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Out of The Shadows

BY GEARY DANIHY

Among the many themes to be found in literature, “the quest” is the one that perhaps resonates most in both the heart and the mind.

It little matters what is being sought – a grail, a mountain of fire, an enchanted castle, a place to call home – it is the journey and what is learned along the way that are most important.

Rowayton resident Emilie Betts knows all about quests, for the octogenarian has been on one ever since the stock market crashed in 1929 and she and her family were forced to leave what she calls her “House of Sunshine” in Easton, Pa., to live in a series of dreary houses and depressing apartments as the Depression ate away at her family’s soul. Her memories of the golden years spent in Easton would follow her into marriage and motherhood, whispering to her, fueling a wanderlust that would lead her to live in 29 different houses, apartments and condos in seven states as she sought to recapture what she believed had been taken from her when she was 5 years old.

As she describes the moment of leave-taking in her book, “Shadows in My House of Sunshine,” she remembers the movers slamming the doors of the moving truck and then: “Slowly, the truck pulled away from us – away from our house and our meadow – and when it disappeared from sight, my stomach heaved and I started wailing.”

Published by Beckham Publications Group, Betts’ memoir has the feel and pacing of a novel. Her voice is intimate and conversational as she moves forward from the Depression into the war years, her courtship and marriage, her family life with her husband, Bob, and her children, and the inevitable deaths that are part and parcel of any true story. Yet this is no homespun, rough-at-the-edges retelling of a life, for time and again Betts calls upon her keen sense of place and her painter’s eye to provide the reader with evocative images. Here, for example, is her description of



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At her home on Wilson Point in Rowayton, author Emilie Betts discusses her new book, “Shadows in My House of Sunshine.”

the Atlantic Ocean on a winter’s morning as she and her daughter, Brooks, stand on the beach to perform a New Year’s Day ritual: “The sight that met us was stunning. The sea must have known we were coming for she had dressed carefully. She wore an exquisite silken shimmer in iridescent hues of the palest mother-of-pearl colors – peach and gold, chartreuse, mauve and blue – all woven together like a splendid sari, stretching from shore to horizon, where the sky was embroidered in a slightly deeper blue border.”

In a recent interview at her home in the Wilson Point section of Rowayton, Betts talked about how she came to write the book and what it has meant to her. Sitting in a greenhouse with a roof powered

by a motor that occasionally growled as panes of glass tilted open, Betts, her eyes dancing and her hands fluttering descriptively, responded wryly when asked about the gestation of the book.

“Well,” she said, “an elephant takes two years, I understand, so you might as well say two years times six elephants.” She laughed, then immediately became serious. “It took about seven or eight years, and there were many motivating factors – there’s not just one reason I wrote the book. I’ve done a lot of writing in my life – not serious writing – and my friends would say, ‘I love your stories’ – these were in Christmas letters – and they said, ‘Why don’t you write a book?’ So it was really my friends who urged me on, and then I started think-

ing about my life – the 29 houses, the seven states and the many experiences – and that’s what we put together.”

The “we” refers to Betts and a family friend, Karen Tesoriero, who lives in Easton, Pa., and travels once a week to Rowayton to work with Betts. As Betts, explained, Tesoriero helped her with research and proofreading and was always available as a sounding board for Betts’ ideas.

They began with Tesoriero tape recording conversations she had with Betts. “There was no rhyme or reason, you see,” Betts said. “There were questions coming at me from all times and all places and all people, and when we put it together it was hysterical. I said, ‘I don’t think this is going to work.’”

The early part of the book describes in great detail the variety of living quarters Betts’ distressed family was forced to find shelter in as they weathered the Depression, details that most people would be hard pressed to recall about their early years. How was Betts able to remember places she hadn’t seen in 70-odd years?

“I guess because they made a tremendous impression on me,” Betts said, “and of course moving from house to house it was very easy to recollect when we moved out of this one and into that one, what happened here, what happened there. It was easy to put together. Now that I’m writing a novel, I find it more difficult. I don’t have those points of reference.”

