

Books

LOW-KEY MEMOIR Fay Weldon stresses her trials over her work

By HEATHER CONN

All good writers bear the stamp of a misfit. Novelist, author and screenwriter Fay Weldon, who wrote the *Upstairs, Downstairs* TV pilot and novels such as *Darcy's Utopia* and *Big Women*, honed her outcast's role to an art form.

Her pithy autobiography *Auto Da Fay* — the title refers to the burning of heretics during the Spanish Inquisition — starts with a traumatic event that sets the tone for a precarious life: While still in the womb, Weldon survives an earthquake and a bad aftershock in New Zealand. Her distraught mother, with a two-year-old in tow, searches the ruins for her doctor husband. He is found, but later abandons the family. His wife struggles to support her daughters by writing romantic serials.

Thus begins a pattern in Weldon's life — one of clever, undaunted women, ne'er-do-well men and literary salvation. Notable writers receive early mention: Her cherished grandmother, Nona, shared friendship with H.G. Wells. Her grandfather had poet Walter de la Mare as a pal. A variety of novelists, playwrights and poets later enter Weldon's life, including

Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath.

She spends more than half of this memoir laying out the trials of her childhood: shame as a British immigrant "homie" in New Zealand; horrid days in a convent; the knife edge of poverty; her recovery from infantile paralysis, scarlet fever and whooping cough.

Some light shines through her bleak youth. Nona, a thwarted concert pianist, plays music with a passion. Her mother shares mystical experiences. Weldon relishes the joy of books.

As a teenager, she arrives in postwar London as a refugee with her mother, sister and grandmother, only to endure the city's worst winter in decades. She shares her bedroom with a rat in the basement of the house where her mother works as a live-in housekeeper; her family must use the tradesmen's entrance. This experience later inspires her *Upstairs, Downstairs* pilot and affirms her socialist leanings.

In her early 20s, she winds up living on a houseboat on the Thames and gives birth to a son, Nicolas. Rather than marry the street-busker father, who promises to retrain as a pipefitter, she chooses solo parenthood. She finds sanctuary in an all-female household where her mother oversees three new mothers (Weldon, her sister Jane, and a friend) with their infants

in "a sea of unwashed nappies."

Weldon shares the rejections she received for her first efforts, a novel and a television play, with the reader. "Writing novels ... was the home handcraft that got you nowhere," she says. For survival, she started writing commercials for the new medium of television. Then she turned her hand to advertising copy writing, sharing an office with the "infinitely romantic" Elizabeth Smart, whom she credits with teaching her how to write "all-adjectives, no-verbs" fashion copy.

Throughout the book, Weldon's feminism shines through. Men appear as temporary lures or dull intruders; a friend warns her that her cleverness puts them off.

She finds herself unhappily married to an older academic. Later, she finds love in a second marriage to a painter and decorator, who has since died. The union, which ultimately ends in divorce, lasts 31 years and produces three children.

Several times, Weldon introduces conventions that seem stilted and unnecessary. Brief diary excerpts add little in the way of revelation. Similarly, a switch to third-person narration at one point seems out of kilter. Despite her many literary successes, she gives only passing mention to her work.

Her candid tone is refreshing, yet she presents events in such a matter-of-fact way that the self-deprecation overrides what might otherwise have been a celebration.

Heather Conn is a Vancouver freelance writer.



AUTO DA FAY

An Autobiography

BY FAY WELDON

Key Porter, 288 pages (\$32.95)