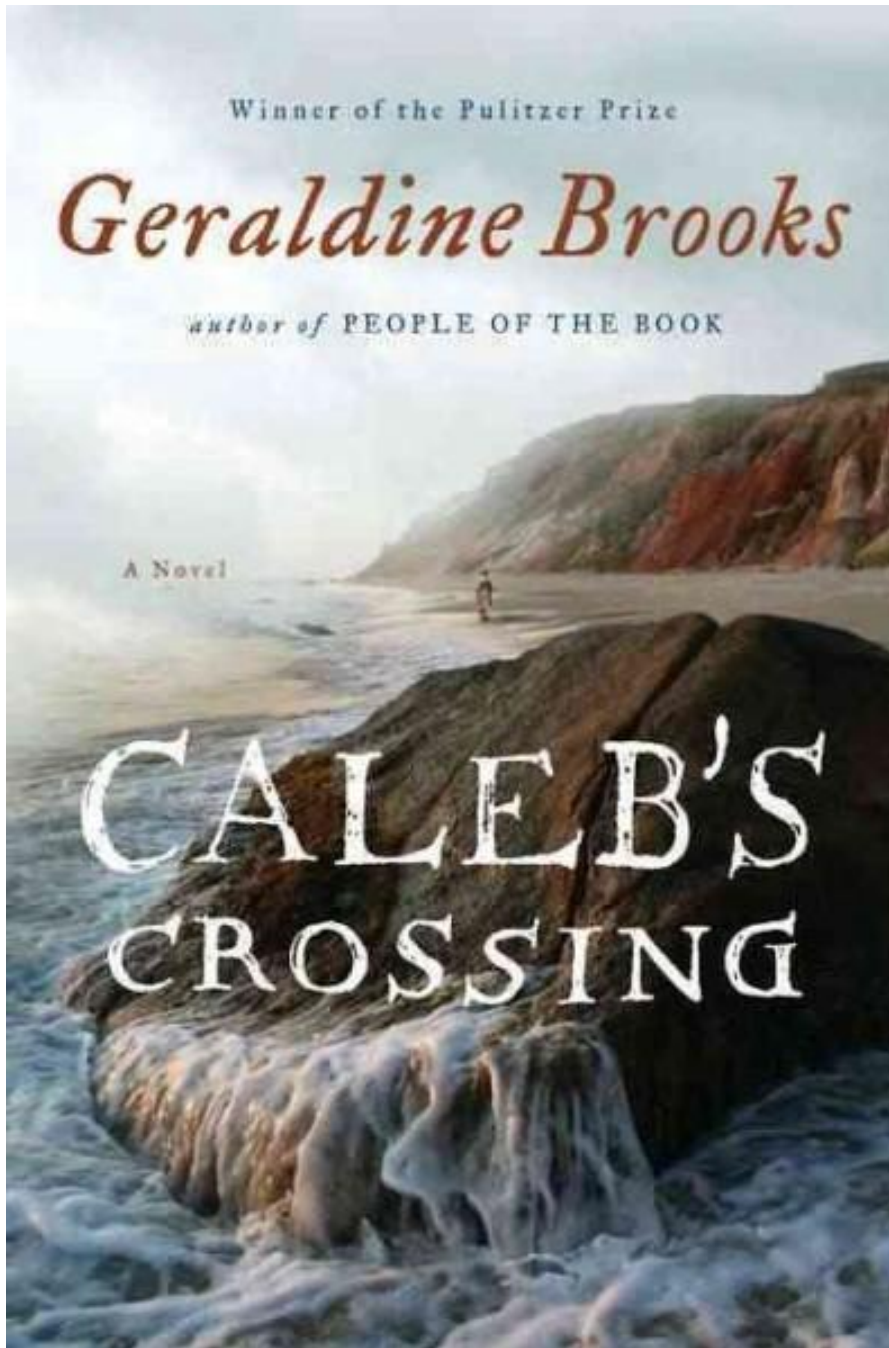


About the book...



Living in the isolated Puritan settlement of Great Harbor on Martha's Vineyard, Bethia Mayfield, the bright young daughter of the local minister, balances her strict religion with a passionate love of nature and a growing curiosity about the culture of the Wampanoag tribe that populates the island. When

Bethia secretly strikes up a friendship with a young Wampanoag named Caleb, she unknowingly begins a

journey that will shape her life. Intelligent, independent, and kind, Bethia is the narrator and the heart of Geraldine Brooks's stunning new novel, *Caleb's Crossing*, the story of Caleb Cheeshahteumauk, who in 1665 became the very first Native American to graduate from Harvard.

