

Whelan's Cove is a place of departures."

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Markhamville's Beth Powning is the latest New Brunswick writer to reach a national and international audience with stories rooted in this place.

So begins Beth Powning's latest novel, *The Sea Captain's Wife*, a tale of the eternal of departures, relationships, and growth, revealed against the historical backdrop of the seagoing past of nineteenth century New Brunswick. The reader departs the present day, departs the New Brunswick in which we live, just as the titular character, Azuba, departs the life she knows, the Victorian New Brunswick familiar to her, to embark on her dramatic journey. And we, in turn, escape into her well-crafted world for a few hundred pages.

But by now, everyone knows that Beth Powning, best-selling author from the small rural community of Markhamville, is scoring another hit in the literary world. The point of this column is not to review the novel - more capable critics are doing this. The English teacher in me, however, won't let me move on without making a couple of comments.

Much has been made of the historical research which underlies the book, and rightfully so. The world of New Brunswick that disappeared five generations ago comes to life in detail in the novel. A part of our past is animated through imagination, like the actors bringing King's Landing to life. Powning did a tremendous amount of research in preparing this novel; however, as *Globe and Mail* reviewer Gale Zoë Garnett wrote on Saturday, the book "never reads as written research but as lives fully and panoramically lived. It reads as real. I am a witness to its truth and sweep. I read, and was there."

I can't help but mention, as well, Powning's literary artistry in *The Sea Captain's Wife*. Words roll effortlessly off the page into the readers mind, combining into the rich sensory landscape Azuba inhabits. Powning's use of simple sentences, loaded with carefully placed sense imagery, creates a world beyond the matter-of-fact sense of the narrative. It's impressive writing.

Powning's artistry is evident from the first page, as the artist finds three ways to describe sun-browned skin in two paragraphs; this is the sort of word art that is invisible to most us, almost subliminally creating an added level of enjoyment, but which students of English literature seek out in a text and rejoice in reading and discussing.

I attended Powning's book launch at the Legion in Sussex two weeks ago. It was festive affair, with local folk singers and seafood and a room draped with old sails and other seagoing relics and people in nineteenth century costumes. Powning read a scene from her novel, and took questions from the large crowd that filled that hall. When the time came for her to sign autographs, she was mobbed by fans like a wayward Hollywood celebrity. It would be an exaggeration - but only a slight one - to say I've been in mosh pits that were less frenzied than the crowd that descended on the author, who remained gracious and seemed genuinely appreciative throughout the evening.

I say appreciative because the book launch wasn't Powning's idea. A group from the Sussex area banded

together and organized the launch to celebrate the author and her book. At one time I would have written a column saying we should celebrate our storytellers and our stories; I'm happy to be writing one recognizing the fact we do celebrate them.

We should be celebrating our authors - everyone else is. Powning isn't an author for New Brunswick. She's an author for readers across Canada, the United States, and anywhere people speak English, really. Our New Brunswick stories and New Brunswick writers don't take a backseat to anyone. We celebrate them not simply because they are ours, but because they are good. World-class good.

David Adams Richards latest book, for example, is a layperson's meditations on the nature of faith in God. Richards can pack a lecture hall at UNB when he does a reading, but he's also put *God Is* on bookseller's shelves next to internationally recognized writers Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Karen Armstrong. It's easy to forget Richards himself is internationally recognized. And not just English literature: it's frighteningly easy to lose yourself in the hypnotic poetry of Hermengilde Chiasson's *Beatitudes*. I think most of us in English Canada don't realize how well respected our former lieutenant-governor is as an artist.

A few weeks ago, this paper published a piece reminding readers of the significance of Charles G.D. Roberts, the "Father of Canadian Literature," a New Brunswick writer and poet who led the "Confederation poets" that first gave a fledgling nation a literature of its own, distinct from English and American literature. He was a child in the small rural community of Douglas in the 1860s, just the time the fictional Azuba Bradstock departs the fictional Whelan's Cove.

New Brunswick's contribution to literature continues.

Peter Smith is a teacher and writer. His column appears Tuesday.