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### Author Beth Powning on why she wrote her new book, her favourite sentences and more

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Beth Powning's previous work includes the bestselling novels The Hatbox Letters and The Sea Captain's Wife, as well as the memoirs Shadow Child, Edge Seasons and Seeds of Another Summer: Finding the Spirit of Home in Nature. Powning, who lives in Sussex, N.B., just published a new novel, A Measure of Light, about the 17th-century Puritan Mary Dyer; it was praised in The Globe and Mail as a "dark, shatteringly exquisite book."

#### Why did you write your new book?

I came upon a brief sentence about a punishment meted out by the Massachusetts authorities, in 1660, to three Quakers, "one of them a woman." I was shocked, both by the punishment itself, and at the fact that I had never heard of this woman, although I grew up in New England and was raised as a Quaker. I began A Measure of Light in a state of anger and curiosity – yet the longer I researched, the more strongly I began to identify with Mary Dyer.

Curiosity turned to compassion; anger to analysis. Once I began to understand the time period and its exigencies, there was no way I could turn back from what I could see was going to be a long, arduous, thrilling and complex journey towards rendering Mary's story.

#### Whose sentences are your favourite, and why?

The last sentences of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. The terse, bleak narrative that precedes the novel's only lyrical sentences, the last nine of the book, isolate these sentences, rendering them a gut-wrenching indictment of our tenancy on this planet. I'm shaken every time I read them. "Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery."

#### Which historical period do you wish you'd lived through, and why?

If I could be sure nothing went wrong with my teeth, I would love to be dropped into New Brunswick, circa 1840-60. I'd like to see ships plying the Bay of Fundy, horses pulling wagonloads of hay, women in capes walking the dusty roads. I'd like to see Saint John when the Age of Sail was in full swing. I believe (which time-travel might disprove!) that people were invigorated by a sense of potential, farms were numerous and small, the country halls still rang with the sound of fiddles, industry was based upon local need and communities were strongly woven.

#### What's the best death scene in literature?

The death of Addie Bundren in William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying. I love how the plain words of the observing family members stand out, clear and sharp, within a lyrical narrative. "Her eyes, the life in them, rushing suddenly upon them; the two flames glare up for a steady instant. Then they go out as though someone had leaned down and blown upon them. ... 'She's taken and left us,' Pa says." There is no more poignant moment in a death scene than Pa's attempts to stroke the quilt smooth over Addie's body. Failing, with his rough and awkward "claw," he desists, "his hand falling to his side and stroking itself again, palm and back, on his thigh."

#### What's the best romance in literature, and why?

Of course one of fiction's great romances (and I love it) is that of Heathcliff and Cathy in Wuthering Heights. Recently, I found the relationship of Theo and Pippa in *The Goldfinch* [by Donna Tartt] to be a moving iteration of the same story – the power and purity of first love, and its tragic, perhaps inevitable, foundering. Both romances are based on the lovely child-companionship that occasionally precedes love, and (sometimes) survives it.

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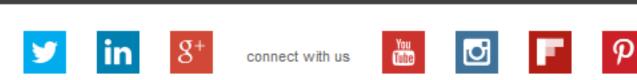
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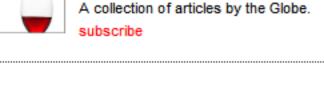
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