



Season of the Witch: Enchantment, Terror, and Deliverance in the City of Love

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In a kaleidoscopic narrative, bestselling David Talbot recounts the gripping story of San Francisco in the turbulent years between 1967 & 1982—and of the extraordinary persons who led to the city's ultimate rebirth & triumph.

Season of the Witch is the first book to fully capture the dark magic of San Francisco in this breathtaking period, when the city radically changed itself & then revolutionized the world. The cool gray city of love was the epicenter of the 60s cultural revolution. But by the early 70s, San Francisco's ecstatic experiment came crashing down from its starry heights. The city was rocked by savage murder sprees, mysterious terror campaigns, political assassinations, street riots & finally a terrifying sexual epidemic. No other city endured so many calamities in such a short time span.

Talbot goes deep into the riveting story of his city's ascent, decline & heroic recovery. He draws intimate portraits of San Francisco's legendary demons & saviors: Charles Manson, Patty Hearst & the Symbionese Liberation Army, Jerry Garcia, Janis Joplin, Bill Graham, Herb Caen, the Cockettes, Harvey Milk, Jim Jones & the Peoples Temple, Joe Montana & the Super Bowl 49ers.

He reveals how the city emerged from the trials of this period with a new brand of "San Francisco values," including gay marriage, medical marijuana, immigration sanctuary, universal health care, recycling, renewable energy, consumer safety & a living wage mandate. Considered radical when they were first introduced, these ideas have become the bedrock of decent society in many parts of the country & exemplify the ways that the city now inspires a live-and-let-live tolerance, a shared sense of humanity & an openness to change.

As a new generation of activists & dreamers seeks its own path to a more enlightened future, *Season of the Witch*—with its epic tale of the wild & bloody birth of San Francisco values—offers both inspiration & cautionary wisdom.

Season of the Witch: Enchantment, Terror, and Deliverance in the City of Love Details

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From Reader Review Season of the Witch: Enchantment, Terror, and Deliverance in the City of Love for online ebook

Jabiz Raisdana says

I loved every page of this book and often stayed up later to get more. I am sad that it is over, because there is so much more I want to learn about my amazing city. What a place. What people. What what crazy stories in one of America's greatest cities.

Fern says

I was excited to read this book about the history of San Francisco-focusing in on the period between 1967-1982. I grew up in the city during this time and was curious to see what Talbot would have to say about the era.

While I appreciated the writing and personal narratives from famous San Francisco characters (oh how I miss Herb Caen!), I found the book to be pretty narrow in it's scope-Basically, its white scope.

While Talbot plays lip service to the African-American community in the Filmore and the Chinese community (mostly with a portrayal of Rose Pak), you would think that San Francisco was basically a big old gay Irish party from reading this book if you didn't know any better.

What about the Mission? What was happening with the Latino community during this time period? I'd sure like to know. Or even the Russian and Jewish community in the Sunset, how did they react to the changes in the air?

Pretty disappointed to read this narrowly focused book-I was hoping for better from David Talbot.

Kristen says

One of the greatest history accounts I have read on the turbulent past of SF in the mid to late 20th century. Recommended to all those fascinated with the city of San Francisco. A great history of the key players who aided in developing the liberal nature of the city, it's culture of acceptance, and the model it served for the rest of the world. Loved!

Emily says

Season of the Witch is an engaging, interesting overview of San Francisco during two very turbulent decades. David Talbot takes readers through twenty years of history in a city that's undergone massive change and social turmoil, highlighting the lives of the city's most colorful inhabitants. The chapters are short - great for commuting - and vary from stories about criminal cases, like the Zebra Murders, to the rise of the Cockettes.

I really vacillated between three and four stars on this one. The stories are compelling and the writing is decent (though I could have dealt with fewer maudlin metaphors). However, the lack of a real narrative arc and its overall one-sided treatment of the city's history brought this down to three stars. It's still worth reading, but I'd recommend it with reservations.

