

A coincidental read? Verily I think not

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Sometimes, I see life as a giant connect-the-dot puzzle, our seemingly random conversations solid enough on their own, but much more interesting when they are connected line by line, giving us a bigger picture, a grander narrative.

This is such a story. It begins with a conversation and ends with a whole book.

About a month ago, I was in a Toronto meeting that was interrupted by one of the few things that can truly derail a business agenda -- death.

In this case, the death of an infant; a still-born child.

Several of my colleagues left our meeting to attend the funeral and when they returned, we could all feel the weight of their particular grief. As we put business aside and talked instead about this sad death, I recommended a book to one of my colleagues, suggesting, in time it might be one she could give to the grieving parents.

The book is called *Shadow Child*, an Apprenticeship in Love and Loss.

It was written by New Brunswick author Beth Powning about her own journey after the loss of a still-born child. The title alone is profound; the book, even more so. I read it when it was first published in 1999 and its imprint never left me.

The day after I talked about the book, I boarded my flight to Moncton and sat beside a woman who looked vaguely familiar. But I was tired and wanted to sleep through the evening flight. She seemed intent on writing in a little black journal. Neither of us spoke to the other until the plane touched down on the tarmac.

And then, peering through the plane's rain-splattered window, I spoke those safe, mundane words of travellers: "Looks like a messy night out there . . . do you still have far to go?"

"Sussex," my seatmate replied. And I realized immediately who the woman was.

I was sitting beside Beth Powning and without thinking informed her of this startling fact -- as if she didn't already know herself quite well.

Although *Shadow Child* was my first in-person introduction to Powning (I interviewed and wrote about her after the book was published) I'd actually 'met' her some years before through another book, *Seeds of Another Summer*.

This gloriously large coffee-table book is full of Powning's nature photographs and essays about settling into rural life in New Brunswick with her sculptor husband, Peter and their son Jake.

Sometimes an author captures your soul the moment you open one of her books.

Powning did that to me with *Seeds of Another Summer* and then sealed our relationship as she continued to publish, first *Shadow Child*, then *The Hatbox Letters*, then *Edge of Seasons*, and most recently, *The Sea Captain's Wife*.

Readers often want to know as much as possible about the authors of well-loved books. Beth Powning's readers are blessed in this regard, because she is an author who is generous with herself, as well as with her words.

I visited her home once, when she, Peter and Jake hosted a tour of their studios. I listened to her read from one of her books at Chapters. Now I'm a fan on her FaceBook page, where I marvel at how consistently she replies to the posts made by friends and fans alike.

I've read her chatty newsletters about rural life which she posts on her website. If I was a member of a

book club, I'd invite Powning to visit, because it's obvious by the schedule she keeps that she loves to meet with readers.

Although I'd vaguely been aware that 2010 represented another book for Powning, I'd somehow missed the publication and launch of *The Sea Captain's Wife*. The launch was done with great fanfare -- the Sussex Legion having been transformed into an 1860s sailing ship.

Participants wore period dress borrowed from Kings Landing.

But rather than seeing a visual representation of the book, I relied on it coming to life by reading it. There's no loss in that, of course -- it's the way most books come to life for readers.

And it did come to life for me -- and it wore me out! This is not because it's boring -- in fact it's such a page-turner that I read the first three quarters of the book in a five-hour reading marathon. It was 3 a.m. when I finally turned off my light. The next night, I finished the rest of the book at 2 a.m.

I was not fit for work the next day. But my imagination was enriched, which brings an energy all its own.

The Sea Captain's Wife is full of adventure, danger, conflict, love . . . all the qualities of a wonderful novel.

But it's also full of detail -- I felt like I was living in the 19th century, looking out across the Bay of Fundy from the tall windows of a sea captain's home, smelling the rank stink of a seasick crew, visiting the exotic locales of a trading ship.

The book is a study in courage, choice and marriage.

Having finished it so quickly, I was left feeling a little bereft -- as if my conversation with Powning had come to an end for another few years, until she publishes another book.

But perhaps not. Perhaps there will be other coincidental meetings with this author, for she is not one to hold herself at arm's length.

Rather, she embraces her readers, sometimes with a book, sometimes with a newsletter, sometimes with a FaceBook post, sometimes with a short conversation on a plane.

If you haven't met her, you should. It's as easy as picking up one of her books.

Lynda MacGibbon is looking forward to another encounter with Beth Powning, who is one of the authors at this year's Frye Festival (www.frye.ca) in Moncton.

She will be dialoguing about the writer's life, reading from her books and participating in Reveille, an open-mic event where adults read from their childhood writings.

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