

The Salem Witch Trials

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Entertainment

Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

You've heard the saying, "those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it." Well, today's episode is a cautionary tale. The Salem witch trials are scarier in my opinion than any any other subject we've covered, not because of any paranormal witchcraft devil nonsense, but because there's no better example of the dangers of fanaticism and of how stupid and self righteous humans can be when we feel threatened or afraid. It's also a story of the dangers of blind conformity, and our tendency to band together try to destroy anything that seems different or unknown or unexplained. Do you think I could cram in more life lessons? So many teachable moments. This one is the podcast equivalent of the shooting star with the rainbow.

So, long before the Puritans arrived in Salem there was already a shameful tradition of witch trials in European history. Between 1580 and 1630 some 50,000 people were hung or burned at the stake in Europe as witches. And by

people I mean women, there have been a few men convicted of witchcraft, but witchery is primarily a female-dominated field. It's not a diverse and inclusive profession. I feel like there's probably a pay gap. You don't want to be a Warlock, there's gender discrimination you don't get a broom, or a cat. Just warts. But on the plus side, you rarely get burned at the stake, so that seems good. Notable witch trials include the largest massacre of so-called "witches" in history, the German trier trials of the late 1500s, and your beloved Scotland in particular is notorious for its witch trials; the north Berwick witch trials occurred almost exactly 100 years before the Salem incident. That one is interesting. After surviving a storm at sea, King James VI had become convinced that witches were trying to take his life. Murder by ocean. The trials followed a familiar pattern: accusation, denial, horrific torture including extraction of fingernails and foot crushing etc, followed by confession and execution. A predictable progression of events. Listen to our torture episode if you want to know just how pointless and awful torture can be. If for some reason you didn't know... if you were under the impression that torture was pretty chill. Our sadist demographic. In total some 4000 "witches" would be put to death in the approximately 140 years between 1560 and the early 1700s in Scotland. Your people. What do you have to say for yourself? You should be ashamed.

By the end of the 1600s the European witch panic was dwindling, but the American colonies weren't ready to throw in the towel. Europe might have been content to surrender to the devil, but the puritans weren't having it. Suck it, Satan. In the American colonies, like in much of Europe, Witchcraft was a capital crime. That's so insane. Imagine passing laws against sorcery. This is a no levitation zone. So there had already been executions and trials carried out in other American colonies as early as 1647, most notably the Connecticut witch trials, which resulted in 11 deaths. Let's call them what they were, states sponsored murders. Charges included alleged infractions like, "calling to the devil by the swamp." literally shouting at the devil. but in Salem, there were supposed to be checks and balances in place to protect against false accusations. As a deterrent to frivolous accusations, the accuser would have to offer up a bond—a substantial sum of money—which would be forfeit if the accusations were determined to be unfounded. In the case of the Salem trials, no bonds were ever offered. And the judicial system was hardly impartial. Unlike America's current legal system, there was no presumption of innocence. No one had the right to free and fair representation, or a jury of their peers. And there was no age limit, the youngest witch to be accused and interrogated in Salem would be four years old. Gender bias, as we've

mentioned, was also an issue. Fully 78% of the convicted witches were women. We've covered this in a few different episodes, but Christianity considers women to be inherently sinful, and more susceptible to the wiles of the devil. Think of Eve in the garden of Eden being duped by the Satan snake, and bringing death and shame and suffering to all of humanity. Eve you ignorant slut. The justice system in colonial America looked quite a bit different than it does today. The Judges in the witch trials functioned like prosecutors, cross examining witnesses and challenging them to prove their innocence. But it's tough to prove your innocence when the evidence against you is intangible and based on nothing more than faith and hysteria. It's hard to defend yourself when the evidence against you consists of ghosts. We'll talk about spectral evidence, this is just bonkers. If you've seen the crucible, Arthur Miller's famous play which is very loosely based on the events of Salem in 1692, the play was intended to be a condemnation of the red scare in 1950s America, the McCarthy hearings that basically functioned like witch trials, weeding out supposed communists. I enjoyed the play, the movie is a little meh, although Winona Ryder is trying her best. The star of the movie is definitely Daniel Day-Lewis's teeth, which despite all of the depictions of public executions in the film may still be the most horrific aspect. The filmmakers really went for authenticity. He's very method, I'm

