



Witches: The Absolutely True Tale of Disaster in Salem

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Tackling the same twisted subject as Stacy Schiff's much-lauded book *The Witches: Salem, 1692*, this Sibert Honor book for young readers features unique scratchboard illustrations, chilling primary source material, and powerful narrative to tell the true tale.

In the little colonial town of Salem Village, Massachusetts, two girls began to twitch, mumble, and contort their bodies into strange shapes. The doctor tried every remedy, but nothing cured the young Puritans. He grimly announced the dire diagnosis: the girls were bewitched! And then the accusations began.

The riveting, true story of the victims, accused witches, crooked officials, and mass hysteria that turned a mysterious illness affecting two children into a witch hunt that took over a dozen people's lives and ruined hundreds more unfolds in chilling detail in this young adult book by award-winning author and illustrator Rosalyn Schanzer.

With a powerful narrative, chilling primary source accounts, a design evoking the period, and stylized black-and-white-and-red scratchboard illustrations of young girls having wild fits in the courtroom, witches flying overhead, and the Devil and his servants terrorizing the Puritans, this book will rivet young readers with novelistic power.

Taught in middle and high schools around the U.S., the 17th-century saga remains hauntingly resonant as people struggle even today with the urgent need to find someone to blame for their misfortunes.

In addition to the Sibert Honor, *Witches!* has been honored by the Society of Illustrators with their Original Art Award Gold Medal, has been named a Notable book by both the American Library Association and the National Council for the Social Studies, and was chosen one of *School Library Journal's* 100 Magnificent Children's Books and one of Chicago Public Library's Best of the Best Children's Books.

Witches: The Absolutely True Tale of Disaster in Salem Details

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Author : Rosalyn Schanzer

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From Reader Review Witches: The Absolutely True Tale of Disaster in Salem for online ebook

Luis says

Religion kills. And tortures innocent people. May it be in Salem - witches!! - or in Iraq - boom splashes of blood, or in Philippines - 333 years of slavery anyone? it does. It would be stupid of you to deny that.

Brittany Gaskins says

The images in the book were a little dark for a child to read and have these pictures in mind as they read. Some of the words seemed a little harder for certain age groups, but it is a good book to tie in with the history of the town of Salem. I remember reading a play about Salem Witch trials and it was more interesting and easier to follow that this was.

This was not one of my favorites but it did align well with the historic facts of Salem. It would be better with an older age group and as a class read to make sure they understood what they were reading.

I would use this in correlation to the history with Salem and we would read it aloud after students identified words they did not know so we could understand them and have them as a resource while reading. I would also be interested to do an opinion writing to see what they thought of the trials and how the people were treated.

Savannah W says

Witches: The Absolutely True Tale of Disaster in Salem, by Rosalyn Schanzer is a Non-Fiction book about witch accusations, that had occurred in the town of Salem, in the beginning of the year of 1692. (Publication year: 2011) I, not being a nonfiction fan, actually liked this book. To me it deserves at least three stars. I'm giving this book three stars because it wasn't boring like a nonfiction hater would presume. The main conflict in this book was that people were being accused of being witches. Two main accusers in this nonfiction tale are Betty, Mr. Parris's daughter, and his niece, Abigail. Betty and Abigail would twitch and talk in strange voices, and turn their bodies into weird shapes, like they were possessed. The book tells of how the girls acted in the beginning, then how the accusations spread like wild fire! The book really was interesting because the accusations were so crazy, it was like they were made up, as they actually were. The accusations were unbelievable, so it makes it crazy to think this stuff actually happened. I would recommend this book to readers who care not fans of nonfiction, or who are interested in paranormal things, actually.

BAM The Bibliomaniac says

Audio #117

Great older children's introduction to the Salem witch trials

Accurate accounting of events
Good explanations
Full cast of characters
Nothing held back just written on a simpler level

Donalyn says

While I've heard of the Salem Witch Trials, I'm still shocked by how much local politics and petty jealousies played into the accusations. Compelling and well-researched. Stunning design with black, red, and white scratch board illustrations.

