

Biography Resource Center

Kathleen Kent

1953-

Birth: 1953 in Pennsylvania, United States

Nationality: American

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2010.

Entry updated: 01/07/2010

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"Sidelights"

Few debut novelists have achieved more success than Kathleen Kent has enjoyed with publication of *The Heretic's Daughter: A Novel*. This historical novel was inspired by the story of Kent's maternal

ancestor Martha Carrier, one of the first women hanged as a witch in Salem, Massachusetts, in the 1690s. Most American schoolchildren learn the basic facts of the infamous witch trials: after two young girls began exhibiting odd behavior, officials suspected that the children were victims of witchcraft. People soon became hysterical at the thought that black magic was being practiced among them; eventually, more than 150 people in and around Salem were accused of witchcraft. Of these, nineteen were hanged, most of them women. For Kent, however, this story was not a mere history lesson but an essential part of family lore.

When she was a teenager, Kent wrote in an essay posted on *Powells.com*, she looked at a library book about Massachusetts history and discovered Carrier's name in the index. Turning to the appropriate page, she found the tales she had heard from her grandmother confirmed in print. "I remember the breathless feeling of being part of that notorious history and eventually came to an understanding of the pride, and at times gleefulness, that my mother felt in having an accused witch in the family," she explained. She told *Dallas Morning News* writer Joy Tipping: "It was kind of stunning to find out that these were real people, they weren't just Grandma's fantasy."

With no experience in writing fiction, Kent set out to research her first novel after having left a fast-paced international career in commodities. This midlife shift, she told Tipping, was far from easy. She spent five years immersing herself in every bit of history she could find and shaping her material into a narrative. No one but her immediate family knew she was working on a novel, she said, explaining: "You know, you're fifty and you tell someone you're working on your first book and their eyes glaze over." Lacking any inside knowledge of the publishing industry, Kent accomplished the significant feat of finding an agent and a publisher for her manuscript. This rare success was enhanced further not only by glowing reviews for *The Heretic's Daughter*, but also by the book's selection as winner of the David J. Langum, Sr., Prize in American Historical Fiction.

The Heretic's Daughter is seen through the eyes of Martha Carrier's nine-year-old daughter, Sarah. The child's point of view, Kent explained to *Publishers Weekly* interviewer Ellen Wernecke, gives the story a special "emotional urgency," especially because the child comes to experience chilling depths of fear and danger. As Kent makes clear, the early colonial New England in which her characters live is rife with anger, gossip, and mean-spirited behavior. Though Puritans, the settlers often get into trouble for drinking, fornicating, and shirking work; they engage in heated disputes with neighbors and live in fear of hardship, disease, and the wrath of God. The Carriers arrive in Andover, Massachusetts, in the winter of 1690, and when smallpox breaks out shortly thereafter, they are suspected of having inadvertently infected the town. Sarah's grandmother dies, and Sarah's brother Andrew is permanently disabled from the disease. When Martha inherits the farm, her male cousin feels cheated out of property he had thought would come to him. Others, too, resent Martha. She confronts neighbors who let their livestock wander onto Carrier property, and she speaks her mind when women are expected to be meek and subservient. As Kent observes, the early New Englanders were "contentious and libelous, full of superstitious dread and malicious gossip."

When fears of witchcraft break out in Salem, it is not long before petty resentments and grievances turn neighbor against neighbor. With no evidence except an accuser's word, suspected witches are thrown into prison, where they are pressured to confess. Even under torture, though, they maintain their innocence. Martha, along with her young children, is accused and held in the squalid jail. Not only does Martha steadfastly maintain her innocence, she berates the judges for believing the malicious accusations of those who informed against her. This boldness, in fact, prompted religious leader Cotton Mather to call Martha the "Queen of Hell."

Realizing that hysteria has taken hold and that she must sacrifice herself for her children, Martha tells

Sarah that she must give the court what it wants--testimony confirming Martha's status as a witch. This, Martha explains, is the only way for Sarah to save her own life. Though the girl is horrified at the thought of making the statement that will send her mother to the gallows, she eventually sees that her mother's bleak understanding of the situation is right. "The real Sarah was only six," Kent told Tipping. "Can you imagine? They put a six-year-old girl in prison and made her testify against her mother."

