



# Hester: The Missing Years of the The Scarlet Letter

*Paula Reed*

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## **Hester: The Missing Years of the The Scarlet Letter** Paula Reed

Upon the death of her demonic husband, Hester Prynne is left a widow, and her daughter Pearl, a wealthy heiress. Hester takes her daughter to live a quiet life in England--only to find herself drawn into the circle of the most powerful Puritan of all time, Oliver Cromwell.

From the moment Hester donned the famous scarlet letter, it instilled in her the power to see the sins and hypocrisy of others, an ability not lost on the Lord Protector of the Commonwealth. To Cromwell, Hester's sight is either a sign of sorcery or a divine gift that Hester must use to assist the divinely chosen in his scheming to control England. Since sorcery carries a death sentence, Hester is compelled against her will to use her sight to assist Cromwell. She soon finds herself entangled in a web of political intrigue, espionage, and forbidden love.

*Hester* will carry readers away to seventeenth century England with a deeply human story of family, love, history, desire, weakness, and the human ideal.

## **Hester: The Missing Years of the The Scarlet Letter Details**

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Author : Paula Reed

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# From Reader Review Hester: The Missing Years of the The Scarlet Letter for online ebook

## Tara Chevestt says

This book was ok. I want to stress that a three star rating means a book was ok. I'm not jumping up and down in excitement but it didn't get thrown on the floor either. I have to give this author some credit for accomplishing something I think would be difficult, taking the heroine of the classic, Scarlet Letter and continuing her story.

Hester has returned to England from a very Puritan New England after much ado over her having a child out of wedlock with a minister and wearing a letter on her clothes to announce her sin. Her young daughter Pearl is in tow, now a wealthy heiress. BUT has Hester left the frying pan only to jump into the fire? If she thought New England was too Puritan, old England is now under the influence of Cromwell and his cronies. It doesn't get more strict than that.

Tho the men of Cromwell's "government" dictate to Hester what she may wear, what she may say in public, who she may socialize with, and enforce a list of a thousand "don'ts" on the whole of society, Hester's inner spirit and spunk remain intact. Her own personal beliefs will not be touched nor deterred by Cromwell or his cronies. Even when Cromwell discovers Hester's ability to see sin or guilt upon other people and forces her to work for him, Hester's courage and firm belief that hypocrisy abounds around her remains firm. This belief, however, may allow her to be roped into a conspiracy that could possibly have negative repercussions later. Will she make the right choice? She also has her daughter's future to consider and it may be easier to ensure that with her own neck still attached to her body. Cromwell is not queasy about cutting off people's heads...

A decent read but got bogged down with talk of philosophy and god at times.

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## Lisa says

Please read this excellent book. I found out I'm not scholar of English history, especially the Puritan phase. Obviously I know what the word means, but I've never really understood that time politically. Also, I have never (gasp!) even READ The Scarlet Letter, upon which this book is based. (I did go read the Spark Notes summary, though - does that count??)

The good news is, you need not know about Puritan history OR The Scarlet Letter to enjoy this book. It is exquisitely written and paced, and I could not stop reading it. If you loved The Scarlet Letter, I imagine you will love it all the more.

The author, interestingly, is a teacher at Columbine High School and after surviving the shooting there, decided it was high time to be doing what she loved doing - writing an awesome tale. I hope she doesn't have any other horrible shocks in her life, but I do say -- encore, encore!!!

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## Cheryl says

I recently won an advance copy of *Hester: A Novel* from [goodreads.com](http://goodreads.com). Many of us have read and loved *The Scarlet Letter*, but according to novelist, Paula Reed, that morality tale of human frailties and deceit was “but the beginning” of Hester and Pearl’s odyssey. Though limited by the frame of the original, Reed weaves a believable and exciting narrative that incorporates and explains important events of Hawthorne’s plot without resorting to simple summary. In fact, this is done so well that a reader could easily manage this novel without having read the first at all.

