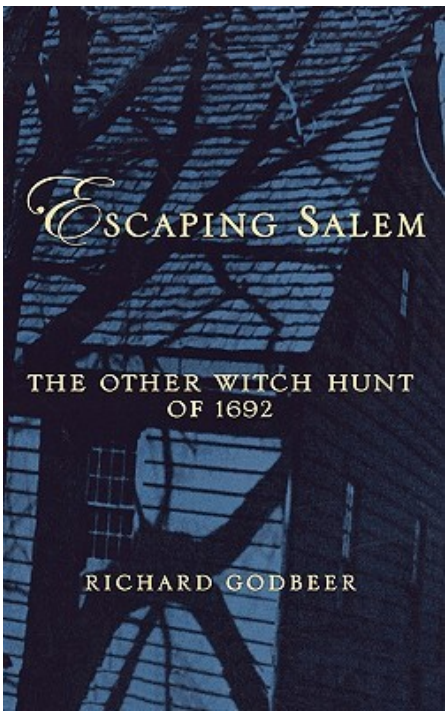

Escaping Salem: The Other Witch Hunt of 1692

Richard Godbeer

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The Salem witch hunt of 1692 is among the most infamous events in early American history; however, it was not the only such episode to occur in New England that year. *Escaping Salem* reconstructs the "other witch hunt" of 1692 that took place in Stamford, Connecticut. Concise and accessible, the book takes students on a revealing journey into the mental world of early America, shattering the stereotype of early New Englanders as quick to accuse and condemn.
Drawing on eyewitness testimony, Richard Godbeer tells the story of Kate Branch, a seventeen-year-old afflicted by strange visions and given to blood-chilling wails of pain and fright. Branch accused several women of bewitching her, two of whom were put on trial for witchcraft. *Escaping Salem* takes us inside the Connecticut courtroom and into the minds of the surprisingly skeptical Stamford townspeople. Were the pain and screaming due to natural or supernatural causes? Was Branch simply faking the symptoms? And if she was indeed bewitched, why believe her specific accusations, since her information came from demons who might well be lying? For the judges, Godbeer shows, the trial was a legal thicket. All agreed that witches posed a real and serious threat, but proving witchcraft (an invisible crime) in court was another matter. The court in Salem had become mired in controversy over its use of dubious evidence. In an intriguing chapter, Godbeer examines Magistrate Jonathan Selleck's notes on how to determine the guilt of someone accused of witchcraft, providing an illuminating look at what constituted proof of witchcraft at the time. The stakes were high--if found guilty, the two accused women would be hanged.
In the afterword, Godbeer explains how he used the trial evidence to build his narrative, offering an inside perspective on the historian's craft. Featuring maps, photos, and a selected bibliography, *Escaping Salem* is ideal for use in undergraduate U.S. survey courses. It can also be used for courses in colonial American history, culture, and religion; witchcraft in the early modern world; and crime and society in early America.

Escaping Salem: The Other Witch Hunt of 1692 Details

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From Reader Review Escaping Salem: The Other Witch Hunt of 1692 for online ebook

Scott says

First of all I love little books. Second of all, I love historical little books surrounding this gruesome and paranoid time in our country's history. This little book recounts the time period of 1692 with one community's divided rally to either "burn the witch" or let the accused go free (all based on delusional finger-pointing.) A great read for the season.

Jourdaine says

Being a direct descendant of Elizabeth Clawson, I received this book as a gift. It was a nice, quick read, and I learned a lot from it. What was refreshing was the humanizing of puritans during the witch hunt era. From other sources I've read, and textbooks in school, the people often came off as hateful and superstitious. In this case, most were apprehensive in convicting witches and did everything they could to prove or disprove accusations.

I would certainly recommend this book for casual history buffs interested in another layer to the witch trials era. For me, it added another dimension that I found fascinating.

Douglas Koehne says

An interesting book detailing the process a small New England town went through in determining whether witchcraft was used in the afflictions of a young lady. The book is short, only 170 pages bound in small hardback form. Unfortunately, this book could have and probably should have been even shorter. The actual content delivered is quite interesting and is written quite well, but this is a thesis paper type of exposition that could have provided the reader with all the facts, information, and analysis in less than half the space.

I cannot abide bad editing - information is repeated again and again, and then yet again, seemingly to stretch out the book to a proper book length.

With all that being said, I did enjoy the step by step process the town used to determine first whether there was witchcraft involved, followed by the organization and standards used in the trial to convict or acquit the two ladies accused. Contrary to popular myth, there seemed to be no rush to judgement or panic, but instead a clear process of observation, gathering evidence and testimony, and finally a jury trial with a very strict interpretation on how to decide innocence or guilt.