Critical response to *The Heretic's Daughter* was highly favorable. *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer Daniel Mallory called the novel "the most engrossing chronicle of the trials since Arthur Miller," whose play *The Crucible* famously examined the subject. Mallory praised the book as a "shapely, full-blooded debut [that] succeeds as both historical fiction and intimate family saga." *New York Times Book Review* contributor Chelsea Cain expressed similar admiration, describing *The Heretic's Daughter* as "a powerful coming-of-age tale in which tragedy is trumped by an unsinkable faith in human nature." Yvonne Zipp, writing in the *Christian Science Monitor*, praised Kent's ability to recreate "the smoldering, suspicious atmosphere of Puritan life" and the "horrors and petty injustices the imprisoned endured." Noting that Sarah's perspective "provides a fresh, bracing and unconventional take on a much-covered episode" of American history, a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* hailed *The Heretic's Daughter* as a "gripping and original" book. Writing in *USA Today*, Carol Memmott observed that the novel's "warnings about the dire consequences of intolerance and fundamentalism still have meaning in the modern world."

While Kent's research brought her a deeper understanding of the complexities of early Puritan society in New England, it did not change her view of her great-grandmother of nine generations earlier. Martha Carrier, she learned, was truly the strong character that family stories described. And the men and women accused of witchcraft in Salem were not in league with the devil and the dark arts, but were, Kent stated on the Hachette Book Group Web site, "brave and unfortunate victims of intolerance, superstition and greed."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born 1953, in PA; married; children: one son. **Education:** Attended University of Texas. **Addresses:** Home: Dallas, TX. **E-mail:** hereticsdaughter@yahoo.com.

AWARDS

David J. Langum, Sr., Prize in American Historical Fiction for *The Heretic's Daughter*.

CAREER

Writer. Former commodities professional.

WRITINGS:

- *The Heretic's Daughter: A Novel*, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2008.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

The Heretic's Daughter was adapted as an audio book.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

- Kent, Kathleen, *The Heretic's Daughter: A Novel*, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2008.

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, August 1, 2008, Michele Leber, review of *The Heretic's Daughter*, p. 35.
- *Bookseller*, May 25, 2007, "Macmillan Stakes Claim on Salem Tale," p. 17.
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- *Dallas Morning News*, August 31, 2008, Joy Tipping, "Buzz over Kathleen Kent's First Novel, *The Heretic's Daughter*"; September 7, 2008, Joy Tipping, review of *The Heretic's Daughter*; September 10, 2008, Joy Tipping, "Author Kathleen Kent Has Personal Connection to Story of Witch Trials."
- *Kirkus Reviews*, July 15, 2008, review of *The Heretic's Daughter*.
- *Library Journal*, July 1, 2008, Barbara Hoffert, review of *The Heretic's Daughter*, p. 61.
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- *School Library Journal*, September 1, 2008, Jane Ritter, review of *The Heretic's Daughter*, p. 221.
- *Tampa Tribune* (Tampa, FL), October 19, 2008, Penny Carnathan, "Daughter Lays Foundation for Horrors in Salem," p. 12.
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ONLINE

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- *Mostly Fiction*, <http://www.mostlyfiction.com/> (May 12, 2009), Mary Whipple, review of *The Heretic's Daughter*.
- *Old Musty Books*, <http://www.oldmustybooks.com/> (May 12, 2009), Rachel Baker, review of *The Heretic's Daughter*.
- *Powells.com*, [http:// www.powells.com/](http://www.powells.com/) (May 12, 2009), Kathleen Kent, "A Witch's Tale through Ten Generations."
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SOURCE CITATION

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Reading Guides

The Heretic's Daughter by Kathleen Kent: Questions, plus a reading group guide, with links to reviews, excerpt, author interview and author biography at BookBrowse.com.



The Heretic's Daughter

A Novel

by Kathleen Kent

Hardcover: Sep 2008,

352 pages.

Paperback: Oct 2009,

368 pages.

