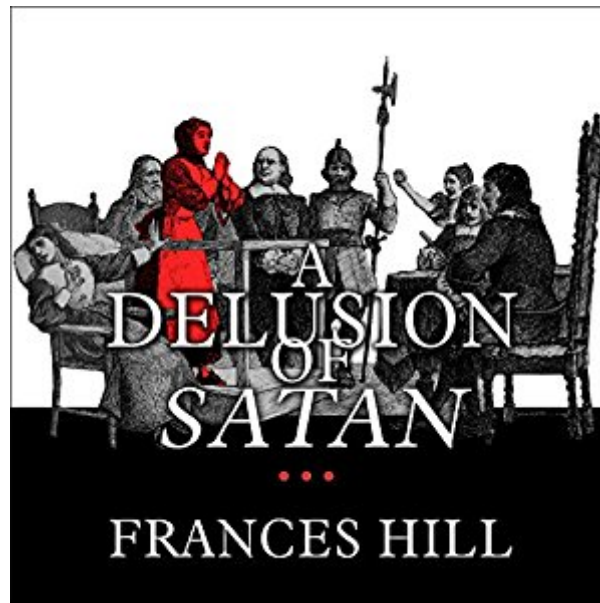


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A Delusion Of Satan: The Full Story Of The Salem Witch Trials



Synopsis

During the bleak winter of 1692 in the rigid Puritan community of Salem Village, Massachusetts, a group of young girls began experiencing violent fits, allegedly tormented by Satan and the witches who worshipped him. From the girls' initial denouncing of an Indian slave, the accusations soon multiplied. In less than two years, 19 men and women were hanged, one was pressed to death, and over a100 others were imprisoned and impoverished. This evenhanded and now-classic history illuminates the horrifying episode with visceral clarity, from the opportunistic Putnam clan, who fanned the crisis to satisfy personal vendettas and greed, to four-year-old "witch" Dorcas Good, who was chained to a dank prison wall in darkness till she went mad. By placing the distant period of the Salem witch trials in the larger context of more contemporary eruptions of mass hysteria and intolerance, the author has created a work as thought-provoking as it is emotionally powerful.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Events leading up to the Salem witch trials began innocently enough to modern eyes. A few girls crack an egg white into a glass to learn one of the girl's future husband's occupation. Unfortunately it occurred in 17th Puritan New England, and innocence was defined a little differently back then. By the way, after settling on the bottom of the glass the egg white assumed the shape of a coffin. Soon after the girls' experiment with clairvoyance all hell broke loose. Hundreds were imprisoned. Four prisoners died in jail. Nineteen were hanged as witches and one was pressed to death. In *A DELUSION OF SATAN* Frances Hill details the horrifying madness. Hill is convincing when describing the religious, social and psychological forces at work. She is a little less so when

discussing later day witch hunts. Hill fashions the Salem experience as the first wave. Joe McCarthy represents the second wave. The third wave occurred in the 1990s when vast numbers of children falsely accused adults of abuse after their memories were `recovered'. The fourth wave, she warns, may come about after the events of 9/11 and how America responds to a perceived, invisible threat. For the most part Hill sticks to Salem and drops mention of succeeding waves after the preface, and this reader was grateful for it. Although well written and clearly presented, it's enough of an uphill climb sorting out the all the players without having to attend to modern controversies. The Salem witch hunts occurred in a society that presented a vivid image of hell and brimstone to transgressors and offered precious little avenues of self expression or tender emotions. As Hill has it, it was an environment ripe for clinical hysteria.

Having been to Salem, Mass. several times, and visited the historical sites and museums there, I felt that I had a good knowledge of the witch hysteria of 1692. After reading *A Delusion of Satan*, however, I have found that my knowledge was basic at best. In *A Delusion of Satan*, Frances Hill provides a rich retelling of the events that draws from court documents, eyewitness accounts, and other primary sources. Also, Hill places the trials into their historical contexts; explaining the Puritan experiences leading up to the trials and the dangerous situation in which the colonists lived. This context also serves to help Hill hypothesize about what drove the original accusers into a frenzy. Hill's arguments about psychological oppression and fear being the impetus for the hysteria are well developed and convincing. Astutely, Hill frequently points out that these are only theories. No one can ever know for certain what afflicted the girls. Equally convincing evidence is presented that suggests that treachery among the community may have fanned the flames of the witch hunt and helped guide the course of events. *A Delusion of Satan* introduced me not only to details I had never read about before, but also to the personalities of those involved. Hill gleans this information mostly from court documents, written statements, and testimonies. The condemned, as well as the other key players, become vividly human and relatable. While no modern writer or historian can declare to know the "truth" about every aspect of this frightening chapter in American history, *A Delusion of Satan* certainly serves as a useful, chilling, and entertaining witch-trial history. Readers (and some other reviewers) of this book should keep in mind that Hill's arguments and opinions are of course merely that.

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