For example, Talbot constantly hammers home this point about "San Francisco values," which got a little tiresome after awhile. I am proud and happy to live in one of the most liberal cities in America, and I support "San Francisco politics." But it feels like Talbot is selectively editing out the stories and people who don't fit his agenda, and he steamrolls right past some of the ethnic groups that he vaguely references. Beyond dedicating a chapter to Rose Pak - a chapter in which he doesn't actually disclose any of Rose's specific accomplishments or neighborhood allies - there's not very much information about the culture clashes between the Irish, Latino, Chinese, and Italian sectors of the city. I would have loved to read more about the transformation of a neighborhood like the Mission. It felt like this was missing solid context. What was most of the city doing while .001% of it was on acid at a Jefferson Airplane show?

I also think it's pretty disingenuous to keep trumpeting that the Irish Catholics were being pushed out of a city that they "didn't understand," given that most of the gay and hippie population in SF during the 60s and 70s was made up of transplants to the area. It's wonderful that SF has been a haven for many different groups during its various periods of history, but as Talbot explicitly says during one of his asides, the middle-class tax bracket funding city hall was none too happy about the Haight's transformation into a dangerous, junkie-ridden smack den, and I can't really blame them for that. There's a balance between razing the Fillmore and totally sweeping aside the experiences of the people who lived in San Francisco prior to the Summer of Love, and I don't think Talbot managed to get that balance. Without an objective perspective, the stories become less meaningful and feel more like a forced, one-sided retelling of events.

Anyway, I flew through this book - its minor flaws make it read like fiction - and I liked the general overview of SF's history it provided. And I really want to read more about Janis Joplin now!

Ann says

It wasn't always peace and love in San Francisco. Or actually - ever. The hot second of 'gentle people with flowers in their hair' quickly gave way to a myriad of social misery - overdoses, VD, abandoned children, racism, AIDS, murder, manslaughter, etc. The problem was the myth we sang about far outlasted the reality we experienced - I had completely forgotten about the connection between the Jim Jones' mass murders and the Moscone-Milk murders a week later, for example. The book reminds us of San Francisco's blue collar, conservative repressed-Catholic heritage - a group of folks who unsurprisingly had a hard time accepting the influx of hippies and gays flooding in on "Trans Love Airways."

The trouble I have with this book is that the author edits events tightly to fit his premise: the Summer of Love was overtaken by a decade or so of unspeakable evil until rescued by the soothing, nun-like leadership of Dianne Feinstein and the ebullience the 1981 49ers 28-27 win over the Dallas Cowboys. The wrap-up is a little too pat in my opinion, and of course San Francisco has continued to have highs and lows - Loma Prieta, dot com bubble and bust, homelessness, etc. You gotta end the book somewhere. I think Talbot must have been on deadline - he stirred up a great big witch's brew of a story and then leaves us with a shallow 'resolution.' But since this is not a novel no resolution is really necessary (or even possible?) San Francisco's history continues to be written, revised and reinvented.

The book was a page-turner, and reminded me once again that the 'good old days' are a complete fantasy. I can't finish without mentioning that Talbot gets his digs in on Ronald Reagan, a president who had lackluster

ratings in office but whose myth has continued to grow as the American people forget his complete lack of leadership on AIDS, his early acceptance of racism, the impact of his economic policies on the poor, etc. It's way more comforting to hearken back to an America full of peace and love, and a kindly 'ol Gipper running the show.

Richard says

This is a sometimes heart-wrenching and sometimes ecstatic narrative of the dramatic era that brought San Francisco through some incredible times and changes.

I can't say it any better than this review: San Francisco's Darkest Hours: The founder of Salon takes a fascinating tour of the Golden Gate City, 1967–82.

If you love San Francisco — or you're interested in rock 'n' roll, gay history, traumatic 70s racial politics, or even the 49ers football team, you'll probably find this book riveting.

If you're a San Franciscan, the public library has 52 copies to share out, although as of Christmas 2012, there are 206 requests outstanding, so you still might have to wait a while. *Update, 27 April 2013* : the public library has declared this a "On the Same Page" book, which means they want as many people reading it as possible at the same time to foster discussion. So there are now 120 holds on the first copy returned of **472 copies**.

