

# To What Green Altar? The Myth of American Paganism 1920-1945

By Philip Jenkins  
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## SUMMARY

In the 1980s, the United States experienced a "Satanic Panic" largely generated by the media, about the nefarious activities of rumored Satanic rings. While much has been written on this phenomenon, it is not generally recognized that a very similar phenomenon occurred between about 1925 and 1945, as popular writers and journalists explored the ideas of Sir James Frazer and Margaret Murray about paganism and pagan survivals in medieval and modern times. Though originally told as fantasy fictions, these stories acquired remarkable credibility and even influenced official behavior. By the 1930s, American news media were avidly exploring tales of witch cults and human sacrifice rings in many parts of the US, including German Pennsylvania, New Mexico, and in Native American communities across the nation. Such tale actually influenced serial murder investigations in major cities. My paper is therefore a study of the cross-fertilization of pulp literature with academic anthropology, with curious consequences for popular belief and folklore.

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It seems unnatural to discuss a period as recent as the 1980s and 1990s as a bygone historical period, yet that is of course what they now are. To get a sense of this, we might recall with astonishment that only ten or fifteen years ago, the media were full of rumors and allegations that now seem utterly bizarre about the menace posed to Americans by Satanic cults that were said to be rampant, particularly in preschools and kindergartens. Police officers were attending training seminars on confronting this danger, while therapists were finding an ever-growing cohort of individuals, particularly women, who recalled being abused by such ritualistic gangs in their own childhoods. Today, it all seems as distant and bizarre as Salem in 1692. <sup>1</sup>

Much has been written on the “Satanic Panic” of recent years, and it is all but universally agreed that the whole affair was nonsense: though Satanic churches do exist, ideas like ritual abuse and human sacrifice are wholly chimerical. However, recent writing has not noticed one fascinating point, which is that in a sense, Americans had lived through this before, and not as far back as the 1690s. In the early and mid-twentieth century too, there was a widely reported occult scare, in which newspapers and fiction writers argued for the existence of deeply rooted clandestine occult networks based particularly in the American countryside. The too, it was argued that human sacrifice might be an all-too prevalent reality, that serial killers might regularly be carrying out a kind of ritualistic homicide, To put this in context, we might bear in mind Shirley Jackson’s famous short story The Lottery, published in 1949. In its depiction of a surreptitious and bloodthirsty rural paganism in the American heartland, this work was in fact reflecting a large body of recent writing, much of it otherwise forgotten. In this paper, I want not only to describe this first Satanism scare, but also to revive the memory of a couple of authors in particular to whom we owe much of the enduring public perception of the occult, both in fiction and (supposedly) in real life. And throughout, I will stress how very thin are the lines between those two categories. Like its successor in the 1980s and 1990s, the Satanic scare which prevailed between 1920 and 1945 was strictly a literary and academic construct.

Discovering Witchcraft

Cults of various kinds were much in the news in the 1920s, when, as I have argued elsewhere, America experienced a full-blown cult scare very much akin to the better-remembered one of the 1970s. <sup>2</sup> And as in the later period, there were allegations that fringe religious groups might be involved in ritualistic violence and murder. Fundamental to the notion of cult violence was a radical reshaping of older notions of witchcraft, which reflected the speculations of academic anthropologists. According to the most extreme interpretation, witchcraft was not merely folk-magic, but a complete alternate religion, a secret domestic paganism which practiced human sacrifice. These revised concepts of witchcraft were forged during a period of intense cultural work in the decade after 1925. However artificial in nature, tales of American blood-cults were soon being treated seriously by journalists and police.

