

Beth Powning

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Beth Davis Powning, writer, photographer (born 15 August 1949 in Putnam, Connecticut). Beth Powning's sensitive and thought-provoking novels, essays and memoirs explore her deep relationship with the natural world, as typified by life in rural [New Brunswick](#). Her books — including *Seeds of Another Summer* (1996), *The Hatbox Letters* (2004), *A Measure of Light* (2015) and *The Sister's Tale* (2021) — have earned many accolades. Powning received New Brunswick's Lieutenant-Governor's Award for High Achievement in English Literary Arts in 2010. She has also received honorary degrees from the [University of New Brunswick](#) and [Mount Allison University](#).





Beth Powning in 2014

(courtesy Wikimedia Commons)

Early Years and Career

Beth Powning was raised as a [Quaker](#) in New England. After graduating with a BA in creative writing from Sarah Lawrence College in New York, she moved to a 300-acre farm near [Sussex, New Brunswick](#), in 1972. She ran a [pottery](#) business with her husband, artist and photographer Peter Powning. From her earliest years, Powning dreamed of being a writer. Although she put those dreams aside for a time to pursue acting, she found that her dramatic studies and the task of thinking herself into character were further preparation for becoming a writer.

Much of Powning's writing is inspired by living in an 1870s farmhouse in rural New Brunswick. She has described some of the features of her first years in the province: sharing an outgoing-only telephone line with twelve families and using a wringer washer and a wood cook stove. Her family kept a cow and hens and cut and hauled all their own firewood from the forest.

Powning took up [photography](#) and then merged her two interests in *Seeds of Another Summer* (1996), a book of essays and photographs. This publication was a significant step in her writing. Published in the US as *Home: Chronicle of a North Country Life* (1996), *Seeds of Another Summer* uses photographs of the changing seasons to chronicle the interweaving of Powning's life with the natural world that surrounds her.

Career Highlights

Powning's novel *The Hatbox Letters* (2004) brought her much national recognition. It features a woman living in a Victorian house in New Brunswick.

recognition. It features a woman living in a Victorian house in New Brunswick. The novel mixes the past with the present while focusing strongly on the natural world. Powning uses descriptions of nature throughout *The Hatbox Letters* to record the changing of the seasons alongside the changes in the life of her protagonist, Kate. Powning's narrative is sensitive, thought-provoking and delightfully visual.

Both of Powning's memoirs, *Shadow Child: An Apprenticeship in Love and Loss* (1999) and *Edge Seasons* (2005), record memories of pain, growth and revelation. They also address the power of nature and the effect it has on a person's ability to perceive his or her life and place in the world.

Powning's fifth publication, *The Sea Captain's Wife* (2010), is set in New Brunswick in the 1800s. Powning paints scenes of the seafaring life in the age of sailing ships, and of the trials, fears and joys of life in rural New Brunswick. Powning's characters are memorable and lasting. She draws the reader into the story with strength, making characters' experiences vividly alive. Throughout *The Sea Captain's Wife*, Powning's detailed observations of the world her characters travel are an essential part of the story that unfolds.

Other Activities

Powning has appeared at literary festivals across Canada and in Ireland and the United Kingdom. She has also served on the jury for the Governor General's Literary Awards. Her short works have been included in many anthologies, including *Northern Wild*, *Dropped Threads 3*, *When the Wild Comes Leaping Up*, *Northern Wild*, *The Sea's Voice* and *In the Fullness of Time*, among others. Her more recent works include the novels *A Measure of Light* (2015) and *The Sister's Tale* (2021), both published by Knopf Canada.

Honours and Awards

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In 2010, Powning received New Brunswick's Lieutenant Governor's Award for High Achievement in English Literary Arts. She also received an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from the [University of New Brunswick](#) in 2014 and an Honorary Doctorate of Laws from [Mount Allison University](#) in 2020 (invested in 2022 due to the [COVID-19 pandemic](#)).

Powning's works have received or been nominated for numerous literary awards. The US-published *Home: Chronicle of a North Country Life* received the New England Booksellers Association Discovery Award (1996) and was shortlisted for the Rutstrum Author's Award (2000). *Shadow Child* was shortlisted for the Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-Fiction (Wilfrid Laurier University) in 2000. *The Hatbox Letters* was longlisted for the Bookseller's Choice Award at the Atlantic Book Awards (2005), as well as the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award (2006).

The Sea Captain's Wife was named a Barnes and Noble Discovery Award Book and a COSTCO's Buyer's Pick. It was also longlisted for the Dublin IMPAC International Literary Award and shortlisted for the Thomas Head Raddall Atlantic Fiction Award. *A Measure of Light* was named a *Globe and Mail* Best Book and won the 2016 New Brunswick Book Award for Fiction. It was also longlisted for the Dublin IMPAC International Literary Award. *The Sister's Tale* received the Mrs. Dunster's Award for Fiction at the 2022 New Brunswick Book Awards.

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