Christopher Enzi says

WOW! This dazzling page turner tells much of the history of San Francisco during the time I've lived here. From 1966 in the ramp up to the Summer of Love through the Big Gay Immigration boom which brought me here in 1976 through drugs, politics, sex, cults, murders and scandals, this book gets to the heart of the matter.

When people hear that I lived here in the 1970s, before AIDS was on anyone's radar, their ears prick up as though they were about to hear a dirty joke. Sure, there were orgies and drugs but there was so much more to the whole thrilling bacchanal as we tried to invent a new way to live that made room for our quirks and looked out for our neighbors. David Talbot really gets this distinction and writes about San Francisco with great love, compassion and excitement; all hallmarks of what most of us moved here hoping to find. BRAVO to the author for an excellent book and to SFPL which has made this their "San Francisco Reads" book for May/June 2013. If you have a library card, you can pick this wonderful book up in any branch. It's featured on the NewArrivals shelf.

Kasa Cotugno says

Most of the events occurred in the decade before I moved to San Francisco, but the effects of these upheavals were still felt and formed the structure and personality of the city I lived in for 10 years, and even that time in which I inhabited it can be looked upon with nostalgia since there has been yet another upheaval, shifting the city again. So I was glad to read this book and learn more about events that shaped the City I knew.

Talbot gives in depth accounts of the people and the forces that influenced the changes, and much attention is given to the short lived summer of love, undermined and destroyed by the drug culture. It was fascinating to learn about the Haight Ashbury Health Clinic, still on Clayton street over 50 years later. The rock personalities, most notably the Grateful Dead and Janis Joplin, but then also the politicians who influenced the city, names that are still familiar today such as Ed Lee, current mayor, who was active even then, also the political arc of Diane Feinstein. It may seem simplistic to indicate that the success of the 49ers healed the city at a time when political assassinations, serial killers, and the emergence of AIDS was plunging the city into depression, but by the time I moved here, Joe Montana and Bill Walsh were considered gods, and it was revealing to read of their history and the part played by Eddie DeBartolo. It's always fun to read about a place you're familiar with.

Jon says

Every San Franciscan needs to read this book to understand the tumult our city has endured to get where it is today. Spectacular writing of the 60s (and before), The role of the Dead in the Haight Ashbury, the importance of music to the city, Jonestown, the early days of the AIDS epidemic, and the details of the rise of so many characters in the SF landscape including Harvey Milk, Diane Feinstein, Mayors Moscone, Alioto. A romping, rough ride through the history of SF. Wonderful.

Nils says

Published in 2012, Talbot's book was composed at the very moment where the particular liberal political and cultural formation the book celebrates was coming to an end — as the tech-ification of San Francisco in the 2010s displaced the old “fly your freak flag freely” political culture that emerged in the 1990s. The thesis of this book is that the cultural and political history of San Francisco in the second half of the twentieth century consisted of a drawn out battle between the old conservative Catholic political establishment and the emergent counterculture and its liberal allies — a battle that eventually the liberals won in the 1980s. While this was indeed a crucial transition in San Francisco’s civic culture, as I will discuss below, the periodization Talbot proposes is highly questionable.

Written in a rollicking if somewhat breathless and at times cliched style (whenever Talbot introduces us to a hooker, for example, we rarely need wait more than a sentence or two to learn what her heart is made of), the book offers many compelling and indeed often poignant personality sketches of legendary San Francisco denizens, from Vincent Hallinan and Herb Caen to Patty Hearst and Janis Joplin. Stylistically, Talbot’s episodic narrative approach also allows for heavy literary-style adumbrations: for example when the Haight Ashbury free clinic brings in the Hells Angels for security in 1967, Talbot observes that, “people knew that bringing the bikers into the equation was like bringing a jungle cat on a leash into a party: it could all be cool—or not” (57) — anticipating the role that the Angels will play at the Rolling Stones concert at Altamont Speedway three years later. Indeed, Talbot’s fervent desire to turn San Francisco’s history into a morality tale in which the good guys persevere through adversity to triumph is likely what leads to the various dubious historical judgments that litter the book.