The first tales of clandestine alternate religions in the heartland date from an era of rapid change in the American countryside, and in the relationship between urban and rural societies. The 1920 census was the first to show a majority of Americans living in cities rather than the countryside, while the popularity of the private automobile vastly increased the opportunities for city-dwellers to explore those rural landscapes which now seemed so exotic. As tourism boomed, entrepreneurs made all they could of the exoticism of the

countryside, selling as commodities the authentic folk-traditions of regions like New Mexico, the Ozarks, or the Louisiana bayou. A serious scholarship of folklore flourished alongside this popular hucksterism, and academic interest in American witch traditions can be dated from the foundation of the Journal of American Folklore in 1888 . 3 Ethnographic observations of backward rural communities flourished in the inter-war years. Though their goals were more exalted than the marketers, ethnographers too exaggerated the primitive and sensational elements they encountered. Interest in rural folk-traditions received a boost in the 1930s when the Federal Writers Project encouraged the collection of oral history accounts, to preserve a vanishing popular heritage.

Because of its proximity to major East Coast cities and newspapers, German Pennsylvania was a particular target for such romantic investigations. The popular discovery of the Amish dates from the publication of the 1905 novel Sabina, which launched a whole sub-genre of fiction set among quaint sectarian groups, and already by 1915, Pennsylvania possessed a whole industry of Amish postcards and souvenirs. Also at the turn of the century, the urban media began reporting on the thriving witch traditions of the Pennsylvania Germans. Removed from their decorative origins, hex signs were marketed as symbols of a society terrified of witches and the occult. 4 Images of witches and pagan-sounding folk-beliefs were welcomed by a new popular media in search of sensational stories, during a great era for newspaper stunts and tabloid exposés.

The extent of popular interest in the “pagan countryside” became obvious in 1928-29 when an incident in Pennsylvania’s York County attracted worldwide attention. In November 1928, three young men murdered the reputed witch Nelson Rehmeyer, whom they accused of hexing them. One of the killers, another witch in his own right, also wanted to seize Rehmeyer’s pow-wow book, or manual of spells. The media frenzy over the ensuing trial was led by the New York World, but major stories followed in all the major magazines, including Fortune, the North American, the Nation, Colliers, Mentor, and the Literary Digest. 5 The York story was reported across the globe, partly because the depiction of such primitive conditions exactly fitted international stereotypes of American country bumpkins in the aftermath of the Scopes trial. Typical reporting in the papers from New York City and Philadelphia portrayed rural Pennsylvania as a medieval community living under the constant shadow of spells and superstition, where “the ignorance and fear of the savages have not been uprooted by our boasted civilization.” Media investigations brought to light the numerous other magicians, brauchers, or pow-wowers scattered across the state, and the hexerei they employed. The main occultism expert conscripted to comment on the York case was William Seabrook, whose expertise lay in the quite dissimilar world of Haiti, but for the media, Pennsylvania witchcraft was an equally mysterious subculture. In this area, observed the Literary Digest, “Witchcraft rears its head and flourishes as it did in the Medieval Ages, and does now along the Kongo.” As evidence that the York crime was no isolated event, another similar murder was reported in Virginia about the same time, in which a Lunenburg County man killed his supposed occult tormentor. 6

For years afterwards, the media sought hungrily for any hint of a new “witch murder” in Pennsylvania, and exaggerated the slightest hints of the occult in the most mundane crimes. The closest parallel to the York County sensation was the 1934 murder of a Pottsville woman by a man who believed he had bewitched her, and who duly claimed self-defense at his trial. 7 Other stories concerned small children who had died while being treated by pow-wowers, instead of being taken to doctors employing modern remedies. As in the York County case, the element of witchcraft here did not imply any kind of organized cult, nor did the violence have any sacrificial purpose, but these cases encouraged journalists

and urban readers to imagine pagan secrets smoldering beneath the tranquil surface of an otherwise modern farming landscape.

