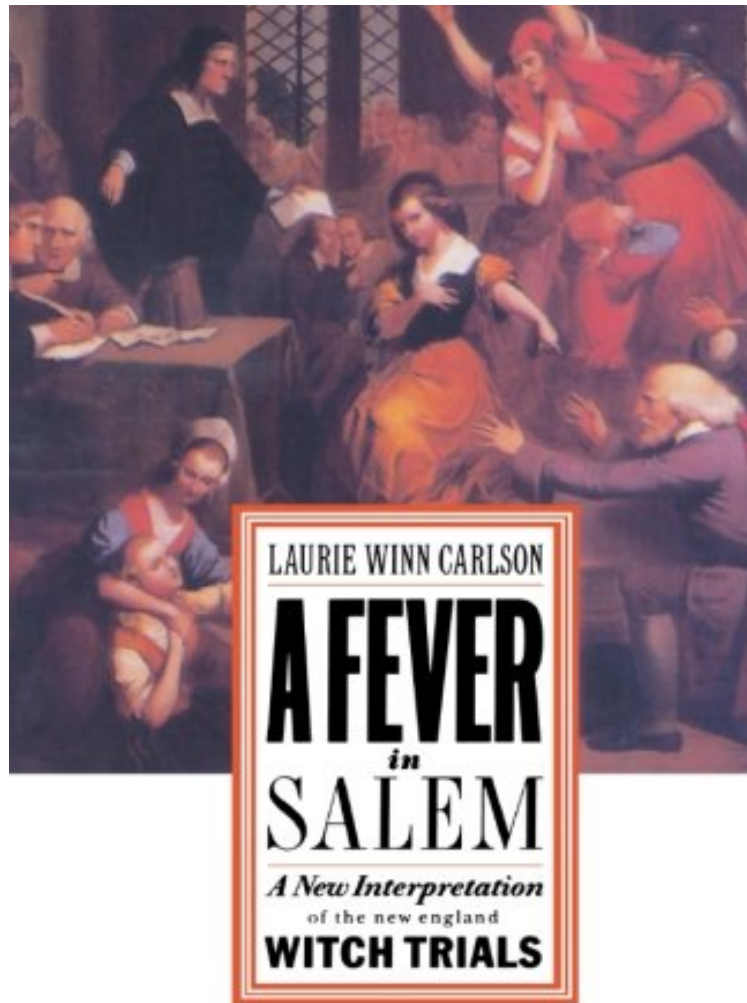


# A Fever in Salem: A New Interpretation of the New England Witch Trials

Laurie Winn Carlson

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"Carlson's study is meticulously researched, and the author marshals her arguments with clarity and persuasive force."—*New Yorker*

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**Laurie Winn Carlson : A Fever in Salem: A New Interpretation of the New England Witch Trials** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Fever in Salem: A New Interpretation of the New England Witch Trials:

10 of 16 people found the following review helpful. fascinating and innovative look at witchcraftBy A CustomerWinn

Carlson has found the facts behind Salem's horror but others may not like that. The witchcraft "industry" is alive and well in academia, where people have embraced the girlish hysteria stuff for decades. Time to rid those poor girls of their Freudian explanations. Thanks to Winn Carlson, the women are no longer seen as acting out or trying to get attention. The bird migration routes seem logical, and match up with the recent epidemic of encephalitis in New York City. This book is a must for someone who wants to look at history in a new way. Who knows how many other historical events can be explained scientifically by disease?

2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Weighed in the Balance and Found Wanting

By V. M. Smith

The author's hypothesis is simple enough: The frightening "fits" of accusers during the 1692 Salem witchcraft crisis were caused by an outbreak of encephalitis lethargica, a neurological disorder popularized in Oliver Sacks' 1973 book *Awakenings*. (A film version starring Robin Williams and Robert De Niro was released in 1990.) As a former cell biologist, I'm well-disposed to considering microorganisms and disease as the moving force of history. (See Hans Zinsser's classic, *Rats, Lice, and History: being a study in biography*, which, after twelve preliminary chapters indispensable for the preparation of the lay reader, deals with the life history of typhus fever.) In this case however, the author fails to make the case.