Betsy says

Sometimes I wish I could sit down with my 10-year-old self and have a conversation. We'd chat about the improvements that will come to fashion someday (I think 10-year-old me would really appreciate knowing that 1988 was America's low point), the delight to be found in *School House Rock* and eventually I'd turn the conversation to books. From there we'd give praise to good Apple paperbacks like *The Girl With the Silver Eyes* or pretty much anything with a ghost in it (does anyone even remember *Ghost Cat*?) but eventually I'd have to start pushing myself. "So what," I might say, "would it take to get you to read nonfiction?" Even from a distance of twenty-three years I can feel the resistance to such a notion. Nonfiction? You mean like the latest edition of *The Guinness Book of World Records*, right? Nope. I mean like straight up facts about a moment in history. And not any of those *Childhood of Famous Americans* books either, missy thang. Then I'd pull out my secret weapon: *Witches!: The Absolutely True Tale of Disaster in Salem*. The cover? Enticing. The subject? Not off-putting. The overall presentation? Enthralling.

When 9-year-old Betty Parris and 11-year-old Abigail Williams began to twist and turn in the home of the Reverend Samuel Parris there was only one possible reason for it: witchcraft. And why not? This was Salem, Massachusetts where the Puritan populace knew anything was possible. What they didn't know was that the afflicted girls would be joined by fellow accusers and launch the town, and even parts of the state, into a series of witch trials the land of America had never seen before. Rosalyn Schanzer tells it like it is, recounting many of the details, giving information on what happened to all the players when the dust settled and things got back to normal. Notes, a Bibliography, an Index, and a Note From the Author explaining how she abridged, updated, and clarified some of the original texts follow at the end.

I'll admit it. I'm not ashamed. Here I am, thirty-three years of age with a Masters degree to my name and if you had asked me to recount exactly what happened during the Salem Witch Trials I'd have been hard pressed to come up with anything I didn't just learn from Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Okay . . . so I'm a little ashamed. And I didn't even know how much I didn't know until I started reading Schanzer's book. The author lays out her book chronologically. It's like watching an episode of *Law & Order*. You see the "crime", the characters, and the endless strange courtroom scenes (Note: Teacher's wishing to spice up their history presentations should definitely make *Law & Order*-like videos of the Witch Trials).

And Schanzer's choice of presentation is fascinating. Ordinarily a book like this would start with an Introduction that would sum up everything that happened lickety split. Not this one. There's a preface, sure as shooting, but the author makes the executive decision to start off with the most interesting aspect of this

story: witches. “Anyone could be a witch – your own mother or father, your best friend, your tiny baby brother, or even your dog. And you might never know who was in league with the Devil until it was too late.” From the get-go Schanzer is asking the reader, without being obvious about it, to walk in the shoes of a Puritan. To understand exactly where it was they were coming from. I know books for adults that have a hard time doing this, so to find it here in a title for the under 21-set is admirable to say the least. The book begins with an explanation that when the Puritans immigrated to America they brought with them “a stowaway from their former home.” That would be an idea that the Invisible World was just as tangible as the Natural World. It sets the stage for what is to come, and if it does not excuse the actions of the characters, it at least gives their reasoning, however weak.

I was particularly impressed with the way in which Schanzer chose to refrain from inserting our contemporary views and theories into the text. When you at last reach the end you find a chapter called “The End is Here” which addresses some questions folks have had about the trials. Even then, the author doesn’t lay down the law and say “this definitely happened” or “we have no doubt of that”. Theories come and go. The idea that the grain in Salem had a mold in it may be trendy one day and then dismissed the next. By giving equal weight to various theories, Schanzer ensures that the book won’t be dating itself any time soon.

