

EM: Alright, here we are. (DOOR OPENS)

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

EM: Here we are. Woo hoo! Salem!

One of the great things about growing up in Massachusetts was taking schools trip to Salem. For a lot people in America, Salem is like something out of a Grimm fairy tale. But for us, Salem was visceral – the colonial houses flush up against the street, the ancient graveyards.

Right after my wife Serena and I parked our car, we came across these local girls in Puritans costumes. One of them was holding a cloth baby.

GC: I do, Baby Rebecca.

AR: She looks just like her mother.

EM: Yeah, the witches have taken her face away. What are your names?

AR: My name is Abigail Robinson.

GC: Goody Carlyle.

They perform witch trials for the tourists.

AR: We do "Cry Innocent," which is a reenactment of Bridget Bishop's witch trial, she was the first to be hanged in 1692. Then the audience plays the Puritan jury, so they get to ask questions of the accused, of Col. John Hawthorne who is conducting the trials, and then at the end everyone votes and majority rules we decide to hold Bridget on formal trial on charge of witchcraft or release her.

Our destination that day was the Salem Wax Museum. The one that I used to go to as a kid – the one that we were brought to several times as part of our education – was unnecessarily awesome!

I remember they'd lead us into an amphitheater, which was pitch black. The only thing lit up was a pentagram in the floor. Then this really old warbly narration would tell the story of Salem and corroded old wax figures would light up in dioramas stacked up to the ceiling. On the bus ride back, we'd try to do the voice of the narrator – "Who's side was the devil really on? Who's side is he on now?!"

When I was in college, I brought some British friends here to see the wax museum – but it was totally revamped. The lighting was bright. The wax figures were slick. We walked through a maze, followed by a new narrator who was weirdly upbeat. He ended by saying, “The Salem Witch trials may have been unfortunate, but they helped pave way for the great legal system we have today!” The only thing that made it worse, was that one of the British women said, “That was very – American.”

Two decades later, it was time to give the wax museum another shot.

EM: I haven't been to the wax museum in 20 years, has it changed?

SERENA: They probably weren't born.

GIRL: I was one.

I was one, she said.

At first, things seemed promising. The lighting was dark again. The pentagram was back. But then my hopes were crushed like Giles Corey under boulders of disappointment.

EM: Sigh, she looks like Christina Ricci.

They were playing sea chantey music. The wax figures felt like mannequins arranged around the room. There was no narrator, just plaques. Nothing wrong with plaques, but it lost that sense of drama. The gift shop was bigger than the wax museum.

EM: Wow, that was a big fat disappointment. I have to say the other thing about Salem I found it creepier before it was gentrified.

SF: Well, yeah, that's not witch creepy, it was just creepy-creepy.

EM: Yeah, it's so cute now.

But the dark creepy Salem – that's still everywhere in pop culture.

MONTAGE

It's amazing that this piece of history has become a horror genre, right next to Frankenstein and Dracula. But the Hollywood version of Salem actually does have something in common with the academic research on Salem.

Filmmakers and historians all trying to say – forget what you’ve heard. I am going to solve the mystery and tell you what really happened in Salem.

Some of the academics theories are really out there. There was this one theory in the ‘70s that the girls in Salem were eating really moldy rye bread, and the mold made them hallucinate. This has been totally debunked, but I’ll be talking with someone about Salem and they’ll lean in and say, “I heard the mold was like some kind of LSD!”

Another popular theory is that Salem was just a big soap opera. A lot of serious historians have been tracing all the grudges people in Salem had against each other. So behind every accusation of witchcraft there’s a jilted lover or a jealous neighbor.

Mary Beth Norton teaches history at Cornell. She says there’s something to this theory. She should know. One of her ancestors – Mary Bradbury -- was accused of being a witch by a neighbor who didn’t like her.

MBN: One of my favorite accusations against her, was that one of her male enemies said he was riding by her house on his horse, and she appeared in the form of a blue boar, and she frightened the horse, and he was thrown off from the horse, and then he knew it was she because the blue boar then went into her house, and when she was in the house, she turned back into herself and he could see her looking out the windows at him. So I’m descended from a woman who turned herself into a blue boar.

The only magical powers that woman had were loads of money. Her husband bribed the guards to let her out of jail.

MBN: I’m convinced by the way there are enough wealthy people who broke out of jail in September, and October and November of 1692 that the jailers in Boston and Salem had their hands out.