The essence of this morality tale is actually a weirdly inverted version of the longstanding calumny from the right that the counterculture’s utopian aspirations, as embodied by the hyper-cliched “summer of love,” curdled into something rancid. Talbot largely accepts this charge, but apologizes for it in a “mistakes were

made” vein (as with the Hells Angels allusion, above). Like many an apologist for Revolutionaries before him, he actually avoids taking in the continuity, the way that the rancid turn of events was baked into the utopian dreamworld to begin with. It’s easy to riff from an anecdote that whereas in 1969 “counterculture communities like the Haight took care of the [Vietnam] War’s mangled souls,” (126) by 1970 “the Diggers has scattered [and] there were no more street guardians to look out for the lost children” (131); but it’s much more painful for a cheerleader of the counterculture like Talbot to acknowledge that the abandonment was embedded in the intellectual and institutional weakness of the initial promise. He quotes Stewart Brand’s apt reflection that Altamont showed that “unleashing Dionysus” creates inevitable results, but then quickly moves past this, observing that most people at the time weren’t interested in “such philosophical reflections.” Unfortunately, this means that Talbot ends up reflecting rather than dissecting the misunderstandings that the protagonists had of their own historical significance. In particular, he seems to be entirely credulous about the liberating potential of rock and roll, peppering his text with rock lyric references, as if these were profound philosophical bons mots.

Worse than that, Talbot’s focus on telling chapter-by-chapter narratives of specific episodes ends up creating what are at best misleading if not downright false interpretations. To speak of the Zebra murders or Symbionese Liberation Army, with their roots in prison culture and black nationalism, as somehow reflecting the counterculture-gone-to-seed is to buy into the venerable rightwing narrative about “cultural rot” and “permissiveness” as some overriding explanandum for the political traumas of the 1970s. The problem with this interpretation is that the SLA and the Zebra murderer weren’t rock stars or teenager runaways or drug addicts (i.e. the modal figures of the counterculture) gone political. Indeed, the counterculture and the radicalism of the SLA or the Zebra Murderers were, politically speaking, wholly different creatures — the former more aligned with anarchism, the latter with varieties of authoritarian pseudo Marxism or black radicalism. The SLA specifically might more accurately be tied to radicalization of certain post-New Left factions by their failure to stop the Vietnam War, the Nixon administration, and corporate power. But in fact the New Left and the counterculture had little in common (certainly not politically) other than a dislike for the Man, and enjoying the occasional joint. Sure, Altamont, the SLA, and the Zebra murders were all phenomena that Normies regarded as showing the country was going to hell in a handbasket, led by feckless kids, but except for the spurious right wing narrative itself, these things had virtually nothing to do with one another.

Talbot’s description of the curdling urban disorder of San Francisco in the 1970s provides little sense of what (if anything) made the Bay Area different during that decade, when much of the country seemed to many to be going to pot. Indeed, arguably the Bay Area and San Francisco weren’t that politically unusual in the 1970s: resistance to integration, spiking drug use, fracturing families, racially tinged urban violence, and tax revolt were all national rather than region-specific phenomena. (One thing that **was** uniquely taking place in the Bay Area during these years was that a different strand of the counterculture, instead of going to seed, was busy inventing a new computer networking cybersculture. This is a major miss by Talbot, since it is in fact THIS descendent of the 1960s which ends up decisively winning the political and cultural battle for San Francisco in the 2010s, as bobo techies enabled by Mayors Gavin Newsom and Ed Lee’s tax policies took over the place.)

One major distinctive feature of San Francisco life in the 1970s was the emergence of an open gay culture, which Talbot rightly (if obviously) emphasizes. The murder of Mayor George Moscone and City Supervisor Harvey Milk by fellow City Supervisor Dan White in 1978, which occupies the last third of the book, indeed embodied the political clash between the emergent culture of personal liberation and the old Catholic establishment. But even here, Talbot’s narrative of the larger significance of this “gay political moment” is dubious. By the 1980s, with the AIDS crisis spurring even more gay activism, San Francisco again emerged with a unique politics, but this new political culture in fact grew not out the counterculture, but instead was a

heritor to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, a topic Talbot touches on only in passing.

