

Terrible tales true: author

BY DEANA STOKES SULLIVAN
The Telegram

As a child, Dawn Rae Downton was always intrigued by stories her mother, Marion, told her about growing up in the tiny Newfoundland outport of Seldom, Notre Dame Bay.

Downton, who moved to Nova Scotia with her mother and sister when she was three, says they were more like tales from the Brothers Grimm.

In fact, they were so sad and scary, she never believed they could actually be true until she was in her early teens.

"The one that really sticks with me was the story of Sailor the dog, and how this bogeyman got mad at the dog one day and collected the little children and shot the dog in front of the kids," she says.

Another sad tale her mother told her was about her little brother, who was locked in his room for a whole summer.

None of his siblings were allowed to speak to him, pass him anything to read or take food to him, said Downton.

She says it's hard to explain how the realization came about, but one day when she was about 13, it just hit her that these were real people. The stories were about her mother's childhood, and about her own grandfather.

"I was stunned by the enormity of the stories and that this could have happened. They really haunted me," Downton said.

Delayed writing story

An award-winning writer and journalist with three university degrees — including a PhD in English — Downton avoided writing about her mother's childhood for a number of years. At the same time, she wanted to write a book in honour of her grandmother, Ethel Wellon, a teacher who in 1922 married Sidney Wiseman and was the mother of six children.

Downton knew that in doing so, she'd have to nail the details and put the right words in the mouths of people now long dead — particularly that of her grandmother, who died when Downton was only four months old.

"I have a real respect for my grandmother. I admire her so much and I didn't want to make any mistakes with her," she explains.

"I felt that she had been silenced all her life by where she lived, in a little outport iced in for four or five months a year. In the 1910s, '20s and '30s, women didn't have much of a voice anyway, so she had been silenced by her times, and she had certainly been, most of all, silenced by her husband.

"Yet she was a woman with marvel-



Dawn Rae Downton.

ous things to say."

Ethel Wellon had been well educated and spoke several languages. She was often called upon to communicate with skippers of foreign ships that came to Little Bay Islands to buy supplies and salt cod.

She is the central figure in *Seldom*, Downton's first memoir-style book, recently published by McClelland and Stewart. Although it is a story of many sorrows — including the deaths of young children from tuberculosis and other diseases — there is also a lot that is positive.

"The kids didn't have a dreadful childhood. In some ways, I think my mom's brothers and her sister were closer, and have a richer experience in life now than they might have had otherwise. They don't live on the surface of anything. They're not afraid of looking into things and looking at the darkness, because I think the more darkness you look into, the brighter the light is when you see the light.

"That's what my experience in life has been, anyway," she says.

Downton's mother, now 78, helped her to recreate the past. It was difficult for her to think back to her youth, with its painful experiences, but Downton says it was a "real testament of love."

"My mother never hated her father. All she wanted was to have him love her," the author adds.

She said her mother, who became a nurse, repeated the pattern of her own mother's life, marrying a charming man whom she later discovered was cold. But instead of staying in the marriage, in 1959 Marion left Newfoundland with her two daughters to make a new life in Nova Scotia. For a woman to make the decision to be a single parent and move away with two young children was almost unheard of at the time.

Downton says writing *Seldom* was a means of reclaiming some sense of family that she lost as a young child.

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