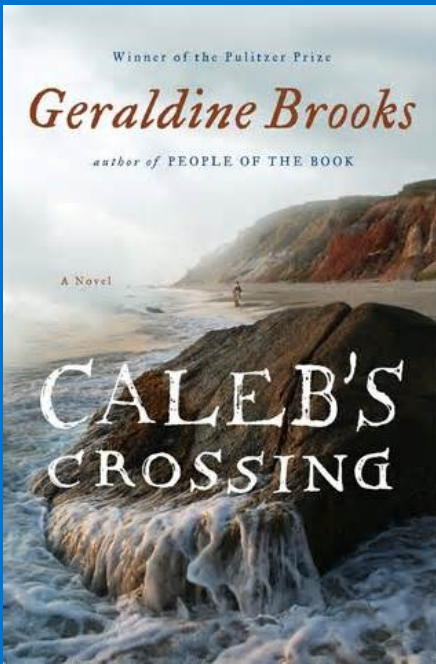


# Caleb's Crossing Geraldine Brooks



## Book Summary

### ***Caleb's Crossing***

Geraldine Brooks, 2011

Penguin Group USA

320 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780670021048

Once again, Geraldine Brooks takes a remarkable shard of history and brings it to vivid life. In 1665, a young man from Martha's Vineyard became the first Native American to graduate from Harvard College. Upon this slender factual scaffold, Brooks has created a luminous tale of love and faith, magic and adventure.

The narrator of *Caleb's Crossing* is Bethia Mayfield, growing up in the tiny settlement of Great Harbor amid a small band of pioneers and Puritans. Restless and curious, she yearns after an education that is closed to her by her sex. As often as she can, she slips away to explore the island's glistening beaches and observe its native Wampanoag inhabitants. At twelve, she encounters Caleb, the young son of a chieftain, and the two forge a tentative secret friendship that draws each into the alien world of the other. Bethia's minister father tries to convert the Wampanoag, awakening the wrath of the tribe's shaman, against whose magic he must test his own beliefs. One of his projects becomes the education of Caleb, and a year later, Caleb is in Cambridge, studying Latin and Greek among the colonial elite. There, Bethia finds herself reluctantly indentured as a housekeeper and can closely observe Caleb's crossing of cultures.

Like Brooks's beloved narrator Anna in *Year of Wonders*, Bethia proves an emotionally irresistible guide to the wilds of Martha's Vineyard and the intimate spaces of the human heart. Evocative and utterly absorbing, *Caleb's Crossing* further establishes Brooks's place as one of our most acclaimed novelists.

(From the publisher.)

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## Author Background

- Birth—1955
- Where—outside Sydney, Australia
- Education—B.A., Sydney University; M.A. Columbia University (USA)
- Awards—Hal Boyle Award; Nita B. Kibble Award; Pulitzer Prize.
- Currently—living in Virginia, USA

Geraldine Brooks is also the author of *People of the Book* (2008), *Year of Wonders* (2002), and the nonfiction works *Nine Parts of Desire* and *Foreign Correspondence*. A former correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*, Brooks lives in rural Virginia with her husband, author Tony Horwitz, and their son.

Brooks was born in 1955 and grew up in the Western suburbs of Sydney, Australia. She attended Sydney University and worked as a reporter for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. As the Greg Shackleton Memorial Scholar she completed a Master's Degree in journalism at Columbia University in New York City in 1983. Subsequently Brooks worked for the *Wall Street Journal*, where she covered crises in the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans—in 1990, for coverage of the Persian Gulf, Brooks (with Tony Horwitz) received the Overseas Press Club's Hal Boyle Award for "Best newspaper or wire service reporting from abroad".

Brooks was awarded a fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University for 2006.

Brooks married fellow Pulitzer recipient, Tony Horwitz, in Tourette-sur-loup, France, in 1984. They have a son, Nathaniel, and divide their time between homes in Virginia, United States and Sydney, Australia.

