "seldom" would be too generous to describe how many moments of happiness this marriage produced. Still, life in Newfoundland has a kind of magical severity. Sidney Wiseman and Ethel Wellon are married within a week of Ethel losing both a niece and nephew to diphtheria. After disease, drowning and storms have taken their toll, it seems rare for more than half the children in any turn of the century Newfoundland family to survive into adulthood. Maybe that's why places are named for children who will probably not live long enough to know anything beyond hardship and fairy tales: Ladle cove, Burnt Woods, Goat Island, and Big Tickle, where the Wisemans settle down.

Seldom is Downton's mother Marion's memoir. Marion's childhood is filled with intense love but even more intense abuse. The hands that Marion used to warm in her gentle mother's hair, are the same frozen hands her father beat into a bloody swollen pulp, when Marion once disobeyed him, at age five. At six her father tries to cure her of her terror of the sea by tying a rope around her and throwing her overboard into subzero water. Not much later. Marion's baby brother falls off a wharf and almost drowns. Afraid to admit she might have pushed him by mistake while playing with the family dog, Sailor, Marion blames the dog. Sidney shoots Sailor in front of his six children. All their lives he never allows Sailor's bed to be removed from the kitchen, insisting they might get another dog, though they never do.

Sidney Wiseman is a sick, narcissistic ogre who creates, despite himself, a family so united in mutual protectiveness that miraculously all the children do manage to survive.

This survivor mentality must be something Downton has inherited. After all those rejections, she managed to sell two books to McClelland and Stewart. *Diamond: A Memoir of a Hundred Days*, a journal of her grief over losing a close friend, is due to be published next year.

She'll admit she's a true writer, but Downton doesn't consider herself a true Newfoundlander. Her forebears were anything but introspective. They'd prefer to just get on with life than write memoirs. I ask Downton how she could persevere, not only in writing two books about death, but to resist the temptation, after all that rejection, to just shove them into a drawer forever. She laughs.

“Oh no, I could never get tired of death. Sweetie, I've only just started. Death is my thing. I find that I'm probably over-bonded to things and in a way that other people might not find useful. But it's what I got. Death is my subject. Death is a huge insult, especially when it comes after a life that's not been fully lived, like my grandmother's. I just feel like going on and on about it and have my say. You should see me at parties.”
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Seldom by Dawn Rae Downton, McClelland & Stewart, hc, 293pp, \$34.99

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