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Books

# Book World: ‘Caleb’s Crossing’ by Geraldine Brooks

By Paul Chaat Smith  
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## CALEB’S CROSSING

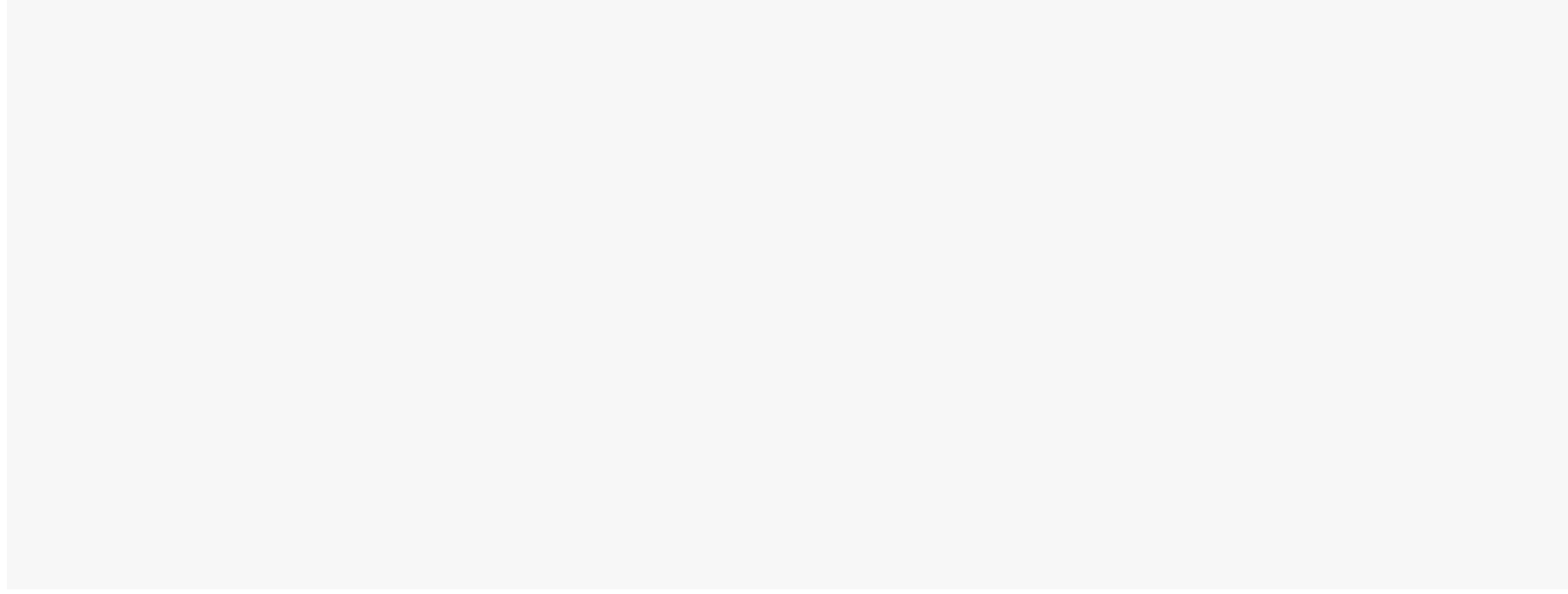
By Geraldine Brooks

Viking, 306 pp. \$26.95

They say that in England, 100 miles is a long distance, and in America, 100 years is a long time. But what about when England met America? How long ago and how far away was that? Calendars and historical evidence argue that it happened nearly four centuries ago, but it feels much longer.

Contemporary American life has little room for real meditations on how a handful of English settlers, in spite of themselves, created the nation we live in today. Most of us remember the consequential decades between Plymouth Rock and 1776 only as flickering vignettes of pilgrims, witches and helpful Indians during a holiday that celebrates family dysfunction and the NFL.

