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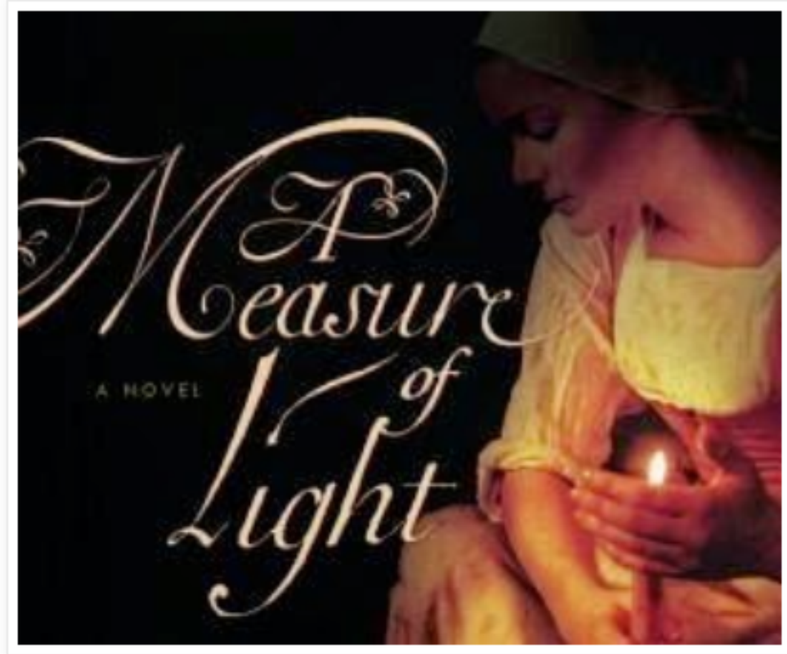
Sunday, April 5, 2015

REVIEW: A MEASURE OF LIGHT



Ask yourself if there is a cause or belief you would die to serve. Or what your death might accomplish for this cause. Hardly speculative questions in our contemporary moment. Where Beth Powning's *A Measure of Light* departs from the present of this reader is, well, the setting and plot: 17th century Puritan New England and the emergence of the Quaker movement. Less obviously, it departs in the sense that those who die for their beliefs do so not as suicides where bodies are the available weapons, but rather those who die for their beliefs are killed by the state for holding beliefs that are deemed so threatening, so challenging as to be violently and publicly killed. It's a grammar slip there, you'll notice, between the belief being killed and the person. And one worth noticing.

Our protagonist, historical figure Mary Dyer, is killed by the Boston officials that see her views of God (as accessible to all with equal access and without the intercedence of the Church) as heretical and threatening to the sociopolitical (and importantly economic) well-being of the region. So while she and several of her Friends are publicly hanged, their deaths do not accomplish the aims of the state in that the belief cannot be killed by killing the person. Or at least not easily. Rather, as Powning's narrative suggests, Mary Dyer the martyr does more to raise the profile of the belief in their death than she does in her actively proselytizing life.

A Measure of Light is a fascinating read for its unraveling of the development of the Quaker movement and its portrait of New England life. It's a rich (and beautifully written) exploration of what it means to hold beliefs with such conviction and the consequences both for the individual life, but for the family and community of that individual. It's perhaps even more interesting – at least for me – in its representation of women and women's bodies in this period. Mary's journey through faith is irrevocably marked by the death of her three-day old child and the subsequent still-birth of her premature child as she and her community view these tragedies as evidence of her damned soul. I admit, as an atheist and 2015 reader, that I struggled to empathize with her conviction that it was God that spoke through her (markedly female) body. What I could understand and relate to – only too well – was the feeling of my body, and its interpretation, as outside my control and dominion. The sense that others read what women's bodies do – and don't do – in questions about when (not if) these bodies will have children, in how (not whether) these bodies will be held up against impossible standards of beauty and in the sexualization and objectification of these bodies at every turn. So while the patriarchal source might be different – God – the experience of a distorted and disturbed relationship between the self and the body is all too recognizable.

All this to say, between the resonant and provocative questions about the power of religious conviction to drive (violent) action and the representation of women's bodies as sites for public debate, *A Measure of Light* is an exemplary piece of historical fiction, doing what historical fiction does best in representing the past in a way that allows us to better understand our present experience. Given the preponderance of historical fiction in Canadian literature (and no, I'm not just saying that because it's my thing) and the attention this genre tends to get in awards season, I'd flag *A Measure of Light* as one likely to come up in discussions of best's of this year.

When's she not reading, Erin Aspenlieder is teaching, running or eating cookies (sometimes all at once). She prefers fiction and books made of paper. She blogs at literaryvice.ca

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