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A Measure of Light is a dark, shatteringly exquisite book

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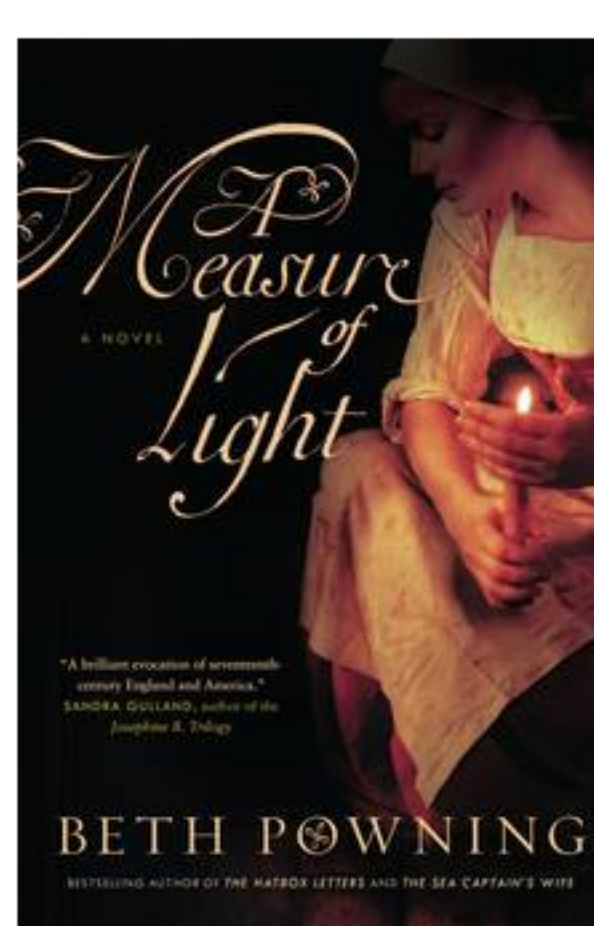
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Title A Measure of Light
Author Beth Powning
Genre fiction
Publisher Knopf Canada
Pages 323 pages
Price \$29.95
Year 2015

Beth Powning has produced six books to date, including two critically acclaimed works of historical fiction (*The Sea Captain's Wife*, *The Hatbox Letters*) and three memoirs in which she writes, evocatively, of her rural New Brunswick home – where she has lived since the early seventies – and, achingly, of the experience of giving birth in her 20s to a stillborn child (*Shadow Child*).

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Powning's superb new novel, *A Measure of Light*, which evens her fiction/non-fiction tally, is a fictionalized account of the life of Mary Dyer, the 17th-century Puritan who martyred herself for the Massachusetts Bay Colony's fledgling Quaker movement. This dark, shatteringly exquisite book isn't just an amalgam of Powning's preoccupations to date, it's also a pinnacle; it feels, that is, like the novel New England-born, Quaker-raised Powning was destined to write.

It begins in 1634. A twentysomething Mary Dyer is walking down a London street when she happens upon an appalling scene: One of three Puritan men held in pillories, his skin "yellow as a spring parsnip ...

his mouth a cave," is having his ears sliced off. As the mutilation proceeds, a frenzied crowd runs forward with buckets, eager to collect martyrs' blood.

A year later, Mary and her husband William have joined thousands of fellow Puritans in their flight to New England, the so-called "New Jerusalem." But as Mary and her servant girl, Sinnie, stroll down a Boston street, we get an ominous sense of déjà vu: A shirtless man, "arms spread like wings," is being mercilessly whipped in stocks for an unspecified heresy.

You will glean from that montage, as Mary and William soon do, that the grass of religious tolerance has not turned out to be greener on the other side of the pond. There is, in fact, no mention of grass at all (the blessed lawns of suburbia are still centuries away), though there is an awful lot of wood to be chopped. There are also wolves, literal and figurative, to be kept at bay.

Powning stays true to the main facts of Dyer's life. In Boston, she was drawn into the orbit of the charismatic midwife and proto-feminist Anne Hutchinson, who, as a key player in the Antinomian controversy – a fight, as the character Mary puts it, over "the proper template for salvation" – was eventually banished from the colony. Among other things, Hutchinson questioned the need for ministers. The ministers, unsurprisingly perhaps, took exception to this.

During her time in Boston, Dyer prematurely gave birth to a deformed, stillborn child. When the authorities learned of it they disinterred and paraded the "monstrous" child as physical proof of her apostasy. Shattered and disillusioned, Mary and William decamped with other Hutchinsonians to Aquidneck Island in present-day Rhode Island.

Dyer converted to Quakerism during a five-year sojourn away from her family in England, where the movement was led by George Fox. Upon her return to Boston she was imprisoned then banished, Quakerism having been outlawed in her absence. Though threatened with execution were she to return to Massachusetts, Dyer nevertheless managed to do so twice. Her first execution was stayed at the last minute, but the second time the authorities kept their word: Mary Dyer died by hanging in 1660, the sole woman among four Quaker martyrs in the colony.

Prose-wise, there isn't a page in *A Measure of Light* where something extraordinary doesn't happen. Like a method actor, Powning has infiltrated Mary's world so completely that she seems to write from squarely within its walls. (There is, however, one notable slip when someone uses the 20th-century aspersion, "Shut yer cakehole!") Powning's descriptions are as visceral and intense ("Stars spread in coruscating clouds against the wet-slate blackness") as they are unexpected ("glimpsed truth like the corner of an envelope slipped beneath a door").

Narratively, her strategy is to posit Dyer's martyrdom ("She had no fear of those who might mock her, suffering pain or humility with gladness, since it had been reduced in proportion to her joy and became as the prick of brambles or the sting of an insect") as the direct consequence of her having been "ruined for a mother" by those who stigmatized her and also by the death of her first child shortly after his birth. Emotionally withdrawn from her ordeals, Mary finds that she is unable to love her six living children; "My heart is dry and black as a bat's wing," she tells her Quaker friend, Dafeny.

Depression morphs into radicalization, if you will, when she goes overseas and falls in with the Society of Friends. So, needless to say, the novel has some unexpected relevance to today's headlines.

It's been suggested that Canadians embrace historical fiction because we're insecure about our putatively drab, uneventful history. That one of the finest books in the genre to come along in ages should be about the birth of the country that's the wellspring of so much of that insecurity is, then, both ironic and entirely fitting.

Emily Donaldson is a freelance critic and editor.

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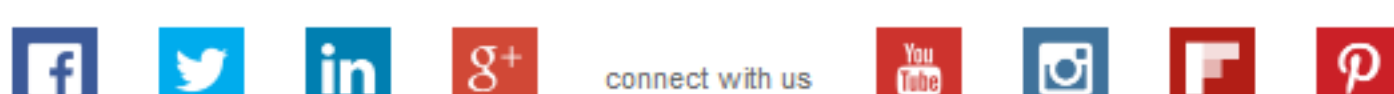
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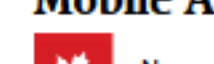
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