

salon

Beth Powning

Q&A

Award-winning New Brunswick novelist Beth Powning will read from her latest book, *A Measure of Light*, on Friday, April 10, at 7 p.m. in the Ganong Hall Lecture Theatre at the University of New Brunswick in Saint John. The event is part of the Lorenzo Reading Series.

Who were your heroes growing up?
I wanted to be Hayley Mills. I also wanted to be National Velvet, the 12-year-old girl who disguised herself as a boy in order to ride in the Grand National steeplechase – as portrayed by Elizabeth Taylor. I was a pony-obsessed tomboy.

What do you treasure most about New Brunswick?
The way in which we are all connected. Almost no one remains a stranger for long. There's that brief, familiar N.B. interrogation – place? Family name? Then the sudden face-lightening-up moment – “Oh, of course! You must know...”

Which living New Brunswicker do you admire most?
There are so many people I admire. Artists, educators, farmers, people who care about community. I stand in awe of singer Measha Brueggergosman, whose dedication to excellence has brought joy to billions around the world.

Which deceased New Brunswicker do you admire most?
I have enormous respect for Molly Kool. She paved the way for women in one of the toughest and most male-dominated jobs of all – sea captain.

What's the toughest job you've had?
Rebuilding our first pottery studio after it burned to the ground, along with a beautiful old horse barn. It was February 1974; after the fire, there was nothing but a sea of blackened slush spiked with charred timbers. Once we had rebuilt the pottery studio, Peter and I, along with Peter's brother David, had to face renovating one of the remaining barns. We worked from February until May. At day's end, it was hard to uncurl my hand from the shape of a hammer's handle.

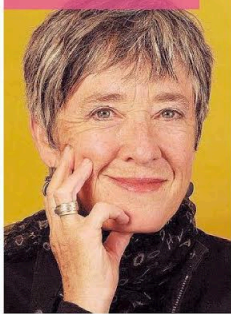
If you could go back in time, when would you go?
I would like to “apparate” in a carriage along with Jane Austen and her family. I would be invisible, of course. It would be late afternoon on a sunny summer's day. We would proceed through an English landscape of farms and villages; and then I would witness this family having dinner by candlelight and entertaining one another with musical performances.

Is there one particular place on Earth that you enjoy the most?
Apart from New Brunswick, I love the little town where I grew up, Hampton, Conn. Eighteenth-century houses line the main street, which has no commerce, only one tiny general store across from the Congregational Church. The village runs along a ridge; huge maples shade generous lawns, and there's a long view eastwards across the valley far below. I go there at least six times a year to visit my family.

How do you relax?
Back-country skiing; then soaking in our deep bathtub. Also: swimming laps at the gorgeous PotashCorp Civic Centre pool, reading, and watching movies and eating popcorn in our living room, with a fire in the Jotul stove.

What's your biggest disappointment?
Heartbreak and anguish related to

interview



BETH POWNING. PHOTO: PETER POWNING

childbirth. I am sorry that my son has no brothers and sisters.

What trait do you admire most about yourself?

Hmmmm. Well, I know that there's something within me that I can absolutely rely upon when I have to do anything in public. No matter how hard my heart might race as I'm waiting to step up to the podium, the minute I arrive behind it I feel totally calm, as if I'm in the one place I truly belong. I also know that no matter how worried I am about my writing (and I do worry, constantly), my ability to focus and to work (Puritanically!) hard will get me to that longed-for final draft.

What trait do you despise most in others?

I have no patience with “know-it-alls,” who hold forth and do not listen to others.

What bothers you most about New Brunswick?

Our long, long black fly season. And the fact that we have not protected some of the earth's most exquisite natural habitats, such as “the Hidden Valley,” a long, deep-sided valley near our home, recently clear-cut.

What's your favourite food?

The first baby potatoes with the garden, drizzled with butter, flecked with fresh parsley.

What is your favourite New Brunswick city: Fredericton, Saint John or Moncton?

Saint John. I love the old buildings, the market, the palpable sense of history. I love how it's a city of tiny communities, all with distinct characteristics, endlessly surprising. I love the complex interplay of city, sea, and river.

What's the greatest misconception people have about you?

I appear to be a light-hearted person, filled with happiness. I'm not. I delight in other people, but when alone, I'm aware of a sadness within myself that it seems I've had my whole life. I can even see it in childhood pictures. I don't think people realize that beneath an exuberant and energetic exterior, I am quite the reverse: fascinated by life's darkness, deeply serious.

What's your most embarrassing moment?

One summer, on the way to my writing cabin in the woods, I set my laptop down on the driveway in order to water a window box. Then I noticed that one of the car's tires was on the hose. So I jumped into the car and backed it up in order to free the hose. I felt a little “crump.” I had driven over my laptop.

What's your happiest moment?

