

***Mistress Bradstreet:
The Untold Life of America's First Poet***

by Charlotte Gordon

Little, Brown and Company

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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Lenox Library Association, Lenox, Ma

**Massachusetts
Honor Book
2006**



SUMMARY:

Excerpted from the book jacket

Mistress Bradstreet is an illuminating biography that reveals Anne Bradstreet to be an electrifying personality at the center of one of the most fascinating periods in our country's history. Though a pious and prominent member of her Puritan community, Anne was also a rebel of sorts, flouting the image of seventeenth-century women as too intellectually weak to tackle the male realms of law, science, and what was considered most challenging of all: poetry. In a fresh and spare style, Anne not only recorded her own experience, but also commented on the political and religious upheavals of her day. This is a gripping story of a woman and poet of great feeling struggling to find a language to describe the country in which she finds herself.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Author Charlotte Gordon presents a set of nine discussion questions on her web site: <http://www.charlottegordonhome.com>. Following are nine pairs of discussion questions. "A" of each pair is Gordon's. "B" is a related question posed by this guide's author.

- 1A. Gordon says that at first Anne resisted the voyage to the New World. What are some of the reasons that Anne chose to embrace her new home in America?
- 1B. What events, that preceded Anne's arrival in the New World, were seen by the Puritans as a sign that "the Lord had 'given' the Puritans 'the land by promise'?"
- 2A. In what ways did Anne's emigration to the New World influence her development as a writer and as a person?
- 2B. Consider the conditions that prompted Anne to take up her pen. If Anne had never immigrated to the New World, were there conditions in England that might have given her cause to write? Discuss possible themes that Anne, a woman of Old England, might have explored.

- 3A. Anne drew confidence and strength from her role as a mother. In fact, Gordon suggests that giving birth helped inspire Anne to become a serious poet. How is Anne's attitude toward parenting similar to modern women and how is it different?
- 3B. Describe how motherhood influenced Anne's writing.
- 4A. Which of Anne's poems do you find most compelling? Which ones are the easiest for modern readers to understand?
- 4B. Shortly after the birth of her granddaughter, Elizabeth, in February of 1664, Anne began writing "Meditations Divine and Moral." She wrote seventy-seven total. Seventy years later, Ben Franklin began writing the maxims of Poor Richard's Almanac. Compare Anne's writings to those of Ben Franklin. How are they alike? How do they differ? How do the cultural differences of each era affect the writing style, content, and intent of each author. [Poor Richard's Almanac on line: <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/loa/bfcont.htm>]
- 5A. Gordon describes the dangers that intellectual women faced from other members of the community. How did Anne circumvent the jealousy and anger that other ambitious women (such as Anne Hutchinson) had to confront?
- 5B. Puritan women formed a society separate from men in their childbirth rituals. Were the childbirth rituals of Puritan women very different from the childbirth rituals of other English women of the time? Describe vestiges of these rituals that remain in American culture today.
- 6A. Puritanism is a difficult religion for modern readers to comprehend. Many of us associate Puritanism with rigidity, prejudice, and intolerance and yet Gordon suggests that Anne drew sustenance and courage from her faith. How did Puritanism actually empower Anne as a woman writer?
- 6B. Compare and contrast Puritanism with modern Christian denominations. How does the status of women compare and contrast?
- 7A. Anne and her husband, Simon, had a passionate relationship that inspired Anne to write some of her most famous love poems. Sadly for Anne, however, Simon had to travel frequently on the business of the new colony. In what ways did Anne's relationship with her husband help her grow as a colonial leader and a writer?
- 7B. As Anne's generation gave way to the children and grandchildren it bore, the strict precepts it followed mellowed somewhat. How would Simon's many absences and Anne's extended service as a "deputy husband" - coupled with her writing - have affected the way in which her children and grandchildren viewed the status of men and women?

8A. Anne's father, Thomas Dudley, chose Anne as his favorite child and was largely responsible for her exceptional education. What impact did Dudley's choice have on Anne and on the rest of her family?

8B. Gordon states that Thomas Dudley left England to "carry the pure church...away from Old World corruption." The ideal of a pure church in New England never matched the reality. Discuss the Dudley family as a microcosm of the New England reality.

9A. Anne's poem, "A Dialogue between Old and New England..." helped initiate the idea that the Old World was the most "righteous" civilization in the world. Instead of the traditional idea that the Old World was superior to the New, she described New England as a healthy young daughter whose duty consisted of healing her ailing mother, Old England. What role did Anne's poem play in the shaping of the identity of America?

9B. With the writing of "A Dialogue between Old and New England," Anne stepped into the arena of political poetry. Investigate other political writings of the time—poetry, essays, and newspapers. Compare them to Anne's poem in terms of subject matter, points of view, and tone.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Excerpted from: <http://www.charlottegordonhome.com/index1.php?p=7>

Charlotte Gordon has published two books of poetry, *When The Grateful Dead Came To St. Louis* and *Two Girls on a Raft*. Her work has received many prizes including a Robert Penn Warren Award. Charlotte received an undergraduate degree in English and American Literature from Harvard University and a PhD from Boston University. While a post-doctoral fellow at Boston University, she taught Religion and Literature in the Department of Theology and from 1999-2002 was a lecturer in Elie Wiesel's seminar, *The Literature of memory*. From 1992-2002 she was the Director of the Writing Program at The Waring School in Beverly, MA. She currently teaches drama at the Glen Urquhart School in Beverly, MA and conducts writing workshops for adults in her home in Gloucester.

HELPFUL LINKS:

<http://puritanism.online.fr/> "Puritan Studies on the Web" is an extensive collection of primary sources and links to primary source sites related to Puritanism in New England. The site was established in 2001 by Laurie Henneton, a by-product of work on a Master's Thesis, American History, English Department, University of Creteil-Val de Marne.

<http://www.puritansermons.com> "Fire & Ice: Puritan and Reformed Writings" is a site dedicated to latter day Puritanism, including among other topics sermons, history and biography, poetry, and the Puritan quote of the week.

<http://www.apuritansmind.com> "A Puritan's Mind" is a site dedicated to the history and continuance of Puritanism.

RECENTLY PUBLISHED TITLES OF INTEREST:

Bradstreet, Anne. *The Works of Anne Bradstreet* (The John Harvard Library). Belknap Press, 2006.

Hall, Donald D. (ed.). *Puritans in the New World: A Critical Anthology*. Princeton University Press, 2004.

Kidd, Thomas. *The Protestant Interest: New England after Puritanism*. Yale University Press, 2004.

Martin, Wendy. *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich*. University of North Carolina Press, 1984.



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