



A Mirror for Witches

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A novel written in the 1920s and set in the Salem witch-hunting days. A young girl is convinced by the spirit of the times that the accusation against her of witchcraft is true.

A Mirror for Witches Details

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Author : Esther Forbes

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From Reader Review A Mirror for Witches for online ebook

Eliza says

Great read, historical as well as deeply thought-provoking.

Hannah says

This is an absolutely fascinating story written in a style I haven't come across before. If you're a reader who likes reading about the Salem witch trials, you need to add this to your list pronto.

Forbes wrote this book back in the late 1920's, but the style and "voice" she used for the narrative is so authentic to the 17th century that it's almost like reading a 350 year old manuscript. It's written in 3rd person, almost like a moral/religious text primer, with elaborate and long-sentenced chapter titles and black and white woodcut prints throughout.

The story itself, concerning the life of an orphaned girl named Doll Bilby, is both pathetic and compelling at the same time. Doll's parents were both burned as witches/warlocks in Brittany and Doll witnesses their fiery deaths. An English merchant sea captain adopts Doll and takes her home to his wife, who despises Doll from day one and attributes all kinds of satanic powers to the child. The Puritan Bilby family soon leave England for the new world and settle into a small community near Salem, MA. As Doll grows into womanhood, her wild and un-Puritan-like ways set her against the rigid religious community. It doesn't help that she's also a beauty.

The narrative is written in such a way as to showcase the outrage against Doll's perceived witchcrafty-ness, while at the same time provoking in the reader the very opposite effect. The supernatural events related throughout the story can all have an alternative, logical, man-made source, but is deliberately vague as to whether Doll's alleged crimes are occult in nature, or just the product of the hyper-religious superstition, hysteria and hatred that was prevalent in the culture at that time.

Excellent, thought-provoking stuff.

Christophe says

A compelling story. Forbes' skills get the reader to like the main character despite the narrator's prejudices.

Tina Gauthier says

Why is The Crucible the story of choice in HS? This is SO much better! I love how the author gives thoughts and feelings from various characters so it is not just a one-sided glimpse into this part of history.

Jukka says

A Mirror for Witches (1928) - Esther Forbes

Dark, powerful and wonderfully wrought! You're probably familiar with the author for her book **Johnny Tremain**, but i did not know of this book written 15 years earlier for older readers. Highly recommended. There is much here to discuss when read in a book group.

What follows aren't spoilers, but if you want to read this book knowing nothing before you start, then go do that.

This book uses a sort of unreliable narrator (sometimes a dislikable narrator) to great affect. If a story's context is the distorted beliefs and prejudice of a collective group, placing the narrator with the group and having the gap lie between the reader and narrator adds extra stress and drama to the story. This dissonance forces the reader to do the work to make moral sense of the story and increases the reader's bond with a main character isolated on the outside. The risk is having the reader swayed inordinately by the narrator and joining the distorted world of the group. This story never fails in this risk although at moments i found myself dramatically flickering along the edge. Adding to the sense of drama, is this book's realistic "period voice", which again adds work and reward to the reader.

[I'd love to hear a comment if you can think of a story that takes this sort of risk and fails.:]

About the illustrations in the book: The wood cuts by Robert Gibbings are a pleasing blend of influence from the novel's time and a sort of style contemporary to their creation in the 1920s.

Very minor spoilers ahead.

I really love that the reader's bond with the isolated includes the main character and the [non-human:] animals.

Quite a zing in that final sentence don't you think? Interesting that it seems to break the time setting through to today.

Quote from book:

... in that world of witchery which none today will ever see. For in those days there were sights and wonders that will not come again. In those days God was nearer to man than He is to-day, and where God is there also must be His Evil Opponent -- the Prince of Lies, for show me Paradise, and there around a corner, I will show you Hell.

Timothy says

The story is interesting. It is a little hard to get past the archaic language, I often had to re-read a paragraph to understand the gist, but that also added to the authenticity of the story.

Courtney says

I'd like a copy of this but it is very difficult to find.

Allyson Shaw says

I re-read this on one sitting- I could not put it down. Nothing short of a work of genius- a lively, vivid and strange use of an unreliable "omniscient" narrator. Why is this book not more widely read?

Jessica says

I gave this book such a high rating because I could not put it down. I had a running commentary in the back of my head based in modern ideology, but it was an interesting look into a world-view completely different from my own.

E.N. McMahon says

This is a superb and curious novel, set in Salem, 1600s. Written in the style of a 17th century tract, the book tells the story of Doll Bilby, an orphan whose parents were both burned as witches. Is Doll a witch? Does she become the witch her accusers believe her to be? Or is everything explainable in modern terms so obvious to us now? The genius of this thought-provoking book is to provide a narrative in which each episode sustains multiple interpretations: psychological; demonic; sexual. Told via an unreliable omniscient (or is he?) 3rd person narrator, the book fully realizes a 17th c. mindset, and brings it to life. Dark, strange, and marvelous - this book is a gem.

Rebecca Radnor says

paperback

Samantha says

another book I got from QPBC in high school.

Leslie says

I found an original copy from 1928 in an Antiquarian book store. It's absolutely incredible how graphic it is for a book written in 1928. Esther was a well educated woman. I plan on seeking her other writings out.

Dick Baldwin says

I found this novel more psychological than historical. Was Doll actually a witch, or was she led to believe it by jealous and superstitious people? Did she take a daemon lover, or were unscrupulous men abusing her? This book is rich in horror and tragedy and interpretation. I recommend it highly. It gets better with each read.

Edward Sullivan says

A dark, atmospheric, psychological tale with a vividly crafted sense of time and place.
