CBC books

CANADA

Literary Prizes

Challenges

Features

Resources

Contact

Search Books

How I wrote it

F Like 20 Tweet 13 8+1 0 Share 33

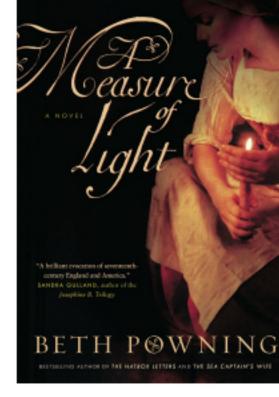
Beth Powning: How I wrote A Measure of Light

On April 1, 2015 6:00 AM 💭 0

Beth Powning was horrified when she first learned about the life of Mary Dyer, a woman who was hanged by the Puritans in Boston in 1660 simply for being a Quaker. Having been raised a Quaker herself, Powning dove deep into Dyer's fascinating story—"a great gift to a historical novelist because so much was unknown."

unusual friendship she struck up with a man online to the farmhouse attic where she wrote the novel's lyrical sentences.

Beth Powning speaks to us about how she wrote A Measure of Light—from the





Mary Dyer. He has also written a biography of her that has not yet been published. He has spent

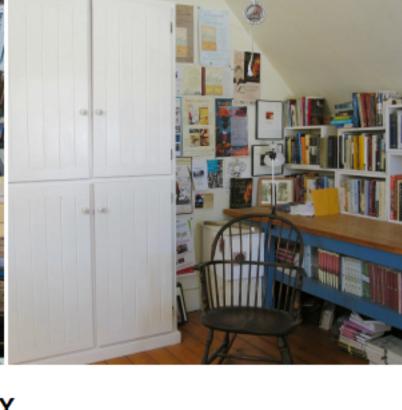
PEN PALS

his life researching her... I've never met him. He lives in Connecticut and he's a Quaker. We've been corresponding for four years. I've been trying to help him get his biography published by steering him to people I know and reading what he's written. He's sent me many drafts of his biography and then he did the fact-checking of my novel. He'd find some new tidbit and he'd say, "Look at this thing I just learned." I was initially nervous because I thought I was trespassing on his story, but he said to me, "No, you are writing a novel and I am writing a biography. They're very different and your Mary may be different from the Mary that I uncover and that's perfectly fine." So he was very generous and I've given him a huge mention in the book's acknowledgements. A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN We live in a great big old 1870 farmhouse at the end of a valley in New Brunswick. It's at the end

One of my most important sources was a man named Johan Winsser who has a website about

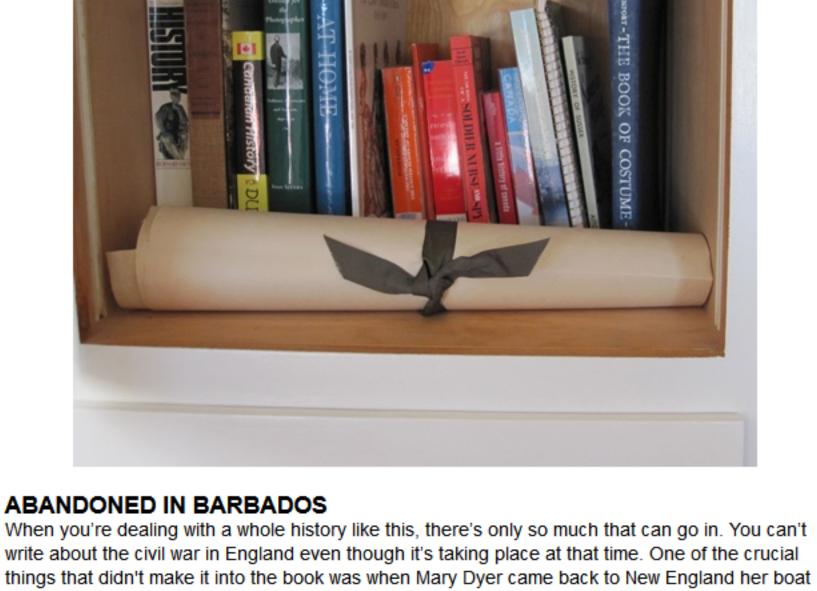
of a long lane so no cars go by. I took over one of the biggest rooms in the house. It's directly over the kitchen. To get into this room, there's a tiny door. I'm 5"1' and even I have to duck... The room has these sloping ceilings and a skylight and then these east-facing windows. This has become my room and all the walls are lined with books. One wall is lined with posters and anything to do with things I've done as a writer. In one corner, the coldest corner of the room, is my computer. There's also a big cabinet with closed doors. That's where I put all the material for the book that I'm writing. As soon as I finish writing that book, I clean out those shelves so they're empty waiting for the next one. They're empty at the moment.





along the side are the characters. So it will say "1635" and it will have Mary, William, the children, who was born that year, and the other characters. So I will look at one year and think, "Oh, she was doing that then!" And then I'll go to the next year and then the year after that... It's a whole chart of history. On the side there will also be a list of things that happened historically. So I will see that Charles I is beheaded in the same year they were getting married. You can see how everything is contiguous with everything else.

