

Seek solace in Seldom

*Author puts to rest family's
struggle with past pain*

By Virginia Beaton

IF THERE'S ONE thing that author Dawn Rae Downton misses about living in Halifax, it's the weekend coffee ritual.

"I used to live in the hydrostone and every Saturday I'd come here to Julien's and have coffee. It was so civilized," says Downton, as she savours her mug of coffee.

and six children, while pretending to be an upstanding member of the community.

Why he acted that way, Downton still doesn't know. "As a writer, I didn't want to solve that," she says quietly.

"At a reading in Montreal, a psychiatrist told me what his diagnosis would be — he was narcissistic."

Instead, Downton relies on her mother's assessment of her



Darren Pittman / Herald Photo

Dawn Rae Downton has published her first book, a memoir about her family in Newfoundland.

Downton now lives on a large farm overlooking the Northumberland Strait. Since moving back to Nova Scotia from British Columbia several years ago, the former director of the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia has focused on her own writing.

Her first book, titled *Seldom*, is the story of her mother's family and is set in their small outport community of Seldom on Newfoundland's northeast coast. It's a wrenching tale of a family dominated by a bullying father, but ultimately saved by the forbearance and generosity of a mother.

"It's been in my mind for a long time to write this," says Downton. "Over the years I tried. . . But it was scary to look at the monsters in your own family."

The monster she refers to is her grandfather Sidney Wiseman. According to accounts from Downton's mother Marion and her siblings, Wiseman was a brute.

Spoiled, angry and vengeful, he was a tyrant who beat and psychologically abused his wife

childhood, and especially on her affectionate memories of her mother, Ethel.

"I talked to all kinds of people in my family," Downton says. As she researched the genealogy "I had a family tree the size of my dining room table."

In *Seldom*, Downton examines how her family exemplifies the lives of countless others in Newfoundland.

Born in 1900, Sidney Wiseman was a prosperous skipper when he married schoolteacher Ethel Wellon in 1922. The match looked ideal but Ethel almost immediately realized that her new husband was disturbed. She left him briefly, telling her parents that he was "a madman . . . born of a madwoman" but she was persuaded to return to him.

The couple had six children, one of them being Downton's mother Marion. Ethel and her children led miserable lives, as Wiseman veered between a monumental indifference to their welfare to beatings and threats.

In one horrifying incident, Sidney chokes his wife almost to

death and when 13-year-old Marion tells him to stop beating her mother, he chokes her as well, only stopping when his son Tom intervenes. Following that, Sidney stopped speaking to Marion for the next two years.

Seldom is the intimate account of a troubled family, but the author also examines some major events in provincial history, as their impact was felt throughout the colony.

There's the 1914 sealing disaster that saw 78 men die while stranded on the ice, the tragic fate of the Newfoundland Regiment in the First World War, and epidemics of diseases like tuberculosis and diphtheria that took a terrible toll, directly affecting families like the Wisemans.

Downton's writing is lyrical but also as forceful as a January outport storm, as she conveys the beauty as well as the stark pain of these lives.

As she looked at her family history, Downton says "I started to realize how many ways there were to die before you were five years old in Newfoundland."

Drownings, fatal burns and infections were commonplace, she notes.

"I never realized how much Ethel, my grandmother, was affected by the deaths of two of her little cousins just a week before her marriage."

The distress of learning about her grandfather's character was balanced by the knowledge of her grandmother's radiant goodness. Though Ethel Wiseman died when Downton was four months old, people still recall her fondly, Downton says.

"She had a warmth. . . She had the utter respect and love of the entire community."

As for her mother's feelings about *Seldom*, Downton says "My mother had a lot of conflict about it, but she wanted to tell her mother's story finally."

While Downton has enjoyed some of the recent fiction set in Newfoundland I thought the TV version of *Random Passage* was really good, her mother is more skeptical.

"She didn't like *The Shipping News*," Downton reports.

Though Downton was born in St. John's, she has spent most of her life on the mainland. After leaving the Writers' Federation, she spent five years as director of the Halifax YWCA, and then moved to British Columbia to be director of Planned Parenthood.

But her writing ambitions have never flagged. Downton's play *Blessed* was staged in Toronto in 1994 and her short fiction has appeared in literary journals including *Fiddlehead* and *Descant*.

Downton and her husband have a house on 107 acres near Scotsburn. "We could farm it but we don't. We do have four ducks."

Her next book *Diamond*, a memoir about moving back to Nova Scotia, is due out from McClelland and Stewart. Downton is also working on a short story collection and a novel. "But novels are tricky because they keep changing," she says with a sigh.

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