Another critique of the book is that it is very much a white, leftish Boomer's view of San Francisco: other than a chapter on Rose Pak which feels like a cliché of "tokenism," you'd barely know from reading this book that the city is a third Asian. Likewise, the fact that San Francisco's black population dropped by a third during the era described in this book is only brought up as an explanation for a serial killing binge perpetrated against whites; there is almost no time spent on what the successive waves of so-called "redevelopment" felt like to the African American community itself. From another angle, you'd also never know that this was also a time of great professional liberation for women, or of urban- and corporate-design flourishing, as described in Alison Isenberg's recent book.

Indeed, the book has an almost desperate desire to essentialize San Francisco as having some "true" core of social meaning. This leads to weird incongruities where Talbot hyperventilates about the (very real) Zebra murders turning San Francisco "against itself" in 1973-4, but then celebrates Armistead Maupin's (unabashedly fantastic) "Tales of the City" as capturing the San Francisco's true fabulousness just two years later. Ideas of multiplicity and contradiction seem utterly alien to Talbot. Everything that takes place is represented as a "battle for San Francisco's soul."

As he tells all these stories, Talbot also seems to lose the thread of his powerful main thesis, which is really about the downfall of the Catholic conservative political establishment in San Francisco from its apex in the early 1960s, when it was largely successful in marginalizing and harassing the weirdos who congregated there, and the mid-1990s, when a new political cohort finally took over. Talbot wants to date the transition to fifteen years earlier, in the early 1980s, because of a sentimental, boosterish desire to anoint Dianne Feinstein and the 49ers football dynasty as the things that brought the city together and allowed it to "bind up" its cultural differences. In fact, however, the last of San Francisco's Catholic establishment mayors was Frank Jordan, who was only replaced by Willie Brown in 1996. It was really the changing demographics of the city (and the realization of the developer class that they could get what they wanted more effectively by working with Brown, Gavin Newsom, and Brown's protégée, Ed Lee), as well as the broader political eclipse of the Catholic Church in the face of sex scandals, that led to the final changing of the guard. Old Catholic San Francisco basically no longer exists as a serious political force in the city, but who won was not the hippies, but the techies.

In sum, although Talbot offers a well told series of vignettes, and a correct assessment of the overarching political direction of the city during the second half of the twentieth century, his narrative is marred by numerous dubious assessments, above all taking the city's various clowns too seriously and being too generous towards its liberal political operators. To make the case that the old Catholic establishment was gross should not require failing to acknowledge the limits of their progressive successors.

Sian Lile-Pastore says

lordy, this was bleak. it's about san francisco from the late 60s to the early 80s, so i was prepared for the murder of Moscone and Milk and the rise of AIDS, but I was not prepared for zebra killers, jim jones, patty hearst and all the deaths from hard drugs. I was relieved when i got to a couple of chapters on american football which i didn't really understand or care about, but was light relief from everything else. I was not looking forward to reading about AIDS either, but actually, it was quite a short overview of the history of the disease in San Francisco and was almost uplifting in the way that it talked about the city pulling together, everyone helping each other and the beginnings of medication that could help people survive. I didn't realise

how instrumental San Francisco was in the research of the disease and was inspired by the ways that it was dealt with and how ordinary people helped out.

I found the chapters about Jim Jones the most difficult to read (although the dan white bits were no picnic) - and was completely unaware of his links with san francisco, moscone and milk. Reading about the deaths of hundreds of Jim Jones's followers was chilling and really stuck in my mind, I couldn't stop thinking about after i finished reading about it over breakfast and then had to go to work at a wedding fair....

anyway, it's a little hard going but it's good and page turnery. i adore san francisco, but feel like i need to read something a little more fun now.

Mal Warwick says

It's difficult to imagine any city in North America that has experienced such a short and intense period of tumult and terror as did San Francisco from the mid-60s to the early 1980s.

The Summer of Love. The racist Zebra killings. The People's Temple mass suicide. The assassination of Harvey Milk and George Moscone. The onset of the AIDS epidemic. And the Grateful Dead, the Jefferson Airplane, and Janis — oh, the music!