Torn between her commitment to her religion and her family and her longing for freedom and intellectual fulfillment, Bethia is a young woman built of contradictory desires. With Caleb, she finds an escape from her stern and pious community in which women are expected to be silent and subservient, the community that denies Bethia an education simply because of her gender.

But for all the freedom that Caleb inspires in her, he struggles to understand her dogged sense of duty and deference. Even as he chooses to adopt her religion, he encourages her to rebel and questions the obedience at the root of her faith.

Their relationship is soon upended as Caleb comes to live with Bethia's family so that he can be groomed to enter a preparatory school in Cambridge along with her elder brother, Makepeace. Living under the same roof

yet forced to keep their earlier friendship hidden, Bethia watches Caleb blossom under the tutelage she so craves. When a tragedy befalls the Mayfield family, Makepeace's hope for entering Harvard suddenly rests on Bethia's shoulders, demanding that she sacrifice her pride and her freedom to make his education possible. The shifting boundaries of Bethia's complex and profound relationship with Caleb change with their arrival together in Cambridge; as he enters school, Bethia becomes an indentured servant, and while their lives move in markedly different directions, their friendship endures.

Caleb's Crossing follows Bethia and Caleb from Grand Harbor 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.

About the author...



The novel [Year of Wonders](#) and the nonfiction 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. Geraldine Brooks is the author of six books, including *Born in Australia*, she currently divides her time between Martha's Vineyard and Sydney.

Reviews

Booklist/*Starred Review*

Brooks, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for her Civil War novel, *March* (2006), here imagines the life of Caleb Cheeshahteumauk, the first Native American to graduate from Harvard. The story is told by Bethia

Mayfield, the daughter of a preacher who traveled from England to Martha's Vineyard to try and "bring Christ to the Indians." In 1660, when Bethia is 12, the family takes Caleb, a Wampanoag Indian, into their home to prepare him for boarding school. Bethia is a bright scholar herself, and though education for women is discouraged, she absorbs the lessons taught to Caleb and her brother Makepeace like a sponge. She struggles through the deaths of her mother, a younger sister, another brother, and her father. When Caleb and Makepeace are sent to Cambridge, Bethia accompanies them as an indentured servant to a professor. She marries a Harvard scholar, journeys with him to Padua, and finally returns to her beloved island. In flashbacks, Brooks relates the woes of the Indian Wars, the smallpox epidemic, and Caleb's untimely death shortly after his graduation with honors. Brooks has an uncanny ability to reconstruct each moment of the history she so thoroughly researched in stunningly lyrical prose, and her characters are to be cherished.

Library Journal

In 1965, Caleb Cheeshahteumuck of Martha's Vineyard graduated from Harvard, whose 1650 charter describes its mission as "the education of the English and Indian youth of this country." That much is fact. That Caleb befriended Bethia Mayfield, the free-spirited

daughter of the island's preacher, is of course fiction—but it's luscious fiction in the capable hands of Pulitzer Prize winner Brooks (March). As one might expect from Brooks, Bethia is a keen and rebellious lass, indignant that she should be kept from book learning when her slower brother gets the benefit of an education. She first encounters Caleb in the woods, learning his language and ways while stoutly arguing her Christian beliefs; later, Bethia's zealous father brings Caleb into the household to convert him. And so begins Caleb's crossing, first from Native to English Colonial culture and then from the island to Cambridge, where he studies at a preparatory school before entering Harvard. Bethia ends up at the school, too—but as an indentured servant. VERDICT Writing in Bethia's voice, Brooks offers a lyric and elevated narrative that effectively replicates the language of the era; she takes on the obvious issues of white arrogance, cultural difference, and the debased role of women without settling into jeremiad. The result is sweet and aching. Highly recommended.

BookPage Reviews

Finding a piece of history in her own backyard

Whether she's imagining the history of an ancient manuscript, as in *People of the Book*, or an English town determined to survive the plague in *A Year of*

Wonders, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Geraldine Brooks is a master at bringing history's little-known but fascinating stories to life.

For her fourth novel, *Caleb's Crossing*, she found inspiration close to home: the tale of a Wampanoag boy who became a Harvard graduate. Brooks first learned about Caleb after seeing a notation on a map. "I'm thinking [this happened in] 1965, the Civil Rights era, and when I found out it was 1665, my imagination started spinning," she says during a call to her home on Martha's Vineyard, which she shares with her husband, writer Tony Horwitz, and their two sons.

"Whenever anyone says, your women are ahead of their time, I tell them, go and read more 17th-century women!"

But that line on an old map of the island was one of very few records of Caleb Cheeshahteumauk's existence. "To tell you the truth, I had a hesitation about creating him too much in full, seeing that we know so little, and I wanted to respect that historical distance with him," Brooks says.