assuming he didn't brush for the months of filming. The one series of incidents that Arthur Miller definitely did not exaggerate or distort and may in fact have downplayed were the scenes of young girls writhing in the courtroom in fake agony and declaring that they were being attacked by the spirit of the defendant, these girls were literally standing 15 feet from the person being interrogated and claiming that the ghostly spirit of the accused was attacking them. And you would have judges yelling at the defendant to rein in their spirit, " why are you harming these young women, call off your demon spirit!" it was mind boggling, this stuff really happened. And it's hard to imagine...unless you've watched a born-again revivalist church service, or Pentecostals, people writhing on the ground and speaking in tongues and shouting hallelujah as they claim to heal the sick. If you think this stuff is super crazy you aren't familiar with modern fundamentalist religions. And Christian cults. QAnon is based around the idea that Democrats are Satanists who murder babies, and if it weren't for police and a robust judicial system January 6 would've involved actual executions. They had set up gallows outside the capital. So we can scoff at the craziness of what happened in 1692 but let's not pretend that nothing like it could happen again.

The Salem area of northern Massachusetts in the late 1600s was a paranoid theocracy, ruled by the

church, and the roughly 500 inhabitants were constantly terrified of attacks by Native Americans, pagans, and the devil. There was no separation between church and state, the laws of the Bible were the laws of the land, and of course the laws of the Bible were interpreted by men. In this case men who were such intense religious zealots that England in the 1600s had been far too lenient for them. These were the Puritans, and you could argue that they did have some valid complaints. The Catholic Church had become increasingly corrupt over the years.

You probably remember learning about indulgences in middle school. This is the most commonly cited and egregious sign of church corruption: if you had sinned but didn't want to go through the trouble of repenting and saying all of those hail Marys or whatever, you could simply purchase an indulgence, basically pay to have your sins wiped clean. It was a pretty sweet time to be a rich guy, it was like a get out of sin free card. Well, not free. It was actually the exact opposite of free.

Indulgences actually began with the crusades; in order to incentivize people to join the crusades, the church advertised that serving as a crusader would be a way of cleansing your soul, it would be like working off your debt to God. And then the whole system snowballed from there.

So anyway, this was a scary time to be alive. There were no electric lights,

nights were dark and dangerous, Salemites—is that a word? The inhabitants of Salem village grew up with a genuine belief in witches and warlocks and believed that Satan was always attempting to recruit them. They believed that they were a chosen people, waging war against the corruption of the church and the pagans of the world, constantly under attack by physical and spiritual forces. According to historian Richard Trask, “They looked at themselves as being the elect of God... and that’s why they believed the devil was coming to Salem Village...to bring god’s kingdom on earth down.” I mentioned paranoia and I can’t really stress this enough: what happened was completely irrational, and also completely predictable. As mentioned, when people are scared they don’t act rationally, whether it’s the 1600s or 2022.

The witchcraft panic of the 1600s began in 1692 in Salem Village. (Not to be confused with Salem town, which was the larger community of which Salem village was basically a suburb.) It all started with two young girls, Abigail Williams and Elizabeth “Betty” Parris. Betty was nine years old, and Abigail Williams, who was depicted as a horny 17-year-old villain in the crucible, was actually 11. Incidentally, her love interest in the crucible, John Proctor, who we’ll get to, portrayed by a young and strapping Daniel day Lewis, would’ve been 59 years old. It’s the Pocahontas syndrome, right, the

situation would be a lot more disturbing if they were portrayed accurately. But the situation didn't exist, there is no evidence that John proctor was biking a preteen. The girls weren't sisters but they lived in the same household with Betty's father, the minister of Salem Village, Samuel Parris. Abigail was an orphan, she was Betty's cousin and Samuel's niece. In February 1692 the two girls began experiencing mysterious fits, unexplained attacks of some type of ailment that caused them to writhe on the floor, contorting and yelling and hurling items around the room... basically throwing tantrums. I'm wondering if this could have all been solved with a spanking. I'm kidding, I'm not necessarily in favor of corporal punishment, but if it would have saved like 19 lives...get a belt.

