

Land and sea

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Author photos Cindy Wilson, archival photos Peter Walsh.



There is no water view from Beth Powning's farmhouse, but the author still feels the tidal pull from her Markhamville home. The seafaring, shipbuilding past of the Bay of Fundy deeply inspired her latest work, 'The Sea Captain's Wife,' an ambitious historical novel rich in adventure.

At the top of the stairs is a door so tiny even the diminutive Beth Powning has to duck under to enter her studio beyond. The light-filled room looks over fields that, this early January day, are clean and white, bordered by spiky black spruce whose branches are draped with thick stoles of snow.

The author used to write at a wooden desk in the living room of her old Markhamville farmhouse on a Smith Corona typewriter.

But she wanted, in the words of Virginia Woolf, a room of her own.

"If I had a room of my own, what would it look like?" she wondered.

She could not imagine the details.



"I want to move into this room slowly," she writes in her 1999 memoir, *Shadow Child*. "I want everything that comes here to earn its place."

Establishing her studio was like writing, she says: she didn't know what it would look like in the end, but trusted the process of creation to move her along.

That was how she wrote *The Sea Captain's Wife*, her sixth and latest book, to be released Tuesday.

The book started with a vision, a simple memory: "I remembered walking up from a beach years ago and being arrested by the way the sun struck the goldenrod."

Experience has taught her this original image is not likely what the book will be about in the end, at least not entirely, but it gives her a place to start. And starting, as her mentor E.L. Doctorow, the American man of letters, told her, is a critical part of writing.

Powning pondered the humble, lucid image, developing a scene and situation around it, her initial writing a sort of dream state as she envisioned a woman and a child, by the sea, and a big house.

"It's like catching at wisps of cobwebs," she says of this early stage of writing.

"Some idea might grab me."

This phase is full of questions: Who is the little girl? Who is the woman? Who is the woman to the girl? What issues does this bring up? Is it the woman's home? What is she doing there? Is she there for work? Is she a researcher?

So Powning called up a marine biologist she knows who works with the Conservation Council of New Brunswick, peppering her with queries about her job, and whether her work would ever take her to a place like the seaside spot in her mind's eye.

It wasn't until a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts in 2005 that the broad strokes of the story that would become *The Sea Captain's Wife* appeared. At the public library in the small mountain town, Powning pulled *Women at Sea in the Age of Sail* from the shelf. There, in the heart of the Rockies, she was transported back to New Brunswick. The non-fiction volume, based primarily on research from the New Brunswick Museum, was about women from the Maritimes.

"I thought, what? Women went to sea?" Powning exclaims.



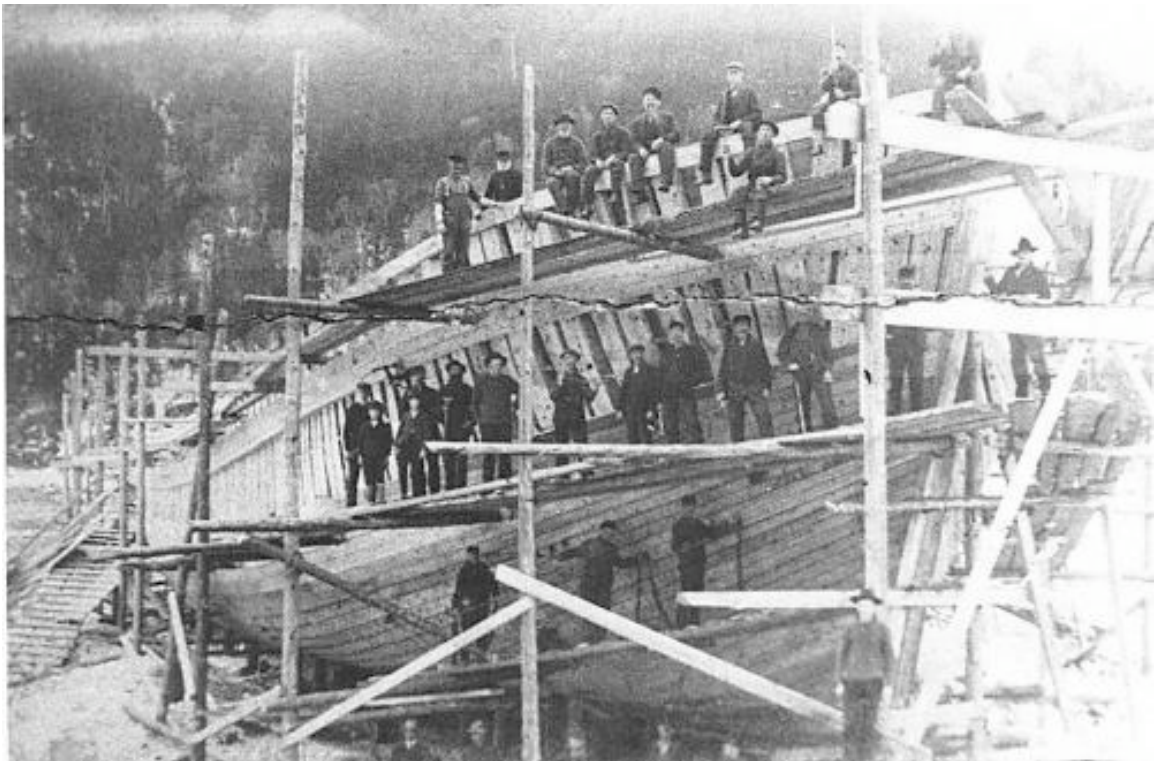
She jettisoned her earlier idea, turning her gaze further back in time, to the 1800s to those women who left the relative safety and comfort of life on shore for the adventure and danger of the high seas.