Witchcraft was a hot topic in the American media in the 1920s and 1930s, usually in the context of distinctive ethnic communities, like the Pennsylvania Germans, or of those urban Slavic and Italian immigrants who retained a powerful belief in folk-magic. 8 When Seabrook published Witchcraft: Its Power in the World Today in 1940, he noted that “Current American witchcraft cases occur with steady frequency, and in pleasing variety, at the rate of several dozens a year.” A handful of the most extreme instances involved the murder of supposed witches, usually by people who believed that this was the only way of removing a curse. 9 Native American traditions also made headlines, and in 1930 the New York City papers exposed witchcraft practices on reservations near Buffalo. In southwestern states like New Mexico, where witches had been lynched at least up to the end of the nineteenth century, stories and incidents recorded in the 1930s demonstrate the continuing vigor of Native and Hispanic occult traditions. 10

#### The Witch Cult

That American witchcraft still existed was beyond question, but in these same years, a diverse group of anthropologists and sensational writers reinterpreted these vestigial practices to construct an enticing mythology of a powerful organized movement. The ultimate influence was Sir James Frazer, whose book The Golden Bough first appeared in 1890. Frazer claimed that fertility cults represented a universal primal religion, which practiced regular human sacrifices, and these ideas had an enduring impact on both elite and popular culture. The concept of rural nature spirits being appeased by blood sacrifice was given an American setting in John Steinbeck’s 1933 novel To A God Unknown, while D. H. Lawrence’s “The Woman Who Rode Away” (1924) explored the human sacrifice theme. Lawrence’s story imagines a cult among Indians in northern Mexico, who inherit a clandestine tradition from the ancient Aztecs.

Also saturated in Frazer’s theories was Margaret Murray, whose 1921 book The Witch Cult in Western Europe formulated the concept of widespread secret religions. Murray argued that the witch hunters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had exposed an authentic underground religion, which was the lineal descendant of an ancient European paganism dating back to the time of the Palaeolithic cave-paintings. 11 In her view, the so-called witches of early modern France or England had been adherents of this goddess-worshipping Old Religion, and the witch-hunters were reporting no more than the sober truth when they told of cells (covens), each comprising thirteen members. Each coven was headed by a disguised leader bearing some title such as The Devil or The Black Man, and the groups met in periodic assemblies known as esbats and sabbats. Also accurate, according to Murray, were accounts of the witches’ calendar, which preserved ancient agricultural cycles, with key dates like Halloween and May Eve (Walpurgis Night, or April 30.) When early modern Christians denounced so-called witchcraft, they were actually describing the European manifestation of Frazer’s primal religion, in which the orgiastic rituals of the Sabbat were really fertility rites.

Murray’s influential account is the grandparent of all modern pagan and Wiccan belief and practice, though as a historical picture, it is worthless. No modern scholar of witchcraft accepts the notion of an underlying Old Religion, at least in the sense of an organized movement, and few would acknowledge that the witch-hunts were responding to any authentic pagan survivals. Among other flaws, Murray paid no attention to the brutal judicial means by which the witch-hunters obtained their stories, and to say the least, she massaged the evidence to produce the “witches’ calendar” which she found so infallibly in

whatever account she examined. Even so, her ideas inspired a thorough revision of conventional views of witches and witchcraft.

Murray's prominent use of the word "cult" helped popularize it as a description of covert occult or Satanic groups, in North America as well as Europe. She argued that the Salem trials genuinely had exposed at least one pagan coven, with Puritan minister George Burroughs as Black Man, the literal Devil of Salem, and other thirteen-member covens could be found in the history of seventeenth century New England. This view ran contrary to the accepted commonplaces of the nineteenth century, when Salem had become a symbol for Puritan intolerance, greed and wild superstition. Standard historical authorities like Charles W. Upham referred simply to the great "witchcraft delusion," the "fanaticism," when "it was in the power of every man to bring down terrible vengeance upon his enemies by pretending to be bewitched by them." This was also the image proposed in works like Hawthorne's House of the Seven Gables. 12

