

# Seldom was heard an encouraging wor

# TORONTO STAR

## Newfoundland memoir as stormy as its outpost setting

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The "Seldom" in *Seldom: A Memoir* by Dawn Rae Downton is actually Seldom-Come-By, a Newfoundland outpost where the author's grandparents lived. What seldom came by, in their case, was domestic happiness.

It's not an unheard of story. Dawn Rae's maternal grandmother, Ethel Wellon, a schoolteacher, married Sidney Wiseman, a skipper, in *Seldom* in 1922. Ethel was a pious, loving parent. Sidney was a brute.

What is highly unusual about the memoir is that Dawn Rae enlisted the aid of her mother, Marion — who experienced Sidney Wiseman's rages at first hand — in order to reconstruct the history of this extremely troubled family. "My mother's not in great health and I sometimes wonder if it was a good thing for me to ask her to contribute to this book," Downton, 45, says. "She needs more serenity in her life now."

Her assistance, in any case, was indispensable, since the book describes events that occurred, for the most part, before Dawn Rae Downton was born. Some of this description involves things that no one liv-

ing can know — such as the intimate thoughts and feelings of Ethel Wellon on her wedding day. "It's a well-known tradition by now," Downton says of this style of memoir. "Even a documentary is not a presentation of facts — it's a *selected* presentation of facts. There's hardly any such thing anymore as a documentary, and I don't think *Seldom* is any the less true for having a creative literary memory. What I would think is that it's way more true because I made educated guesses about what my main characters were thinking and feeling."

Her mother, at least, seems to agree. "Mom and I have always been close, but I would say we're even closer now," Downton says. "It was just a great experience writing this book."

There's no denying that it's a sad story, a chronicle of one man's meanness and inexplicable rage to thwart his wife and children, sometimes with actual beatings. Downton gives no pat answer to the mystery of her grandfather's behaviour. "It wouldn't have interested me to say something like, 'Well, Skipper Sid was dropped on his head when he was three years old and that accounts for his brain pathology and his nastiness in mid-life,'" she comments. "As a writer, I would never dream of trying to explain away my characters like that." In the book, she does attribute to her mother Marion a moment of insight into Sid's

character: "He was jealous of everyone; he was envy incarnate. Virtue, the kind of virtue that everyone loved except him — that was Mom. Everyone loved Mom, and for that the Old Man punished her."

Of course, it can be trying to be married to a saint, Sid might tell us from the grave. While he stormed, she read her Bible. "One of the things I struggled with most was my grandmother's religious beliefs," Downton says. "I don't have it, I don't share it, but I really wanted to respect it in her. I know it meant everything to her — her children and her religious belief. I didn't want to dismiss it, I wanted to get at that. My grandmother was an intelligent woman and she was intelligent enough to know she needed solace and that religion provided it."

In the end, Ethel Wellon Wiseman triumphed. "One of my grandmother's biggest accomplishments was to keep her children alive, and she did so well that not only did they survive but they made good lives for themselves," Downton comments.

Downton's own mother, however, had her struggles even after she left home in *Seldom*. As it happened, she married a man who turned out to be another version of her father. Unlike her mother, she did not stick with the marriage, but left her husband and moved to Nova Scotia, with two young children in tow. "She came over to the mainland and upgraded her nursing degree and supported us as a single mom," Downton recalls. "We weren't rich kids, we wore hand-me-downs, and suffered in school because of that, but she brought us up well."

Today Downton lives with her husband, a self-employed electronics engineer, and their three cats and four ducks, in rural Nova Scotia, near Pictou — a region of farmers descended from old Scottish families, aging hippies and draft dodgers, and lesbian dairy farmers. Downton, a former arts journalist and critic and a writer of fiction whose work has appeared in numerous literary journals, finds the quiet atmosphere conducive to writing. "We're not even in the town, we're at the end of a dirt road — many a time in the winter it takes four or five days before we can get out," she says of her current habitat. "It's very isolated, so you can really feel it, and at the same time it's very serene. I love my ducks and my garden and my low overhead. You can feel lonely at times, but it's probably the best environment a writer can have."



**DAWN RAE DOWNTON:** Writer enlisted her mother's help in reconstructing turbulent family saga.