When we think of nonfiction images, particularly those found in books published by companies like National Geographic, we think of photographs. And if we happen to be dealing with a point in history that came before the birth of the F-stop then we expect to see public domain images of the time. Usually paintings or prints made after the fact (and with scant attention to historical accuracy, but that’s neither here nor there). To incorporate original art into a book for tweens and teens is more acceptable now that graphic novels have reached a kind of grudging acceptance from the mainstream. And what art! Little wonder that the book has already garnered the prestigious Gold Medal for Best Illustrated Book of 2011 from the Society of Illustrators Original Art Exhibition. Schanzer (who both wrote *and* illustrated the book, believe it or not) uses the Ampersands Scratchboard medium for this particular work. Black and white with the occasional use of bloody red (the endpapers are a nice touch) Schanzer illustrates both the true facts of the case as well as the wild suppositions poised by the accusers. The pictures actually lighten the tone of the book a bit. Some of this stuff is pretty bleak, but Schanzer’s pictures have a bit of drollery to them (the dogs help). I was also taken with the font (not usually my area of expertise), which is listed as Caslon Antique and P22 Franklin Caslon. It makes the book look as if it was written in the past on an ancient printing press. Nice touch.

So if you’re a librarian, teacher, or parent and you need to do a bit of booktalking with a work of historical nonfiction, *Witches!* is the answer to your prayers. Boy is it easy to talk up. I think all you’d have to do would be to recount one or two of the accusations to get the kids alert and awake. Then mention this fact to them: In a witch-hunt nobody is safe. It’s the immediacy of the material that makes this story all the scarier. If you’re looking for some straight history to entrance the kids, *Witches!* makes for a fantastic addition. Even my 10-year-old self would be forced to agree.

For ages 10 and up.

Jackson Sennhenn says

This book, “*Witches!: The Absolutely True Tale of Disaster in Salem*,” is an interesting book. The small history book is packed with action and surprises, without sounding fake. The moments when someone important is accused are some of the most well described moments in the story. The suspense and frustration

that grows inside you when reading this book is heavy. You are reading the questions in the trials, and a person pleads guilty, by the accusers and “judges” don’t believe them. The things that people find out to be treated better make you question the logic of the people of Salem back in the late 1600s. Another reason for my 4 star rating is the way the story is written. The book actually feels like a true STORY. History is learned all throughout the book, along with surprises. Instead of telling you what happens, the author implies it. This book is a very good over-time read, but has explicit language and has inappropriate things mentioned within the creepy pages of the tale of witches. DISCLAIMER... Recommended for a more mature audience...

Sesana says

It might be strange, but the first thing that struck me about Witches, once I had my hands on it, was the size and shape. I've read a fair few of National Geographic's YA and middle grade nonfiction, and they tend to be large, with gorgeous, glossy covers. Schanzer's book is going an entirely different route. It's small, even smaller than an average paperback, and the cover is a black and white, engraving-like illustration. And it looks really, really cool. The illustrations inside are very similar, and very striking. This is definitely a book that stands out.

Let's face it, you'd have to try pretty hard to turn the story of the Salem Witch Trials into something dull. Schanzer certainly doesn't disappoint. There are plenty of exciting details, and the basic timeline is riveting. Schanzer doesn't offer a definitive explanation for what exactly happened in Salem, or why, and I appreciate that. I haven't exactly read widely on the subject, but this is the first time that I remember seeing a book aimed at this age range emphasize the corruption of the judges. I knew that there were some Salem residences who profited from the trials, by confiscating the property and land of the accused. I hadn't realized that it was illegal, and that the judges knew it was illegal, knew that the property was being confiscated anyways, and probably pocketed some of it themselves. (One woman, asking after her confiscated cattle, was flatly told that the judges planned to eat them.) Certainly puts a different spin on things, doesn't it?

Like I said, I haven't read tons of books on the trials. But this is by far the best one that I've read, and the one that comes closest to capturing the mood of the times. National Geographic also has a fantastic interactive story on their website that, though not related to this particular book, also does a great job of capturing that mood. The presentation is a little dated right now, but the writing is great.

Katia M. Davis says

A relatively short look at the witch trials. Some quite interesting information on the background and references to transcripts. A good little read if you enjoy reading about the history of witches or instances of accusations. I read it because I am fascinated by the 'mass hysteria' type phenomenon often cited and the cultural history behind this phenomenon. It is interesting to try and place yourself in a mindset where something such as spectral evidence was legitimate to an argument.

Chloe says

We sell this in the gift shop of one of the historic sites I work at, and I've had my eye on it for a while, since witches and history and #spooky aesthetics are My Thing. I finally got my hands on a copy after ages and

ages, and I'm so pleased to say that I really liked this book!