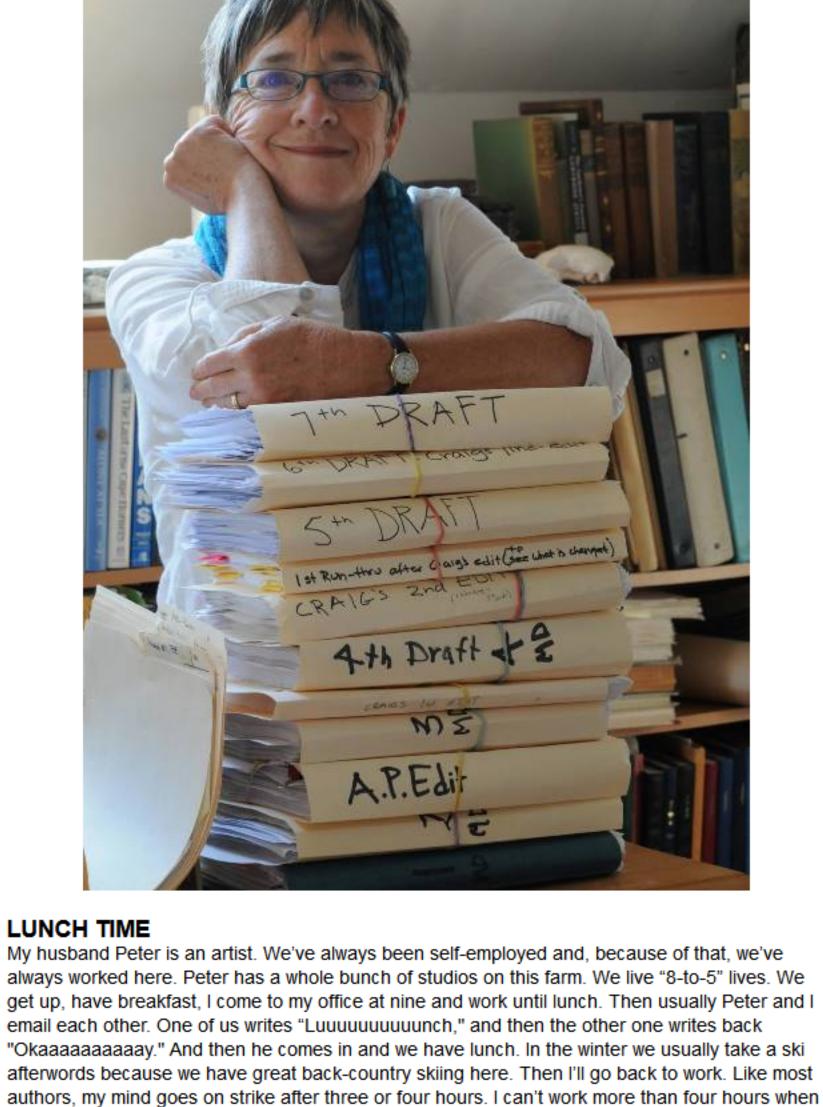
Something I have done with both of my last novels is that I make this great big scroll. I take paper and I tape it together so it becomes this long thing that rolls up. Along the top are the years, and



archives and prowled around and made up a whole part of the book where she was on a

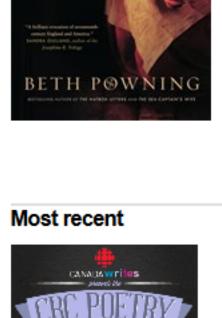
plantation that was owned by Quakers. Then, of course, I had to research what sugar plantations were like and what would it have felt like for her to be there. This was a huge section of the book and it was all abandoned.

was blown off course and ended up in Barbados. I actually went to Barbados and visited the



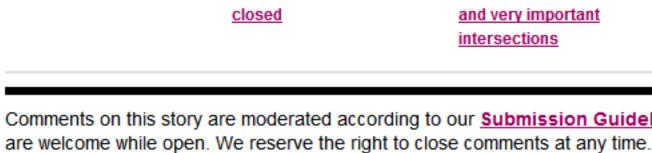
I'm really pulling it out of nowhere. I just get to this point where I think it's just going to be anti-productive to keep working. Beth Powning is the author of Seeds of Another Summer, Shadow Child: An Apprenticeship in Love and Loss, The Hatbox Letters, Edge Seasons and The Sea Captain's Wife. Her most recent book is A Measure of Light. In 2014, she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters degree from the University of New Brunswick.

Read more in our "How I wrote it" series »



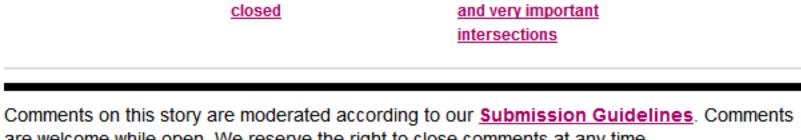
2015 CBC Poetry Competition now open!





Lorna Crozier on why

she writes with the door



David McGimpsey on

country songs, Oprah

0 Comments Write your comment here

Login | Signup

Follow

There are no comments yet.

Submit

Newest

Submission Policy

Note: The CBC does not necessarily endorse any of the views posted. By submitting your comments, you acknowledge that CBC has the right to reproduce, broadcast and publicize those comments or any part thereof in any manner whatsoever. Please note that comments are moderated and published according to our submission guidelines.

TV

Radio

News

Sports

Explore CBC CBC Home Music

Kids Local Documentaries Comedy

RSS

Terms of Use

Privacy Policy

Aboriginal Weather CBC Connects

Podcasts

Books

Parents

Site Map

Digital Archives

Games

Contests

Mobile

Commercial Services

Stay Connected

Services and Information Corporate Info

Public Appearances

Radio-Canada

Reuse & Permission

©2015 CBC/Radio-Canada. All rights reserved

CBC Shop Help

Contact Us

Newsletters & Alerts

The Shakespeare Selfie Challenge



The BEST of Writes

DAYS to submit your entry to the CBC Poetry Prize SUBMIT YOUR ENTRY NOW »

Jobs