It is quite a shame the additional pages did not include more background information on the principal players involved and more analysis by the author of how the concurrent Salem witch situation might have affected or prejudiced the Stamford population. These were very briefly touched on and really needed more attention to flesh out the entire story here.

KC says

A quick read about Connecticut's witch hunt. Fun to learn about the history so close to my neighborhood!

Olivia says

A very good book and a nice quick read.

I had to read Escaping Salem for my American Religion class in University. To be completely honest, if I would have stumbled across this book on my own, instead of it being assigned I would have read it.

Escaping Salem, takes on a very narrative perspective.. almost like a historical fiction would. Towards the end of the book however, more actual information form the cases and events get pushed towards you in a very non narrative way.

Sandy says

I am descended from Elizabeth Clawson, one of the main two women accused of witchcraft in this account. Although this does bias my review somewhat, I have to say that I would've enjoyed this book regardless. Some of the text comes from court documents of the time and it can be a little dry. However, the author does an excellent job of painting a picture of that time period and explains why things happened as they did. After hearing so much about the Salem trials, it was nice to read something that didn't end in such tragedy. The Salem trials might have ended differently had more people come forward to defend the accused as they did here.

Delilah Blu says

Where the trial does escape the pandemonium of the Salem Witch trial it does show the hysteria that is evident for that era. I can say I misunderstood what the books purpose was but everything comes to light in the Afterword chapter. Not much is known who lives were pieced back together (if they really ever were). Even though there was strict instruction on how to find a favorable conviction, great lengths were taken to still convict those accused of witch craft/contracts with the Devil or evil spirits. Forgoing actual evidence while condemning those to the gallows. The author gives detailed and excellent insight as to the mind set of the trials and the reasoning of all those involved.

Katherine Addison says

This is a fairly straightforward recounting of the events of 1692 in Stamford, Connecticut, where a

seventeen-year-old servant named Katherine Branch started having fits in April (too early, in other words, for her to be influenced by reports of the goings-on in Salem). Godbeer chronicles her master and mistress' attempts to find an explanation, either natural or supernatural, and the eventual uneasy settling on witchcraft; the (comparatively) slow process by which Kate came to accuse Elizabeth Clawson and Mercy Disborough as her tormentors; and Goodwives Clawson and Disborough's trial and eventual acquittal. It's all very familiar if you've read much of anything about witchcraft in colonial New England--and probably a good place to start if you haven't. The most interesting chapter is the examination of the magistrate William Jones' notes on the legal requirements for a conviction. Unfortunately, the least successful chapter is the last one, where Godbeer steps back from his narrative to provide historical contexts and some very rudimentary analysis. Most of his best points are simplified from other authors (particularly John Putnam Demos), and he doesn't *do* anything with them. Also, although he does some comparisons with Salem, he doesn't discuss the points I thought were the most interesting:

1. Kate Branch's affliction was not contagious, unlike the very similar fits of the girls in Salem. No other persons joined her in her suffering--and this despite the fact that Joanna Wescot, the daughter of Kate's employers, had suffered fits of the same sort a few years previously.

2. The magistrates in Connecticut seem to have been following very different rules than the ones in Massachusetts, including the a priori disallowal of spectral evidence (i.e., anything an afflicted person claimed to have seen or heard in one of her fits); the insistence that there be two reliable witnesses for any piece of evidence; and the clear focus on the covenant with the Devil as the prosecuteable offense, not the sufferings that the accused might or might not be inflicting on her neighbors. Books about Salem spend a lot of time, of course, talking about the controversy over spectral evidence (although Godbeer makes it sound as if there *was* no controversy, that the legal situation was unambiguous--which my other reading has suggested was *not* the case), but the other two points--also the point that judicial torture was illegal under English (and therefore colonial) law, which means (a.) most of the confessions in the Salem trials were invalid and (b.) the actual criminals were the authorities--are things I haven't seen discussed before. I would really have liked a little more unpacking of this particular issue.

3. The attitude shown by the magistrates toward the afflicted parties were polar reversals of each other. Whereas the afflicted girls in Salem were considered to be unimpeachable witnesses and were all but encouraged to "perform" at the trials of those they accused, Kate Branch was treated with extreme skepticism. If she was present at the examinations of Goodwife Disborough and Goodwife Clawson, either she did not fall into fits or the magistrates disregarded her fits as evidence. Partly, of course, they were determined not to follow Salem's terrible example, but I would have liked Godbeer to have discussed in greater depth the process by which, in Stamford, the focus shifted away from Kate Branch once the legal proceedings began.