Mary Beth Norton is considered the premiere historian on Salem right now because she put out this groundbreaking book where she said forget the small town shenanigans. If you look at the big picture, Salem is a story about war and politics.

First of all, she says back in 1692, accusing someone of being a witch was not a strange thing to do.

MARY BETH: We often look at Salem witchcraft in isolation but in fact there had been numerous witchcraft accusations in New England before and even other places in America, in Virginia and Maryland there had been witchcraft accusations. Most of the time, those accusations -- regardless of who made them -- had been rejected by the judges.

The weird thing about Salem was that the judges and other people in authority allowed this kind of testimony in court. Even back then, if a guy walked into a courtroom and said, “My neighbor is a witch who just turned herself into a blue boar” – the judge would throw that guy out.

MARY BETH: So for me, what’s crucial about 1692 is that those accusations were not rejected by people in authority and one has to ask the question why.

That was the big mystery she wanted to solve.

So she started by reading letters people in Salem wrote to their relatives back in England. At first, she thought this was just a dead end.

MBN: I was actually expecting to find many comments on witch trials. I mean my goodness, why wouldn’t people write about the witch trials? I did find a few comments, they were very prosaic – something like, a witch hanged yesterday and then that was it. Nothing about what that person thought about that or anything, I was very upset but then I realized even though the people were not telling me what they thought about the witch trails, they were writing reams and reams about the Indian War. And that’s clearly what was on their mind.

What do Indians and witches have to do with each other? Everything, in the minds of Puritans.

But let’s put this in modern terms: The Puritans are occupying a land so they can exploit its natural resources and spread their culture. At the same time, they’re fighting a war against an indigenous people who were using terror tactics to scare away the occupying force. But instead of Iraq or Vietnam, the battlefield was Maine.

Maine used to be part of Massachusetts, and Maine was where the good stuff was – all the animals and wood and natural resources the Puritans needed to fuel their economy.

But Maine was really dangerous. The Wabanaki tribe slaughtered towns of settlers. Which made the Puritans wonder. If God was on their side, why were they loosing a war against these savages, these agents of the Devil?

MBN: Everyone knew that the devil couldn't act without God's permission, the devil did not have an independent existence, the devil is a fallen angel, the devil can't act without God allowing them to, and so for his own reasons, God had loosed the chains that he usually kept around the devil, he'd given the devil permission to chastise people in New England for their failings.

Right, God was punishing them for not being Puritanical enough. But then in midst of this tension, a girl named Ann Putman Jr. made an accusation that was so explosive it triggered what we now call The Salem Witch Trials.

MARY BETH: Ann Putnam Jr. had a vision in which she accused the former minister of Salem Village, who also happened to be the former minister of Falmouth, Maine as the leader of the witches.

His name was George Burroughs. He was a minister that had a bad reputation – eccentric, difficult to work with – and a 12-year old child had just accused him of being double agent working for Satan.

MARY BETH: Now this is a little girl growing up in Salem Village, there's no way she had any personal knowledge of the life of George Burroughs on the Maine frontier, but in this spectral vision she had of George Burroughs, she talked about things that had to do with life on the Maine frontier and she accused him of having bewitched the soldiers who were fighting the Indians. So I asked myself, where did Ann Putnam Jr. get this information? Well, the only place she could have gotten it from was from the servant in her household, Mercy Lewis. Mercy Lewis had actually grown up in Falmouth and had been a servant to George Burroughs at one point, probably after her parents had died.

If you've ever read or seen The Crucible, you definitely remember Tituba – the West Indian slave who got blamed for introducing the girls to witchcraft.

Norton says even if that was true, the real spark came from this group of war orphans whose families had been wiped out on the Maine frontier. Without any prospects, they were sent down to Salem to live as servants.

They suffered from what we would call PTSD, and they spread fear like a contagion. And if you look at the testimony from the first batch of girls, they talk about Indians and witches all in the same breath.

MBN: You also see by the way in their accusations, images from the Maine frontier. For example some of them said that the witches threaten to tear them to pieces. There were a lot of stories that circulated around Salem and Essex County at this time of the Indians torturing people and literally cutting to pieces.

Which was weird. Normally, the devil would entice people with gifts – he was more carrot than stick.

So the judges had a choice whether to believe these girls and allow testimony based on dreams and visions, which is not something they usually did.

MARY BETH: Girls had testified in court before it's just usually they hadn't been believed. This time they were believed, and why were they believed? Because what they were saying accorded with what the magistrates wanted to hear. They wanted to hear that they weren't responsible. I mean after all, if you're fighting the devil how can you be responsible for what's happening? If the devil is behind the Indians, if the devil and the witches are behind the Indians, how can any mortal man fight them?