You can't make this stuff up.

For those of us who lived through this era in and near San Francisco and even knew some of the players, David Talbot's masterful portrait of that time and place, *Season of the Witch*, reawakens memories, some of them long suppressed. To recall that we lived our lives punctuated by such rapidly alternating bouts of exhilaration and despair!

Talbot tells the tale of this time through a series of interconnected biographical sketches, bringing the bold-faced names of the 1960s and 1970s back to life in vivid detail: Scott Newhall, Herb Caen, Joe Alioto, Jerry Garcia, Bill Graham, Harvey Milk, Janis Joplin, Dianne Feinstein, and dozens of others. This is a story not of saints and sinners but of flesh-and-blood human beings with their own faults and failings no matter how society may have lionized them.

Season of the Witch opens and closes with vignettes from the colorful lives of Vincent and Vivian Hallinan who, with their six pugilistic sons and the other lawyers the old man trained, set the combative tone for progressive politics in the city for decades to come.

Talbot makes clear that San Francisco was always a world apart from the nation, with its origins rooted in the frenzy of the Gold Rush (the pro football team isn't called the 49ers without reason!). "By 1866," he writes, "there were thirty-one saloons for every place of worship." Six decades later, "[d]uring the Prohibition era, the local board of supervisors passed legislation forbidding San Francisco police from enforcing the dry law." It could have been no surprise, then, how young Vincent Hallinan responded in an early court appearance when asked by a judge whether he wished to show contempt for the court: "'No, Your Honor, I'm trying to conceal it.'"

To Talbot, the story of San Francisco in the 1960s and 70s is one of a "new city growing within the old" — the flower children, anti-war protestors, weed smokers and acidheads, the gays, and more gays: these were

the newcomers who grafted themselves on to a tradition-bound, Catholic, pro-labor town run by Irish and Italians who were never prone to go down without a fight.

David Talbot was the founder and editor-in-chief of the online magazine Salon in 1995 after serving as an editor for both newspapers and magazines. He has written for many other publications and has authored several other books.

Adam says

Dante is often quoted (I paraphrase) as finding heaven the hardest to write of all the sections of his Divine Comedy. I wonder if the writer Talbot had similar difficulties on certain sections of this exuberant popular history of one of my favorite cities, San Francisco during the sixties and seventies. His writing about the utopian early hippie days and an attempt at redemption in an effective stint as mayor by Diane Feinstein and a good 49ers season (I did find the section on the city's response to the AIDS epidemic inspiring compared to the cold shoulder New York gave in the same era.), are overshadowed by the middle section. This section is the inferno. Talbot calls it Terror. Here is a city at war with itself in the dread seventies. Hard drugs take over the Haight, the Altamont disaster spoils the mood and the revolutionary movements move towards rage. These changes happened all over the country in the Nixon years but San Francisco seemed to be hit the worse, the Red Queen section of the wonderland replete with death cults, violent revolutionaries, mad bombers, and assassinations. Talbot's portrayal of S.L.A., the People's Temple, and the Zebra murders are chilling and compulsory reading, but thankfully also nuanced and fresh takes on these horrific events.

Jay Hinman says

It was with much anticipation and excitement that I started former Salon.com editor David Talbot's 60s-70s-80s history of San Francisco, "SEASON OF THE WITCH", and with much disappointment and disgust that I slammed it down thirteen chapters later. No, I did not finish the book. I'd never get those hours back, and alas, neither will I get back the four or so hours I invested in those 13 chapters. I believe that I can successfully and accurately review the book anyway, and hopefully talk you out of any inclination you might have toward reading it. To wit:

1. It has some of the most cringe-worthy, unimaginative writing I've seen in years.

I knew in the back of my head that Talbot, for all the initiative and gusto he showed in founding the once-excellent SALON back in the 1990s, was the web magazine's primary weak link when it came to actual journalism. Left-wing and emphatically so to a fault, his screeds about Bush this, 9/11 that (not to mention a bizarro Kennedy assassination obsession) made Michael Moore look like Tom Brokaw. Yet his bozo rock-n-roll shorthand in this book is even worse. He actually writes about how, in the Haight Ashbury, "the idea of free medical service was blowin' in the wind" (I wish I was kidding), and he quotes numerous other hippie rock lyrics in the service of his horrifically purple prose. I just googled the SF Gate review of his book and they respectfully quoted a very representative line, about the murdered George Moscone and Harvey Milk:

"Both men gave their lives for this oasis of freedom," Talbot writes, "the city where no stranger was kept outside its golden gate."