The author tells us what happens to Hester and her daughter after Roger passes away and leaves Pearl his fortune, something Hawthorne only cryptically mentions in his denouement. The novel follows these two across the Atlantic as Hester returns to her English village in hopes of beginning life anew and securing Pearl a place in high society. There have been many changes in England that do not bode well. The England of Hester’s youth is gone, her father dead and the nation is in the throes of the Puritan Revolution. The England she returns to is not measurably different from the New England she left behind. Hester also learns that for a woman during this turbulent time, wealth is not a sufficient means to acquire happiness or peace of mind. Hester is reminded that, as she puts it, men are “necessities in my life.” Since her father is dead, and it is unseemly for a woman to live alone, Hester avails herself of the hospitality of a childhood friend, Mary and her Puritan brigadier general husband, Robert. Initially, Hester believes that this situation will give her the important social connections she needs to introduce Pearl into high society, but soon learns these connections have strings attached.

Hester still has the “unwanted knowledge of my fellow man,” the gift she earned by having her private acts made public. As Mary puts it, Hester is “a mirror.” This gift made her a pariah in her old village and isolates her again in this new place until Robert sees a way to use it to advance his position. He introduces her to Britain’s Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell, who forces her to use this inner sight to determine who is guilty of crimes against the State. These sessions of questioning suspects leave Hester conflicted. She is torn between the need to protect and provide for her daughter by working for the Puritans and helping to protect and stabilize her country by working against the Puritans. Our heroine by turns aids both the Roundheads and the Royalists, but her loyalty to Pearl never wavers.

Hester seems resolved to have some happiness for herself, and is finished paying for an act that was not to her a sin. She meets John Manning, a man who, like Hester, feels no guilt and so is not intimidated to meet her gaze. Their relationship is honest, based on respect and physical need. The author’s attempt here to make Hester a more rounded character and move her past the loss of Arthur, Pearl’s father, is thwarted by the limitations of Hawthorne’s original storyline. We know, because Hawthorne has already told us that in the end Hester will return to New England and die alone. Hawthorne tells us also that she mourns Arthur to the end. Reed’s Hester proclaims Arthur weak and expresses anger at his treating his love for her as sin. It is difficult for the reader to reconcile Hester’s self awareness and growth in this new novel with a return to Old Salem and her old ways. Some may find it disappointing, but in the end, the author had to allow Hawthorne his way with our brave protagonist.

Paula Reed teaches at Columbine High School and decided to follow her passion for writing in the aftermath of the tragic events there. She has chosen a worthy heroine and has done well by her.

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## Misfit says

(3.5)

"And I could almost pity him, the most powerful man in England"

We've all read Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* back in our old school days (and most of you hated it), but I reread it a few years back and just loved it. Hester refuses to name her lover and is forced to wear the badge of an adulteress - the Scarlet Letter - while preacher Arthur Dimmesdale wears his own badge in secret. In the end, Hester's older husband dies and leaves his fortune to her free-spirited daughter Pearl. So, what happened after that? Thanks to author Paula Reed now we know - Hester and Pearl return to England, an England ravaged by Civil War and controlled by Oliver Cromwell and his New Model Army. An England where the Puritans reign supreme and gaiety, laughter and frivolity are frowned upon.

Finding her father dead, Hester takes up residence in the Puritan household of a childhood friend who is married to one of Cromwell's loyal generals. She enters their social circle, but Hester's gift of being able to look into one's eyes and see the \*sins of their soul\* becomes a bit disconcerting to those Puritans who are perhaps not quite as pure as they pretend. This gift (which she developed in her years of wearing the letter) comes to the attention of Cromwell, who sees Royalists spies and traitors everywhere. Hester eventually becomes a bit too involved in the plots to oust Cromwell and finds herself caught in a dangerous game of cat and mouse as England tires of Cromwell and plots abound to bring Charles Stuart back to England as King.

