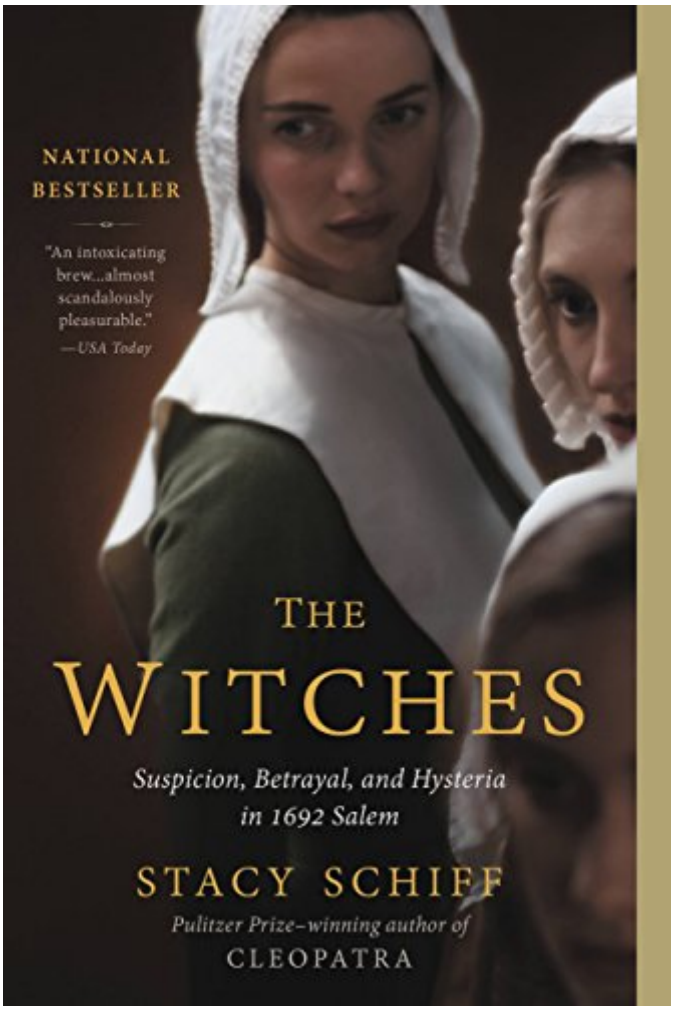
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The Witches: Salem, 1692



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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.

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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.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (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 ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â • and the endpaper map

ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â • 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 voudoun 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.

It is difficult for serious students of the Salem Trials to fathom why this book made the best-seller list and how its author came to be current darling of the talk-shows. Although I have submitted only positive Customer Reviews in the past, as a teacher and author focusing on the Salem Trials for 30 years, I cannot allow Schiff's "The Witches - Salem 1692" to escape my critical eyes. There has been too much serious and exemplary scholarship published on the subject, particularly since the international Tercentenary Conference held at Salem College in 1992. And these highly-respected scholars have uncovered much more of true historical value and explained the topic and era better. Nothing new is offered here and the book is tedious, overlong, and rampant with factual errors.The word is that Schiff hired 8 researchers and if this is true and she did not do all her own research, it shows!For example, Schiff tells us that "Men with formal legal training did not immigrate to the colonies, which had no law schoolÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â|" when actually, "New England's laws were crafted from English Precedents as well as from Holy Scripture. New England first immigrants brought with them experience and knowledge of the British judicial system. Indeed, some of the earliest colonial leaders, including Governor John Winthrop and Chief Justice William Stoughton, were formally trained in English Common Law(see Mofford, "The Devil Made Me Do It!" - Crime & Punishment in Early New England" (Globe Pequot Press, 2012), p. 4.Folks living in Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1692, never referred to themselves as "Puritans." This was a derisive term used in Old England by their Anglican enemies. And this was hardly "our first true-crime story," as author Schiff claims.She would have been wise to hire fact-checkers since the book is riddled with careless mistakes. "Giles Corey's age; the spelling of Proctor's name; Dudley Bradstreet never served as Governor (although his father, Simon, did); Martha Carrier's first son was not born before marriage; nor were her "strapping sons ever "orphaned," as Schiff erroneously claims! Nor did any of Carrier's children sat that their mother told them she ever was or would be "Queen of Hell!" (Indeed, that comes from the "Examination of Mary Lacey, Junior" and was later used by the Rev. Cotton Mather in his 1692 book "The Wonders of the Invisible World." Shriff also states that Mary Walcott said