So Betty's father, the head of the household, Samuel Parris, was at a loss as to what to do. He called in a doctor named William Griggs, but no physical ailment was detected. Confounded, on February 25 he left the girls at home under the care of a neighbor, Mary Sibley, and attended a church service—called a Thursday lecture—to seek advisement from reverend John hale and others on the situation. While he was gone, the neighbor with whom he left the children, Mary Sibley, offered a possible solution: the baking of a "witches cake." what do you know about witches cakes? Witches cake was a magical solution for healing

someone afflicted by witchcraft. What you would do is you would create a cake batter and add the urine of the afflicted person to the flour, and then you would feed the cake to the family dog. It sounds like I'm making this up but I'm not. No one knows exactly why they fed it to the dog but most sources will tell you that dogs have long been considered "familiars" to witches and devils. the cake might have been intended to transfer the affliction to the dog, or cause witches to target the dog instead of the girls. So The Parris family had two slaves— Samuel Parris had been born in England but briefly lived in Barbados where he had acquired a slave named John Indian and his wife, a woman with only one name, Tituba. So Tituba and John Indian dutifully collected the urine and baked the cake.

Unfortunately, after the dog ate the cake, the girls' symptoms only worsened. Strange that feeding a dog a piss-cake didn't solve the problem. When Samuel and his wife returned the following day, they noticed that the girls were worse than before, The girls were now claiming that they were experiencing the sensation of being slapped and bitten by some spectral force. When asked to identify the specter, they pointed the finger at the household slave, Tituba. Under questioning, tituba denied any involvement, but did explain to Samuel what had happened with the neighbor while he was gone. When Samuel learned of the witch cake, he was enraged, not because his daughter

and niece had been forced to piss into a cake, but rather because now even more witchcraft was afoot. They had obviously roused the ire of the devil with their magical shenanigans. On February 27, the day after the witch cake debacle, 17-year-old Elizabeth Hubbard, the niece of William Griggs (the doctor who had examined the girls), claimed that she was followed home by a wolf, and somehow suspected that the wolf was the familiar of two witches: Sarah Goode, and Sarah Osborne. Meanwhile the word of the afflictions and accusations was spreading, and a friend of the girls, 12-year-old Ann Putnam Jr. also began experiencing fits. Witchcraft was spreading like COVID. warrants were drafted for the arrest of the three women who had been accused.

So let's talk about the first three women to be interrogated. So far we have Tituba, Sarah Goode, and Sarah Osborne. As we'll see, these were three outsiders, you might call them undesirables. Sarah Good in particular was an easy target, because she was universally reviled. Sarah had been born wealthy but her father died when she was young and she had a falling out with her siblings and ended up destitute with two children and an unemployed husband, not to mention some pretty extreme undiagnosed mental problems. She would often go door-to-door begging for food and shelter, it's pretty sad. It also seems like whatever mental issues she was dealing with made her extremely

unpalatable, frankly she was mean, quick with an insult and she had a habit of muttering to herself if turned away, which many people interpret as her attempts at putting a hex or curse on those who refused to help. The girls couldn't have picked a better target. It almost feels as if the community was looking for an excuse to rid themselves of Sarah good. If you've seen the crucible or if you're familiar with this time period, you'll know that for blue-collar folk, "goodman" and "goodwife" were common honorifics, equivalent to Mr. and Mrs. today. Good wife was usually shortened to Goody, and then the last name. So a woman named Linda Smith would be known as Goody Smith. So yes, in this case if there's anything to lighten the desperate tragic sadness of this scene, it's imagining how many times in court, during these incredibly tense hearings, they referred to Sarah Good as goody good.

Now, Sarah Osborne. She was a widow whose wealthy husband, related to the powerful Putnam clan, had left a comfortable inheritance to his children, but instead of allowing the property to go to the intended heirs, Sarah married a younger man, an indentured servant named Alexander Osborne and kept the inheritance for herself and her newly freed husband. This did not sit well with the Putnam family, and Sarah's unique love life did not endear her to the locals. Notice that one of her accusers was named Ann Putnam Jr.; I'm sure this was entirely a coincidence. Additionally