The judges were also military leaders who suffered major losses on the battlefields of Maine, and they wanted to hear it wasn't their fault.

MARY BETH: They are definitely losing the war on the Maine frontier and they are in large part responsible. For example, it was the second attack on Falmouth in May of 1690 that completely wiped out the town – I mean more than 200 people were slaughtered in the aftermath of that attack. But why was that town undefended? It was undefended because the examining magistrates themselves, John Hawthorne and Jonathan Corwin had just been in Maine to investigate what was going on in the frontier and they reported back to Massachusetts that the militia troops of 40 men that was stationed there in Falmouth was not needed and so those men pulled out of Falmouth and literally the next day the Indians attacked and besieged the town and eventually wiped it out after five days.

George Burroughs was found guilty of conspiring with the devil. And that opened the food gates to all those other people across Massachusetts who

had grudges against their neighbors. They stormed the courtrooms and said “Will you believe me now when I tell you this person is a witch?!” The accusations kept snowballing until the Governor’s wife was accused of witchcraft – and he quickly put the kibosh on this whole thing.

MBN: The governor, by the way, engaged in a massive cover up of his role in what was going on, he claimed that he knew nothing, but in fact he knew everything! In letters that he wrote to England, he said I was up fighting the Indians on the Maine frontier. I wasn’t around. Well, I show in my book that he was around all the time. He knew exactly what was happening! But as soon as it started to fall apart, he didn’t want to take responsibility for what had happened, and so he basically lied to the authorizes in England about where he had been.

EM: It’s funny, it sounds like you are -- you’re angry at the judges. I mean you’re angry that they’ve been let off the hook.

MARY BETH: Oh! I’m angry at them! Yes, I mean, I think it was their responsibility and they did not fulfill their responsibility. I am angry at them. You’re absolutely right. They deserve it, and they have been let off the hook by historians and everybody else because everybody focuses on the quote hysterical girls, and that started happening right after the trial – right after.

EM: One of the things that I find so fascinating about this theory is that in the post 9/11 world, it feels so – it makes so much sense to me. Was that something too for you -- you came up this theory after 9/11, right?

MARY BETH: No! Do you want to hear amazing fact?

EM: Sure.

MARY BETH: I’ll tell you my 9/11 story. I was working at home. I had a deadline of the end of the week for the submission of the final manuscript. I was writing the last few pages, in fact the pages where I talk about PTSD. I had a breakthrough. I had a major problem in how to wrote this part. I called my editor with great excitement around 10:30 or 11 o’clock in the morning. I have solved my problem, isn’t that great? She said, do you know what’s happening? I said no. She said, turn on TV. A lot of reviewers early reviews of the book, and I thought it was entirely appropriate, their last paragraphs were, gosh this really rings a bell with post 9/11, the kind of atmosphere I created, but in fact it was all created pre 9/11.

I always want people to care about history -- to see our ancestors as human beings, not that different from ourselves.

But there have been a lot of different theories about Salem. They always feel right to people in their time, but then they're later debunked and replaced with new theories.

I wonder if every theory about the Salem Witch Trials is like another wax museum. A wax museum is trying to mold life out of death – dead cultures, dead people, dead belief systems. Maybe we can never really understand people in the past because we can never see the world through their eyes. We can never pretend that we don't know what we know now.

But that doesn't mean we should stop trying.

That's it for today's show, thanks for listening. You can like this show on Facebook or leave a comment in iTunes. I tweet at emolinsky. Special thanks to Mary Beth Norton, and the engineers at WCAI on The Cape and Cornell University.

MBN: I later on saw a production of The Crucible done by the Royal Shakespeare Company. And so I remember at the intermission, I went out and found that I argued with the entire first act, the entire time that I couldn't appreciate the play as a play. And so I remember at the intermission I went out and I told myself, stop arguing with the play, just enjoy it as a play. I might add here that there is a current production of The Crucible at the Old Vic in London and they asked me to do program notes – and so I did!

A different version of this story originally aired on the show un-Fictional from KCRW. I interviewed a psychology professor who talked about how a lot of the testimony in Salem is compatible with sleep paralysis. And I talked with a friend who grew up as religious Baptist in Kentucky. She had sleep paralysis starting at the age of 5 and she thought it was the devil until she was 23 years old. I'll include a link that version on my site, imaginary worlds podcast dot org.