The book’s controlling metaphor is house as shelter, house as refuge, house as a source of self-definition. As such, “Shadows in My House of Sunshine” is as much about Betts’ search for self as it is about a search for the right place to live. When asked about those early peripatetic years, Betts said, “Believe it or not, it was a spirit of adventure. I had my little brother, who was always at my side, so the two of us were like explorers. If I had been alone I don’t think this book would be the same. He was a polestar for me.”

Such a bright, upbeat appraisal of those days is somewhat at odds with what she has written. For example, in describing her arrival at a summer cottage in Ocean City, N.J.: “It was a terrible, terrible place...There was an old moldy icebox, a spindly-legged sink and an ancient fourburner gas stove – all jammed into one corner...An ancient yellow globe in the ceiling filled with the carcasses of dozens of flies was the only light. And this dreary cell of a room was going to be our home for the summer?”

Memories fold in on themselves and take on



different hues as they are viewed from different perspectives. The writing of the book behind her, Betts, like any writer, is now somewhat removed from the intense process that led to the laying down of more than 300,000 words in the book’s first draft.

“I sent the manuscript to an editor in Toronto and she, of course, said that it was much too long, so we had to start cutting,” Betts said. “When that was done it was still too long, so I looked around here for another editor, and I found one in Westport, and she helped me cut a lot more, but as a result I have all of these wonderful deletions that are just waiting for me to put together for a second book.”

The words – those cut and those that remain – carry with them a great deal of honesty, sometimes an honesty that must have been painful for Betts to deal with. However, as she explained it, she was determined not to shy away from the “shadows” that were part of her quest.

“I felt if I was going to tell a story I ought to tell it a hundred and one percent,” Betts said. “I didn’t want to fudge anything, and I felt that if I left certain parts out, fearing that they would ruffle feathers, it just wouldn’t come across. So I decided, OK, go for broke. I’m going to tell the whole story, and if people don’t like it, well that’s too bad. It’s what I am and here I am, as Popeye would say.”

However, Betts admitted to having moments of doubt, especially when it came to writing about her husband, whom she described as “a very complicated, very intelligent man who had all of these different emotions.”

“I just had to record them, or else he wouldn’t have come across as a whole person,” she said.

This commitment to honesty resulted in some of the most moving parts of the book as Betts describes the effects fighting in World War II had on her husband, his occasional alcohol-fueled anger, his bouts of depression and, finally, his battle with cancer. Such honesty, however, is not reserved for her husband, for Betts is equally unremitting in her evaluation of her own actions and emotions, fears and frustrations. Whether describing the humiliation of having her daughter find her sprawled atop their dog after having tripped over the creature in a drunken stupor or the deception necessary to carry on an affair, Betts pins herself beneath the microscope and forthrightly describes what she sees.

Betts’ life story is, of course, the story of other lives as well. Conscious of this, Betts said she told both of her children what she was doing and her intention to “reveal certain things.” As Betts described it, her daughter Brooks’ reaction was, “Mom, it’s your story. Write it.”

“So I said, ‘OK, I’m going to do it.’”

And once the deed was done and the book was published?

“She loved it,” Betts said. “She said, ‘Oh, Mom, it’s really good.’ And then my son called from Wyoming and he said, ‘Well, Mom, you really did it this time,’ and I said ‘Oh-oh, what have I done?’ He laughed and said, ‘The book is terrific. I loved it.’ On top of what Brooks had said, that was my double whipped cream.”

And what of the quest? After all of the moves, all of the renovations, the endless hours traveling with real estate agents to see another apartment, another house, another condo – after all of the signatures on dotted lines had Betts finally found her heartsease on a gentle hill in Rowayton? Her animated face and lilting voice rising above the sound of the motor tilting the glass panes toward the sun provided an answer that Betts puts into words at the close of her book.

“I walked through the front door,” Betts writes, “and a sense of belonging came over me. Beamed ceilings, classic cottage walls of white plaster, and the sun spilling across the gleaming cherry wood floors transported me back to my childhood when I once lived in another enchanted cottage – my house of sunshine.”

After some 80 years of wandering, Betts was finally home.

“Shadows in My House of Sunshine” can be purchased at www.amazon.com.

www.emiliebetts.com