



SUSANNAH MORROW

Readers' Guide

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Author Interview:

The Salem Witch Trials in America in the 17th century have always fascinated me. There are many theories to explain the hysteria and delusion that rocked the small New England town of Salem Village, Massachusetts in 1692, and the trials have inspired countless ghost stories. I wanted to know what really happened. Most of all, I wanted to know why.

When Susannah Morrow arrives in Salem Village to care for her sister's family, she has no idea what terrible emotions her exotic presence rouses in a town already simmering with guilt and tension. Nothing in London could have prepared her for the horror and betrayal that she will face in this village, where rationality and justice no longer have a place. Soon she finds herself fighting the worst enemy of all: one without a face.

What really happened in Salem Village?

How much research went into the creation of Susannah Morrow?

I did a great deal of research. As much as possible, I prefer to research from original sources. Many of the transcripts from the original trials are now available, and I utilized those, as well as Salem Village documents such as transcripts of legal conflicts between Salem Village and Salem Town, arrest warrants, examination testimony and various other documents referring to the accusations and trials. I also immersed myself in original Puritan writings, sermons, diaries and letters. I don't think it's possible to truly understand what happened in Salem without understanding the times and the people, and so I read everything I could find on seventeenth-century New England and on Puritan theology and philosophy. My emphasis on original documentation gave me the freedom to develop my own theories of what might have happened in Salem Village in 1692.

Were there things you discovered in your research that surprised you?

One of the most fascinating things I discovered was that the Puritans were not as puritanical as we assume. They lived life with gusto, and for the most part were extremely loving and generous with their children. Today, we think of Puritans as extremely rigid, even zealous in their condemnation of sin. My research shows that such people were the exception rather than the rule. They were human, after all.

Also, before I did the research, I'd always found it surprising that those who confessed to being witches were never tried and hung. From my safe and modern perspective, it seemed a perfect out—I wondered why more people didn't just confess and save their lives. But then I discovered that those who confessed were spared only because the magistrates needed them to implicate others and provide evidence—evidence that was often secured under torture. The intention had always been to try and hang the confessed witches when they were no longer useful, and in fact, that only reason that never happened was because the governor put an end to the hysteria the week before the confessed witches were scheduled to go to trial.

What was the most startling revelation you came upon in your search?

The biggest surprise to me was that, viewed in the context of the culture and the times, the witch trials seemed inevitable.

By the end of the seventeenth century, Puritan domination was ending in New England; they were losing even their children to religious lifestyles that were less rigid and demanding. The threats of capitalism, foreign influences, and a changing economy grew stronger daily. Adding to these strains was the uncertainty of the political world under the new rule of William and Mary, and the constant financial and emotional drain of the Indian wars. Science was still in its infancy, and it was bound closely to religion—even Newton and Copernicus explained theoretical aberrations as God's physical manipulations. Medicine relied on prayer and herbal remedies.

Salem Village was already known throughout New England as a place of contention—both because of battles between neighbors and because the village chafed beneath the rule of Salem Town.

For a people deprived of both autonomy and scientific understanding, it wasn't surprising that the villagers laid the blame for their problems where they understood it—at the foot of the devil. They were led by an ineffectual pastor with no skill for either the pulpit or mediation, and the bored and dissatisfied girls who became accusers were all at least one parent orphans with no standing in the community and no future to look forward to. It's not surprising that the girls took power where they could, or that it led to mass hysteria.

Did you choose this topic, or did this topic choose you?

It definitely chose me. I've been fascinated by the Salem witch trials since I was very young. There are many young adult novels about witches in general (*The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, by

Elizabeth George Speare), and many about the Salem witch trials in particular. I think I read most of them. I was always aware that I wanted to do a story set during that time. The complexities of it were fascinating. The story percolated in my head for several years before it became too compelling to ignore.

What effect did the real stories about the trials have on you, if any?