I have to admit I was a bit nervous going into this one, usually spin-off novels fall flat as a pancake, but I was pleasantly surprised with this one. While not the greatest novel ever written, it was still quite enjoyable and fun reading \*the rest of the story\*. I really liked Reed's writing style, even with the first person narrative (not a favorite of mine) and she managed to keep Hester in the thick of things and not retelling the story from the sidelines of the sewing room. Although this is a pretty complicated period in England's history, the author keeps it on the lighter, less complicated side, so I wouldn't be concerned going in not knowing too much about it. I didn't care too much for the final bit of Pearl's story and her romance felt a bit contrived and for that I'm knocking off a half star to 3.5/5. Outside of that quibble, this was a light, entertaining read and I'm looking forward to more from Ms. Reed.

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## Gretchen says

Paula Reed has done great justice to the *Scarlet Letter* and the literary character Hester Prynne.

What I enjoyed about this tale:

- \* The original story was woven in so that you don't necessarily have to reread or have read *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne can be a difficult and dry read)
- \* The writing style was wonderfully easy to follow
- \* The growth of both Hester and Pearl. Each woman discovered their own path and followed their hearts.
- \*The Wright Family. I loved that Hester got a friend! She was so lonely before it was nice for her to have someone she loved and trusted to share with the burden of being a mother.

What I didn't enjoy as much:

\*Politics. The whole book was about Hester being involved in the politics of a turbulent England and weighing sins of herself and others. Part of this may be that I am not as familiar with English history as American history.

\*The fact that Hester could "see" sin. Honestly that was a little far fetched, but it was the whole basis of the book. Once you get past her "super power" the rest of the story is well done.

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## **Judith says**

A woman returns to London, after a sojourn in The Colonies, with her precocious, and wealthy, 8-year-old daughter. After settling in with old friends, she finds herself in the midst of the political machinations of Oliver Cromwell's England.....due to a certain "gift" of "seeing into the hearts of men".....her ability to spot lies and treason, while retaining her womanly propriety..While employed as such a Judge, she meets a hunky Sir John, who is playing both ends against the middle, politically. He's also pretty much of a libertine...Life continues...Cromwell "falls" and dies. The precocious daughter matures into a "boy crazy" drama queen, ultimately landing an "impossible" match.....marriage-wise. she hies of to Germany, pregnant but "in love"....satisfied to be a "kept woman" all her life..Mother returns to The Colonies....the site of her own past "sins"

This would be a pretty good Historical Romance, for those who fancy such, if not for the overt reference to The Scarlet Letter and the character of HESTER PRYNNE.

For one thing, any woman in possession of such a 'gift", as mentioned above, would more than likely have been condemned as a Witch and dispatched without qualms, or a trial. She would never have been given a seat in Oliver's STAR CHAMBER.

The back alley skulking betwixt her and Sir John probably did occur, but people made an art of Discretion in those days.....being Puritans and all

The intrusion of modern attitudes towards boys/men and sex were pretty un-subtle and annoying

I had a difficult time making a connection between Ms Reed's Hester, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's original...though I haven't read the original SCARLET LETTER in years, I seem to recall that Hester as being more of a slow burn.

With all of the historical detail present in this book, I am surprised at the anomalies I have mentioned. I found them to be rather jarring.....and a distraction from the story Ms Reed was trying to tell..Maybe that's my fault....but if the book had just been titled HESTER without the reference..i think it would have "gone down" easier

My rating:

4 stars for the story

3 stars for the delivery

3 1/2 stars total

## Eve says

"If it is a lonely life to be the embodiment of sin, lonelier still it is to be a legend...In truth the tale of the letter I wear was but the beginning of my journey. That story may fade as it will, until it is little more than a footnote in some public record house. Herein lies the events of my years away---the middle of my story. For myself, it is my favorite part."

Near the end of *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, as you may recall, Roger Chillingworth, Hester Prynne's malevolent husband, dies, but mysteriously leaves his considerable fortune to Pearl, Hester's illegitimate daughter. With this money, Hester and little Pearl leave New England to go abroad. Hester returns many years later, without Pearl, to live humbly once again in the village that had once ostracized her. Hawthorne never tells us what Hester did during that time. In *Hester: The Missing Years of The Scarlet Letter*, Paula Reed imagines what may have happened during those years when Hester went away.