There were a few things that prejudiced me against this book: publication by a small house (Ivan R. Dee); description of the author as an "independent scholar," somehow implying other scholars aren't; a noticeable disdain for the entire field of psychology; and, inclusion of material that is at best tangential, at worst, irrelevant. For example, there is an afterword titled *Satanic Possession and Christian Beliefs* outlining how to differentiate between mental illness and demonic possession. The mere possibility that there is any reality to demonic possession is antithetical to the author's hypothesis. Chapter Seven, *Alternate Outcomes*, recounts experiences in New Hampshire a half century after the Salem witchcraft crisis to predict how the Salem crisis might have gone. A much better example would have been the similar crisis in Stamford Connecticut that was concurrent with that in Salem. (See Richard Godbeer's *Escaping Salem: the other witch hunt of 1692*.) Encephalitis lethargica is a rare neurological disorder that appeared at about the same time as the 1918 influenza pandemic. Unlike influenza which is caused by a virus, the definitive cause of encephalitis lethargica is unknown. It might even be an immunological consequence of influenza. Its symptoms are varied and vague: high fever, headache, double vision, delayed physical and mental response, lethargy, coma (in acute cases), abnormal eye movements, upper body weakness, muscular pains, tremors, neck rigidity, and behavioral changes including psychosis. (See National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke.) Like Linnda Caporeal (*Ergotism: The Satan Loosed in Salem?*), Carlson tries to shoehorn symptoms like "abnormal eye movements" and "psychoses" into a physical cause. A great deal of her argument is comparing experiences reported by accusers and their observers against possible symptoms for encephalitis lethargica. In many cases, commitment to "proving" her hypothesis ignores obvious, more mundane explanations. For example, descriptions of symptoms like "some suffered only a mild affliction, perhaps a heavy weight on their chests and legs while in bed, which left them momentarily paralyzed," or "people felt sudden weights on their chests at night so that they could not breathe ... complained about weight on their chests while in bed at night, an inability to speak," are well-known descriptions of the common experience called "sleep paralysis." They do not require special explanation.

The author is sometimes overreaching, if not plain wrong. For example, page 46 states: [Midwives] were present in Salem and in colonial settlements, but there are no references to individuals or their families seeking them out for assistance in combating an epidemic. .... Some women who were tried as witches had performed as midwives, but they were not tried for any offense connected with their vocation. Both Mary Beth Norton's *In the Devil's Snare*, and Richard Godbeer's *Escaping Salem* report midwives did indeed serve as a kind of "nurse practitioner: "Women like [midwife] Sarah Bates emerged as experts from those communities of mutual care, their skills endorsed by the experience and gratitude of their neighbors rather than university degrees or formal apprenticeship. Goody Bates had a finely honed instinct for discerning what ailed a sick neighbor and was widely respected for her abilities. But what's missing from *A Fever in Salem* is epidemiology. This is most evident in the "touch test" used to "prove" an accused was indeed a witch. An accuser would fall into a fit - and usually faint - at the mere sight of an accused witch. If the accuser revived at the touch of the accused, it "proved" the accused was a witch. Biological epidemics are not so easily turned on and off. In some ways, *A Fever in Salem* is an example of cognitive dissonance. The author continually tries to extend her hypothesis, and thereby add validity, but at each step the exercise backfires. For example, a map reprinted from Robin Briggs' *Witches Neighbors: the social and cultural context of European witchcraft*, shows areas of heavy, moderate, or light "persecution or important witch-hunts." Not surprisingly, dark centers spread into moderate, then lighter areas. Two pages after, a different map, with a four-fold change in scale, shows bird migration patterns. The author's conclusion?... we see how closely they match up. Birds migrating from sub-equatorial western Africa fly directly over these areas as they head north each spring ... Migratory birds may have brought disease from western Africa to Europe, where a virus in their blood was extracted by arboviral mosquitoes who then fed on peasants and villagers. Not only do they not match up closely (to my eyes), eight pages later Carlson suggests the vector might have been ticks. In all, weighed in the balance, and found wanting. I would not recommend this book.

4 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Under-researched, lacking effort by the writer

By H. Quinn

Laurie Carlson had a theory about Salem and supported it using an ambivalence for fact that you might experience gossiping with friends over a beer at Chili's. What a disappointment because it could have been

interesting. Where do I start?[1] All her research was done using books written in the 20th century. She is (sadly) unknowingly swayed by the biases of those 20th century authors. She wrongly accepts their judgements as fact, which annoyed me immensely. [2] She accepts outlandish courtroom pranks as genuine physical ailments. Why? Even by her own description, the 'fever' that was present in the colony subscribed to far more uncontrollable symptoms than repeating the words of the accused 'in chorus'. [3] She would have benefitted from reading documents from the period. Her understanding of the period is academic and lacks any genuine understanding of the events that unfolded. [4] The sentence that finally made me stop reading? "The first arrivals at Plymouth had been delighted to discover that the Indian population had already been wiped out by an epidemic... [any 3rd grader can tell you there were Indians in Plymouth]" an epidemic which she credits to the French in Nova Scotia, despite the fact that Europeans had been fishing the waters up and down the coastline for years and had even established outposts along the coast long before the puritans arrived in Plymouth. Sigh. [5] Please don't read this book.