In general, this book is quite useful for throwing a spotlight on the moments at and ways in which Salem fell off the beam and into what can be quite accurately called hysteria. Ironically--given its title and Godbeer's stated aim of correcting our view of witchcraft trials in colonial New England--I found that this, being a single case study and without any ground-breaking analysis, didn't tell me anything new about the general subject of witchcraft in New England, but it DID highlight peculiarities of the situation in Salem and suggested new questions to ask.

Jason Marciak says

Richard Godbeer delivers a very different perspective to the witch trials that made Salem Mass infamous throughout history. What we are delivered instead is a partial narrative. This book, built from actual trial transcripts of a different trial that took place almost concurrently, combined with a stunning afterward that ties all of the earlier examinations together in a brilliant display of social research. A great read for anyone interested in the psychological consequences of fear or how a close knit community ties engender powerful effects in the face of both real and perceived consequences.

Christie says

AN easy read about a witchcraft accusation in Connecticut around the same time as the one in Sam occurred. It was a good read to learn that not all incidents were the same and to get a different view from the time period of the mindset of people then.

Grace says

3.5 stars
Nice short read. If you are at all interested in the Salem crisis or have done any reading on it it is an interesting contrast. Emphasizes how everything just really went all wrong for Salem.

Karolinde (Kari) says

This book is an easy-to-read look at witchcraft trial/hunt in Conneticut that occurred towards the end of the much more famous Salem Witch Trials. The author does a great job of explaining why witchcraft was a staple of New England life, what kind of evidence pointed to a witch in people's minds and how that conflicted with the court, along with other interesting points. And why the author does show how this trail was different from Salem, he fails to prove his thesis that the Conneticut trials were the typical, Salem the unusual. He really needed to provide evidence from other trials to back up his claim, preferably ones that happened before Salem. This is especially true since he keeps showing how the magistrates often pondered the events at Salem and how to not repeat them.

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

Godbeer, a history professor at the University of Miami, writes a fascinating account of a witchcraft trial that took place in Stamford, Connecticut, in 1692, at the same time as the trials were proceeding in Salem, Massachusetts. The Connecticut trials, however, had a very different outcome from those in Massachusetts. Godbeer uses primary source documents to relate the events as they unfolded and tries to recreate how people thought at that time. He explains how English secular law viewed witchcraft, a capital crime, and why Stamford did not become another Salem.

I liked how the author refrained from speculating as to what, in modern terms, Katherine Branch's "bewitchments" might have been attributed. He presented the facts of the case, and pointed out where there is missing information. His insights into why witchcraft accusations occurred in colonial American society

were fascinating, as was his explanation of the difference between witchcraft trials in America and Great Britain and those in Europe. I especially appreciated his emphasis on the personalities involved, as much as can be determined from existing records.

This book was so interesting that I wish it had gone on for another hundred or so pages. I can see it being used in college courses on colonial America. It's a quick, fascinating read that I highly recommend to anyone who enjoys reading about the human side of history.

MeriBeth says

Escaping Salem: The Other Witch Hunt of 1692 is a balanced, nuanced study of the short brief witch hunt in Connecticut in the same year as the more famous events in Salem. It is a small, dense book which only describes the events of the witch hunt without going into speculation as to the causes of the affliction of the accuser leaving the reader to decide if it was witchcraft or a natural illness.

Being unfamiliar with the events in Connecticut, this makes a good introduction to that witch hunt; however, the lack of followup or even examination of the community in detail leaves a lot to be desired. This is especially apparent when you read the 'afterword' when the New England witch hunts are compared to more modern events, especially the McCarthy era investigations for communists.

Still, as an introduction to the other witch hunts of the colonial period, this is a good, well-written little text.

Julie says

As a descendant of Mercy Holbridge Disborough, I was quite interested in this book. Admittedly, that's the main reason I read it. I wonder if a little info. on Mercy's background would have added to the story. For instance, her father died when she was 7 or 8 and when she was about 10, her mother remarried Rev. John Jones. Lore has it that the child, Mercy, and the Reverend had a contentious relationship. She was sent away to live with a relative and came back after she married Thomas Disborough. I wonder if this could have colored the locals' opinions of her? It seemed the author consistently gave New Englanders a pass based on their religious beliefs, which is understandable, given the time and general illiteracy. However, he states that, "Although most accusations of witchcraft originated in tensions between close neighbors, we should beware of concluding New Englanders used such allegations as a cynical ploy to get rid of their enemies." I wonder. According to my research, Mercy remained in Campo, CT until her death in 1711.