she had taken ill and had been confined to her bed, and as a result hadn't attended church in approximately three years. During her interrogation she would be asked, "have you made no contract with the devil"? Her answer did not help her predicament. "I am more likely to be bewitched than to be one myself." Osborne explained how The devil had once come to her in a dream and threatened her, demanding that she stay away from church. Trying to cast herself as a victim, she clearly miscalculated. A magistrate retorted, "Why do you yield thus far to the Devil, then?" oops. This would be a pattern: desperate to deflect blame, The accused would begin improvising with explanations that either pointed the finger at other victims and made the situation worse, or simply ensnared them in a web of ridiculous lies. Speaking of which, Let's talk about Tituba. In some ways she can be cast as one of the villain of the tale, because it's arguable that if she hadn't done what she did, the situation may not have spiraled into absolute madness. It's also easy to understand her rationale from a psychological perspective. Tituba is kind of a mystery, she is usually described as an Indian slave, indicating she was Native American or appeared Native American. What is certainly true is that she was in an extremely vulnerable position, at the mercy of the people around her, and there's no doubt she understood how much danger she was in. She had very possibly been

originally enslaved in South America, somewhere in the vicinity of Venezuela, and spirited away to Barbados, and then from Barbados taken to the coast of North America. So she had never known stability or freedom. She was a brown woman surrounded by the most uptight of white people, she had no reason to trust and certainly wasn't trusted, she knew she wasn't going to be given the benefit of the doubt. The night before the interrogation, after the witches cake incident, Samuel Parris had beaten her. So this is all context to try to explain why Tituba did what she did, but we'll never know for sure. Because without context it's pretty hard to justify, and even with context it seems at the very least...unfortunate. Tituba went all in and not only admitted to witchcraft, she claimed that Satan had convinced her to sign his Devil's book, I guess it's like a satanic yearbook—you get a headshot in there, you get nominated most likely to burn for eternity—but not only that, she also joined the scapegoat pile-on by pointing the finger of blame at Sarah good and Sarah Osborne, and then she basically said fuck it and threw a bunch of other randos under the bus just for the hell of it. She stated that there were four other women and one other man who were involved, though she claimed to not know their names. So at least she didn't directly implicate anyone else specifically, but she did clearly widen the net by indicating that there were a large number of people involved, many of whom had yet to be

unmasked. She also implicated a bunch of animals. Some random pigs and dogs, as well as a yellow bird owned by Sarah Good, which she must have known would seem credible because everyone knew that witches had familiars. Nothing more intimidating as an enforcer than a small yellow bird. This is my evil henchman, Tweety. and of course Tituba mentioned a wolf, which everyone knew had been the animal to bedevil Elizabeth Hubbard. Tituba apologized for her role in the bewitching, and begged forgiveness, and I think at this point it's important to note that she would be one of the only accused to survive, so whatever you want to say about her, her instinct for self-preservation worked. And if I were her, I sure as hell can't pretend I do anything differently. I don't owe these people anything, I'm saving my own skin.

The girls played along as Tituba confessed, they really flexed their acting chops. When Tituba described one particular apparition that had come to her, a woman with a black hood, the girls began screaming and writhing, putting on the full middle school play version of being filled with the Holy Spirit. Rolling around in their seats, pretending that they were being tormented. The magistrates asked Tituba who was attacking these girls and of course she said that it was Sarah Good. As soon as she mentioned the name, the girls quieted, as if the attacker had fled after being called out.

So now we've got an improv performance going on, an unspoken back-and-forth between the accusers, playing off each other. It is if everyone understood the role that they were going to play in this debacle, with different motivations: The girls for attention and the thrill of the farce, and Tituba out of self preservation. Following Tituba's performance, The accusations snowballed in a predictable fashion. Neighbors started accusing neighbors, using the opportunity to punish their enemies and to settle old scores. Spectral assaults were occurring all over the county. From teenager Mary Daniel's testimony: "I was taken very ill again all over & felt a great pricking in ye soles of my feet, and after a while I saw apparently the shape of Margret Scott, who, as I was sitting in a chair by ye fire pulled me with ye chair, down backward to ye ground, and tormented and pinched me very much." I love that these apparitions were tickling feet and pinching. The most adorable ghost attacks ever. What was the motivation here? We don't kink shame.

The rationale behind accusations became increasingly petty and trifling, as the community targeted anyone who had committed even the most insignificant perceived slight. Wealthy landowners Elizabeth Proctor and her husband John—main characters in the crucible—were known to have allowed Native Americans to drink in the tavern they owned, and as a result they were resented by certain members of the

community. Racial tolerance, considered a major character flaw by these people who claim to worship Jesus.