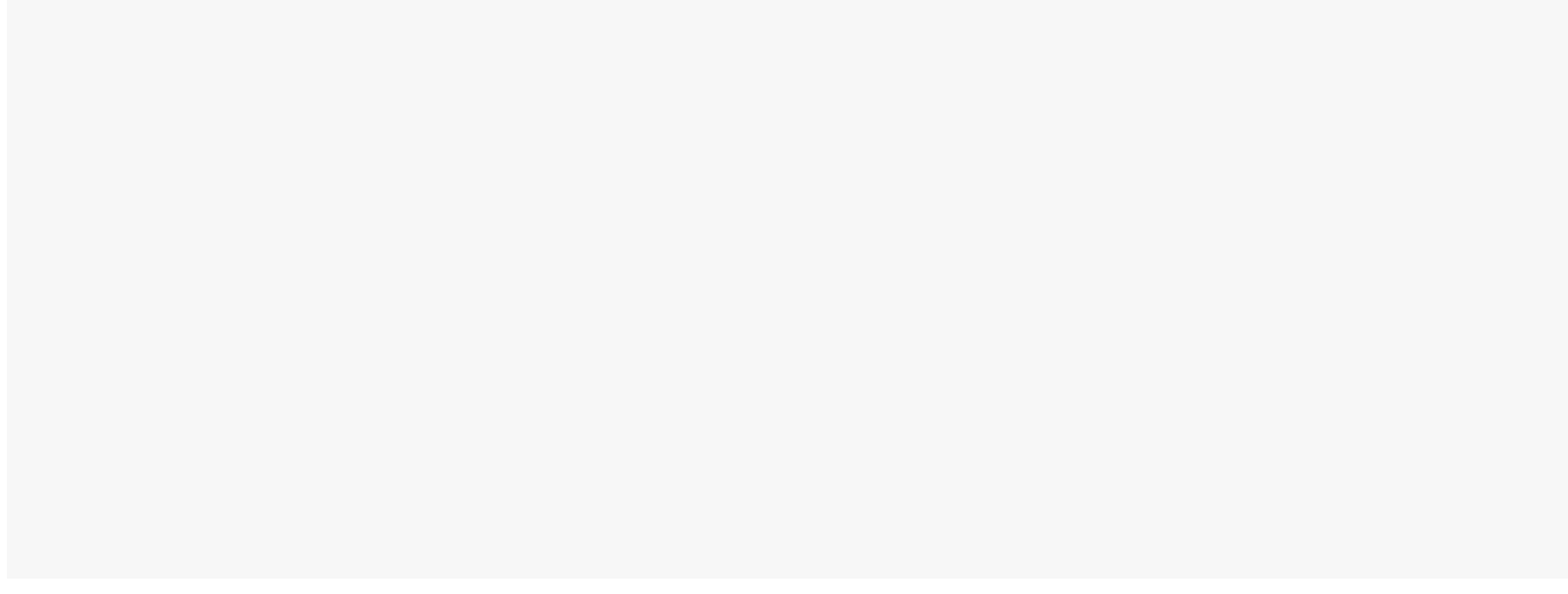
As often happens, it falls to an outsider to breathe life into our past — in this case, an Australian. Geraldine Brooks, once a foreign correspondent for the Wall Street Journal and more recently a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist (for “March,” in 2005), writes about early America the same way she wrote about Sarajevo and the Middle East, which is to say very well.



The story begins with overheard whispers in the dark. An English girl named Bethia Mayfield, burning with secret desires, learns that Caleb, her Wampanoag Indian soul mate — and, who knows, one day, perhaps more — will be joining the Mayfield home. It’s not clear how this is supposed to work since nobody has a clue that Caleb and Bethia are even friends, much less soul mates who’ve taught each other their native tongues. And by the way, it’s pretty easy for Bethia to eavesdrop on her father and brother because the house has blankets for bedroom walls.

Perfect setup for a situation comedy, but there are no cheap laughs in this 17th-century New England. By Page 6, Bethia confesses to killing her mother, to being in Satan’s thrall, to eating forbidden fruit. She feels terrible about all that and is desperate to redeem herself, but she’s gloomy about her prospects for salvation.

Fortunately for us, she’s also a fabulously engaging narrator, nothing like the dreary Manson Girl her confessions might suggest. Bethia believes her own sins caused her mother’s fatal illness a year earlier. In addition to blaming herself for asking too many questions, Bethia regrets that she loved the natural beauty of Martha’s Vineyard too much, tripped on a hallucinogenic plant, talked back to her obnoxious brother and covertly learned Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Wampanoantaoank. Bethia knows some would argue that she is not to blame, that Satan took advantage of a young girl, but she’ll have none of it: These are her sins alone, and because of them, her mother is dead, and Bethia is probably going to hell.