The illustrations are lovely, but I actually really (surprisingly) enjoyed the text of this book more than the illustrations! This is a non-fiction book for youth (a genre that I've read surprisingly little of) and I wasn't sure I'd like the text much. I was wrong - I loved it. To compare, I read Stacy Schiff's *The Witches* late last year, and I think I left that book without really having learned anything. Schiff was too thorough, and tried to go into detail on too many people, and as a result, I couldn't keep up with who was who and why their story was important. Schanzer, on the other hand, summarizes beautifully. She captured the whole affair, went into a few key people's backgrounds, told some stories, and wrapped it up in a fifth of the time it takes Schiff - PLUS, she has cool illustrations!

Highly enjoyable - I'll be able to recommend this to customers wholeheartedly.

Christine says

Suggested Grade Levels: Middle School to High School

Genre: Informational (Chapter Book)

Historical Topic: Salem Witch Trials

Themes: Conformity and Scapegoating

Awards: Many awards, but most notable are Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Honor, 2012 Notable Children's Books (ALSC) and 2011 School Library Journal Best Books.

This is an informational text that takes on a novelistic approach. The true tale of the Salem Witch trials unfolds with learning of the hardships of Salem's Reverend Samuel Parris. He is no longer being paid and is running out of firewood because he is not being paid. Ironically following the decision to not pay the Reverend for his services, his daughter and niece begin to have terrible spells of twitching and contorting their bodies into strange shapes. It is believed they have been bewitched! The novel continues to give real accounts of the events of the Salem Witch trials, but also gives interesting facts about the accusers and previous ill experiences or grudges they had with the ones that they have accused of being witches. Public fear spreads and the witch hunting becomes almost an all out epidemic. A crooked legal system and public fear leads to the hanging of several innocent people. The book leaves the reader with a puzzling question, will we be able to stop witches, the devil and superstition from ruling America. Of course a witch epic would not occur again in America, but the author is reaching at a bigger idea. The idea of how some people will find anyone to place the blame on and how they can start an epidemic to falsely accuse the innocent. History has repeated itself several times. The reader is really left wondering if America is any better off then it was during the Salem Witch trials.

The book uses scratchboard illustrations like the one that can be seen on the front cover. The image is of a Puritan woman with half of her face white with tears and half of her face black with red eyes. The cover leaves the question, "is she is good or evil." The illustrations throughout the book play with the concept of who is really the evil one in the case of Salem? Is it the so-called "witches" or the accusers that falsely brought torment and death to so many. The illustrations play with this concept of showing contrast of white and red within people, animals and objects in the illustrations.

This book would be an excellent book to use with intermediate students to study the Salem Witch Trials and how they came to be. The number of characters and storyline can get complex at times and I would have the students keep a character map to keep track of who each person is and how they are related to other

characters in the story. It would be helpful to get other books that give accounts from both sides and informational text with more factual information to cross check our information to check the “validity” of “Witches: The Absolutely True Tale of Disaster in Salem.” Also this book touches on the concept of placing the blame on others. I would have students look for other times in history that this concept has happened. I would lead the class into a discussion on how to prevent things like this from happening.

Agn? says

3.5 out of 5

Since I knew absolutely nothing about the Salem witch trials before, Schanzer's *Witches!* was a great introduction to the subject: short, engaging and beautifully illustrated (gorgeous black-and-white with a sprinkle of red scratchboard illustrations are done by the author!).

Witches! is well-researched, as evident from the back matter consisting of extensive source notes, bibliography, index and author's note. Schanzer also does a great job making a very clear distinction between facts and speculations. And the book design is simply excellent. However, the book is relatively short, thus the characters are rather underdeveloped, and since there are so many of them, sometimes it is a little bit challenging to keep track of who is who, especially when listening to the audiobook.

Emily Arrant says

Summary: This book starts off with two girls from Salem Village, Massachusetts. One day these two girls started twitching and their bodies began to contort into weird shapes. A doctor tried to cure them but he could not find a cure. The mysterious illness turned into a witch-hunt that ruined a lot of people's life. This book shows what people will do just to blame someone else so that they can cover up for themselves.

