

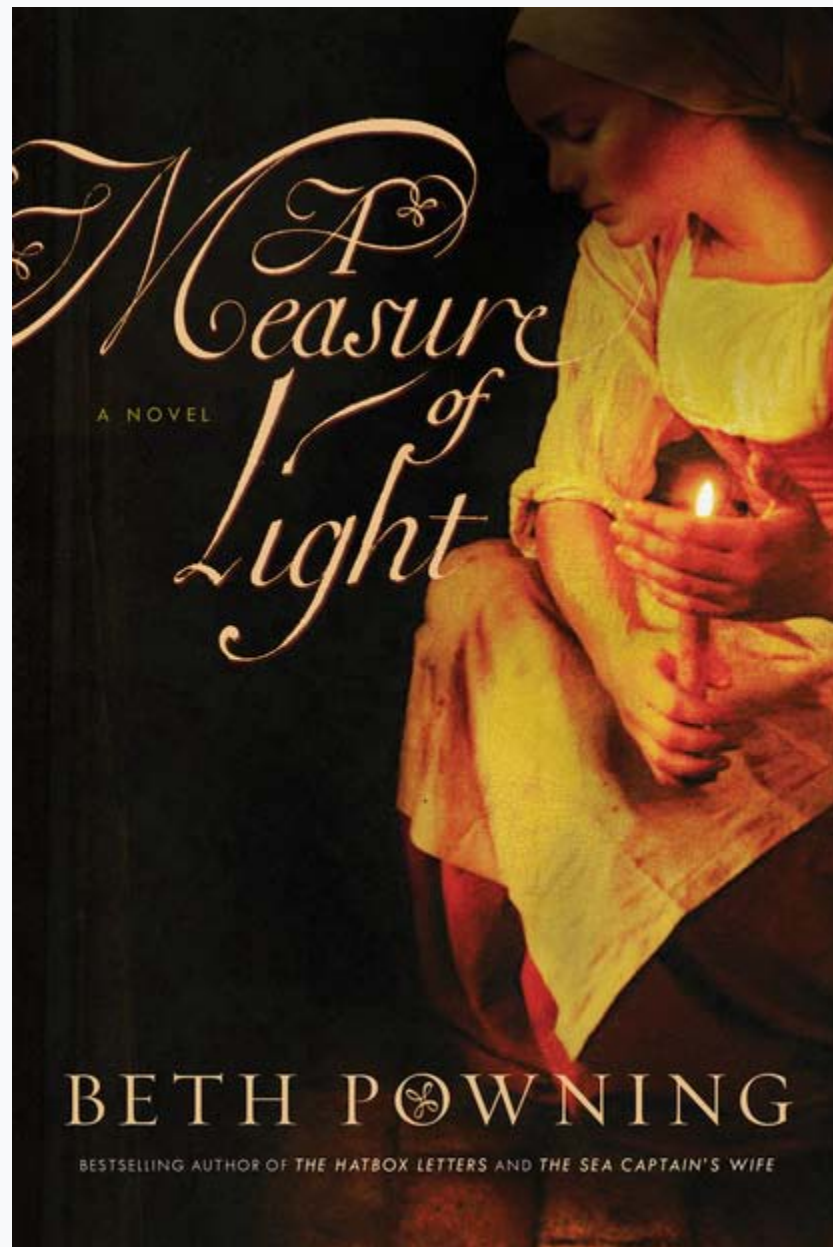
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Review: A Measure of Light

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A Measure of Light by Beth Powning, Knopf Canada, 323 pages

In Beth Powning's latest novel, faith collides with religious intolerance, and luscious writing acts as a counterpoint to an often stark story.

A Measure of Light follows the fortunes of Mary Dyer, a Puritan-turned-Quaker in 17th century England and New England. The title comes from Mary quoting the Quaker leader George Fox: "... that every man or woman hath received from the Lord a measure of light. He tells that if we hearken to that light we shall come into the state Adam was before he fell. Then we do be innocent. Pure."

Longing for that state is what drives Mary throughout this remarkable book. *A Measure of Light* is a true story that Powning has transformed into a work of art. Mary Barrett did marry William Dyer in the church of St. Martin-in-the-fields in 1633. Much of what is recounted in the book took place. But Powning created Mary's early years, added characters, fictionalized dialogue and cast the entire story in a frame of writing so rich in description that is almost verges on becoming voluptuous at times.

The novel begins in England, where Mary – a Puritan convert through her marriage to her husband, William – is living at a time when the English clergy are persecuting the Puritans for their beliefs. The family decides to strike out to Massachusetts, where the Puritans are free to live unmolested, although the new world holds new challenges to familiarize themselves with such as wild animals, the aboriginal people of the area and fiercely cold winters. Decided, Mary and William, and their servants embark for Boston.

New England turns out to be as intolerable as England. Mary befriends an outspoken woman, Anne Hutchinson, a heretic whose pronouncements divide the Puritans and lead to a crackdown on Hutchinson and those who align themselves with her. In the midst of this, Mary suffers a miscarriage and is soon

branded a disbeliever for having delivered a "monster."

Bereft, Mary returns to England for the funeral of her aunt who raised her, and while there, encounters a group of Quakers. Far away from her husband, her children, and her beloved servant Sinnie, Mary embraces the new religion and in doing so, again aligns herself with a persecuted religion. She sets out to preach the word of the Lord at a time when the English government had Quakers put in

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stocks, whipped, their ears cut off and worse.

A Measure of Light is at once a novel of great beauty and of unforgettable tragedy. Powning offsets the austere existence of the Puritans and Quakers with warm, evocative writing. She has a gift for producing such wonderful images as, “Over the sea, slivers of cloud shimmered like minnows.” The world of Mary Dyer is palpable and real, as are the characters who inhabit the book.

William, Mary’s husband, is hard-working, conservative, unshakable in his Puritan faith. Mary’s servant Sinnie is kind-hearted, meek, the mother to Mary’s children as Mary proves incapable of finding love in her heart for them herself. Anne Hutchinson is unrepentant, hard, and yet a strong friend to those she trusts. Mary herself is bleak, empty, troubled, driven to find the peace of mind she has lost since her miscarriage.

Among them swirl The Friends – as the Quakers call themselves – and the stern Puritans who cruelly punish the Quakers for their civil and spiritual disobedience. Whether Mary’s steadfast refusal to back down from the church and government is the conviction of faith or just plain madness is left to the reader to decide.

Powning, who lives near Sussex, N.B., shows again that she is in the top tier of Canadian novelists. If there is a comparison to be drawn, then it is with one of the best historical novelists, Penelope Fitzgerald. With Fitzgerald, Powning shares the ability to create gorgeous, tactile scenes that are at once original and alive with life. *A Measure of Light* transcends genre writing; rather, it is a keenly intelligent, memorable work of literature, and that rare thing, a book worth returning to again.

Charles Mandel is a Halifax-based writer

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