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The Witches: Salem, 1692



Synopsis

The Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Cleopatra*, the #1 national bestseller, unpacks the mystery of the Salem Witch Trials. It began in 1692, over an exceptionally raw Massachusetts winter, when a minister's daughter began to scream and convulse. It ended less than a year later, but not before 19 men and women had been hanged and an elderly man crushed to death. The panic spread quickly, involving the most educated men and prominent politicians in the colony. Neighbors accused neighbors, parents and children each other. Aside from suffrage, the Salem Witch Trials represent the only moment when women played the central role in American history. In curious ways, the trials would shape the future republic. As psychologically thrilling as it is historically seminal, *THE WITCHES* is Stacy Schiff's account of this fantastical story—the first great American mystery unveiled fully for the first time by one of our most acclaimed historians.

Book Information

Hardcover: 512 pages

Publisher: Little, Brown and Company; First Edition edition (October 27, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0316200603

ISBN-13: 978-0316200608

Product Dimensions: 6.5 x 1.5 x 9.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 2.8 out of 5 stars • See all reviews • (416 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

View larger View larger View larger View larger Jail census and prison transfers of accused witches, as of 23 May 1692. • (Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass) Two women meet the devil, from an early English chapbook. Yellow boards? Brown boards? How to do this stunning jacket • and the endpaper map • justice? Some office bookshelves. Note interloping Loeb Classical Library at top, orphans from the *Cleopatra* years.

If there's one historical event that the citizens of the United States had better never forget, it's the 1692 Salem Witch Craze, and historian Stacy Schiff's newest work could have gone a long way towards re-establishing the tragedies and injustices of the Witch Trials in the public consciousness--if the public could read it. In spite of all the laudatory blurbs provided to by the work's publisher, twice the number of Customer reviewers give it one or two stars than give it five. Three- and four-star reviews are in shortest supply. Sadly, there's a reason for this. "The Witches: Salem, 1692" is probably one of the most disorganized contemporary historical works that I've seen. The author begins by a caustic dismissal of perhaps the best known popular history of the Witch hysteria, Marion Starkey's 1949 "The Devil in Massachusetts", and undoubtedly the best known fictional portrayal, Arthur Miller's "The Crucible": "The Holocaust sent Marion Starkey toward Salem witchcraft in 1949. She produced the volume that would inspire Arthur Miller to write 'The Crucible' at the outset of the McCarthy crisis. Along with Nathaniel Hawthorne, Miller has largely made off with the story (p. 11)." That sounds an awful lot like sour grapes, but to be fair, Stacy Schiff may have one legitimate gripe. She argues that most recent historians before her, including Starkey, have utilized sources that have been traditionally viewed as primary, but which are actually secondary, to begin the witchcraft story--namely, the monographs the ministers Increase and Cotton Mather penned one to five years after the craze had subsided. Only from the Mather writings, she contends, do we get the idea that the girls of Salem Village were introduced to witchcraft by elementary voodoo and fortune telling practiced by the Parris family's West Indian slave, Tituba, and Schiff theorizes that this was a "must-have-been" hypothesis supplied by the Mathers rather than an "actually-was" fact that could be gleaned from court documents or other contemporary records. For all that, though, Schiff chooses to prove her point by an eye-crossing myriad of dry, repetitive, poorly-arranged data that goes in, around, up, down, across, and through the chronological line to suggest that not only interpersonal community tensions but a confusing Gordian knot of other contributory factors, including even the political attitudes of a cabal of ministers who had worked together to oust the previous governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Edward Andros, and establish the new one, William Phips, all had their part in the great witch scare. I note with dismay how many other reviewers remark that they gave up trying to read the book, or simply started skimming, after so many pages along, because finally, on pp. 386-398, Schiff offers her own thoughts on the phenomenon's causes: hysteria, as defined first by Jean-Martin Charcot and later Sigmund Freud. And, by the anthropomorphic, schizophrenic-as-the-humans-who-thought-it-up God that the Puritans worshiped, she stands a danged good chance of being right. But if Schiff had only stated her thesis at her work's beginning

and built her historical case around it in an orderly and logical manner, much as Marion Starkey had done with her own thoughts in 1949 however much they may have been influenced by Cotton and Increase Mather's after-the-fact hypotheses, Schiff could have produced a much more readable and compelling volume.

Like many people, I've long been fascinated by the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. They seem to embody so many contradictions and unsolvable debates that sit at the core of American life, such as public good vs. the rights of the individual, individual courage vs. mob mentality, or religion vs. rationalism. Plus, the struggle to create a just legal system, public safety, the idea of capital punishment, what constitutes as legal evidence, presumption of innocence, and more. It was the first moral panic to hit American society, and we've been grappling with its meaning ever since—especially every time a new panic emerges. Sometimes these panics are relatively benign, but the experience with Sen. McCarthy or the McMartin Day Care controversy show us that witch craze-like hysteria is still very much with us today. I was pleased to see Stacy Schiff's new study of this disturbing chapter of American history. There are hundreds of works on the subject (fiction and non-fiction), but none of them is absolutely perfect. *Salem Possessed* by Boyer and Nissenbaum is a classic that delves deeply into the social roots of the 1692 panic, but for all its detail it feels incomplete for me—it does a brilliant job of explaining why such a craze *could* have happened, but is less successful on why it *did* happen. *The Crucible* is a brilliant work of theater, but it completely re-works events and people to make its own point. Any of the number of works looking for a single cause—food poisoning, lead poisoning, misogyny, etc.—usually feel needlessly reductionist or sensationalist. Schiff provides a different sort of work; for me it worked quite well, but readers should know what they're getting into. The strength is Schiff's vivid writing. She brilliantly brings Salem Village, its environs, and its inhabitants to life. There is a wealth of details told with sharp, insightful turns of phrase that allow you to get a clear sense of what's happening. She is particularly successful in showing just what an alien world the New Englanders inhabited; it is clearly America, but a kind of proto-America that's very different from the America we know today. Once the trials begin, the work reads like a novel. Schiff skillfully uses foreshadowing and other literary techniques to keep the momentum going and to help clarify the events. This is necessary, as the story of the Salem Witch Trials is a communal story, and there is a huge cast of characters with mixed (and changing) motivations to keep track of. The trials take up a significant section of the book, and while I thought they were deftly told, I can see some readers becoming bleary-eyed by

the wealth of details. It helps that Schiff provides a cast of characters. One problem with Schiff's prose is that sometimes, for me, it verges into being too colloquial. There are numerous references to The Wizard of Oz, Harry Potter, and other bits of pop culture. I'm sure many readers would find them familiar and witty, although at times I found them arch. Readers should also be aware that this book clearly falls into the category of popular history rather than scholarly history. Don't get me wrong—it is knowledgeable and makes great use of a variety of scholarly sources. But at its core, Schiff is less concerned about breaking new historical ground or presenting a deep analysis than she is about bringing this horrible episode to life for modern readers. In this she is hugely successful, making the Salem trials relevant, terrifying, and all-too familiar.

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