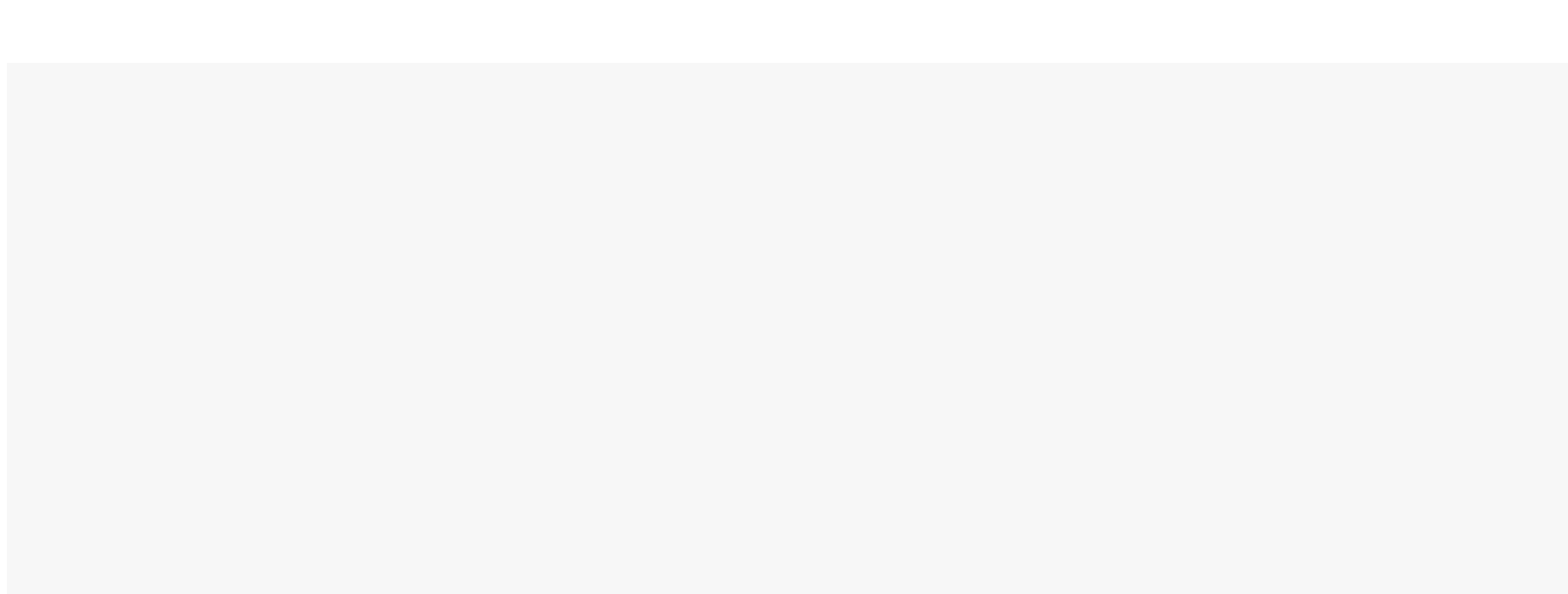


Brooks shows us the immediate and all-encompassing nature of religious belief in this world. It’s not a subject of conversation so much as the context for everything and everyone. Bethia’s very name, for example, means “God’s servant.” Recalling her afternoons with Caleb when he would instruct her about plants and animals, Bethia says, “He walked through the woods like a young Adam, naming creation.” In her eyes, Cambridge, where Caleb studies the classics and Bethia mops floors, is more or less an open sewer, while her beloved Martha’s Vineyard is an Edenic paradise, “perched at the very farthest edge of the new world, first witness to each dawn of the turning globe. I count it no strange thing that one may, in a single day, observe a sunrise out of the sea and a sunset back into it.”

The Caleb of the title is based on a real person, about whom little is known, except that he was a Wampanoag Indian and graduated from Harvard a century before the United States came into existence. Despite the title, he is not the main character and is absent for long stretches. That’s not a bad thing, because Bethia is far more interesting. Also funnier. Her passion for learning and for books is illegal and dangerous, even if the learning and books are about Christianity and her goal is to be closer to God. She sees her covert friendship with Caleb as (perhaps) part of God’s plan, yet she must lie to her family and pretty much everyone she knows. Penalties for criminal behavior in the English colonies include having a nail hammered through your tongue.

At the same time, Caleb is central to the novel’s overt ambition to honor the life of this historical figure and to present a new perspective on 17th-century Native culture. Here, Brooks succeeds and fails. It is thrilling to see Caleb and his Wampanoag friend debating philosophy in Greek and Latin, switching languages in mid-conversation as necessary. Knowledge and religious insight are precious, for Indian and English alike. Caleb, no passive figure, sees Christianity and European book learning as a survival strategy for his people.

But at other times, the Indians feel like people we’ve met before: “Very tall, lean in muscle, taut at the waist and broad in the chest, their long black hair flying and whipping about their shoulders. . . . They gleamed and shone in the sunlight, so that you could see the long sinews of their thighs working as they ran.” (To be sure, not all the Indian characters are buff brainiacs, just the most important ones.) And sentences like these seem air-dropped from another, lesser novel: “Their fires had blazed up against the night sky and the music had grown wilder. The animal self inside me responded to it. . . . The drumming touched me in some deep, inner, unsounded place. There, in the dark, without even knowing my own purpose, I commenced to unlace my sleeves. The warm air caressed my arms. I let fall my hose and stood, bare armed and bare legged like the Wampanoag women in their short skin shifts. My toes dug down into the sandy, cooling earth, as my heartbeat matched itself to the drumming. . . . Thought ceased, and an animal sense drove me until, in the end, I danced with abandon.” The Indian and English characters in “Caleb’s Crossing” are so original and compelling that I had trouble believing the passages in which they became familiar and predictable.



Yet even when Storm Eyes, as Caleb calls Bethia, is pursued by an English islander named Noah Merry, it is unfair, though certainly tempting, to see this drama as a rivalry between Team Jacob and Team Edward. There is too much at stake in pre-modern New England, and Brooks’s achievement is that we see just how much that is, for the red characters and the white ones. They struggle every waking moment with spiritual questions that are as real and unending as the punishing New England winters.

Smith is a curator at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian and author of “Everything You Know About Indians Is Wrong.”

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