I guess the idea was that if the proctors consorted with heathens, it wasn't much of a stretch to accuse them of being sympathetic to the devil. Not only that, Elizabeth Proctor's grandmother had been tried as a witch. So it wasn't particularly shocking when Elizabeth Proctor was accused of witchcraft by her disgruntled maidservant, 18-year-old Mary Warren, who suddenly began experiencing fits, and when John Proctor voiced his skepticism, suddenly he was suspected of witchcraft as well. Proctor noted that Mary Warren's fits completely ceased when he had threatened to beat them out of her, seems like he wasn't a nice guy but also this supports my theory that a belt could've saved a lot of lives. Proctor wasn't the only head of a household to respond to these fits with threats of corporal punishment... and weirdly it always seemed to work. Girls who were indulged or encouraged in their dramatics escalated the charade, while those who were immediately told to cut it out responded by cutting it out.

Meanwhile the accusations started going fully off the rails; now the girls were targeting respected members of the village like a grandmother named Rebecca Nurse, who seemed like an unlikely witch, but she had begun

attending church in Salem town rather than Salem Village. Super Shady. The trials themselves quickly devolved into an absolute shitshow. When Tituba's husband John Indian claimed that Elizabeth Proctor had tried to get him to sign "the devil's book," John proctor leapt to his feet and threatened to beat the devil out of him. Understandable. I mean clearly this guy has an anger management issue, his solution to everything seems to be beating the crap out of people, but still. When Elizabeth Proctor finally took the stand, she admonished the girls, basically calling them melodramatic little hussies, and yeah. Fair. Of course the girls responded with their usual histrionics, writhing on the ground and now claiming that Elizabeth's husband John was spiritually attacking them. This was the spectral evidence that we've touched on a few times now. How do you defend yourself against claims that your invisible spirit is going Mortal Combat on someone? I guess I'd just be like, I'm not that good at multitasking. You really think I'm managing to have a full-on conversation here while judo-grappling with some 11-year-old across the room? But you can't prove your innocence, there's no way to combat these accusations without sinking to their level and playing the same acting game, and now everyone is rolling on the ground and accusing everyone else of ghost attacks. I mean there's no other way to do it, except to just be like, "I refuse to engage with

this nonsense" which is basically what a bunch of people did and got themselves hanged.

So John Proctor was dragged up to the front of the room and as a test he was challenged to say the lord's prayer. It is noted in the trial transcript that he said "hollowed be thy name" instead of "hallowed," a clear indication of witchcraft. Everyone knows that when you mispronounce a word, that's the devil yanking your tongue. Or spectrally sodomizing you. "Sodomized by the devil." Or maybe it was just hard to hear John Proctor over the writhing and screeching of all those little Hoochies. The girls went full WWE, rolling around and screaming and fighting the air, it was chaos.

Both Proctors were dragged away. John would eventually be executed on August 19th, but Elizabeth's execution would be placed on hold due to pregnancy, and she would be one of the lucky few of the convicted to survive the purge.

So although it was clear by early June of 1692 that hangings were imminent, the first casualty of the Salem witch trials was not an execution. Sarah Osborne died in jail after nine weeks of incarceration, aged 49. She had told the court she was in poor health and that she hadn't been able to attend church for years because of it, but they were pretty sure she had spent three years in bed not because of sickness but because of Satan. That's what the devil likes to do: incapacitate

his victims so that they are unable to commit evil acts. That's his diabolical plan...possess people and immediately put all of his minions in a vegetative state. That's productive. Anyway, it turned out she was actually just a sickly middle-aged woman, and she died. Oops. But that didn't change any hearts or minds, it was full steam ahead with the persecution plans.

Meanwhile, the local magistrates who had been running the proceedings, John Hathorne and Jon Corwin, (there are so many of the same names in this story, it's ridiculous. So many Sarahs and Johns and Bettys I can't even with this damn Village) anyway, they had requested help from the governor, and in May of 1692, mere days after the death of Sarah Osborne, the royally appointed Massachusetts governor Sir William Phips ordered the establishment of a Special Court of Oyer and Terminer to prosecute the cases of those in jail. Oyer and terminer translates as "to hear" and "to determine." William Phips appointed chief judge William Stoughton to be in charge of the trials. William appointed William, you see what I mean? This particular William—Stoughton—was an absolute piece of garbage. If you're looking for someone to blame, there are a lot of candidates, but I'd say this guy is the worst of the worst. King fuckhead. As I mentioned he acted as both prosecutor and judge, and he was an absolute nightmare in the courtroom. For instance, famously when Rebecca

nurse was initially found innocent of witchcraft, Stoughton ordered the jury back into deliberations until they returned with a guilty verdict. How does that even work? "We the jury find the accused not guilty." And he's like, "Do you though? Let's try this again. I want you to go back into that room and think about what you've done, and don't come out until you're willing to hang an innocent old lady." Stoughton was also a huge proponent of spectral evidence, even though Governor William Phipps and many of the other judges had specifically ordered him to disregard it.