Reed, a former high school English teacher (who probably taught *The Scarlet Letter* countless times) certainly is well-versed in the important details and themes of the original: Hester's skill in needlepoint and love of embellishment, at odds with her wish to remain unnoticed and in the background, the contrast between what is hidden and what is apparent. Reed seizes and embroiders upon on the original Hester's gift/curse of being able to see other people's sins, though they may try to hide it. When Hester and Pearl go to England to start a new life, it is this gift which will bring her to the attention of one of the most famous and tyrannical Puritans of all time, Oliver Cromwell, and place her and those she loves in the center of dangerous political times. Once again, Hester's fate is subject to the whims of a powerful man.

I thought back to all those years of shame and degradation, the slow and steady climb that I had made from the depths of ignominy. Well, I knew upon what steps had I made that climb. The truth. Every day, everyone I saw knew the worst there was to know of me. They had done the worst that they could do, laying me bare to their judgment, taking my kindness and my charity and throwing it in my face. In time, I had nowhere to go but up. And they? After a while, the letter I wore became a burden upon their souls, a constant reminder of their darkest secrets.

There is plenty of political intrigue in *Hester*; by the book's end, I felt very familiar with the England of Cromwell's time, a rather grim and unhappy place (Cromwell apparently made Christmas illegal). Against this gray backdrop, Reed embroiders fantastical what ifs - what if Hester Prynne unwillingly became Cromwell's pawn, able to influence historical events? What if Hester was caught between Cromwell and Charles II? What if Hester had been a spy?

As historical fiction, *Hester* is a richly woven tapestry. However, I was hoping for more of the juicy stuff - you know, what we were denied in the original. Maybe lengthy, detailed flashback scenes with Arthur Dimmesdale, the courtship, the sinning (BTW, did you know that the word "adultery" never once appears in *The Scarlet Letter*? - weird, huh?). Reed gives us just a glimpse and also explains Hester's marriage to the decrepit Roger Chillingworth. The Hester here is appropriately muted, like somebody who's been publicly humiliated for seven years because of one indiscretion. Somehow, though, I thought once she escaped Salem, Hester would succumb to her wild nature --- start dancing on tables or something, have a myriad of lovers, find a man worthy of her spirit. Pearl, too, who was such a strange child in the original is now much tamer, until towards the end when it seemed that she might follow in her mother's footsteps.

Hester: The Missing Years of The Scarlet Letter by Paula Reed is a nice companion book to the original. You can enjoy it not having read The Scarlett Letter - but at least knowing the bare bones of the story, which Reed touches upon in the beginning.

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### **Linda says**

I was a Goodreads winner of this book...I am so glad, too! This book was fabulous. I would never have imagined the direction the sequel to "The Scarlett Letter" would have taken, but the one Ms. Reed put together for us was not only logical (as "The Scarlett Letter" hinted at where it might have gone), but quite riveting as well. I really could not put the book down. The language used was more modern than "The Scarlett Letter" but not in a way that detracted from the book...if anything, it made Hester's and Pearl's adventures even more exciting to read. If you enjoyed anything from "The Scarlett Letter" you will want to read "Hester." I am so glad I did!

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### **Erika says**

Have I read *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne? Yes. Do I remember any of it? No. Did that affect how I enjoyed *Hester*? Absolutely not.

Paula Reed picks up the narrative of Hester Prynne and her daughter, Pearl, during the years Hawthorne, at the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, tells his readers she was in Europe, returning later to America without Pearl; *Hester: A Novel* explains why.