The stories still haunt me. The Puritans disliked the woods—they found them terrifying, full not just of the very real threat of Indians, but of evil—and I live in the woods. I found myself staring out at the trees, especially at night, imagining the terror and confusion these people must have felt, the things they believed they saw. Even coming at it from the perspective of modern knowledge, it was impossible to discount the power of their superstitions and beliefs, the hardship of their way of life. Beyond the fact of innocence or guilt, the stories of their lives were extremely affecting. Even now, there is so much still unknown in the world; it's easy to fill those gaps with the terror of your own imagination.

We often hear the phrase “history repeats itself.” Looking at the current state of affairs in this country and abroad, how does the phrase apply in terms of the implications of “witch trials,” and all that entails, if at all?

I think witch trials of one sort or another will always exist. Unfortunately, I believe it comes with being human. From McCarthyism to the Clinton impeachment to supposed satanic child sex rings, there will always be extreme reactions based on fear. Today, with 9/11 so fresh, it's extremely hard not to draw parallels. I think, whenever we're attacked with the things we truly fear, when we feel children are in danger or our own lives in peril, we tend to retreat into superstition and let fear guide us. In spite of our modernity, the human heart is essentially no different than it was in the seventeenth century. In the grip of fear, rationality is the first thing we lose. That's a lesson humanity must learn over and over again—it never seems to stick.

Why did you choose a fictional approach as opposed to non-fiction?

I'm more interested in telling a story. The facts themselves are fascinating, but I can't do research without characters and story suggesting themselves to me. I'm a storyteller ultimately—the facts are only important to me in light of how they apply to a story.

How much interest is there about the Salem Witch trials today?

I think interest in Salem has never really wavered. Whenever I've told someone I was working on this book, they're been very interested. Internet searches reveal several web sites dedicated to the trials. Throughout the years, there have been a dozen theories propagated as to why the witch trials happened: there was ergot in the rye, or an epidemic of encephalitis, or real witchcraft and Satan-worship was going on ... I think Americans especially are intrigued and appalled that something like Salem could happen here—and we're always looking for excuses to explain it. We like to tell ourselves that it was aberration—and to find the reasons why requires that we keep returning to it with a kind of repulsed fascination.

Susannah Morrow is written from the point of view of all three main characters. Whose point of view was the most difficult to write?

Susannah's viewpoint was the most difficult. Susannah is a rational woman in an irrational time, and it would seem that I would be able to relate to many of her experiences. But she was also fairly immutable—she's a catalyst character, without much in the way of growth herself, and she is also a stranger in what she views as a fairly primitive village and a restrictive culture. The danger was in making her too objective, too much a modern voice. I wanted her to be both a woman of her time and a guidepost for the reader, and that was a difficult balance to capture.

Many of the characters in the novel are real people. How difficult was it to blend fiction with historical fact?

In some ways, it was easy. The transcripts and timeline of the real events provided a framework to work within. The difficulty lay in taking known personalities who were closely associated with Salem (Reverend Parris, John Proctor, Tituba) and working around reader expectation to present a story that was as true to the facts as I could make it. Because the witch trials were so tied to certain personalities and events, I felt I had to use them. Their words are public record, the events that preceded the trials are as well. I felt it lent a reality and complexity to the story to use the real people. My goal was to make the novel as true to life as possible, while still making it a good story.

What responsibility do you feel a historical fiction writer has to maintain the accuracy of the period and the events?

I don't believe history should be window-dressing. I don't like anachronisms, especially in characterization, and I strive to be as accurate as possible in depicting the people and events I'm writing about. I believe that a story should be so entwined in historical and cultural context that it could not be set in any other place or time. I feel a great responsibility to do that. Having said that, I'm well aware that it may be impossible for a modern person to completely inhabit the soul of a historical character.

What is the most difficult aspect of writing historical fiction? What is the most rewarding aspect?

The most difficult aspect is the responsibility I feel for getting the historical aspect right. The most rewarding aspect is when I discover something during researching that is truly inspiring—a great idea, an unexpected tidbit, a detail that brings the entire story into focus ... I love research, and I love the challenge of turning it into fiction.