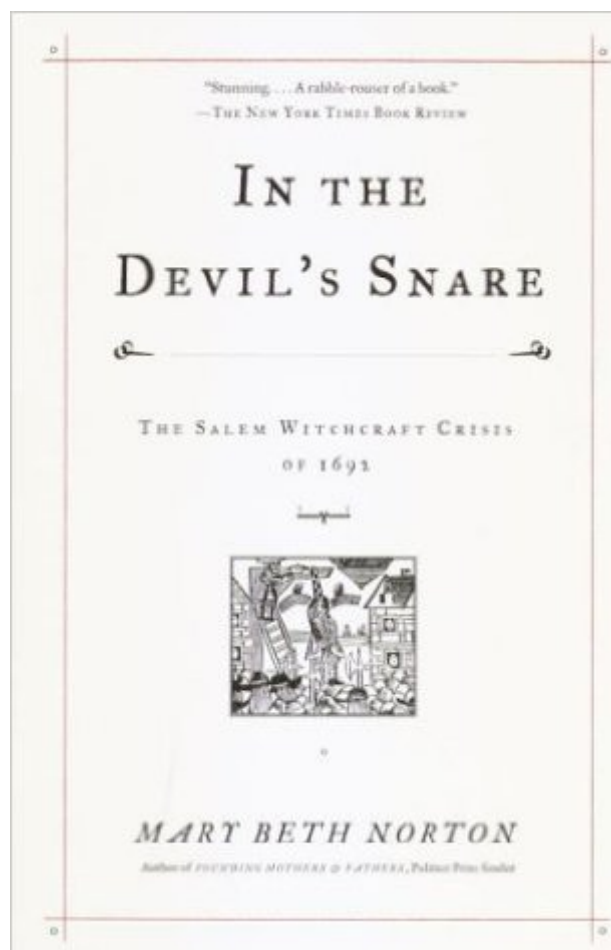


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In The Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis Of 1692



Synopsis

Award-winning historian Mary Beth Norton reexamines the Salem witch trials in this startlingly original, meticulously researched, and utterly riveting study. In 1692 the people of Massachusetts were living in fear, and not solely of satanic afflictions. Horrifyingly violent Indian attacks had all but emptied the northern frontier of settlers, and many traumatized refugeesâincluding the main accusers of witchesâhad fled to communities like Salem. Meanwhile the colonyâs leaders, defensive about their own failure to protect the frontier, pondered how Godâs people could be suffering at the hands of savages. Struck by the similarities between what the refugees had witnessed and what the witchcraft âvictimsâdescribed, many were quick to see a vast conspiracy of the Devil (in league with the French and the Indians) threatening New England on all sides. By providing this essential context to the famous events, and by casting her net well beyond the borders of Salem itself, Norton sheds new light on one of the most perplexing and fascinating periods in our history.

Book Information

Paperback: 448 pages

Publisher: Vintage; Reprint edition (October 14, 2003)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0375706909

ISBN-13: 978-0375706905

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.9 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (49 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #116,230 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #176 in [Books > History > Americas > United States > Colonial Period](#) #194 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > New Age & Spirituality > Wicca, Witchcraft & Paganism > Witchcraft](#) #436 in [Books > History > World > Women in History](#)

Customer Reviews

Every historian dealing with the Salem witchcraft episode has attempted to explain "why Salem?" in terms of their own times. Reasons why have ranged from sheer fakery to mass hysteria to land greed or medical causes. Noted historian Mary Beth Norton has thoroughly combed through the surviving original records to arrive at a new and convincing explanation of the infamous 1692 witch crisis: the very real fear of Indian attacks on settlements in Massachusetts and Maine. Norton

explores the news and letters of the times before and during 1692 to discover that Essex County MA residents were primarily concerned with the hit and run attacks on homes and settlements by Native Americans (some with French support). She bases her thesis on what she has found in original documents, rather than use the records to support her thesis. Puritans and others had very real reasons to be obsessed with the Devil in Massachusetts as they considered Native Americans Satan's agents.... Norton's narrative is most absorbing in relating the cause and effect of Native American attacks on colonial settlements. Two factors in Norton's work are most striking: 1) Just about everyone involved in the Salem witch episode had or knew of someone who had suffered losses in the eras now called King Philip's and King William's Wars, and 2) Nearly everyone involved was related to everyone else in some degree. Norton rights many historical fallacies concerning the Salem witch episode (which she accurately terms Essex County witchcraft), focusing on the Andover area which had the highest concentration of witchcraft accusations and confessions, as well as Salem Town and Salem Village. Norton brings to light some "lost" information on accusers and accused as well, however noting that many documents may be forever lost due to deliberate destruction by either the originators and/or decedents of both accused and accusers, all wanting to preserve their families good names. This fascinating and informationally dense book kept me up late two nights running to finish it. Norton also provides nearly 100 pages of notes and source materials, mostly of interest to serious amateur and professional historians, but full of interesting facts and further explanations. The only real flaw in this best book I've encountered of the 1692 Witch Crisis (and I've read all of them, I believe) is that Norton uses the "they must have thought such and such" language of many of today's historians, rather than write "may" or "might", instead of "must" or "should". Norton does back up these "must" conclusions with evidence, however the reader may silently disagree upon rare occasion. Altogether, this is a must-have book for those interested in "Salem 1692."

It is hard to imagine that Prof. Norton's narrative and analysis of the Salem witch crisis will be surpassed anytime soon. This book re-examines an episode in American colonial history that many other historians have tried to tackle. What makes Norton's book special is the care with which she has combed through the primary sources and the skill with which she sifts the data in arriving at what is, for my money, the best explanation of the Massachusetts tragedy. As Norton points out, the Salem witchcraft episode involved many more people, and was much more intense, than any other such episode in America or England. Her central explanation for Salem's "uniqueness" is that, in Massachusetts in 1692, there was a fatal concurrence of New Englanders' belief in witchery and the

supernatural, renewed war against northern New England settlements by the French and the Wabanaki Indians, and a series of military disasters for Massachusetts (including the wiping out of several villages). Although, as Norton readily acknowledges, this theory was advanced by other historians in scholarly articles in the 1980s, no one had previously attempted to flesh out the theory fully and examine the entire, sad series of events in light of it. Not only does Norton do a fantastic job as a scholar, but she also is (contrary to what some reviewers have said) quite a good writer. I only wish all scholarly works were written with Norton's careful craftsmanship and scorn for pseudo-intellectual gobbledygook. The book also includes excellent and helpful maps, appendixes, and index. It should be noted as well that Norton is amazingly generous in her acknowledgements (in her notes and elsewhere) to all the researchers and even graduate students who gave her ideas and data. She sets a fine example for other historians. I wouldn't think that this book would be beyond the capacity of anyone with a college education. Some of the other reviews, unfortunately, show that my estimate of the reading public may be too high. I suppose that, if you just want to be titillated and not have to think too hard, there are other books you should buy. But, if you really want to understand an important and notorious series of events in American history, then this is the book to read.

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