There are so many factors to consider when reviewing a historical fiction novel--more when that novel is a response to a piece of literature. Paula's Reed prose, for one, is different from Hawthorne's. The language isn't as elevated, separated as it is by time and culture. As a response to *The Scarlet Letter*, *Hester* is wonderful--the characters blossom vividly from Reed's writing. I cannot judge whether, as a historical fiction, it merits marks for accuracy (I would hope so). My knowledge of Cromwell's reign as Lord Protector is pragmatic and extremely beneficial to one thing only: to help navigate against a vast timeline of literature and place certain texts into the context in which they were conceived and received. To put it bluntly: I know about Cromwell because I had to study texts written during the time or that were affected by his rule to get my degree (not history). While I enjoyed *Hester* and thought Reed did an amazing job keeping the timeline of Hester and Pearl's story concurrent with Cromwell's and that of the nation, I'm not an educated enough layperson to notice whether she grossly misconstrued events, dialogue, or customs. I do feel confident saying I'm encouraged enough by how accessible (and enjoyable) she made the history to venture forth on my own, using, of course, her characters and their timelines, to measure against the real events and how these imagined people may have fit into reality.

As for the rest of the book: don't be intimidated if you had to read *The Scarlet Letter* in school as part of the curriculum and didn't like it. Reed took two dynamic characters and made them entirely her own. The result is a novel built around the relationship between a mother and her daughter, their struggles to survive on their own, and the ways they discover themselves through their treatment of each other. Don't even be intimidated with the history--Reed keeps a running commentary made necessary by Hester's involvement in the government, drawing on a rich history and tumultuous times to give her quite an adventure.



There were a couple of things I particularly enjoyed, one of which was Hester's relationship with John Manning, the only character lively enough to stand out in an almost entirely Puritan cast. The scene where Hester is first invited to White Hall and stands admiring the painted ceilings was the first of their philosophical discussions together. Laced with innuendo and flirtatious intelligent discourse, it was only a matter of time before Reed paired the two off again. In a way unique to Reed, the two discuss matters of religion and reality, inspired by an apple at lunchtime. There are some beautiful and insightful lines throughout the book, but most importantly, in conversation between John and Hester. The undertones of their meetings motivated the feel of the novel; caution and danger fly in the face of passionate freedom and hidden desires. Because I am reviewing an ARC, I'm obliged not to quote directly from passages or pages that might have changed for publication, but for the most part, Reed's writing was accessible and assumed an intelligent reader. There were a few awkward spots of prose, mostly when she referred to Hawthorne's scenes to give her characters memory of past events as he imagined them, or when I found a few modern phrases that I felt stood out of place with the feel of the rest of the dialogue.

The only other odd thing I found was the foundation of Hester's adventures: her adultery gifted her the ability to see sin in others--a fantastical talent that at times, felt unbelievable, especially because in the mid 17th century, I'm supposed to believe the most powerful man in England turns to a commoner for help exposing traitors and Royalists (those that would have a restoration). As long as you believe in her ability to look someone in the eye and see if they've sinned, then you're free to enjoy the rest of the book. If you don't, you'll have a harder time of it, especially because all that Hester becomes is contingent on not only readers believing it, but Cromwell and his retinue (who eventually learn to fear her). To top that off, when she confronts Cromwell about exploiting her she winds up becoming his conscience instead of "quitting" her current position.

The prose was enjoyable, the characters grew on me, but what had become a novel about Hester doing everything in her power to give Pearl the opportunities she never had, ended ultimately in disappointment. I didn't like the ending. Maybe I lack the insight to appreciate it (I try *really* hard in the insight department), but I thought it was an unexpected way to turn Hester's penance--something I thought Reed had made quite clear was something she felt she'd finished already--into yet another chapter of her life. To have Hester become as powerful as she did emotionally, as well as politically, only to have her fuse back into her shell and pine away her years in torment over what she'd done to Arthur was, I thought, completely out of character. I didn't mind so much how she left things with Pearl, that was believable, but to punish herself after being exposed to public shame (during which, supposedly, she'd accepted what she'd done) and punishment for decades afterwards is a slap in the face to every inch of growth she'd gained in forgiving herself. Honestly, I thought it was a bit ridiculous, but as a reminder: Hester had to go back to America alone; I don't remember her frame of mind at the end of *The Scarlet Letter* to judge whether this guilt was Hawthorne's or how much was imagined for Hester from Reed.

