


[Find Books ▾](#)
[Canada Reads ▾](#)
[CBC Literary Prizes ▾](#)
[The Next Chapter](#)
[Writers & Company](#)
[Contact](#)

Search Book Portal Site



Beth Powning on writing novels with her eyes closed

Friday, November 25, 2016 | 0
 [Like](#)
 [Share](#)
61

61

Tweet

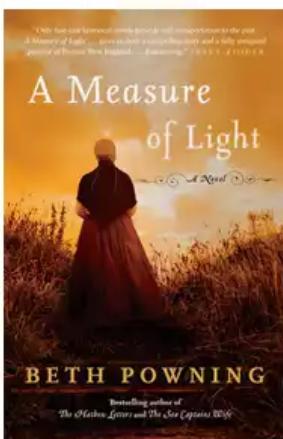
G+1

1

In *A Measure of Light*, Beth Powning explores the life of a polarizing historical figure through fiction. Mary Dyer was persecuted in 17th-century Boston simply for being a Quaker. Her life ended at the gallows, but her story lives on in Powning's novel, which is one of 17 Canadian books nominated for the International DUBLIN Literary Award.

- [Beth Powning: How I wrote *A Measure of Light*](#)

Below, Powning takes part in CBC Books' **Magic 8 Q&A**, answering eight questions from eight writers.

**MAGIC 8****CBCbooks.ca**

1. Kate Taylor asks, "What was the last novel you read?"

Exposure by Helen Dunmore. It is a Cold War story about a woman who buries her spy-husband's briefcase in her London garden, with terrible consequences. I love Dunmore's novels *Zennor in Darkness* and *A Spell of Winter*. Having published poetry before novels, her use of language delights me as much as her terrific storytelling.

2. Anthony Bidulka asks, "What has been your best experience with a reader of your work?"

I've had many intense experiences with readers, particularly with my memoir, *Shadow Child*. But a particularly memorable one was the man who wrote to me after reading *The Hatbox Letters*. He sent me a long, handwritten, heartfelt letter, saying that one chapter of the book had changed his life. After a reading at Munro's Books in Victoria, I noticed a man waiting patiently, *The Hatbox Letters* clutched to his chest. After everyone was gone, he came up and identified himself, shyly, as the man whose life I had changed. Such a joy for an author. He had responded with perfect understanding to my own solitary journey of creation.

3. Linden MacIntyre asks, "To what extent is Google becoming a substitute for experience, real research, and even the imagination?"

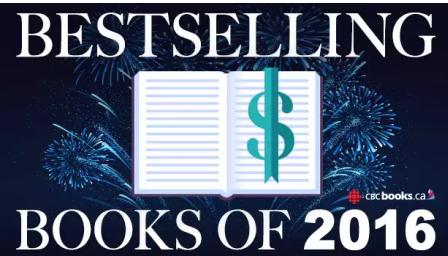
I was born in 1949, so my devotion to books as research tools is deeply entrenched, although I am susceptible to the expedience of Google. What was a revolution for me, however, is life as usual for my granddaughters. They use their devices the way we once used our telephones and electric typewriters. They get their information from both computers and books, and they have terrific imaginations. So I'm not too worried about the new reality. Except for one thing. Birds, wildflowers, rivers, trees. Will they have spent enough time around the non-human world to be passionate about its preservation?

Subscribe to the CBC Books newsletter:

Email:

Enter your email address

Sign up



4. Linwood Barclay asks, "Does writing get easier the more you do it, or more difficult because you don't want to repeat yourself?"

I write with my eyes closed, without thinking about composition. And I do find it gets easier, the actual act of writing. I write to enter the world I'm creating, to find out what is going to happen, and to carry my characters through their passages. I don't get hung up on the craft, not until my (beloved) editor starts in on me. I haven't yet experienced the fear of repeating myself. It will probably happen one of these days, like other wearisome facts of aging.

5. Donna Morrissey asks, "Who has been your favourite character to write so far, and why?"

I loved creating Sinnie in *A Measure of Light*. Mary Dyer was a real person - tragic, dark and tormented - and it took hard work to see through her eyes, with constant reference to the historical truth. Sinnie was my creation, entirely, and she served as a kind of resting place for me. And, of course, for the reader.

6. Shilpi Somaya Gowda asks, "Do you ever get stuck creatively? If so, what do you do to get your creative juices flowing again?"

The best thing I can do to get my creative juices flowing is to stop. Just stop. Remove myself from obligations. Sit in a quiet place by the Bay of Fundy, watch clouds and birds, hold my journal. And wait. Then ask myself questions and answer with a pen.

7. Nazneen Sheikh asks, "Have you ever been frightened by what you write? How and why?"

I have remembered fear when writing about it in my memoirs. And relived the feeling. It is shattering, and I feel physically drained afterwards. In fiction, I was most often frightened when writing *The Sea Captain's Wife*, as I imagined myself as Azuba on that ship, especially when the pirate junk loomed into view.

8. Padma Viswanathan asks, "What is the place of dreams in literature, or, for you, the relationship of dreaming to writing?"

Love this question. The relationship of dreaming to writing is huge. Dreams come from the part of the mind most useful to me as a writer, the closet of weirdness, the place where truth floats in strange guise. I trust my subconscious as a powerful resource. One of my cultivated disciplines is to think about the story that I'm telling, making a kind of mental stage set, and then, while holding the scene in my conscious mind, letting the subconscious do its work. It's a kind of looking without seeing, waiting to be surprised by what drifts up. Note that I'm talking about using dreaming as a tool. Dreams, as subject matter in and of themselves, are rarely interesting in a narrative. The reader wants to get back to the real story.

Read more in the **MAGIC 8** series

CBC books.ca

Subscribe to the Newsletter 



Get book recommendations, stay up-to-date on CanLit news, discover the best author interviews on CBC and more with the CBC Books newsletter.

Subscribe to the CBC Books newsletter:

Email:

Enter your email address

Sign up

Related