



Jan DeGrass Photo

Coast authors Rosella Leslie, Betty Keller and Jo Hammond held a combined book launch last Saturday night at the Sunshine Coast Arts Centre in Sechelt. All three of their books are set on the west coast.

OCTOBER 8, 2010

JAN DEGRASS/ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT WRITER

Three Coast authors, who know and respect one another, hosted a triple book launch at the Sunshine Coast Arts Centre last Saturday to a full house.

In 1967, Gibsons author Jo Hammond left her home in England and travelled by freighter to her teaching job in Sechelt. Seduced by the Sunshine Coast's scenery and its inhabitants, she fell in love with a handsome, self-educated log salvager, the late Dick Hammond.

Jo learned the trade and, as one of the few female log salvagers in B.C., she worked the shores of Howe Sound in all kinds of weather, alone and with her husband. When she became a mother of two, her children also learned about life on the waves at an early age.

At the Oct. 2 launch, Hammond chose to read some of the action scenes from this second book, her memoir *Edge of the Sound*, to show how the world that surrounds the beachcomber's boat had changed her life. One of the sections was a harrowing description of taking the boat out in a Squamish wind with her baby, Patricia, in a carry cot tucked under the bow and a broken piston in the engine. She managed to contain the salvaged logs, keep the baby safe and cry for help at operatic volume.

But these adventures on the water, though exciting and certainly of interest to Coast historians, mask the overriding theme of the book: it is a powerful love story. Hammond is touchingly honest in her portrayal of life with a man that many thought reclusive and a permanent bachelor. The degree of love and respect that Jo and Dick exchange in their married years together is the very foundation for this heartfelt work.

Rosella Leslie's fifth book, *Drift Child*, is also set on the water at a fictional location up the Strait of Georgia.

On assignment for her lawyer boss, Emma Phillips is sent to the backwoods to have legal documents signed. The trouble begins when she picks up a hitchhiker who offers his boat for the journey home. The aging vessel is shipwrecked, along with a smaller boat in distress that bears a father and his three unusual children. When the father is washed overboard in the storm-tossed strait, Phillips must take charge of the children: practical Julie, fearful Caden and the slightly spooky Skylar, a trio who will change her life forever. Though Skylar is the most difficult of the three, Phillips feels a growing attachment, and the reason for this is explained much later in the book by their ethereal aunt.

The theme of a childless adult suddenly forced to take responsibility for youngsters is not a new one in literature. In fact, Leslie's previous novel, *The Goat Lady's Daughter*, explored a somewhat similar theme. "Families that are created by accident are wonderful stories," she told the audience.

Leslie has found strong characters and a level of empathy with children that shines through in this smooth read.

*A Thoroughly Wicked Woman* by Sechelt author Betty Keller is inspired by the colourful history of Vancouver from 1905 to 1907. It is the engrossing and true story of a murder investigation that casts two women, mother Esther Jones and her daughter, the lovely Theresa Jackson, as suspects in the grisly poisoning case of Theresa's husband, the prospector Thomas Jackson. The events are described with historical accuracy and involve other suspects, nephew Harry Fisher and boarder Ernest Exall, the judges, police investigators and lawyer Joe Martin who later became premier of the province.

One of the most interesting characters in the book is fictional. Dennis Hopkins is the reporter for the Vancouver Daily Province newspaper, recently assigned to the crime beat, and he represents many ambitious journalists of the time writing for the sensational newspapers that tried to out-scoop one another.

This is not the first book for Keller that draws on Vancouver's history. (*On the Shady Side: Vancouver 1886 to 1914* was published in 1986.) She comes by this interest honestly. After homesteading in Manitoba, her Irish grandfather moved to Vancouver in 1886, the same year Vancouver officially was declared a city. It was his photographs, now available in the city archives, which provide many of the early scenes of the young settlement. In Keller's research of the day's newspapers, she was drawn to what she terms "the naughty bits" of Vancouver's history, not always as well documented in formal accounts. The sensational murder, the threat of two women meeting the noose, and subsequent perjury trial was about as juicy as they come. By the end of the book, readers will have drawn their own conclusions as to the guilty party. The nefarious nephew? The pretty widow? Or the scheming mother? The media had the last word, labelling the mother in print as a thoroughly wicked woman.

*Edge of the Sound* and *A Thoroughly Wicked Woman* are both published by locally owned Caitlin Press. *Drift Child* is published by NeWest Press. All are available at Talewind Books in Sechelt.