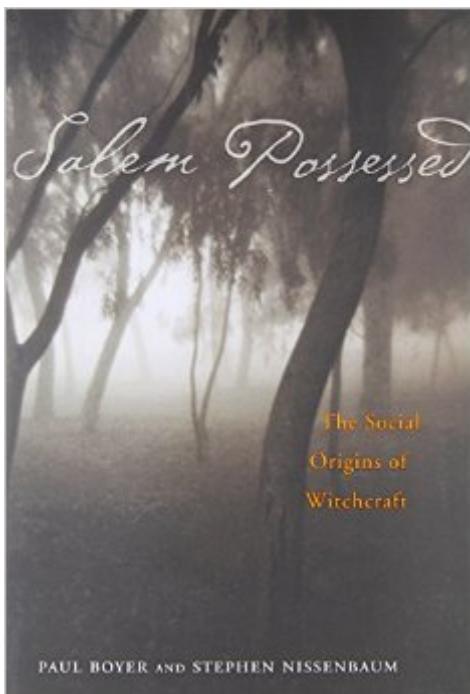


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Salem Possessed: The Social Origins Of Witchcraft



Synopsis

The stark immediacy of what happened in 1692 has obscured the complex web of human passion which had been growing for more than a generation before building toward the climactic witch trials. Salem Possessed explores the lives of the men and women who helped spin that web and who in the end found themselves entangled in it.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

When I was a history grad student in the mid-1980s, Salem Possessed was widely viewed as a masterpiece of the "new" social history, i.e., the history of the lives of everyday people, as opposed to major political events and cultural high points. In it, scholars Boyer and Nissenbaum take the then-standard Salem witchcraft narrative and subject it to reinterpretation on the basis of patterns and trends they see in the social history of Salem and Salem Village (now Danvers). Essentially, they argue that the witchcraft accusations and prosecutions were an unconscious (or perhaps conscious) means by which the poorer and more agrarian segment of the Salem Village population got back at the wealthier and more worldly types. As social history of Salem and Danvers in the 17th century, much of the book is fascinating and insightful. However, as an explanation of the witchcraft crisis, the book is, in my opinion, implausible. Too often, the authors seem to be reading into the data, finding evidence of discord where little or none exists. As one example, they interpret the bare negotiating positions of Salem Village and Samuel Parris regarding the hiring of Parris as minister to

evidence aggressive overreaching on Parris's part, without any comparison to the agreements typically reached by other towns and ministers. More importantly, it's simply very hard to believe that, based on the types of disagreements the authors claim to have existed, people would hate their neighbors enough to throw about accusations of capital crimes on a vast scale. Salem Possessed stands today as another in a long line of unsatisfying attempts to make sense of the witchcraft crisis.

Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum's Salem Possessed - The Social Origins of Witchcraft has long been recognized as one of several standard texts for university level classes on the subject. The authors view Salem as a specific and perhaps hyperbolic extension of the world-wide socio-economic tensions occasioned by the rise of Mercantile Capitalism (209). Specifically, they postulate that the growth of political-religious factionalism within Salem Village was due primarily to causes beyond local control; and that, when combined with the inopportune convergence of certain chance factors (such as long lasting intra-family feuds and the debate over the church) and personalities (such as Parris, Putnam and Porter), resulted in the collective abreaction of social tensions we now know as the Salem Witchcraft Episode (178, 191). Salem Possessed is a logical, extremely readable, and seemingly well researched book. However, a closer examination of both the focus and methodology may be in order. It will be readily admitted that a definition of the term "social history" remains ambiguous. There are, however, certain basic expectations a historian expects to have fulfilled by any work labeled so, among them: explanations concerning the broad socio-political background leading to a specific event; how the effects of this background narrow in focus and relate to the local event; how the event itself impacts various effected segments of society; and how these segments themselves view and/or react to the event. The specific focus chosen by Boyer and Nissenbaum fail to fulfill the great majority of these expectation.

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