Publication information

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Printer Friendly Guide

Caution! It is likely that the following questions will reveal, or at least allude to, key plot details. Therefore, if you haven't yet read this book, but are planning on doing so, you may wish to proceed with caution to avoid spoiling your later enjoyment.

1. How was Sarah changed by living with her cousin Margaret? How was she changed by returning to her family?
2. What was it about Martha's character that seemed to antagonize so many neighbors?
3. What do you think was the most compelling reason that Martha was eventually brought to trial?
4. Discuss the various factors that lead to the witch hysteria.
5. Why did Martha choose to take a stand of innocence knowing that a refused confession meant death?
6. Why did Thomas, despite his size and capabilities, not seek to persuade or deter Martha from her course of action?
7. Why did the community of Salem, and the magistrates, so easily believe in and rely on "spectral evidence"?
8. How has reading the book changed your opinions about the men and women hanged as witches?
9. Are there modern day "witches"?

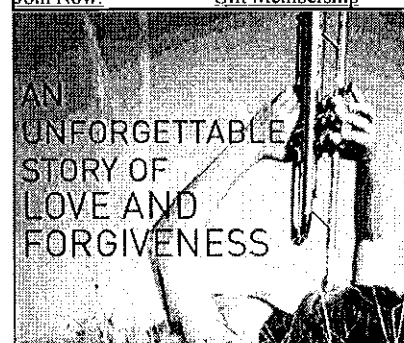
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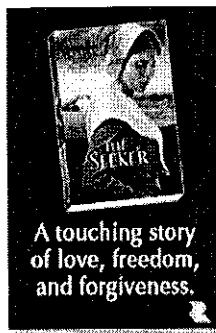
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Fernanda Eberstadt



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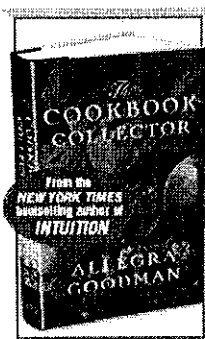


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10. Can we, or should we, redefine the meaning of the word "witch"?

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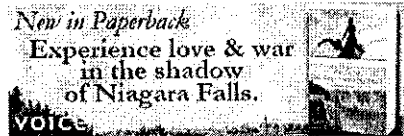
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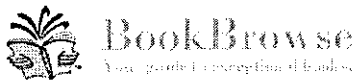
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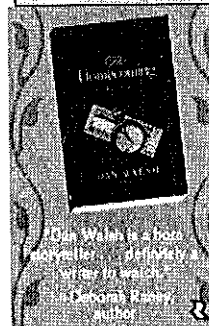
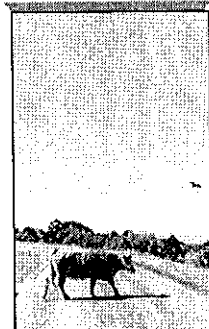
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Interview

A Letter from Kathleen Kent

Dear Readers,

Martha Carrier, my grandmother back nine generations, was hanged as a witch in 1692 in Salem, Massachusetts. Called the "Queen of Hell" by Cotton Mather, Martha was unyielding in her refusal to confess and went to her death rather than join the accused men and women who did so and were spared.

I've read countless historical sources about the trials, including the transcripts that captured verbatim Martha's defiance to the court. But it was the stories of my mother and my maternal grand parents that defined more clearly the courage—and obstinacy—that set the Carriers apart.

All the Carrier tales I heard as a child were enthralling. The children made bows and arrows and practiced shooting objects off each other's heads. Their cow was fed pumpkins so she would give golden milk. Martha's husband Thomas was, according to local gossip, a soldier for Cromwell and the executioner of King Charles I of England. Thomas was over seven feet tall and, when he died at 109, two coffins had to be fitted together to bury him.

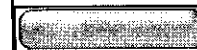
Sarah is the central character of *The Heretic's Daughter*, and Martha did have a daughter with that name. She was arrested on suspicion of witchcraft along with her three brothers and spent months in captivity in a crowded cellar prison. It's my hope that weaving my family legends into the fictional narrative will bring an authenticity to the story of their tremendous bravery and fortitude.

