

## Beth Powning

**Categories:** Female Authors - Anglophone Authors - Novelists - Authors of Non-Fiction - Fundy Coast



Source: Peter Powning

### Biography

Beth Powning was born in Connecticut. She attended Edwin O. Smith High School and graduated from Sarah Lawrence College with a degree in creative writing. She and her husband, Peter Powning, bought a farm in New Brunswick in 1970. They moved here permanently in 1972 and became Canadian citizens. They had one child, Jake, in 1977. Together they started a pottery business, eventually owning a store in Sussex and later hosting open houses at their studio. Running the business and growing most of their own food in large vegetable gardens was Beth's "day job", while she found writing time around the edges, sometimes rising at 4 a.m. She became a photographer in 1988, and her first published book was photography of roses for a gardening book. In 1995, she published her first book of writing, which included her own photography. Gradually, she shifted from working with her husband to becoming a full-time author. Her vegetable gardens are larger than ever. Two granddaughters live just down the road.

#### *How has New Brunswick influenced your work?*

My writing is highly sensual, i.e. filled with sight, sound, smell, texture. And those sensual elements are mostly of the New Brunswick landscape: a winter storm sweeping over fields, the sound of ravens in spring, glinting freshets, trout lilies in May sunlight. Being an immigrant gave me a child's eyes. I saw this landscape for the first time when I was twenty. I sought to internalize it, the way the landscape of one's childhood is internalized. This is a process not only of sharp and concentrated "seeing" but of realizing how a place is slowly transformed by the accrual of memories. Thus I became aware of how relationship with people augments relationship with landscape. This is the place, for example, where our neighbours showed us the fiddlehead patch; where we canoed with friends; where we watched a house burn down. Thus trees and earth retain shadowy stories. And there is a way of being, in New Brunswick, that has influenced my writing: both the rural oral tradition, the repetitive telling of familiar stories; and an emotional openness. Here, one tells of pain and sorrow without fear of judgement. There's a peeling back of outer layers, far different from the emotional containment of my New England childhood. Fewer people in a space makes for appreciation. I love people, and here I have found that others, too, are deeply appreciative of one another. Here, it is not surprising to learn, or tell, a life's story to a stranger as a matter of course. There's a closeness to the land, and to history, and to the present wonder of one's fellows that is the essence of New Brunswick, and makes me the writer I have become.

#### *What do you consider to be the highlight of your career so far?*

Probably the moment when my agent phoned to tell me that Knopf Canada had given an offer to buy both my novel *The Hatbox Letters* as well as a second manuscript, *Edge Seasons*. Being enthusiastically and warmly taken into the "family" of a publishing company is an amazing feeling, since so much of an author's time is spent in isolation. I walked into the main office and saw a wall

covered with black and white photographs of legendary authors. I could barely believe I was now “one” of them. This heady period of time included the experience of reading at literary festivals in Ottawa, Vancouver, Banff, Calgary and Victoria. I felt like a member of a travelling circus, as I met up with writers from Finland, Scotland, England and Mexico (etc!) in one hotel after another. Before this time, although I had published two earlier books, I had remained out of touch with other authors. Meeting other people who lived the same precarious and fraught inner life as I did was a life-changing experience.

Literary prizes

Longlisted, International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award - 2006	In recognition of: <i>The Hatbox Letters</i>
Shortlisted, Atlantic Independent Booksellers' Choice Award - 2005	In recognition of: <i>The Hatbox Letters</i>
Shortlisted, Rutstrum Author's Award, Rutstrum Wilderness Trust - 2000	In recognition of: <i>Home : Chronicle of a North Country Life</i>
Shortlisted, Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-Fiction - 2000	In recognition of: <i>Shadow Child</i>
Selected, Discovery Program, New England Booksellers Association - 1996	In recognition of: <i>Home : Chronicle of a North Country Life</i>

Featured Publication



Excerpt:

“How bad is it?” Azuba asked.

“The captain says it’s a regular Cape Horn snorter, coming up out of the southwest, just what you’d expect down here.” She heard fear in his voice, although he spoke as if such words were matter-of-fact. “We’re hove to, all the sails are furled, save the storm spanker and fore topmast stay sail. He said he’s seen worse. He said to tell you not to worry, he’ll see us through.”

The ship’s bow went down again. This time, *Traveller* shuddered and paused for so long that Azuba clutched at the young man’s soaked wool sleeve. The ship slewed as if no longer buoyant but carrying a sudden, intolerable weight.

Find this author in the New Brunswick public libraries catalogue.

Source(s): Author