Either way, I didn't like the end. The rest of the novel, however, I enjoyed, but realize it's not for everyone. I only have to warn readers of one last thing: if reading radical discussions against Puritan ideals isn't something you think you'd like or something you don't think you could put into context to enjoy and understand the novel, *Hester* is not for you. Mostly it reads smoothly, with little attention paid to romance in favor of political survival, friendship, and the relationships between men and women; women and their daughters.

*Hester* will be released in the US on February 16th in hard cover.

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## Sarah Collier says

The Scarlet Letter is a story I've re-read at different times in my life and responded to differently based on maturity and experience. In my opinion, one must really be able to relate to Hester's point of view in order to really get all there is to get out of The Scarlet Letter. Yeah, you can be the scorned and bitter type and get Chillingworth, you can be the self-hating man with a martyr complex and get Dimmesdale, but to get Hester, you've got to understand redemption. You've got to "get" grace. Not everyone who reads Hester sympathizes with Hester. You sort of have to have been Hester to get it and the more life experiences I have that draw me closer to her character---all of her character---the more I cherish the story.

Reed pretty much butchers everything Hawthorne built in the character of Hester. Granted, there were some great story line themes but I was disappointed overall. As one who usually doesn't enjoy continuations, I was willing to come into this one with an open mind. I started out really admiring the new, stronger Hester; but as the author destroyed her strong and sure character more and more as the book progressed, I ended up highly disliking and disrespecting her.

It's interesting that one character trait that many reviewers seem to despise was the one thing about her that seemed completely real and believable to me. Because of her experience with the consequences of sin, Hester has the ability to see the sins of others. I, too, see hypocrisy and hidden sin in people. It's a discernment that God gives to some---a trust so one can pray and possibly speak into the situation at the appropriate time. And yes, it requires a little bit of, "it takes one to know one." Hester describes it as a mantle that they wear---I see it as a name or title they are given. As a Christian, I know that God desires us to walk with the character of Christ. When we sin, he doesn't desire to call us by that sinful name, but to give us a new name that symbolizes our redemption and salvation through him (Rev. 2). When I see a person burdened by their secret sin and that sin is named to me, I am able to privately pray into that specific situation, usually without the person ever realizing I know, in a way that not everyone can. Hester's "ability", as well as the way she was treated because of it, seems perfectly plausible to me as I have operated in this fashion to varying extents for years.

Now for all the stuff I didn't like...

Hester's deep and regular involvement in aiding Cromwell seems \*a bit\* contrived and overdone. Her discernment of peoples' motives and private sins was an interesting twist at first, but the author turned it into something seemingly unbelievable when she made Hester, a commoner and a woman without a male head, a most trusted aid to Cromwell. This is the 17th century we're talking about. At best, she would have been thrown out of the Wright's home to avoid scandal on their good name. At worst, she would have been condemned as a witch. Never would she have been, one day and seemingly without much thought, private confidant, and later conscience, (what????) of the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell.

I was also really annoyed with her free and easy sexual nature. The author wanted the opportunity to bring in a Libertine character since that was a big Charles II "thing", but the derogatory sexual escapades and language that Hester uses change her from a woman with passions who had already learned to bridle them to something cheap and nasty. The author seemed to think Hester had to have some kind of "release" and thus took up with the character of John. But seriously, if she was so desperate for more illicit sex, wouldn't we have seen that crop up in The Scarlet Letter, where she lived alone and shunned, rather than later on when she had friends and the respect of those around her?

It would have been nice to see Pearl learn from her mother's mistakes, but instead we have to follow the

predictable "sins of the fathers" trope and watch her fall into the lust trap---only to be rescued in probably the most ridiculously contrived part of the story. (Except for maybe the part about Charles II and his entourage taking regular dinners with Hester and Pearl in their little townhouse in Buges.)