Regards,
Kathleen Kent

A brief history of the Salem witch trials

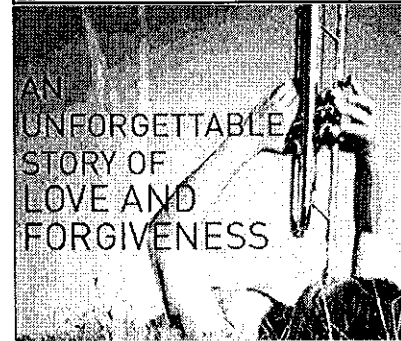
The Salem witch trials of 1692 were a unique and tragic part of American history. The trials and executions, which took place in Salem Village, included nearly 150 men and women arrested from many different villages in Massachusetts. The accused came from such towns as Andover, Topsfield, Beverly, and as far away as Wells, in

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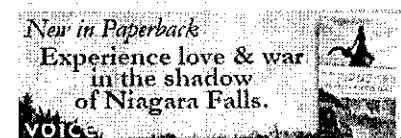
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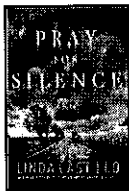
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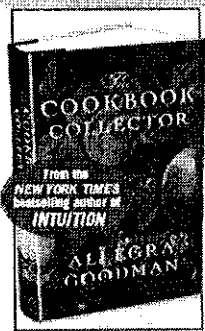
With *Rat*, Eberstadt has found a new setting she knows well, the South of France, and the story she tells is original, powerful, and heartrending—about a child's search for a father she has never known.





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Howard Norman
Howard Norman discusses his 2010 novel, *What Is Left The Daughter*, and what draws him to write about Nova Scotia, even though he was born in Michigan and now lives in Vermont.

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Lily King
An interview with Lily King about her life and works, and in particular her 2010 novel, *Father*

what is now the state of Maine. Ultimately 19 men and women were hanged, and one man pressed to death with stones because he would not testify, either to his guilt or his innocence. The witch hysteria, and the ensuing legal actions, took a little more than a year from January 1692 to May of 1693, and yet the fascination with the Salem "witches" has never diminished.

One of the most terrifying aspects of the trials was the reliance by the court magistrates on "Spectral Evidence", said to be the manifestation of Satan's Invisible World seen only by the afflicted, accusing girls. It was the testimony of these young women which was accepted and written into the court transcripts; the original documents held for posterity in such institutions as the Peabody Essex Museum in Boston.

Many of the accused, to save themselves from death, pled guilty to consorting with the Devil and so were only imprisoned. The men and women who held fast to their innocence were all condemned to be hanged. Martha Carrier, one of the 19 accused witches who was hanged, not only professed her innocence, but harshly admonished her judges for allowing the words of a few hysterical girls determine such a cruel fate for so many. It is a common misunderstanding that the Salem witches were burned, but no witches in the Colonies were ever killed at the stake as they were in Europe, as the British courts considered a burning death too cruel. But to the Puritans who had forsworn themselves to being in league with Satan, this false self-testimony meant eternal damnation.

The imprisonment of mostly women and children took place in some of the most appalling conditions ever seen by the Colonial judicial system. Upon release from jail, many of the accused were never compensated for their expenditures for provisions such as food and water, as well as for the very shackles and heavy chains that confined them. With a few exceptions, such as the grave memorial of Rebecca Nurse, there are no known grave sites for most of the executed witches, as they were tossed into shallow open pits after being hanged.

There have been many different theories as to the cause of such a terrifying outcry by young women, ranging in age from 11 to 20, accusing their neighbors and friends of witchcraft; ergot poisoning, encephalitis, and, more reasonably, conflict brought about by land disputes, disagreements over fundamental religious practices and the dread of attacks and capture by the indigenous native tribes. Whatever the confluence of causes, it is the mystifying social drama of family against family, friend against neighbor, that still haunts us and echoes today through the current events of religious intolerance, superstition and the fear of the "Other."