High noon, Aug. 11, 1977, when our son Jake was born. The doctor was humming “Greensleeves,” the nurses were excited, Peter had his arm around me, and suddenly our world changed, forever. A son.

When is it OK to tell a lie?

When you are protecting someone else's feelings. I do it all the time. “Your hair looks GREAT!” It's not about the hair! It's about how the person feels inside, so you have to bolster that.

How would you like to be remembered?

As a loving and caring person.

Please share a secret with us.

I sing to my chickens and they love it. Their names are Daisy, Mrs. Gummidge, and Rhonda Redfeather. They love to be carried around and they are very funny. They have 30 different sounds, all with a specific meaning. One day I will learn their language.

Using exaggerated words, a writers group's 10-year anniversary, and running lines with my daughter

Nancy Bauer
state of the art

Our minister, Rose-Hannah Gaskin, lent me the book *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies* by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre. I'm only a few chapters into it, but it's already stimulating me. I knew I would like it just by looking at the bibliography. She points out the “lie” of using exaggerated words. I know I'm guilty of this fault. I was looking for a word to describe the book itself and used “fascinating” but then realized that was too inflated a word. When I comment on the photo of a friend's grandbaby, I often use hyperbole.

The writer, a professor of English, emphasizes the importance of the precise use of words in conversation as well as in the written form. A meeting of a writers' group is enjoyable partly because of the precise conversation. Gossip, family happenings, and plots of movies do get discussed, but after the writer reads a new poem or story, we settle down to analyze the work. The writer has poured his/her soul into it, and we feel in our hearts that it deserves intense concentration.

McEntyre suggests that certain “grand old” words aren't used now, and with their abandonment, the very thing they describe is extinguished: “prudent” or “noble.” I got thinking of how we denigrate such words: “proper” is always used with “prim,” “sensible” implies timid.

You may have noticed a popular plot for the kind of TV reality show that features singers or dancers vying for stardom. The plot seemed to have been created spontaneously in 2009, when a plump woman in a dowdy dress received snide smiles from the *Britain's Got Talent* judges as she walked onto the stage. Sarcasm turned to surprised pleasure, and the audience reacted with loud applause. Susan Boyle had been turned up since then, but her website retains some of her homely village charm. Now when an unprepossessing person comes on stage, the opportunity arises for the plot to be re-enacted. The story is guaranteed to please – an obese singer, a child guitarist, or an ancient dancer shows the superstar judges a thing or two. The “underdog wins” denouement is

compelling. David beats Goliath. King Lear realizes that the daughter who loves him is Cordelia. Cinderella wins the prince.

The Harriet Irving Library at the University of New Brunswick is selling a limited edition, fine art print of Stephen Scott's portrait of Alden Nowlan. Diane Reid, the muscle behind the establishment of the Nowlan Graduate Student House, told me about the sale. When the portrait was first unveiled, I was pleased that it had caught Alden's spirit so beautifully.

Allison Calvern asked our Wilmot writers group to participate at her Odd Sundays reading venue. When she asked for a biography of the group, we tried to figure out when we began. Fortunately, Carolyn Atkinson keeps a diary and could tell us. Serendipitously we'd be celebrating our 10th anniversary. A storm, alas, cancelled the celebration. My other writers group is like the proverbial Chinese soup, kept on the back of the stove for generations. The group has been going for uncountable years with a potato ladled out one year and a carrot added another.

My daughter Grace has been home for a visit. Because she is in two plays in the next six months, we spent time “running lines.” I love to learn the jargon of various activities. This phrase means that she recites her lines while I read all the other characters' lines. It's a wonderful way for me to study a play. I'm not required to read the lines “expressively,” but sometimes I can't help it. I see that the phrase “running lines” is also used in tennis and fly fishing. The two plays are contemporary; the one being performed in Portland, Maine, is *Other Desert Cities*, the one being performed in Baltimore, Md., is *Technicolor Life*. Their plots are oddly similar, very much of this time.

Grace also helped me to organize her father's papers. She's of the generation that doesn't mind throwing away pads of unused paper, worn-out ring binders, making the job more manageable. My husband, on the other hand, would save used paper, cut out its blank parts and stapled these together to make a pad.

A reader of my column on landscapes, Cheryl Feindel, emailed to say that her family called a dusting of snow a “skiff,” so perhaps “a sift” of snow could be used since it resembles sifting flour. For the band of snow that blows sideways, she invents “a flight of snow.” Dave MacFarlane sent me two words for landscape: “bogan” (a slow back-water, from the Gaelic – wet, soft place) and “a thoroughfare” (a water channel such as Blind Thoroughfare, between French and Macquait lakes). I'm familiar with the thoroughfare between North Lake and East Grand Lake and am glad to know there are others.

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A Fredericton writer

Winter at My Parents'
by Colin Smith

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