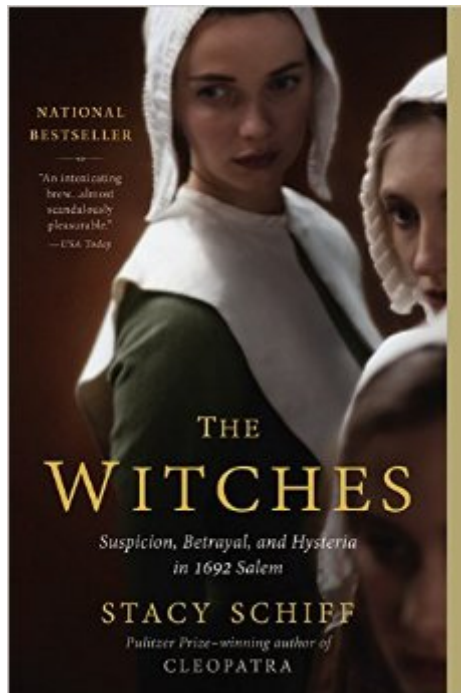


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The Witches: Suspicion, Betrayal, And Hysteria In 1692 Salem



Synopsis

Pulitzer Prize winner Stacy Schiff, author of the #1 bestseller *Cleopatra*, provides an electrifying, fresh view of the Salem witch trials. The panic began early in 1692, over an exceptionally raw Massachusetts winter, when a minister's niece began to writhe and roar. It spread quickly, confounding the most educated men and prominent politicians in the colony. Neighbors accused neighbors, husbands accused wives, parents and children one another. It ended less than a year later, but not before nineteen men and women had been hanged and an elderly man crushed to death. Speaking loudly and emphatically, adolescent girls stood at the center of the crisis. Along with suffrage and Prohibition, the Salem witch trials represent one of the few moments when women played the central role in American history. Drawing masterfully on the archives, Stacy Schiff introduces us to the strains on a Puritan adolescent's life and to the authorities whose delicate agendas were at risk. She illuminates the demands of a rigorous faith, the vulnerability of settlements adrift from the mother country, perched-at a politically tumultuous time-on the edge of what a visitor termed a "remote, rocky, barren, bushy, wild-woody wilderness." With devastating clarity, the textures and tensions of colonial life emerge; hidden patterns subtly, startlingly detach themselves from the darkness. Schiff brings early American anxieties to the fore to align them brilliantly with our own. In an era of religious provocations, crowdsourcing, and invisible enemies, this enthralling story makes more sense than ever. *The Witches* is Schiff's riveting account of a seminal episode, a primal American mystery unveiled-in crackling detail and lyrical prose-by one of our most acclaimed historians.

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Customer Reviews

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.

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 causeâ ”food poisoning, lead poisoning, misogyny, etc.â ”usually feel needlessly reductionistâ | or sensationalist. Schiff provides a different sort of work; for me it worked quite well, but readers should know what theyâ™re getting into. The strength is Schiffâ™s vivid writing.

This book, a historical account of the Salem witch trials by an author whose prior work has been highly acclaimed, turned out to be a long-winded and tedious disappointment. I regret the many hours I spent slogging through it. Schiff takes a textbook-like approach to the writing, throwing facts and assertions at the reader without connecting them through any meaningful narrative. We learn little about the accusers and victims; those curious about the lives, personalities, and motivations of the people most directly involved will be disappointed. There is more information about the witchcraft judges and the local ministers â “ in fact, perhaps the two most-discussed figures are Increase and Cotton Mather, prominent ministers who were not present for any of the events in Salem. Lengthy accounts of accusations and confessions are included, relating fanciful stories as if they were true: â œSkimming groves of oak, mossy bogs, and a tangle of streams, Anne Foster sailed above the treetops, over fields and fences, on a pole. . . . Before Foster on the pole sat Martha Carrier, half Fosterâ™s age and the dauntless mother of four. Carrier had arranged the flight. She had persuaded Foster to accompany her; she knew the way.â •Many pages are spent paraphrasing such accusations, but very few on analysis. The book has no organizing principle or thesis, focuses on no key figures, and has almost nothing to say about why the events in Salem might have occurred. And the writing style makes for laborious reading; it alternates between drowning the reader in details whose import to the larger picture is unclear, and wallowing in wordy abstractions that utterly fail to enlighten. It is often repetitive, and sometimes jumps between ideas that have no apparent connection.

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