

Character longs for the sea

Sea captain's wife wants to sail away but women's dreams not heeded in 1800s

By STEPHEN PATRICK CLARE

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Beth Powning sets her current novel, *The Sea Captain's Wife*, during the age of sail. (PETER POWNING)

YOU MIGHT NEVER guess that Sussex, N.B.-based writer and photographer Beth Powning was originally "from away."

Charming, genuine and forthright, the author of such critically acclaimed works as *Shadow Child*, *Edge Seasons* and *The Hatbox Letters* is quick with a colourful Maritimes anecdote when we meet for drinks at a Halifax hotel.

"My husband and I had come up for an event a few years ago," she recalls with a smile, "and I had parked my Smart Car in the lot downstairs here at the hotel. For some reason it wouldn't start. I explained to the manager that I had to get it out on the street to meet the tow truck. The next thing I know, he's got these six big guys pushing my little car up the exit ramp while I steered."

Perhaps wisely, the Connecticut-born Powning was being chauffeured around the city last week as she made the rounds of the local media in support of her latest novel *The Sea Captain's Wife*.

"This book began as another story altogether," she explains.

"I had this initial vision of a woman and her child living in an old house overlooking the Bay of Fundy. It stayed with me for over 15 years, but I always felt like there was something or someone in the shadows of that vision waiting to emerge."

It was while she was in residence at the Leighton Artist's Colony in Banff that the silhouette showed itself.

"It was just one of those things," she remembers. "I pulled a book down from the library shelf called *Women at Sea in the Age of Sail* and it suddenly dawned on me that this old house in my vision could have easily been a sea captain's home."

Soon after, a narrative arc began to unfold. "I kept seeing this woman who was looking out over the ocean, yearning not for her sea-bound husband, but rather to go to sea herself."

That ache took shape in the story's central character Azuba Calloway.

"It was a name that I came across in an old black and white parlour photograph while I was doing research for the book," notes Powning.

"I later learned that the name literally means the deserted."

Epic in its emotional intensity, *The Sea Captain's Wife* charts both the inner and outer worlds of the young protagonist; her longing to sail, her romance and marriage to

Capt. Nathaniel Bradstock, her resignation to life on land, the scandal that forces the couple to flee with their child to London, and the hardships encountered during the ocean voyage that takes them there.

"When we are young we are filled with this sense of the possible," said Powning.

"Over time, as we experience the realities of life — the tough times, tragedies and so forth — those youthful dreams can slip away from us."

WIN A BOOK:

To win one of two copies of *The Sea Captain's Wife* (Knopf) by Beth Powning, send your name, address, daytime telephone number to tocontest@herald.ca. Please type *Sea Captain Book* in the subject line. Entries can also be dropped off at The Chronicle Herald building, 2717 Joseph Howe Dr., Halifax, during regular business hours (Monday through Friday, 8 a.m.-6 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 8 a.m.-1 p.m.) or mailed to *Sea Captain Book*, c/o The Chronicle Herald, P.O. Box 938, Halifax B3J 3S5. Contest deadline is 9 a.m. on Feb. 5. Winners will be announced in the books section of The Sunday Herald on Feb. 7.

Out on the open sea, surrounded by men and questioning her marriage, Azuba's illusions are painfully shattered.

"Which is probably the best thing that could have happened to her," says Powning. "She realizes that she is exactly where she is supposed to be in her life."

In that regard, the tale serves as a testament to the times. "Like most women of that era (mid-1800s), Azuba's wants and needs took a back seat to her husband's career."

The work also succeeds at painting a vivid and vibrant portrait of the Atlantic Canadian landscape during the last days of the age of sail.

"It is amazing to think that a city like Saint John was once one of the three most important ports in the world. I'm sure that there are many stories still to be told about that place and time."

Renowned for its coastal beauty, the Bay of Fundy area would also lend itself well to celluloid.

"It's funny," says Powning. "Throughout the process of writing this book I kept imagining it as a movie. It's a big story about big dreams and I think that it belongs on the big screen."

She might even be convinced to take a role in a cinematic adaptation. "Not a big part," she laughs.

"Maybe I could play someone like Azuba's mother. Believe me, I know my place."

Stephen Patrick Clare is a freelance writer who lives in Halifax.