Instead, she approaches the story through another character: Bethia Mayfield, a minister's daughter with a hungry mind who has picked up her learning a piece at a time while eavesdropping on the lessons of her

older (and less intellectual) brother Makepeace. Bethia meets Caleb while gathering clams on the shores of Martha's Vineyard, near Gay Head. The daughter of a minister and the granddaughter of the island's governor, both of whom pride themselves on their good relationships and just dealings with the native tribes, Bethia is less intimidated by an Indian boy her own age than the average colonial girl. When she speaks to him in his language, a friendship is born.

"I don't remember who said this, but there's a saying 'learn another language and you gain another soul.' I found that very true when I was studying Arabic," Brooks says. "The way it's structured and the way the root words have developed give you such insight into the thinking of people. So it was fun to sort of think about that at a time when the English were trying to put their very foreign stamp on the landscape and bring in foreign species and things like this, to think of the original names for things on the island."

The understanding that Bethia and Caleb develop as a result of their friendship utterly changes their lives. Bethia is fascinated by the shaman of the tribe, Caleb's uncle, whose rituals are considered the devil's work by her father. Caleb is eager to adopt the ways of the colonists in order to level the playing field for his people.

Eventually Caleb comes to live with Bethia's family so he can be tutored by her father; then the two (along with Makepeace and another Wampanoag boy, Joel) go to Cambridge. Their story is narrated by Bethia in a diary written at three different points in her life, though no actual journals by colonial women before 1750 exist.

"There were literate women, certainly," Brooks says, "but they were just so damn busy! They were working from before sunup to after sundown, and you can imagine how fatiguing that all was. Also paper was very scarce, and the stress was on women reading the Bible but not necessarily writing, so it was a small population that would have found writing easy or pleasurable."

Bethia, of course, is among that small number. Living in a time when being an intelligent woman carries few rewards, she struggles to match her desires with the role that society has set for her (even her name means "servant"). Though she is perhaps an unusual woman for her time, Bethia deals with her situation in a way that feels authentic to the period—as do the people around her, even those who love her. Her father's pleasure in her learning, for example, "was of a fleeting kind—the reaction one might have if a cat were to walk about on its hind legs. You smile at the oddity but find the gait ungainly and not especially

attractive,” Bethia muses.

Though Caleb is also seen as an oddity, his gender still gives him more privileges than Bethia, and though she’s proud of him she can’t help but resent this injustice, especially as her personal trials and tribulations mount.

“I think it’s a slightly arrogant view to imagine that it’s only in our lifetime that women have had the wit to see that their lot stank,” Brooks says, citing examples like the poet Anne Bradstreet as well as multiple court cases from the period that involve women speaking up for themselves “in ways that are very recognizable to second-wave old feminists like myself. So whenever anyone says, your women are ahead of their time, I tell them, go and read more 17th-century women!”

Readers will come away from *Caleb’s Crossing* with a new appreciation for this time in American history, and an interest in the Wampanoag people, who are going through something of a renaissance these days. Tiffany Smalley will be the first Wampanoag from the Gay Head Aquina Tribe since Caleb to graduate from Harvard later this month. And thanks to a MacArthur genius grant, Jessie Little Doe Baird has resurrected Wopanaak, the language of the Wampanoag, which had been lost for several generations. “When the tribe’s medicine man died the year before last, the

language was heard on the cliffs at his graveside ceremony, probably for the first time in very many years,” Brooks says.

Perhaps we’ll get to hear that language in the film version of *Caleb’s Crossing*—though the novel hasn’t been optioned for film yet, Brooks is hard at work on a screenplay. “Previously I didn’t want to have anything to do with it, and I would just sling the option in the direction of the West Coast and not think about it anymore, but this one I felt very strongly about and I had such a strong visual sense of it. It just so happened that a friend of mine, who actually knows how to do this, was between projects, so we’ve been collaborating on it. Even if nothing comes of it, I feel that I’ve learned an immense amount from the process of doing it.

Brooks is also finishing up her selections as editor of *Best American Short Stories 2011* (she was working on the introduction just before our talk). “I’ve got them all scattered at my feet now and I’m looking down and remembering what the very specific pleasures of each [story] were. It was a wonderful exercise, because I started it with a high heart and finished it in a complete state of moral collapse!” Reading 120 stories (she chose about 20 for the collection) also introduced her to new favorites. “I’m absolutely embarrassed to say I didn’t know Steven Millhauser before this!”

In a novel that so carefully dissects the joy and pain of learning, it seems natural to ask Brooks what she thinks about knowledge and its boundaries. Not surprisingly for a trained journalist, she doesn't believe there should be any.

"I'm a big supporter of Julian Assange, let's just put that out there," she says laughingly of the WikiLeaks founder. "It's not for anybody to tell anyone what they're entitled to know. Put the information out there and let the chips fall where they may."