William Stoughton wasted no time obtaining the first conviction— Bridget Bishop was put on trial and convicted within eight days, which actually was a marathon compared to later trials; many of those would often last barely two. The proceedings featured all of the standard craziness we've come to expect; the girls were in peak form, rolling around on the floor and claiming that they were being spirit-assaulted. From her trial:

"Bridget Bishop: I am innocent.

Hathorne: ... you seem to act witchcraft before us by the motion of your body which seems to have influence upon the afflicted.

Bishop: I know nothing of it. I am innocent to a witch. I know not what a witch is.

Hathorne: How do you know then that you are not a witch?

Bishop: I do not know what you say.

Hathorne: How can you know, you

are no witch, and yet not know what a witch is?

It's such a wonderful catch 22. If you seem like you know too much about witchcraft, you're clearly a witch. If you don't know anything about witchcraft, then how can you know you're not a witch? The only way to save yourself is to be like, "OK, I might be a little bit of a witch, that's my bad, but if you don't hang me I can give you some names of other witches who are way more witchy than I am." Maybe there's a reason that witch rhymes with snitch.

Bridget Bishop was of course found guilty of witchcraft, in no small part owing to the discovery of a third nipple on her body during examination, known as a witches teat. However, upon a second investigation, no third nipple was detected, but by that time it was too late. She's a duck! Seriously, this stuff wasn't very far from Monty Python and the holy Grail. it wasn't just nipples; birthmarks, moles, and scars could all be considered signs of witchcraft or marks of the devil. And of course we already saw John Proctor subjected to the prayer test, which was when the accused would be forced to recite passages from the Bible perfectly, and any deviation from the exact text was considered evidence of guilt. However, even when the accused recited the text perfectly, their biblical prowess would often be dismissed as a "trick of the devil," as happened with George Burroughs,

who recited the Lord's prayer impeccably right before his execution but was hanged regardless. Nice try, devil. Proving you can do the thing we challenged you to do to demonstrate you're not a witch, that's the oldest trick in the book. Very sneaky. Proving you're not a witch, exactly what a witch would do.

Other is-it-a-witch tests like the touch test and incantation tests relied on judging the reactions of the people who had been afflicted by witchcraft when interacting with their accusers. So in other words, the magistrate might tell the accused to touch the afflicted person, or to say out loud "I banish Satan from this body" or whatever, and if the victim immediately recovered, that was proof of guilt. So again you had 11-year-old girls determining the fate of grown adults.

Then there was the test of floating, known as the swimming test, this was an actual test that was used in many historical witch trials. The accused would be bound and tossed into the water, with a rope attached so that they could be hauled out if necessary. Witches had of course never accepted the sacrament of baptism, and as a result it was believed that water would reject their filthy unholy bodies, so a witch would float. The water was like, nope. Get that witchy ass out of me. But an innocent person would sink, so if you sank like a stone you were not a witch, and there was also a good chance that

they wouldn't pull you out in time and you'd be a dead not-witch. Bridget Bishop was found guilty and sentenced to be executed on Gallows Hill, with the hanging scheduled for just two days after the trial, even though the standard minimum time between judgment and execution was four days. Ignoring even the minimal rules protecting defendants was par for the course during this debacle. We have to briefly talk about maybe the most notorious incident of the trials, and we've mentioned it before on this podcast, the strange case of 81-year-old Giles Cory. He was by all accounts kind of a dick, he had been arrested previously for beating one of his servants to death, he was an ornery bastard. And stubborn to a fault, as we will see. His third wife, Martha, was arrested for witchcraft on March 19th. And to prove that this guy was a piece of crap, he initially supported the accusations. I think he was looking forward to wife number four, but he changed his tune when he himself was accused. "I saw the apparition of Giles Corey come and afflict me urging me to write in his book and so he continued most dreadfully to hurt me by times beating me and almost breaking my back till the day of his examination being the 19th April [1692] and then also during the time of his examination he did afflict and torture me most grievously and also several times since urging me vehemently to write in his book and I verily believe in my heart that Giles Corey is a dreadful wizard

for since he had been in prison he or his appearance has come and most grievously tormented me." I want to be accused of being a wizard.