The men and women hanged by the Court of Oyer & Terminer 1692:

- June 10: Bridget Bishop
- July 19: Sarah Good
- July 19: Elizabeth Howe
- July 19: Susannah Martin
- July 19: Rebecca Nurse
- July 19: Sarah Wildes
- Aug 19: George Burroughs
- Aug 19: Martha Carrier
- Aug 19: George Jacobs
- Aug 19: John Proctor
- Aug 19: John Willard
- Sept 22: Martha Corey
- Sept 22: Mary Easty
- Sept 22: Alice Parker
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- ☐ Convenience
- ☐ Wider range of titles
- ☐ Wider range of formats
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Jonathan Tropper

Jonathan Tropper discusses his novel *This Is Where I Leave You* - a riotously funny, emotionally raw novel about love, marriage, divorce, family, and the ties that bind—whether we like it or not.

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For further reading on the Salem witch trials, the author recommends:

- *In the Devil's Snare* by Mary Beth Norton (Published Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2002)
- *The Salem Witch Trials Reader* by Frances Hill (Published DaCapo Press)

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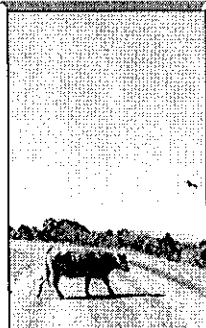
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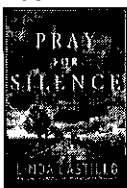
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Biography

Kathleen Kent lives in Dallas with her husband and son. *The Heretic's Daughter* is her first novel.

"Most of the books that have influenced and touched me the most are historical fiction. When I was a child I read a lot of Dickens, Poe and H.H. Monroe. Some of my favorites from the past are *"The Quincunx"*, by Charles Palliser, *"Instance of the Fingerpost"* by Iain Pears, *"The Weight of Water"* by Anita Shreve, and *"The Source"* by James Mitchener. I also read everything by Annie Dillard, Cormac McCarthy and Larry McMurtry. Currently I'm re-reading a book called *"The Long Home"* by William Gay who is, to me, one of the best writers in American fiction today."

This biography was last updated on 09/24/2008.

A note about the biographies

We try to keep BookBrowse's biographies both up to date and accurate. However, with over 1,500 lives to keep track of it's inevitable that some won't be as current or as complete as we would like. So, please help us - if the information about a particular author is out of date, inaccurate or simply very short, and you know of a more complete source, please [let us know](#). Authors and those connected with authors: If you wish to make changes to your bio, please send your complete biography as you would like it displayed so that we replace the old with the new.

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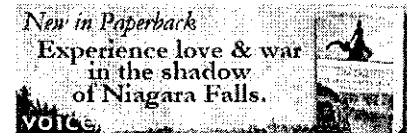
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Rat

Fernanda Eberstadt



With *Rat*, Eberstadt has found a new setting she knows well, the South of France, and the story she tells is original, powerful, and heartrending—about a child's search for a father she has never known.



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Questions and topics for discussion

1. How was Sarah Carrier changed by the time she spent living with the family of her cousin Margaret? How was Sarah affected by the return to her own family?
2. At one point Sarah says, "Mother had an unsettling ability to foretell the weather" (page 91). Do you believe that Martha Carrier possessed special powers of any sort? What was it about Martha's character that seemed to antagonize so many neighbors?
3. In what ways did Martha and Sarah have a typical mother-daughter relationship? If there are aspects of their relationship that you found exceptional, can you attribute those exceptions to the particular time and circumstances in which the Carriers lived? Consider Sarah's statement: "Perhaps it was true that I was like my mother, as everyone seemed to think so" (page 142).
4. Identify and discuss some of the factors that contributed to the witch hysteria in seventeenth-century New England.
5. Discuss Mercy Williams's role in the tragedy that befalls the Carrier family. What motivates Mercy?
6. Discuss the significance of Martha Carrier's big red leather-bound book. Why does she ask Sarah to "keep this one thing a secret, even among your brothers" (page 150)? And why does Martha make Sarah promise not to try to read the book until she comes of age (page 178)?