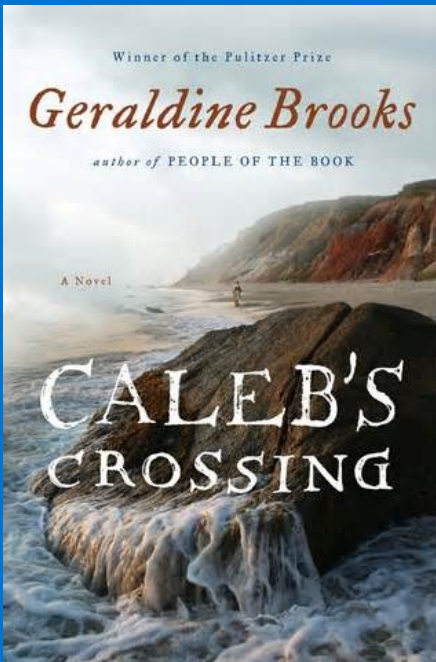
Her first book, *Nine Parts of Desire* (1994), based on her experiences among the Muslim women of the Middle East, was an international bestseller, translated into 17 languages. *Foreign Correspondence* (1997), which won the Nita B. Kibble Award for women's writing, was a memoir and travel adventure about a childhood enriched by penpals from around the world, and her adult quest to find them.

Her first novel, *Year of Wonders*, published in 2001, is an international bestseller. Set in 1666, *Year Of Wonders* follows a young woman's battle to save her fellow villagers and her soul when the plague suddenly strikes the small Derbyshire village of Eyam.

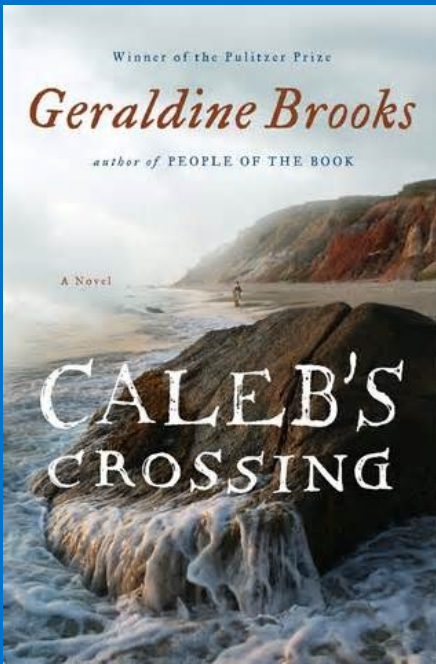
Her second novel, *March*, was published in late February 2005. An historical novel set during the U.S. Civil War, it chronicles the war experiences of the March girls' absent father in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. The parallel novel was generally well received by the critics. In December 2005 *March* was selected by the *Washington Post* as one of the five best fiction works published during the year. In April 2006, the book earned Brooks the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

*March* seems to have had its roots in Brooks' childhood. A copy of *Little Women* was given to Brooks when she was only ten years old, by her mother Gloria, a journalist and radio announcer.

(From Wikipedia.)



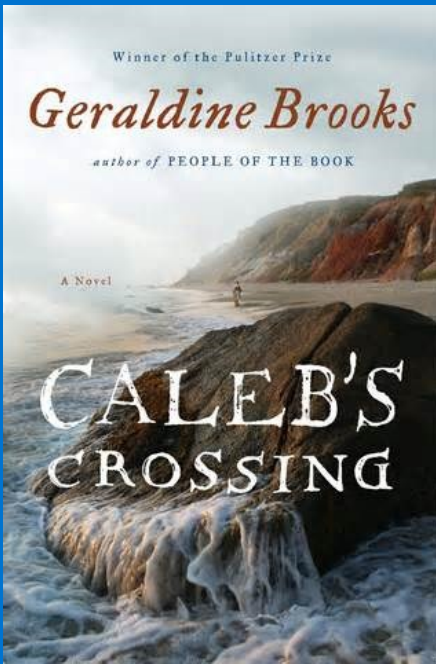
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## Discussion Questions

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?
- (Questions issued by publisher.)

# Caleb's Crossing Geraldine Brooks



## Reviews

Geraldine Brooks, once a foreign correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal* and more recently a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist...writes about early America the same way she wrote about Sarajevo and the Middle East, which is to say very well...[Bethia's] a fabulously engaging narrator.

***Washington Post***

Pulitzer Prize winner Brooks (for *March*) delivers a splendid historical inspired by Caleb Cheeshahtemauck, 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.

***Publishers Weekly***

In 1665, Caleb Cheeshahtemauck 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. —*Barbara Hoffert*.

***Library Journal***