

Geraldine Brooks, *Caleb's Crossing* (Fourth Estate, 2011)

The year is 1660. Bethia, the daughter of a Puritan minister, is growing up in the settlement of Great Harbor, on an island off the coast of Massachusetts. Her life is circumscribed by a land so narrow that 'one may, in a single day, observe a sunrise out of the sea and a sunset back into it' (14). The narrow island evokes an image of the constrictions of her life: a girl child, reared in the strict religion of her forefathers, she is restricted to a life of 'huswifery' and prayer. Her intelligent and active mind must be bent only to the study of her Bible, and her future husband has already been chosen for her.

Caleb's Crossing is as much the story of Bethia, its narrator, as it is of Caleb Cheeshahteumauk, the first Native American to graduate from Harvard. Geraldine Brooks has taken the scant facts about the seventeenth-century American Indian scholar – only one document in his hand has survived – and on this 'slender scaffolding' has written 'a work of imagination' (363). The result is a pleasure to read: a richly-imagined, thoughtful and compelling novel about a specific time and place in America's early colonial history.

Brooks, an Australian journalist and novelist, has specialised in this kind of historical story-telling since the publication of her first novel, the best-selling *Year of Wonders* (2001). This 'novel of the Plague' vividly captured the terrible atmosphere of Eyam, the Derbyshire village riven by the plague in 1666. Her second novel, *March*, set during the American Civil War and based on the life of Louisa May Alcott's father, won the Pulitzer Prize in 2006. In *Caleb's Crossing* (2011), Brooks stays in her adopted country and revisits the seventeenth century.

Geraldine Brooks' gifts lie in her capacity to make her imaginative historical re-creations vivid and convincing. Like her earlier work, this novel is well-researched: from her home on Martha's Vineyard, the island of the novel, Brooks immersed herself in local history – reading books and pamphlets, searching in archives and genealogies, and talking to the Native Americans in her community. Caleb's story was difficult to piece together because 'the written record from that time is mainly from the colonial point of view'.¹ But even the voices of the colonisers can be muted when, like Bethia, they are members of the silenced sex:

It was interesting to try to create Bethia because first-person narratives – even letters – by women in 17th-century America are scarce. Women were encouraged to read the Bible but not necessarily to write because that was men's business, and women didn't have access to paper anyway because it was a great luxury and not to be used for something as frivolous as setting down a woman's thoughts.²

¹ Geraldine Brooks, 'Tales of the Unexpected' [Interview by Stephen Romei], *The Australian* (Review) 9 April 2011, 4.

² Brooks, Tales 4.

Bethia's 'spiritual diary', the text of the novel, is said to be written on 'scraps of paper' scavenged from her elder brother's hoard, and then on 'crumpled discards and part-written sheets' (100) removed from the boys' school-room in Cambridge. In spite of her bright and lively mind, Bethia is not a student at Master Corlett's school, but an indentured servant, set to hard hours of physical labour. Her dream of a life of the mind, a chance at education, is even more remote than Caleb's, and he is just a 'wild boy ... a half-naked, sassafras-scented heathen anointed with raccoon grease' (29).

Caleb, however, is valued by the Puritans: he is seen as a convert, a 'great hope to lead his people' from paganism to 'the one true religion', Christianity. As such, he is given a Harvard education, moving beyond his native language and the English that Bethia has taught him to Latin, Greek and Hebrew. The single surviving historical document from his schooling is written in Latin, a letter to his benefactors, in which Caleb discusses the myth of Orpheus 'as it relates to his own experience of crossing between two very different cultures' (i). The text of this letter is reprinted on the endpapers and the inside cover of the novel.

Caleb's 'crossing' is not an easy one. Although he has a love of classical scholarship and learning, 'his soul is stretched like ... rope' (8) between the world of his forefathers, with its own beliefs and customs, and the demands of the civilisation that is trying to claim him. Like Orpheus, he must cross from one world to another, and the exertions and trials of this crossing drive the narrative and inform the themes of Brooks' novel. At the same time, Bethia must make a crossing of her own: from innocence to experience, from girlhood to womanhood, from Caleb's free, natural world to the conventions and repressions of Puritan life:

As time passed it became harder for me to keep a bright line between my English self and that girl in the woods, whose mouth could utter the true name of every island creature, whose feet could walk trackless through leafbed, whose hands could pull a fish from a weir in a swift blur of motion and whose soul could glimpse a world animated by another kind of godliness ... [I knew that] one day I would have to leave my other self behind forever: that it could not go on, this crossing out of one world and into another. (60-61)

Like all insightfully-written historical fiction, *Caleb's Crossing* puts flesh on the bare bones of historical fact. This is not always a well-received process: think of the 'history wars' that were fuelled by Kate Grenville's fictional version of a period in Australian colonial history (*The Secret River* [2005]). Geraldine Brooks recognises that some of her readers will feel 'reservations about an undertaking that fictionalises the life of a beloved figure and sets down an imagined version of that life that may be misinterpreted as factual'; she is careful in her 'Afterword' to try to 'address those reservations somewhat by distinguishing scant fact from rampant invention' (367).

Whatever your opinion of the fictionalising of history, I can recommend *Caleb's Crossing* as an enjoyable and thought-provoking novel. Brooks has created a convincing seventeenth-century world and peopled it with characters whom we learn to understand and to feel sympathy for. Thematically, her novel gives us a great deal to think about: the function of religion in social and political life, the immorality of racism, the value of education, the effects of repressing the talents and abilities of women. These are all issues that have relevance in our own, twenty-first-century

society. If a fictional re-creation of history deepens our understanding of our own world, then that is something in its favour. Perhaps Brooks' readers will make a 'crossing' of their own.

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