

Discussion questions for Stacy Schiff's THE WITCHES

1. In *The Witches*, Stacy Schiff evokes what everyday life was like for the Puritans of Massachusetts. Drawing from Schiff's descriptions, what about the culture and routines of Puritan society would you say laid the foundation for the explosion of witchcraft?
2. The events of the book take place in the 17th century. Can you imagine something similar taking place today? Can you point to recent current events that have parallels to those Schiff describes?
3. In modern society, there are many who feel strongly that science and a belief in magic are incompatible. Was this also the case in the time of *The Witches*? How did the popularity of mysticism among highly educated citizens influence the way Puritan authorities handled accusations of witchcraft?
4. Consider the role gender played in the Salem witch trials. Most of those affected—whether in the position of accused or accuser—were female. What do you make of this? What social forces does Schiff suggest may have led to this gender imbalance?
5. Schiff often compares the experiences of the possessed women to the experiences of Joan of Arc, drawing parallels between the visions they had. At a time when women weren't allowed in the military, Joan of Arc used her visions to justify fighting in the armies of King Charles VII, and went on to become a hero. Think about the place of Puritan women and girls in society at the time of the trials. Did those who claimed to be victims of witchcraft derive a similar power from their visions?
6. Contrast the reactions of the officials—the two Mathers, Judges Hawthorne and Sewall, Parris, Stoughton, and ultimately Thomas Brattle—to the crisis. Who do you think exercised his influence the most responsibly?
7. On page 414 Schiff writes: "In troubled times, we naturally look for traitors, terrorists, secret agents." What fueled the Puritans' panic? Identify and discuss examples from your lifetime in which widespread panic has ignited. Were these instances of panic the product of deeper anxieties?
8. Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, one of the most influential literary depictions of the witch crisis, was written and performed during the Red Scare, a period marked by fear of Communism's influence over American life. What do you suppose prompted Stacy Schiff's decision to research and write about Salem now, at this moment in history? In what ways do the events that have unfolded in the wake of 9/11 echo the period of the witch crisis?

9. Because of the small size and religious intensity of their community, the Puritans led very public lives, and the power of reputation and shaming provided fertile ground for accusations of witchcraft. With the rise of the internet as replacement for the public square in today's culture, has the act of shaming become more potent? How so? Does the society you live in place as high a premium on a clean reputation as Puritan society did? The Puritans held each other accountable for their adherence to a shared moral code. Do you find that this is true today? Who holds you accountable?

10. Can you imagine how those in and around the two Salems resumed their normal lives, how families embraced children who had accused now-dead relatives, how neighbors greeted those against whom they had testified, how congregants treated ministers who had denounced their family members? How do you read the various apologies and the timing of those apologies?