



***Beheld*, by TaraShea Nesbit  
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy**

This November marks the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Mayflower*'s iconic landing in Plymouth Colony. For generations, grade-school pageants in the United States have depicted happy Pilgrims and Native Americans sharing a bountiful feast at the first Thanksgiving. *Beheld*, TaraShea Nesbit's gritty historical novel, however, paints a darker picture of that nascent community.

*Beheld* begins in 1630, ten years after the founding of Plymouth Colony. The community was flourishing after its first harsh winter, and its population had expanded to 350 residents. Distrust, however, prevailed between the Puritans and the indentured servants who had traveled with them on the *Mayflower*.

The novel's principle narrators are two women alienated from each other by religion and social class. The first woman is Alice Bradford, Pilgrim Governor William Bradford's wife: "We were divided, as we had been from the beginning. Half 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."

Eleanor Billington, the second narrator, and her embittered husband John had been indentured servants. When John completed his seven-year servitude, he was not given the land he was promised: "He had been the tenth person to step off the ship. He should have been considered an elder. But the leaders of Plymouth would never recognize him as such.... Plymouth was the England John tried to escape, just under a different name. Instead of King James, there was Governor Bradford and his hired soldier, Myles Standish."

Although religious freedom was a tenet of the Mayflower Compact, the Puritan faction imposed its rigid beliefs and customs on those whom they considered "commoners." Dancing, singing, and even celebrating Christmas were frowned

upon. Only Puritans were allowed to sell their goods and beaver pelts to Native Americans for profit.

John Billington, nevertheless, worked hard and saved enough to purchase the acre of land that he believed should be his. However, when John approached Captain Standish to buy the property, he was harshly rebuked. The land John so coveted had been sold to a newcomer who had arrived from Salem. Disheartened, John left, setting in motion a tragic confrontation. "The sounds of the wilderness had always been among us," Alice Bradford later concluded. "Danger was everywhere, and sometimes the grandest threat was within your own community."

Ms. Nesbitt infuses her novel with real characters and actual events. Brimming with authentic period details, *Beheld* is an unflinchingly honest portrayal of early American life. *Beheld*, indeed, is an example of historical fiction at its best.