Speaking of tropes, I get so tired of the "every man will betray you" garbage. Hester lectures Pearl about her ignorance toward men and assures her that even her beloved new beau will betray her before long. Men just can't be trusted. Sure, that might be true---but no one bothers to point out that women betray their men in the same ways. It's called being human. You stay with someone long enough and they will hurt you at some point. No matter how true in spirit they are. Can we get off the man-hater wagon...or, at the least, acknowledge we women are no better when it comes to disappointing the ones we love?

Anyone who is a fan of Hawthorne and *The Scarlet Letter* will probably want to read this one---regardless of how lousy the reviews are. If you go into it ready to chuck plausibility, historical accuracy, and depth of character growth out the window, you'll surely find something redeemable about the story.

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### **Kathleen says**

I received an Advanced Reader's copy of this book from the Goodreads Giveaway.

I was a little reluctant about reading this book because, in my experience, a book which is a retelling or a continuation of a classic can often be horrendous. When I first realized the book was a continuation of Hester and Pearl Prynne's story from the *Scarlet Letter*, I couldn't help thinking of the disastrous film starring Demi Moore that failed in capturing the original book. However, I was pleasantly surprised by Paula Reed's novel. I have given it four stars but if we could give half stars I would have given it 4 and half stars.

Because I had read *The Scarlet Letter* so long ago I had to go back and read a quick synopsis to refresh my memory. The book takes up soon after the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale's death. After Hester is told that her husband, Roger Chillingsworth, has died and left his estate to Pearl, she and her daughter travel to England to make a better life for Pearl. Since Hester was first forced to wear the scarlet A, she has had the ability to recognize and mirror the sins and hypocrisies in those she encounters back to them. This ability soon unwittingly entangles Hester in the turbulent political happenings of London of the time. She also must do everything in her power to see that Pearl is in a position to ensure her future.

The novel, like the original, continues to explore the nature of sin and hypocrisy. But the aspect I found most enjoyable is that Hester and Pearl make decisions about how they will live their lives not on the basis of what those around them believe but on what they themselves feel and believe. They are very strong female characters in a time when women wielded very little power over their own lives. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this novel.

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### **Linda says**

In the fairly new tradition of modern authors writing "sequels" to classics, especially those of Jane Austen, Paula Reed has imagined a future for Hester Prynne, one of the icons of English literature. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is brooding and evocative of its time and place, yet simultaneously ageless in what it reveals about human nature. Now Reed presents us with an older Hester, widowed and leaving New

England to claim her daughter's inheritance in England.

This plot hinges on the reader's ability to accept that, when she donned the scarlet A, Hester inadvertently developed a sort of sixth sense, the power to "read" the sins of others simply by looking into their eyes and sensing their auras. It's a pretty unlikely idea to swallow, but, at any rate, this new talent causes her much distress, and others to distrust her. Now taking shelter with a girlhood friend, Mrs. Wright, Hester and Pearl are integrated into the family. Mr Wright is one of the close confidants of Oliver Cromwell, and when Cromwell learns of Hester's powers, he insists that she assist him in the rooting out of traitors to his new kingless regime.

Reed's story is interesting enough, but the personality of her Hester simply doesn't match the classic one. Her other characters are credible enough, although it's difficult to care about any of them. It's interesting to compare the social conditions in Interregnum England with those in New England; after all, the Puritans were in control in both places, and they were not relaxed and casual! If the protagonist were some less iconic than Hester Prynne, I'd likely be less critical, but this problem cannot be overlooked. Paula Reed is a competent writer. Read Hester as a romance with strong historical overtones, and her story is an enjoyable one.

Review based upon the advanced reader's copy provided by the publisher at no cost.

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### **Sarah says**

I'm not exactly sure how I feel about this one. I liked it but didn't love it. I would recommend it to my historical fiction friends, but it's not one I could recommend to everyone.