The details that would shape the novel began to emerge. The woman Powning had imagined became her protagonist, Azuba, a feisty sea captain's wife not

entirely content with the mores of her time. The seaside home started to take shape in the author's mind. This is a big, old house, isn't it? Powning thought, picturing the wooden sea captains' homes that dot the province's coastal towns. The character of the child developed into Carrie, Azuba's smart, spirited daughter. In the fictional New Brunswick town of Whelan's Cove, the females lived out their lives in sight of the Bay of Fundy, awaiting the return of Captain Nathaniel Bradstock, their husband and father.

Trained as an actor at Sarah Lawrence College in New York in the late '60s, Powning uses theatre exercises she learned as a student to inhabit her characters' headspaces.

"So I'm sort of a character actor as a writer," she says. When she was writing about her heroine, for instance, "I'm her. I'm Azuba."



The novel is an adventure, a love story and a coming-of-age tale about shedding the illusions of youth, replacing bright, shiny ideas about the future with "a new thing to strive for: compassion and understanding and a deep journey of love."

While Powning lives inland, in Markhamville, outside of Sussex, the Bay of Fundy and its rich seafaring past is just 20 kilometres as the crow flies from the 1870 farmhouse she shares with her husband, the artist Peter Powning.

Inside her house, Powning looks up at the swooping wooden staircase whose curving spiral she suspects was designed by someone who worked on boats. Its curvatures reminds her of "knees," bent branches that were used in

shipbuilding. For nearly 40 years, ever since she and Peter left their native New England for rural New Brunswick, she has tread those stairs, but it wasn't until she began research for *The Sea Captain's Wife* that the possible connection occurred to her.

In her studio, beneath a honey-coloured wooden bookshelf crammed with books and topped with nature's ephemera - a jar of bird's feathers, a scatter of beach stones, a wasp's nest the size of a man's head - Powning sits in a tiny wooden children's rocking chair, talking about the agony and ecstasy of captaining a novel through the years-long process from concept to creation.

"The whole time that I'm writing a book, I feel like I have this crushing weight on my shoulders," she says. "It's like it's your dance with yourself. Your expectations for what you want to create are so high, they're higher than anyone else's."

That's the agony part.

The ecstasy?

"What I'm in love with is this feeling, (where) I just go into this place and the words start to spin and I feel at home."

While *The Sea Captain's Wife* sweeps from New Brunswick to London and beyond, to the Peruvian port of Callao, the horrific, guano-rich Chinchas Islands off the west coast of South America, Antwerp, Cape Town and Hong Kong before heading homeward to New York and, eventually, back to New Brunswick, Powning didn't feel compelled to travel to these ports to write about them.

She found everything she needed in personal writings, books, photographs - and her imagination.



"I did want things to be historically accurate," Powning says. She read scintillating journals kept by women at sea, including Eliza Cox Carter, who lived on New Brunswick's Kingston Peninsula and went to sea with her husband; technical books about sails and navigation; old sea charts; ship logs; academic books; and

letters from the mid-1800s that are smart and sharp.

"These people are real," she says. "We see these people in black and white, but really they were wearing colour."

Still, some of the women's journals and letters she found hushed, reserved.

"I wanted to shake them and say, 'What did you really mean?' Then I realized, that's not my job."

Powning struggled against the dry language she encountered in some of her research, but "it was hard not to let that tone creep into my novel."

Everything that happens in the novel happened to someone she read about, including the harrowing, days-long experience of sailing through a Cape Horn "snorter," pirates, the depravity of life onboard when stores run low and the threat of starvation and mutiny become very real, and the curiosities collected in foreign ports, including a purse made of the skin of pigeons' feet.

Originally 100 pages longer, Powning had to cut from the novel many of the details she found in her research. "It was all so fascinating," she says. "For me, it was all so extraordinary, it made my hair stand on end."

She slaps her hands together with excitement.

"Oh! But the coolest thing, I have to show you this," she says, leaping up, rummaging around the shelves in her office, proffering Harper's Handbook for Travellers in Europe and the East, an antique guidebook bound in crumbling black leather that closes with a flap. Powning's great-great-great uncle used the guide on his European tour in the 1860s.Photo: 1Cindy Wilson

Powning crossed the Atlantic herself once, in 1976, sailing from New York to London on the Mikhail Lermontov, a Soviet liner. And last year, she and Peter took an Arctic cruise. En route to Greenland, she sat on deck for hours looking at the ice, imagining Azuba's wonder at the bergs and floes that would jam the sea from South America to Antarctica.

With the book opening and closing in Whelan's Cove, Powning had to imagine life at home, as well as at sea. Driving from Fredericton one day, she crested a hill that offered a sweeping view of Southern New Brunswick.

"I had a sense of the way space and time would have felt then," she says, of the dark, forested land and the even darker ocean beyond.

She thought about what it would feel like to have a family member at sea, with no way of knowing where they were or whether they were alive or dead for months or even years. She had originally proposed *The True Size of the World* as the book's title.

"They knew how huge it was," she says of the sailors of yore.

The book will be released on Tuesday, with an elaborate launch at the Sussex legion Friday night.

Powning is readying for the public part of being an author, the interviews and reviews, book tours and readings. Promoting her work is necessary, exciting - and somewhat surreal.

"It's like, you did what you were supposed to do and now a whole lot of people are going to do their job," she says. "My job is done, and the book is out there living its life."

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