Evaluation: I liked this book. However, this book could be a little too violent for younger students. You could use this book for higher grades such as sixth grade. I think it is a great book to have a discussion on. This could be used during a literature circle.

Teaching Idea: This book could be used as a class novel. We could use this book to explore new vocabulary words that they may not. The students could also have a reading guide that they would have to fill out with different check mark questions throughout the text. An example would be why did the Puritans come to America.

Shannan Schoemaker says

In the interest of full disclosure what drew me to *Witches* was its fascinating cover art and illustrations throughout. The cover lures its audience in with a black, white and red rendition of a split persona, that of the white sweet innocent puritan woman and the other half depicted as what else but a “witch.” Possessing a red squinted eye, a scornful frown and inked in all black, needless to say the cover looked fascinating. I was expecting a melodramatic filled historic fiction about the witch trials of Salem and boy was I wrong.

Instead what I got was a refreshing history and examination of the motives and goings on of the Salem witch trials. It is a 130 page read and I finished the entire thing in one sitting. I was hooked, had it been a campy interpretation of the trials I would have been bored by page 50 but it was a refreshing look at the history of the witch trials written in a perspective and language that upper middle and high school readers could easily grasp and be used as a supplementary text for learning about the Witch trials packed into a tiny book that can be read in just a couple hours by a strong reader. As an adult reader I would even venture to say that adults who were wary of getting their feet wet in the history genre could use this as a gateway history book into the witch trials. Although it could be a great resource for stronger readers it may still be above some struggling readers because of the litany of characters and plots that run through the book, it may be useful to create graphic organizers and visually organize the reading individually or as groups and provide a visual interpretation or history of the events as they unfold.

Schanzer who is both the author and illustrator uses a large number of primary source documents and quotes to truly bring the trials to life, they are full of fresh language and salty comebacks as those who are falsely accused argue for their innocence and plea to the court. The true gem of the book is its information on both the accused and accusers, while many other books and information on the witch trials only discusses the accusers or is told from their perspective, *Witches* has a third person bird's eye view of both. It discusses the sweeping mass hysteria that raced through town and the potential political motives many of the accusers and the judges of the trials had in convicting "witches" to hang. It also, although not as prominently tells the tale of those who decided to speak out against the witch trials and their fates.

It is hard to understand how the trials could have taken place when one thinks about these allegations and the results - if they really were for political or financial gain when we look at them against the puritan Ideal that they 'feared god above all else.' The book is an impressive unbiased look at the witch trials of the 17th century in America, however the author does at the end of her book caution the reader before jumping on the bandwagon of condemnation again when she writes "But never again will we allow witchcraft, the Devil, and the lure of superstition rule the day in America. OR WILL WE?" That statement in itself would provide a very scintillating discussion with a mature thoughtful group of readers.

Taneka says

In 1692 in the village of Salem Massachusetts, two girls have fallen ill. Their bodies contort and they are speaking in a strange tongue. The diagnoses: Bewitched. The story of the Salem witch trials began with the accusation of three women and soon any and everyone was being accused. In the end, the witch hunts affected many, killing over a dozen and ruining the lives of countless others. One of the accused was sentenced to jail with her infant child in tow. The black, white and red artwork adds a menacing visual to the dark twists and turns of this episode in our country's history. The language is simple enough so that the book can be understood for tweens and young adults. The author intends to show the horror and dread of the trials, but tone of the book displays the ignorance of the time and presents the accusers as mindless fools. Many would act out terrors in court such as crying out in pain if the accused moved or bit their lip. Notes from the actual trials are throughout the book and are italicized for clarity which gives a voice to those poor, unfortunate individuals being questioned. Reading can become overwhelming, especially when there are so many names given at once. One page contains at least eight different names in one paragraph and the change in characters are not mentioned in the subtitle heading. The author poses more questions than answers throughout the book. It is a short read and ideal for reluctant readers who would prefer nonfiction. If you are

looking for a book that gives a broader look at this subject, Milton Meltzer's *Witches And Witch Hunts* is a great selection.