On the plus side, I like historical fiction that has a little detail. I like hearing about clothing, food, etc. I like when the dialogue seems realistic and the characters aren't throwing around modern phrases or usages.

Also, I hate when people try to out-Austen Austen or out-Bronte the Brontes. The author did neither here - she took the characters Hawthorne introduced and fleshed them out in a way that felt reasonable to me within the framework Hawthorne already built.

On the negative side, I am not sure how I feel about Cromwell's strong presence in the book. It was almost a bit too much to take to think that Hester Prynne would be an advisor to Cromwell.

One the author tied Hester to Cromwell, she was somewhat obligated to follow Cromwell's timeline, since that is historical fact and Prynne is the fiction. The author did well in not getting too bogged down in Cromwell's timeline, but the story could have flowed a little more freely if she wasn't tied to that.

One thing I really like was how Pearl developed. It seemed entirely in keeping with what Hawthorne began in the *The Scarlett Letter*. I didn't care for the direction Pearl's life took at the end (too good to be true). I would have liked a little more left unknown.

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### **Ali O'Hara says**

I was a little torn between 4 and 5 stars, but I loved this book. I couldn't put it down and ended up staying up until 4 am one morning (a weeknight too, ack!) reading it.

I don't know that its the best book ever, but what I'm looking for in a book is enjoyment. I've had a hard time getting into fiction lately, but I was hooked on this right away.

I enjoyed the story and I thought the author did a great job writing in a style that seemed appropriate for the time (not that I'm any expert!) without it being difficult to read.

I loved the characters and the ending was unexpected, and yet I liked it. I even thought the book had some good points of thought for life.

If she wrote a book on Pearl, I'd probably read that too. :)

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### **Roxane says**

I rarely ever read historical novels and I'm not quite sure why. Those I've read, I remember enjoying, but it's just not a genre I naturally turn to when looking for something to read.

I would never have picked this one up if I hadn't been asked to read it at work. Also, on a completely unrelated note, this is the first book I've read on my iphone thanks to the Stanza app and I must say that reading on the iphone felt as comfortable as reading on paper.

I'll shamelessly admit having never read The Scarlet Letter. Sure, I've studied bits and pieces of it in class, but my most vivid memory of the book's content is the movie with Demi Moore. Well, it all comes down to the fact that we were studying Poe at the same time and well really, the latter took up most of my study time as you can imagine...

At the end of The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne tells his readers that the main character, Hester Prynne, leaves America with her young daughter Pearl, only to come back years later, alone. Paula Reed's novel fills in the blank left by the Scarlet Letter and recounts what became of Hester and Pearl as they journeyed back to England (then, under Oliver Cromwell) and reunite with old acquaintances of Hester's.

You really don't have to have read Hawthorne's novel to get into this book as the author makes a wonderful job at recounting here and there events of Hawthorne's novel, as well as including certain elements when they provide for a greater understanding of the character's motivations.

If the premise didn't really strike me as particularly interesting, I was quickly grabbed by the author's rich and flowing style. It's a real pleasure to read.

Also, this is a story about women and how they fare in a world ruled by puritan men who see their female counterparts as little more than elaborate pieces of furniture capable of providing them with an heir... The mothers, daughters, sisters and friends in this story do what they can to bend the rules and work within the system to help and comfort one another... and really, some situations are not without resemblance to situations faced by some contemporary women.

My only complaint would be that, although the characters are well fleshed out, you never really feel worried

or anxious regarding what may become of them. Unfortunate events do take place but Hester and Pearl are never irrevocably threatened by them. The reader simply knows that all will turn out fine for both of them and that's not just because you know all along that Hester will go back to America.

Still, this makes for a solid and wonderfully written story centred on women, which raises some interesting points about social conventions and religion. I would recommend it to all those who enjoy historical novels and 17th century England. Again, whether or not you've read or enjoyed *The Scarlet Letter* is of little consequence here.

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