7. Why did Martha choose to take a stand of innocence, knowing that a refusal to confess meant death?
8. Why did Thomas, despite his size and capabilities, not seek to persuade or deter Martha from her course of action?
9. Discuss the assault on Sarah in the burying ground near the meetinghouse (pages 121–125). To what extent does the incident seem a typical case of adolescent bullying? Have you, or has anyone you know, had a similar experience? Put yourself in Sarah's shoes; how would you have responded to the girls' taunting?
10. Why do you think the magistrates, and the wider community of Salem, so easily believed in and relied on "spectral evidence"?
11. Has reading *The Heretic's Daughter* in any way changed your opinion of the men and women who were hanged as witches in seventeenth-century New England?
12. Do you believe in witchcraft? Have you ever met anyone who claimed to be, or whom you perceived as, a witch?
13. If you have read or seen Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible*, discuss the ways that both that play and *The Heretic's Daughter* draw from the historical record to tell fresh and relevant stories. In what ways are the two works similar? How are they different?
14. Are you aware of any social intolerance in the community in which you live? If so, discuss the nature of that intolerance (for example, religious, ethnic, xenophobic). Do you think this intolerance could ever rise to the toxic level of the Salem witch hunts? Why or why not?
15. Are there any notable or notorious ancestors in your family tree? If so, do you remember your relatives telling stories about them when you were young? If you've researched your ancestry, discuss what you've learned about your family and yourself.

Questions and topics for discussion

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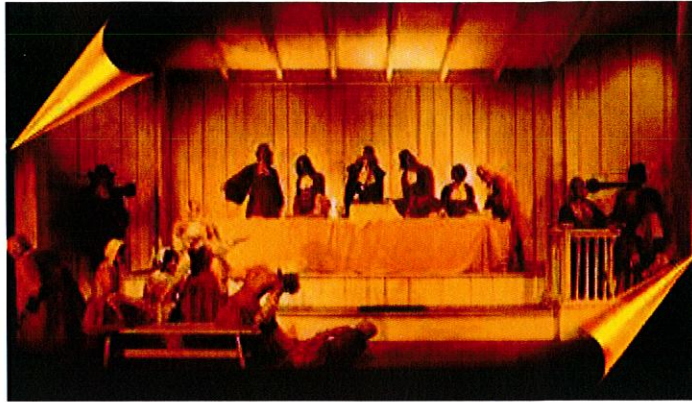
The Salem Witch Trials of 1692

In January of 1692, the daughter and niece of Reverend Samuel Parris of Salem Village became ill. When they failed to improve, the village doctor, William Griggs, was called in. His diagnosis of bewitchment put into motion the forces that would ultimately result in the death by hanging of nineteen men and women. In addition, one man was crushed to death; seven others died in prison, and the lives of many were irrevocably changed.



Dr. William Griggs examines Betty Parris and declares her possessed by the Devil.

To understand the events of the Salem witch trials, it is necessary to examine the times in which accusations of witchcraft occurred. There were the ordinary stresses of 17th-century life in Massachusetts Bay Colony. A strong belief in the devil, factions among Salem Village fanatics and rivalry with nearby Salem Town, a recent small pox epidemic and the threat of attack by warring tribes created a fertile ground for fear and suspicion. Soon prisons were filled with more than 150 men and women from towns surrounding Salem. Their names had been "cried out" by tormented young girls as the cause of their pain. All would await trial for a crime punishable by death in 17th-century New England, the practice of witchcraft.



Trial of Rebecca Nurse

In June of 1692, the special Court of Oyer (to hear) and Terminer (to decide) sat in Salem to hear the cases of witchcraft. Presided over by Chief Justice William Stoughton, the court was made up of magistrates and jurors. The first to be tried was Bridget Bishop of Salem who was found guilty and was hanged on June 10. Thirteen women and five men from all stations of life followed her to the gallows on three successive hanging days before the court was disbanded by Governor William Phipps in October of that year. The Superior Court of Judicature, formed to replace the "witchcraft" court, did not allow spectral evidence. This belief in the power of the accused to use their invisible shapes or spectres to torture their victims had sealed the fates of those tried by the Court of Oyer and Terminer. The new court released those awaiting trial and pardoned those awaiting execution. In effect, the Salem witch trials were over.

As years passed, apologies were offered, and restitution was made to the victims' families. Historians and sociologists have examined this most complex episode in our history so that we may understand the issues of that time and apply our understanding to our own society. The parallels between the Salem witch trials and more modern examples of "witch hunting" like the McCarthy hearings of the 1950's, are remarkable.