True to form, Cory stubbornly refused to confess, even though it might have saved his life, and he was sentenced to be "pressed"...wood planks were laid on his prone body on which stones were stones were stacked, with more stones weight gradually added to the pile in order to prompt a confession or plea, but after two days Cory's only quote was "more weight." That is one tough geriatric sorcerer. I kind of believe he might have been a witch. That's crazy. 81, and getting crushed for two days and being like, bring it. In a case of famous last words, Giles Cory's final defiant statement is disputed, but it seems likely that it was either "Damn you. I curse you and Salem!" or once again, "More weight." I think it was probably more like gargle, wheeze. But who knows. The curse of Giles Cory lives on in legend, and speculation is that the reason for his defiance was that if he confessed or agreed to a plea, his property and belongings would be forfeit to the state, so by refusing to confess he preserved the inheritance for his sons-in-law. Possible. He was definitely a tough old bird.

Accusations soon began to spread outside of Salem village to neighboring towns, it was like a viral outbreak of stupidity. There were five more hangings in July, another five in August and eight in September.

Around this point respected ministers like Cotton Mather—who had initially supported the trials and bears no small blame for this travesty—even HE began to question the fairness of the trials and the use of spectral evidence, and under the pressure of increasing complaints, Governor William Phipps finally dissolved the courts of Oyer and Terminer on October 29. Might have also had something to do with his own wife being implicated in witchcraft. I can't say for sure, but it seems like a possible motive. Phipps replaced Oyer and Terminer with a Superior Court of Judicature, which wasn't having any of that WWE-style spectral evidence BS. Subsequently, only 3 more of the 56 defendants were convicted...so, better. Still not great. "Only 5% of the remaining innocent people were murdered, so...win?"

In the aftermath of the trials, the only one of the girls ever known to have publicly apologized for her role in the death of 19 people was Ann Putnam Jr, who said,
"I did it not out of any anger, malice, or ill will to any person, for I had no such thing against one of them; but what I did was ignorantly, being deluded by Satan.

And particularly, as I was a chief instrument of accusing Goodwife Nurse and her two sisters, I desire to lie in the dust, and to be humble for it, in that I was a cause, with others, of so sad a calamity to them and their

families; for which cause I desire to lie in the dust, and earnestly beg forgiveness of God, and from all those unto whom I have given just cause of sorrow and offense, whose relations were taken away or accused." Still blaming the devil, but better than nothing.

The Salem witch trials are fascinating for many reasons, but one thing that gets overlooked is the shift in power dynamics. In Puritan society women, and especially young women, had practically zero power. And yet here was a group of young women controlling the proceedings like puppet masters, exacting revenge on their perceived enemies, fashioning themselves into tyrants who could condemn people to death with a few words. Imagine the sense of power they must've felt; there's no excusing what happened, but it was an incredible moment in history when a group of young women essentially took a village hostage, and wreaked havoc. I don't believe in witchcraft, but those young women might be the closest analogy to real witches; like diabolical sorceresses they enchanted an entire village and sent 19 innocent people to their graves. It would take 250 more years for Massachusetts publicly acknowledge the travesty that was the Salem witch trials. In 1957 Massachusetts formally apologized for the events of 1692. Sorry!

This is kind of a tangent, but there's

nothing more dangerous than Fanaticism, and that usually starts with blind faith and inability to acknowledge shades of grey. I cringe every time I see a QAnon hashtag like "I believe the children" or even well-meaning but misguided jargon like "believe all women" etc. I know that there is good intention and sentiment behind these ideas, I have sympathy for anyone who is a victim, and the fact that there is a biased justice system that they have to contend with, but blind belief in anything is terrifying. The word "witchhunt" became a saying for a reason. Don't believe or disbelieve anything until you've gathered facts from reputable and trustworthy sources. I'm not saying that in a "do your own research and ignore experts" sense, I'm talking about being a discerning consumer of information.

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