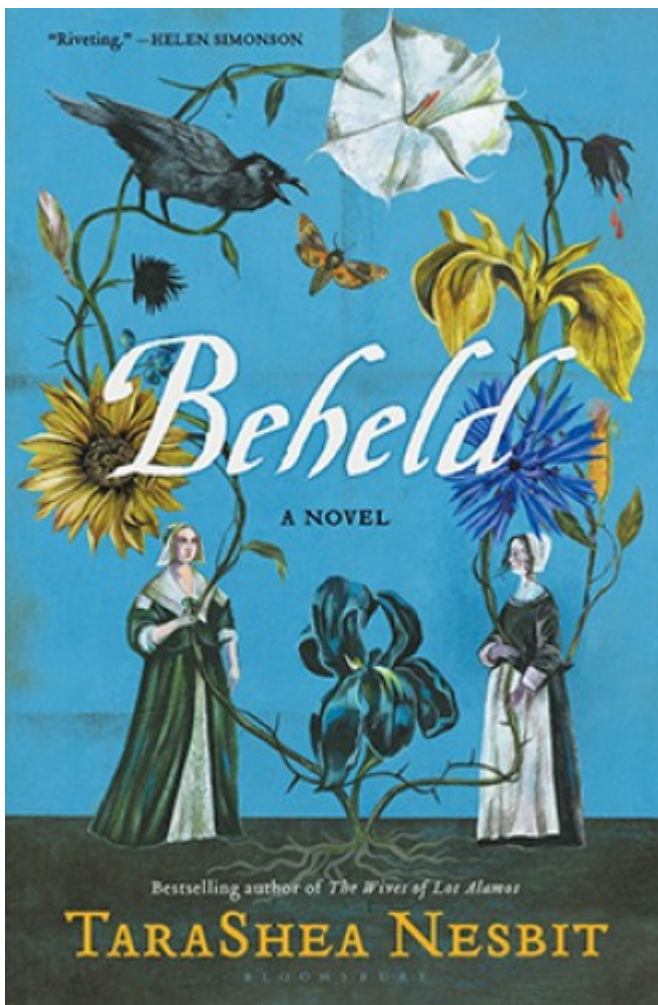


Discord on Plymouth Rock

## TaraShea Nesbit's novel about the *Mayflower* pilgrims and their conflicts

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [May 6, 2020](#) issue

### In Review



### Beheld

A Novel

By TaraShea Nesbit

Bloomsbury

My office is situated about 100 feet away from a sliver of Plymouth Rock, which the congregation inherited from Chicago Theological Seminary several years ago when the school relocated. We received the rock with considerable fanfare: church members dressed up in full Pilgrim regalia for the presentation, and we immediately hired a stone mason to embed it into one of the church walls. We're not the first Congregationalists to take Puritan history so seriously. CTS is said to have received the rock after the Columbian Exposition in 1893, where it had been displayed to honor the role of Congregationalism in the formation of democracy.

*Beheld* is a story of Puritans, but not Puritans alone. Indeed, the spare book—like the historical Plymouth—is diversely populated. TaraShea Nesbit explains in the author's note:

In telling this story, I wanted to add more possibilities to our collective imagination about "the pilgrims." I also wanted to challenge certain myths, such as the belief that all the Mayflower passengers were seeking freedom to practice their religion. . . . The people on the Mayflower arrived to Patuxet from a variety of backgrounds and for different reasons—indentured servants who signed up out of various necessities, craftsmen hired to assist in the physical creation of the colony, people looking for economic gain, . . .

In other words, they weren't all God-fearing proto-Congregationalists. Among the first Plymouth colonists, there were Anglicans such as Eleanor Billington and her husband, John. The Billingtons are central characters in Nesbit's novel, along with Governor William Bradford and his first and second wives (Dorothy and Alice, in that order).

We first meet Eleanor through the disapproving gaze of Alice, who notes, "Half of the colonists were congregants striving to live as God intended. And the other half? Well, they were why we took care to mend the fences." The animosity is decidedly mutual. "Oh, their chaste little bosoms, their pious little smiles," Eleanor snarkily thinks to herself. Mr. Billington is even more outraged by the indignities of second-class citizenship in the colony, his seething rage poised to detonate at any moment.

These religious and cultural conflicts between the uneasy neighbors fascinate Nesbit, as do the figures who don't loom large in history books. The author's nuanced and careful attention to the inner lives of women and underdogs is notable. It represents one of the best impulses in contemporary historical fiction.

There are some less worthy literary impulses too. While the prose is generally strong, every so often a word or phrase reveals that Nesbit, like many literary writers, struggles to kill her darlings. I dashed my hopes of donating this one to my church library when I underlined the line about Eleanor's pleasure in remembering her husband's mouth "betwixt" her legs the prior night. "As one doth," Nesbit quips in another passage. A stricter round of editing would have smoothed out the prose.

I also found myself unsatisfied with the plot, perhaps in part because of how the book was marketed. Arguably, there isn't really such a thing as a spoiler with historical fiction: given that the events of the novel more or less happened, its plot is a matter of public record. For those who approach *Beheld* without a detailed knowledge of the happenings of 1630s colonial America, however, it might not help that the main plot point is revealed on the dust jacket and reiterated within the first few sentences of the novel. Readers know, going in, that this will be a story of Plymouth's first murder—or rather, as we come to find out, Plymouth's first murder in which the victim was a white man.

Contrary to the tone of the first paragraph, the majority of the book dwells in slowly paced characterization, backstory, and a subtle building of suspense. I won't go so far as to name the page upon which someone is finally murdered, but the anticlimactic scene is closer to the end than the beginning. If Nesbit had trusted *Beheld* to hold its own on the merits of her research and insight—rather than playing up the murder—I suspect I wouldn't have felt disappointed by the less-than-thrilling plot.

Nonetheless, Nesbit achieves her goal of adding more possibilities to the collective imagination surrounding colonial America. I reckon anyone who reads this book will not feel like donning a Pilgrim hat anytime soon. To be sure, we already knew they weren't saints; their sins against indigenous populations are far too well documented to ignore. But Nesbit's book puts flesh on the stories of colonialism we often receive in the abstract, dismantling any remnant sentimentality we might have harbored toward the Puritans.

At the end of the day, though, I want more than just a challenge to the collective imagination. I'd approached this book hoping for more than a reminder that people are often terrible.

Perhaps it is a fool's errand to pan for glimmers of hope in a work of literary historical fiction. The embittered Alice Bradford muses near the end of her life, "Our better future is an imagined past." She may be right. But where does that leave us?

*This version was edited on April 28, 2020 to correct a quotation.*