In the late winter and early spring of 1692, residents of Salem Village, Massachusetts, began to suffer from strange physical and mental maladies. The randomness of the victims, and unusual symptoms that were seldom duplicated, led residents to suspect an otherworldly menace. Their suspicions and fears eventually prompted the infamous Salem Witch Trials. While most historians have concentrated their efforts on the accused, Laurie Winn Carlson, *A Fever in Salem* focuses on the afflicted. What were the characteristics of a typical victim? Why did the symptoms occur when and where they did? What natural explanation could be given for symptoms that included hallucinations, convulsions, and psychosis, often resulting in death? Ms. Carlson offers an innovative, well-grounded explanation of witchcraft's link to organic illness. Systematically comparing the symptoms recorded in colonial diaries and court records to those of the encephalitis epidemic in the early twentieth century, she argues convincingly that the victims suffered from the same disease, and she offers persuasive evidence for organic explanations of other witchcraft victims throughout New England as well as in Europe. *A Fever in Salem* is a provocative reinterpretation of one of America's strangest moments, and a refreshing departure from widely accepted Freudian explanations of witchcraft persecution.

.com The 1692 Salem witch trials have made an indelible impression on our national conscience. Investigations into this strange moment in colonial history, when 20 accused witches were executed and over a hundred imprisoned because of their "supernatural" infliction of townsfolk and animals, traditionally focus on the accused. In *A Fever in Salem: A New Interpretation of the New England Witch Trials*, Laurie Winn Carlson focuses instead on the afflicted, examining potential natural explanations for their typical symptoms, which included hallucinations, convulsions, psychosis, and frequently death. She provocatively concludes that the witch hunts of New England were a "response to unexplained physical and neurological behaviors resulting from an epidemic of encephalitis." Winn Carlson, an independent scholar based in Washington state, has thoroughly familiarized herself with conventional explanations for the event, which range from the Freudian female neurosis to the sociological community-based socioeconomic problems. In eight methodologically composed chapters, she convincingly illustrates how these fail to account for many relevant facts. Instead, by contrasting the symptoms of 17th-century Massachusetts victims with those in other colonies, in Europe, and in more modern times, Winn Carlson supports her claim for an organic cause. A statistical appendix, maps, and chronology further bolster her theory. Academically rigorous without sounding pedantic, *A Fever in Salem* offers a refreshing interpretation to both the scholar and the general reader of an event that continues to fascinate. --Bertina Loeffler Sedlack  
From Publishers Weekly  
Members of nearly every major school of historical analysis have taken a crack at explaining the Salem witch trials, from Freudian scholars (who posit mass hysteria) to Marxists (class conflict over property), from feminists (hatred of women) to more ecologically minded historians (a hallucinogenic ergot fungus on grain). In this innovative new study, an independent scholar focuses on the physical symptoms of "possession" -- convulsions, hallucinations, distorted language, paralysis -- which are precisely congruent with those of encephalitis lethargica. Carlson (*On Sidesaddles to Heaven*) supports her case with an impressive array of sources, including legal records of the trials, accounts of Puritan religious and medical beliefs, histories of witchcraft and of mental illness, scientific studies of plagues and Oliver Sacks's *Awakenings* (which dealt with the victims of the encephalitis epidemic of 1916-30). She never "explains" the event in its entirety, leaving open the possibility of further analysis of the public, religious and legal response to these phenomena. Discussing other possible historical and cultural ramifications of encephalitis symptoms, Carlson provocatively suggests that the disease may have inspired the *Sleeping Beauty* folk tale and been at the root of some Christian mystical experiences. While her use of radical psychiatrist Thomas Szasz's work to analyze cross-cultural "epidemics of mental illness" and her superficial reading of feminist analyses are not up to the high standard of the rest of the book, her theory, though ultimately impossible to prove, is persuasive. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.  
From School Library Journal  
YA-- Carlson examines the behavior and physical symptoms that led to accusations of witchcraft and subsequently to trials, imprisonment, and executions. Using various sources including diaries and court records, the author compares reports of the symptoms of the citizens and livestock of the 17th century with those described by victims afflicted with encephalitis lethargica during the early 20th century. Her discussion, which includes such things as convulsions,

hallucinations, and paralysis, is fascinating and it is easy to see how what couldn't be explained within the limits of medical knowledge at the time took on a life of its own. Particularly useful features include a chronology that compares patterns of disease in the Colonies and Europe and a statistical appendix. The medical terms might prove difficult for all but the most advanced student but those willing to persevere would certainly find much about which to think. The author's intent was to stimulate readers to look at history and the present in different ways, and she has certainly achieved this goal. Peggy Bercher, Fairfax County Public Library, VA Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.