



Caleb's Crossing

By Geraldine Brooks

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Genre & subjects

Historical Fiction

American Indians

Synopsis

Caleb's Crossing follows Bethia and Caleb from Grand Harbour to Cambridge and beyond, charting not only their crossing of the stretch of ocean between island and mainland but of the vast—and sometimes unbridgeable—expanse between Native American and white settler, between pagan and Christian, and between male and female. Brooks has built a world of emotion, struggle, and natural beauty in which the balance between the traditions of the past and the potential of the future are captured in the lives of two young friends.

Author biography

Geraldine Brooks is the author of several books, including the novel *Year of Wonders* and the non-fiction work *Nine Parts of Desire*; her second novel, *March*, won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2006. Earlier in her career, Brooks was a foreign correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal* and was stationed in Bosnia, Somalia, and the Middle East. Born in Australia, she currently divides her time between Martha's Vineyard, an island in Massachusetts, and Sydney.

Discussion starters

- In discussing the purchase of the island from the Wampanoag, Bethia's father says, "some now say that [the sonquem] did not fully understand that we meant to keep the land from them forever. Be that as it may, what's done is done and it was done lawfully" (p. 9). Do you agree with his opinion?
- With that in mind, examine Caleb's view of the settlers on p. 143 - 144. Why does he say that the sound of their "boots, boots, and more boots" (p. 143) moved him to cross cultures and adopt Christianity? Contrast this with Tequamuck's reaction to the settlers' arrival (p. 295). Placed in their situation, what would you have felt?
- Look at Bethia's discussion of the question "Who are we?" at the top of p. 57. Of the options that she offers, which seems most true to you? Are there other options you would add to her list?
- On p. 285, Joseph Dudley discusses the philosophical question of the Golden Mean, which suggests that the ideal behaviour is the middle point between extremes. But he then goes on to argue against this belief, stating that, in fact, there is no middle point between extremes such as "good and evil, truth and falsehood." Which perspective do you agree with?

- Compared with those in her community, Bethia is remarkably unprejudiced in her view of the Wampanoag. Did you grow up surrounded by prejudices you disagreed with? How did this affect you? Conversely, did you have prejudices in your youth that you've since overcome?
- Bethia sees her mother's silence as a great strength and tool in dealing with society, particularly as a woman in a male-dominated culture. However, while Bethia repeatedly tries to emulate this behaviour, she's often overcome by her own passionate opinions. Find an example where Bethia's boldness in stating her mind is a good thing and an example where it brings her trouble. Have you ever wished you had spoken when instead you stayed quiet—or wished you had stayed quiet instead of having spoken your mind?
- The Wampanoag and the Puritans have very different views on raising children. Describe the differences you see between the two and which method you believe is healthier. Are Caleb and Bethia the typical product of their respective societies?
- Bethia acknowledges that her own religion could seem as crazy to Caleb as his does to her: "Of course, I thought it all outlandish. But... it came to me that our story of a burning bush and a parted sea might also seem fabulous, to one not raised up knowing it was true" (p. 35). In the end, Caleb does come to accept Bethia's religion, and she develops a kinder attitude toward him. Have you or anyone you know ever converted religions? Have you grown interested in or accepting of religions or practices that initially struck you as strange or foreign?
- When visiting Italy, Bethia writes of feeling overwhelmed by how different it was from her own home. Have you ever had a similar experience when travelling somewhere new? Did your travels make you see your own home in a new light? Does Bethia's visit to Italy change her beliefs or behaviour?
- Unlike Bethia, her son has no interest in travelling to older countries like Italy, saying that "everything there is done and built and finished. I like it here, where we can make and do for ourselves" (p. 274). Is this sense of independence and potential still true of the United States today?
- Both Bethia and Caleb struggle against the limits and expectations placed on them by society. How are their experiences similar? How are they different? Who faces the greater challenge?

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