Carrier boasted she'd been a witch 40 years, where elsewhere in this same book, Schiff informs readers that Martha Carrier was 38 years old!In the York massacre of January 25, 1692, the minister Shubael Dummer was not "butchered on his doorstep" as Schiff tells us, but was actually killed as he attempted to mount his horse. The author and/or her team of researchers gives us 1694 as the date of the Native American raid upon Haverhill that resulted in Hannah Duston's captivity, when the event took place in 1697.It is as if the author is determined to show off every trivial fact in her repertoire. She seems eager to show off all she knows from her ventures into psychology, world literature and European history. And why not select relevant 17th century quotes instead of words from the likes of Montaigne, Jean Renoir, Charles Dickens, Flannery Connor, Somerset Maugham, and Ambrose Bierce? Regarding religion, Schiff strangely decides to quote a 20th century mill worker.Her frequent references to Sweden are tiresome and unnecessary,and only serve to interrupt the flow of the narrative. Her references to Joan of Arc whose "Saints appeared" to her and "also thoughtfully identified themselves," are likewise out of place and irrelevant.In one end-note she even attempts to sum up the Enlightenment by name-dropping Issac Newton and John Locke and the alignment of the stars and astrological wisdom from a 1692 Almanac.I'm guessing Schiff's references to modern pop culture are designed to appeal to modern readers who have never been exposed to seventeenth century studies. These all-too-frequent distractions seldom make sense and only trivialize serious history. She sticks in scenes & dialogue from The Wizard of Oz ie. "ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â¦like watching the Wicked Witch of the West melt back into Miss Gulch" or "It is because Miss Gulch owns half the property in town that Auntie Em cannot say what she thinks of her to her face.") We are even treated (?) to references from Harry Potter. Perhaps Schiff hopes to snag middle-school audiences with "as Dumbledore assures Harry Potter..." and "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"This historian found Schiff's comparisons to contemporary life downright irritating. Here, Indians are described as "swarthy terrorists in the backyard" or "in its permanence, a witchcraft accusation resembled an Internet rumor." Or "Nearly as many theories have been advanced to explain the Salem Witch Trials as the Kennedy assassination." Or "she stumbled upon a Catch-22 of the 17th century system." Or, "As Hilary Mantel writes of her six year old selfÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â¦" Speaking of the devil, Schiff claims "He operated as a kind of steroid." Indeed, she even calls upon Donald Rumsfeld to inform her readers that "People were chasing the wrong rabbit!"Although the selected Cast of Characters that introduces the book is helpful, one can't help but wonder how Schiff knows what these players looked like or how they acted. Tituba is "kindly, "William Barker: "silver-tongued," Mary Esty is "kindhearted," Ann Foster:"quiet;" Susannah Martin is "tiny," while the Reverend

Francis Dane is "autocratic, uncompromising." although his assistant minister, "excitable." "Dane ruled with a strong hand, (while) Thomas Barnard with a sharper edge." The Rev. Nicholas Noyes may be a "plump, uncompromising poet," but Schiff somehow knows him to be "good company, vivacious, and witty."Is Schiff writing historical fiction or simply aiming for a popular audience? Whatever, she fictionalizes far too many well-documented facts.Indeed, the book contains far too many personal opinions to be considered serious history. For example, she says "Andover turned out to be rife not only with sorcery but also folk magic, religion’s popular, wayward stepsister. It settled comfortably into parsonages. The Barnard and Dane households, like those of Higginson and Hale, were infested." (p. 290)Statements like "History is not rich in unruly young women; with the exception of Joan of Arc and a few underage sovereignsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â|" will not set well with historians or seventeenth century scholars."The Witches - Salem, 1692" does little to enlighten our understanding of what and why the events of 1692 happened.

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