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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.

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."

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.

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.

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.

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.

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TOPICS: Sussex, New Brunswick | Cormac McCarthy

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