

A Conversation with Charlotte Gordon about *Mistress Bradstreet*

Q: Today, we think of Puritans as having been “puritanical”-sternly moral, prudish, strict. Is this what Bradstreet and her congregation were like?

A: Actually, Puritans have been falsely accused of being “puritanical.” The real Puritans consumed at least three pints of ale or hard cider a day, beginning with breakfast. Puritan ministers taught their flock that good sex was an essential aspect of marriage. Because they believed that a woman could not get pregnant if she did not have an orgasm, Puritan leaders encouraged men to become expert lovers. Anne was deeply in love with her husband and wrote him poems that describe her passion for him with a frankness that would have made the Victorians squirm. She also had a highly developed sense of humor. In her poetry she pokes fun at egotistical male writers, demanding children, self-centered adolescents, and pompous old people. Always, she laughs at herself.

Q: What first attracted you to the subject of Anne Bradstreet?

A: I discovered Bradstreet through a strange coincidence. I was living in Ipswich, Massachusetts, about to start a new job as an English teacher. Anne was the first writer on the syllabus and I didn’t know anything about her. The afternoon before the first day of class, I went for a run and saw one of those historic plaques mounted on a stone near my house. When I read it, I discovered that Bradstreet and her husband had lived next door to me three hundred and fifty years ago. It was at that moment that my fascination with Anne Bradstreet began, and I rushed home to begin my research.

Q: You and Anne Bradstreet have something in common: you’re both poets. What compelled you to depart from poetry and write a nonfiction account of her life?

A: When I taught Bradstreet’s work in that English class in Ipswich, my students and I fell in love with her. Her wit, honesty, and fresh, accessible language made her experience as a pioneer woman vivid to all of us. I admired her bravery and intelligence as a writer and as a woman.

Q: There are so many female poets out there, from HD to Gertrude Stein to Szyborska. Why read Anne Bradstreet? What can she offer a modern audience as a poet and as a woman?

A: I began my writing life as a poet (I have published two books of poems), and the two most famous female poets when I was growing up were Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, both of whom, of course, committed suicide. I did not want to be like them. I wanted to live a full, rich life as a woman, have children, and yet still write poetry, and I wondered if this was possible. Anne provided me with the role model I needed, one who I thought would be important for other young women to know about as well. I was struck by Anne’s dedication to living life, her ability to be a mother, wife, friend, and writer as well

as an explorer and a pioneer. I wanted to know how she had managed to be a serious writer and raise a family at the same time, especially during a time that was so prejudiced against intellectual women. If she could write, then so could I. After all, I have running water!

Over time she became an inspiration, a teacher, and a guide to me. I turn to her prose for advice. I read her poetry with delight. And when I had a baby I found the courage to write about this experience by following Anne's lead as a poet. Some of her most important poems are about being a mother or grandmother.

Q: Other accounts of Anne Bradstreet's life have been published. What does your biography offer that makes it the definitive account of this pioneer's life?

A: Actually, there are only two biographies of Bradstreet—one is out of print, and the other was written in 1972. That [1972] book contained interesting information, but somehow it missed the essence of Anne's experience. I wanted to know what it was like to land on the shores of America in 1630. Were the Indians terrifying? How tall were the trees? Did Anne hear the howls of the wolves at night? The questions kept piling up, both small and large: What did the colonists eat for breakfast? Who were her friends? What did she wear? What were her fears? What made her laugh? How did she pray? Did she love her husband? Did she resent her overbearing father? How did she manage to quell her rebellious feelings about leaving England?

I began by reading everything that Anne wrote: Her poems, her prayers, her meditations, and her autobiography. Then I plunged into the letters, wills, poems, and diaries of other settlers. Finally, I read historians' descriptions of early colonial life. It has taken me over ten years to piece together these various scraps of knowledge. Still, there are a few gaps. For example, we do not know what she looked like. We have portraits of her husband and father, but none of her. Anne had many male admirers, so she must have been appealing, but we will never know if she was short or tall, fair or dark, plump or aquiline.

Q: What do you most admire about Anne Bradstreet?

A: I am constantly amazed at her spiritual strength. Again and again, she derived faith from hardship, using her poetry to sort through her difficult feelings. When her house burned down, she wrote a poem to try to accept the will of God. When her grandchildren died, one after another, she struggled to keep her faith and wrote poems that grappled with her anger. She used her work to sort through her loneliness, depression, resentment, and doubts about her religion. I cannot imagine where she found the fortitude to write in a world that condemned intellectual women. She knew that her neighbors "carped" at her for writing poetry.