Kirkus Reviews

The NBA-winning Australian-born, now New England author (*People of the Book*, 2008, etc.) moves ever deeper into the American past.

Her fourth novel's announced subject is the eponymous Caleb Cheeshahteumauk, a member of the Wampanoag Indian tribe that inhabits Massachusetts's Great Harbor (a part of Martha's Vineyard), and the first Native American who will graduate from Harvard College (in 1665). Even as a boy, Caleb is a paragon of sharp intelligence, proud bearing and manly charm, as we learn from the somewhat breathless testimony of Bethia Mayfield, who grows up in Great Harbor where her father, a compassionate and unprejudiced preacher, oversees

friendly relations between white settlers and the placid Wampanoag. The story *Bethia* unfolds is a compelling one, focused primarily on her own experiences as an indentured servant to a schoolmaster who prepares promising students for Harvard; a tense relationship with her priggish, inflexible elder brother Makepeace; and her emotional bond of friendship with the occasionally distant and suspicious Caleb, who, in this novel's most serious misstep, isn't really the subject of his own story. Fascinating period details and a steadily expanding plot, which eventually encompasses King Philip's War, inevitable tensions between Puritan whites and upwardly mobile "salvages," as well as the compromises unavoidably ahead for *Bethia*, help to modulate a narrative voice that sometimes teeters too uncomfortably close to romantic cliché. Both *Bethia*, whose womanhood precludes her right to seek formal education, and the stoical Caleb are very nearly too good to be true. However, Brooks' knowledgeable command of the energies and conflicts of the period, and particularly her descriptions of the reverence for learning that animates the little world of Harvard and attracts her characters' keenest longings, carries a persuasive and quite moving emotional charge.

While no masterpiece, this work nevertheless contributes in good measure to the current and very welcome revitalization of the historical novel.

Publishers Weekly

Pulitzer Prize–winner Brooks (for *March*) delivers a splendid historical inspired by Caleb Cheeshahteaumauck, the first Native American to graduate from Harvard. Brooks brings the 1660s to life with evocative period detail, intriguing characters, and a compelling story narrated by Bethia Mayfield, the outspoken daughter of a Calvinist preacher. While exploring the island now known as Martha's Vineyard, Bethia meets Caleb, a Wampanoag native to the island, and they become close, clandestine friends. After Caleb loses most of his family to smallpox, he begins to study under the tutelage of Bethia's father. Since Bethia isn't allowed to pursue education herself, she eavesdrops on Caleb's and her own brother's lessons. Caleb is a gifted scholar who eventually travels, along with Bethia's brother, to Cambridge to continue his education. Bethia tags along and her descriptions of 17th-century Cambridge and Harvard are as entertaining as they are enlightening (Harvard was founded by Puritans to educate the "English and Indian youth of this country," for instance). With Harvard expected to graduate a second Martha's Vineyard Wampanoag Indian this year, almost three and a half centuries after Caleb, the novel's publication is particularly timely.

Discussion questions...

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. On p. 285, Joseph Dudley discusses the philosophical question of the Golden Mean, which suggests that the ideal behavior 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?

5. 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?

6. 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 behavior, 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?

7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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 traveling 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 behavior?

10. Unlike Bethia, her son has no interest in traveling 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?
11. 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?

Readalikes (*NoveList*)

The White by Deborah Larsen

A novel based on the story of Mary Jemison, who, in 1758, was taken by a Shawnee raiding party from her home near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, describes her life among the Seneca and reveals how she became an integral part of their tribe

The Winthrop Woman by Anya Seton

Elizabeth Winthrop endures two bad marriages before finding love with William Hallet and a welcome exile from the Massachusetts Bay Colony

The Widow's War by Sally Gunning

When Lyddie Berry's husband is lost in a whaling disaster, she becomes the dependent of her ruthless son-in-law, who tries to take everything she and her husband had worked for.

The Plague of Doves by Louise Erdrich

Unaware of a violent event that marked the beginning of her mixed ancestry, ambitious young Evelina Harp, a part-Ojibwe, part-white girl prone to falling hopelessly in love, learns disturbing truths from her gifted storyteller grandfather.

Thirteen Moons by Charles Frazier

From the age of twelve, when he is sent alone into the wilderness to run an Indian trading post, Will's life becomes intertwined with the destiny of the Cherokee Indians, as he falls in love with a girl named Claire, and builds a friendship with a chief named Bear.

The Plague of Doves by Louise Erdrich

Unaware of a violent event that marked the beginning of her mixed ancestry, ambitious young Evelina Harp, a part-Ojibwe, part-white girl prone to falling hopelessly in love, learns disturbing truths from her gifted storyteller grandfather.



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