That's a line the reviewer thought represented Talbot's writing style very well. I think so too.

2. Talbot has absolutely zero nuance, nor the ability to tell a complex tale.

In David Talbot's 1960s San Francisco, the world is strictly black and white. The hippies and the people that welcomed them were heroes; the city's Catholic "old guard" were intolerant, incompetent, racist, sexist pigs. Rock and roll, peace and love was all upside. Dissent against the warmed-over, likely half-baked, "Rolling Stone" popular history of liberated 60s San Francisco is nowhere to be found here. Everyone is cast into stereotypical roles: "socialites"; "free thinkers"; gruff, tough-talking cops; gritty newspapermen; earthy rock and rollers like Jerry Garcia; and so on. Talbot shows zero initiative in carving his own researched narrative through the tropes of the past, and instead relies on the sort of Summer of Love picture books I used to flip through as a dumb kid in the 1970s for his journalism. I know this book takes a "darker" turn later, after the part where I stopped reading, yet after such an awful first third, the thought of how badly he'd butcher the People's Temple and Patty Hearst stories was just too much for me to stomach.

3. He believes every bit of BS this city's been telling itself since 1967.

I've lived in San Francisco since 1989, and I love it here. The self-congratulatory mythology this city soaks in, however, is and has forever been totally nauseating. Talbot has bought it all hook, line and sinker. He repeatedly waxes rhapsodic about "the fog rolling across the hills" and about San Francisco's "liberated, anything-goes spirit", except he usually uses some trite rock lyric or metaphor to write it even worse than I just did. Anyway, who actually calls this place "the city of love"? No one except for stoned hippie journalists in 1967 did – no one. The last straw for me was Tablot's misty-eyed chapter on San Francisco Chronicle columnist Herb Caen, "swinging with the hepcats at Tosca", nursing a highball, rapping with Ferlinghetti, stooping down to understand the hippies, wearing his fedora to jazz clubs blah blah blah. I couldn't believe the shorthand and the shortcuts this guy took in the service of telling what could have been an incredible tale. The popular thumbnail view of everything that's happened here, and everyone who did it, just happens to be Talbot's lazy method of describing it as well.

All my worst fears about a clunker of a book were realized in its first third, and then some. I'm writing this as a warning to any potential readers, so that you may be dissuaded from investing four hours of your own life into this complete exercise in futility.

Aubreywynn says

Worth the read for the panoramic and general tour of San Francisco's history, from 1930-1989, Talbot introduces a cornucopia of cast members against the ever abused imaginary stage of San Francisco's past.

Despite his floundering attempts to add depth to his ever expanding cast of characters, Talbots writing is a lesson in binarism and blindness. But even as cliche-filled, linguistically stunted and intellectually-numbing as Season of the Witch is, I had a hard time putting it down for its Da Vinci Code-esque intrigue and churning pace.

If you're willing to overlook the undeniably grievous abuse of metaphor and indulge yourself in yet another caricature of "the City," it's a quick read that will hopefully leave you delving for more. For the latest generation of transplants and windy footed children of San Francisco, it is a necessary history lesson, about as nuanced and polemic and as your 8th grade US History textbook.

Talbot's greatest strength lies in his compassion for the San Francisco's bewildering band of miscreants and messengers, through their sickness and health. Perhaps this kind of passion skewers his candor and nuance, but it leaves us with a glimmer of his love for San Francisco. Season of the Witch is an egregious sonnet of a scarred and scared Mercury, unfit but game to write his eulogy to deified poets past.