Director of Education, Alison D'Amario
faq@salemwitchmuseum.com

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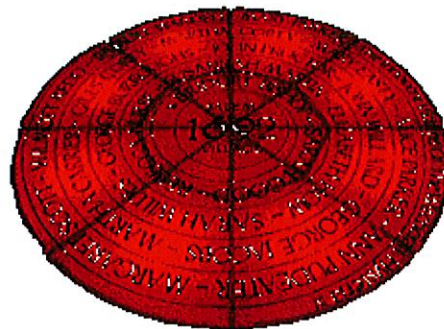
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FAQ's About the Salem Witch Trials



1. How was the practice of witchcraft viewed in 17th century New England?

Under British law, the basis for Massachusetts Bay Colony legal structure in the 17th century, those who were accused of consorting with the devil were considered felons, having committed a crime against their government. The punishment for such a crime was hanging.

2. What was the difference between the "afflicted" and the "accused"?

The "afflicted" were those supposedly "possessed" and "tormented"; it was they who accused or "cried out" the names of those who were supposedly possessing them.

3. What caused the girls' behavior?

This is a complex question. There are many theories to explain the "fits" of the young girls who accused so many of practicing witchcraft. Among the theories are adolescent hysteria and ergot poisoning; however, there is no definite answer.

4. What role did Tituba play in the Salem witch trials?

Tituba, an Arawak or Carib Indian from Barbados, was Reverend Samuel Parris' slave. Her documented role in the witch trials includes arrest and confession of witchcraft on March 1, 1692. Her influence on the afflicted girls' behavior is unclear.



Tituba telling Salem Village children
mysterious tales of the Devil.

5. Were only women accused of practicing witchcraft?

Actually, men were accused as well. Five men were convicted and hanged, and one man, Giles Corey, was pressed to death for refusing to cooperate with the court.

6. Who was executed during the Salem witch trials?

With the exception of Giles Corey, who was pressed to death, the following were hanged:

Bridget Bishop	Alice Parker
George Burroughs	Mary Parker
Martha Carrier	John Proctor
Martha Corey	Ann Pudeator
Mary Easty	Wilmott Redd
Sarah Good	Margaret Scott
Elizabeth Howe	Samuel Wardwell
George Jacobs, Sr.	Sarah Wildes
Susannah Martin	John Willard
Rebecca Nurse	



The Hanging of George Burroughs

7. Where are the victims buried?

This question remains unanswered. Because of the nature of their alleged crime, victims were not allowed to be buried in consecrated ground. Tradition has it that families came to Gallows Hill to claim their relatives and buried their bodies privately. A memorial honoring the victims of the witch trials was built in Salem in 1992.

8. How long did the witch trials era last?

The witch trials era lasted less than a year. The first arrests were made on March 1, 1692 and the final hanging day was September 22, 1692. The Court of Oyer and Terminer was dissolved in October of 1692.

9. What was the aftermath of the trials?

Jurors and magistrates apologized; restitution was made to the victims' families and a Day of Fasting and Remembrance was instituted. Little is known of the lives of the afflicted girls. Tituba is believed to have been sold and taken out of the Salem Village area. The 300th anniversary of the trials served as an opportunity to bring a sense of reconciliation and an appreciation of the lessons of that time.

10. What are contemporary perceptions of witchcraft?

It is widely understood that witchcraft is a pantheistic religion that includes reverence for nature, belief in the rights of others and pride in one's own spirituality. Practitioners of witchcraft focus on the good and positive in life and in the spirit and entirely reject any connection with the devil. Their beliefs go back to ancient times, long before the advent of Christianity; therefore no ties exist between them and the Christian embodiment of evil. Witchcraft has been confused in the popular mind with pointy black hats, green faces and broomsticks. This is a misrepresentation that witches are anxious to dispel.

11. Where do I find information about my ancestors?

New England Historical Genealogical Society. An excellent research resource.

12. Where can I find more information about the Salem witch trials?

The Salem Witch Trials and **The Salem Witch Trials Facts** web sites are good sources of information on the Salem trials.

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