Pride of the Indian College

by AMELIA ATLAS

Not every novelist can say she owes her career to the Nigerian secret police, but the Pulitzer Prize-winning Australian writer Geraldine Brooks, RI ’06, likes to give credit where credit is due. While investigating Shell Oil malfeasance in the Niger Delta as a foreign correspondent for the Wall Street Journal, Brooks ended up on the wrong side of Sani Abacha’s military regime. “To cut a long story short, they didn’t like reporters looking into that, and they threw me in the slammer in Port Harcourt,” she says. Her first reaction wasn’t fear of prison but of her biological clock: “I thought, ‘Oh, gee, if they keep me for too long I’ll be too old to get pregnant,’” Brooks recalls, explaining her decision to trade journalism for the relatively risk-free world of fiction.

These days, now a mother of two, she works from the quiet of her home on Martha’s Vineyard—the source of inspiration for her newest book. Caleb’s Crossing, appearing this May, tells the story of Caleb Cheeshahteaumauk, a member of the Vineyard’s Wampanoag tribe, whom Brooks first discovered on a map marking the birthplace of Harvard’s first Native American graduate. “I thought it would be really interesting to talk to him about that experience, because I was thinking civil-rights era, maybe 1965, kind of vintage-y,” Brooks recalls. “And then I learned it was 1665 and that was an incredible sort of mind-shift experience...I started to wonder about Harvard and what it was like in the seventeenth century.”

It’s those austere beginnings that Caleb’s Crossing endeavors to recreate as it covers Cheeshahteaumauk’s journey from the Vineyard wilderness to the rigid world of English Puritanism. Narrated by Bethia Mayfield—a precocious minister’s daughter whose frustrations with Puritan life find an outlet in Caleb—the novel un-
Honeybee House Hunting

Beekeepers have long observed, and lamented, the tendency of their hives to swarm in the late spring and early summer. When this happens, the majority of a colony’s members—a crowd of some ten thousand worker bees—flies off with the old queen to produce a daughter colony, while the rest stays at home and rears a new queen to perpetuate the parental colony. The migrating bees settle on a tree branch in a beardlike cluster and then hang there together for several hours or a few days. During this time, these homeless insects will do something truly amazing; they will hold a democratic debate to choose their new home.

This book is about how honeybees conduct this democratic decision-making process. We will examine the way that several hundred of a swarm’s oldest bees spring into action as nest-site scouts and begin exploring the countryside for dark crevices. We will see how these house hunters evaluate the potential dwelling places they find; advertise their discoveries to their fellow scouts with lively dances; debate vigorously to choose the best nest site, then rouse the entire swarm to take off; and finally pilot the cloud of airborne bees to its home. This is typically a hollow tree several miles away.

My motive for writing this book about democracy in honeybee swarms is twofold. First, I want to present to biologists and social scientists a coherent summary of the research on this topic that has been conducted over the last 60 years…. The story of how honeybees make a democratic decision based on a face-to-face, consensus-seeking assembly is certainly important to behavioral biologists interested in how social animals make group decisions. I hope it will also prove important to neuroscientists studying the neural basis of decision making, for there are intriguing similarities between honeybee swarms and primate brains in the ways that they process information to make decisions…. One important lesson that we can glean from the bees…. is that even in a group composed of friendly individuals with common interests, conflict can be a useful element in a decision-making process. That is, it often pays a group to argue things carefully through to find the best solution to a tough problem.

My second motive for writing this book is to share with beekeepers and general readers the pleasures I have experienced in investigating swarms of honeybees. I can thank these beautiful little creatures for many hours of the purest joy of discovery, interspersed among (to be sure) days and weeks of fruitless and sometimes discouraging work. To give a sense of the excitement and challenge of studying the bees, I will report numerous personal events, speculations, and thoughts about conducting scientific studies.
not getting a hot breakfast,” Brooks jokes, referring to the 2009 scandal in which Harvard’s dining-hall cutbacks made the New York Times. “I was like—hot breakfast!?”

Like her previous works (Year of Wonders, People of the Book, and the Pulitzer-winning March), Caleb’s Crossing borrows liberally from the historical record. Brooks has a journalist’s zeal for fact-finding, but tries not to let her reportorial impulses overtake the imaginative work. “I like to let the story tell me what I need to know. I love libraries and archives but I try not to get carried away to the point where some fantastic bit of research I stumbled on is going to shape the plot rather than vice versa.”

Because very few letters and diaries from seventeenth-century American women survive, the process of conjuring the narrator’s voice became one of the pleasures and challenges of Caleb’s Crossing. Whereas Caleb, his friend Joel Iacoonis—who would have been a fellow Indian graduate had he not been murdered by seafaring marauders on the way to Commencement—and even Bethia’s family are drawn from real-life figures, Bethia herself is wholly fictional.

“It was intriguing to take the scant evidence and try to build a portrait of somebody who is plausible,” Brooks explains. Still, the depth of her research is more than evident: Bethia’s musings take her on detours into everything from the grammar of the Wampanoag language to the dangers of colonial midwifery.

Fittingly, Brooks began researching the novel while a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute. Although she found few remaining traces of seventeenth-century Cambridge to inspire her, Harvard archaeologists have since excavated part of the foundation of the Indian College in the Yard, near present-day Matthews Hall (see “Pay Dirt in Yard Dig,” July-August 2008, page 80). Brooks’s excitement about recovering this lost part of history is palpable: “My dream is, they find a shard of pewter with CC carved in the bottom of it.”

Caleb Cheeshahteauk, A.B. 1665, as imagined by Stephen Coit ’71, M.B.A. ’77

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