

DALHOUSIE AUTHOR'S COMING OUT

BY WHITNEY NEILSON

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DALHOUSIE — Growing up in a small town can be hard enough, but add an unaccepted sexual orientation in the 1960s and you've got yourself a book. Charles Seems seemed to think so, having just published his new novel, *The Road to Dalhousie*.

Seems's fictional biography takes the reader on the journey of the main character, Richard, who returns to Dalhousie from Ottawa to visit his aging parents, with flashbacks to the struggles of his youth.

"I'm hoping that it will touch at the heartstrings," said Seems, who spent his childhood in Dalhousie. "And the real message in the book is 'Don't let things happen. Make them happen.' In other words, in terms of coming out, don't wait until people ask you — come forward and tell them."

Seems said he had a strong relationship with his mother. She was very supportive, but he feared her. He never had the guts to tell her he was gay, and she found out through somebody else.

"That was my biggest regret in my life. I should have been forthright and gone to her and said, 'Look, I've got something to tell you.'"

He said he doesn't know if he worried his mother would be upset, but he kept delaying the conversation, hoping it would get easier as time went on. He said his mother accepted it, but it took awhile for them to be comfortable around each other again.

Richard said in the book "The love between us pulled us through and we never again talked about my homosexuality. She may never have understood that it wasn't a choice I was making but rather an acceptance of what I couldn't change.

Despite his struggles, Seems believes his upbringing made him stronger. He went through quite a difficult time, he said, but others had it worse.

In those days, if anyone found out you were gay, you were shunned and it was better to keep your sexuality in the dark, he said. If the wrong person found out, you could be bullied or harassed.

In the book, there's a bullying scene at boarding school, based on a real time in Seems's life.

"You tried very, very hard not to be obvious," he said. "However, it was very difficult because there's a fine line to cross. You wanted to find out who others were who were gay, and you had to sort of give signals to others that you were but without being overly obvious."

In his youth, Seems would go to Campbellton, where people from all over northern New Brunswick and even parts of the Gaspé coast would congregate. There was free liquor and these gatherings of similar people gave them an outlet. They were fortunate, he said, because other small towns didn't have as many outlets.

"It was difficult, mind you, because we had to be extremely careful, mindful of each step and mindful of what we said."

Seems said it's easier in some ways for people to come out now, but harder in other ways. There are more support networks and there's more information today, but it's much more difficult to avoid being bullied.

"The bullying has taken on such proportions, in particular in respect of the Internet, where people can actually post very nasty things about you and there's no way of stopping that.

"In my day that didn't exist. You could sort of go home and hide and as long as you didn't go outdoors nobody would touch you."

Seems said part of the reason he went to boarding school was to avoid the possibility of being bullied. He returns to Dalhousie to visit family every year and will return in October for the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Petit séminaire St-Charles Borromée, the Bathurst school that his fictional hero also attended.

Seems's spouse, Robert, encouraged him to write the book because he felt he had a lot of stories to tell. Seems has published 24 books.

“It had never occurred to me because I had been writing a lot of non-fiction and I never thought I’d get into fiction writing. But the fictional biography seemed to be an interesting area to get into as a first try into the fiction world.”

He started writing the book in January 2012 and finished it in September that year. He spent three or four months writing in the morning, resting in the afternoon and reviewing in the evening.

Trying to figure out a style and structure for the book was one of his biggest challenges. In the end, he chose a flashback approach.

The book starts and ends in 1984, but with a flashback going back to 1958 and covering a good part of his childhood. That wasn’t the only challenge.

“And also the dredging up of emotions, because when you write something like that, which is partially based on your life, some of your own emotional stories come to the forefront, and I did a lot of crying when I wrote that.”

He hoped the book would resonate with people for different reasons, and it already has. Some people are interested in the coming-out story. Others are drawn to the familial relationships, especially the mother-son relationship. And some are intrigued by the travel aspect, discovering a part of the Maritimes they didn’t know about.

Writing has been an interest of Seems’s for a long time. From the age of six, he was inspired after reading books and seeing how well the words flowed together. He remembers telling his mother when he was young that he would write a book one day, but she laughed and shrugged it off.

“That hurt me to the point where I took the position that I would prove to her that I could do it,” Seems said. “And I wonder to this day whether she took that position to show me I would need to work very hard to create a book.

She liked to take the Seems children on short trips — to places like Tide Head or Jacquet River. Every year they’d travel a little farther.

As a young boy, Seems looked at the different licence plates on cars coming through Dalhousie in the summer and wondered why anyone would drive so far to a place he considered “no man’s land.”

Seems has visited more than 80 countries and said his favourite trip was the four-month journey around the world for his honeymoon.

“The more I learned about what I did not know about, the more I got interested.”

Seems’s mother was a strict teacher and a strict mother. Being part of an upper-middle class family meant Seems had to watch who he hung out with. His mother didn’t always approve of his friends.

“However, she was extremely close to her children, all of us. And she left us with a whole bunch of values that I still treasure very much today, and they’ve helped me immensely in conducting myself honestly and professionally. And I often go back to some of the principles my mother taught us.”

He said he’s grateful his mother taught him to be honest, to be true to himself and to work hard. She had a copy of Max Erhman’s *Desiderata* from 1927 on the kitchen wall, which she referred to often. The following part of it is at the end of the book.

“And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore, be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be. And whatever your labours and aspirations in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace in your soul. With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.”

Seems’s newest book is sold at the Restigouche Regional Museum and at most chain bookstores, including Chapters and Barnes and Noble.

Whitney Neilson

Intern journalist | Brunswick News Inc.

T: (506) 753-8242

Neilson.Whitney@tribunenb.ca