The witch-hunts long continued to be powerful metaphors for unreasoning intolerance, as in the 1937 film Maid of Salem, which brought the story back before a mass public once again. As for the alleged orgies and sexual rites, the liberal view saw them as no more than fantasies arising from Puritan repression. 13 But Murray's work raised the question whether America's numerous witches were part of some secret cult. The Literary Digest concluded its 1930 investigation of witchcraft among New York's Native Americans with the remark that "no organized cult... seems to exist," a note which would have been superfluous only a decade previously. 14

#### Pulp Fiction

The speculations of Murray and Frazer would have remained an academic curiosity if they had not been taken up so avidly by a new generation of sensational writers, for whom they offered wonderful new material. During the 1920s, the world of popular fiction was revolutionized by mass marketing and the pulp magazines: by 1934, about 150 pulps were being published in New York alone, and a few famous names redefined whole genres. The most prominent titles included Black Mask (detective stories) and Astounding (science fiction), while the key name in the horror genre was Weird Tales, the legendary magazine that published all the major American horror authors from 1923 until its demise in 1954. As exemplified by writers like H. P. Lovecraft, the Weird Tales type of horror story often used the American backwoods as a setting for secret horrors, depicting cults, witches, and sacrificial religions. While Weird Tales did not reach a mass national audience, it is representative of a large area of popular culture, and similar themes now pervaded not just the pulps but the cheap novels, and appeared in radio serials and films.

The notion of an American witch-cult proved extraordinarily attractive for Lovecraft and the Weird Tales generation, many of whom were immersed in antiquarian scholarship. Fantasy writers began treating Salem as if the witchcraft genuinely had represented a serious occult movement, and the village had been the scene of evil rituals by an organized movement. The pioneering fictional work was Herbert S. Gorman's novel The Place Called Dagon (1927), which portrays a secret cult in a western Massachusetts town populated by descendants of refugees from Salem, and still practicing what Lovecraft describes as "the morbid and degenerate horrors of the Black Sabbat."

Because it would be so critically important for later developments, I want to focus here on Gorman, who is certainly not a well-remembered writer today. By far his best known work is his two major biographies of James Joyce, whose literary importance he recognized by the early 1920s. However, his career had two other main aspects, both of which would be crucial for our present purposes. First, he was thoroughly familiar with the

thought of nineteenth century France, and wrote on Alexandre Dumas and General Boulanger among others: this interest meant that he could draw on French speculations concerning the Black Mass. This parody of the Catholic ritual was celebrated by a defrocked priest, who used a naked woman for his altar, and who sacrificed living creatures, including children. The Black Mass achieved a literary revival in the decadent literature of late nineteenth century France, and an extensive account appeared in J.-K. Huysmans' novel La-Bas (Down There.) Shortly after the English translation of La-Bas was published in 1924, elaborate stories of the Black Mass began appearing in American pulps, particularly Weird Tales, familiarizing American readers with the concepts of Satanic worship. Gorman, however, knew the literature at its source.. Second, he worked extensively on nineteenth century American writers including Longfellow and Hawthorne, and it was precisely in 1927 - the same year as The Place Called Dagon - that Gorman also published his biography, Hawthorne: A Study In Solitude. Now, the Hawthorne link is critical, since that writer was deeply interested in New England witch persecutions, and his "Young Goodman Brown" could be read as describing a genuine witch-cult, though the standard reading is that the story involves a fantasy or delusion. What Gorman did was to bring that idea into the twentieth century, and to take the quite unprecedented step of presenting an occult or Satanic theme in contemporary America. 15

Reading The Place Called Dagon today, we might be struck by its rather commonplace nature, since so many thousand fictional treatments have depicted secret witch-cults and sacrificial rings in American villages and country towns; but in his day, Gorman's work was radically innovative. Gorman provides a whole alternative history of American religion, founded on Murray: the Salem witches "belonged to a secret and blasphemous order that met all over the world, that they were divided into covens or parishes, that they each had their leader in the shape of a Black Man who represented the devil, and that they attempted to practice magic.... The trappings and the ceremonies and the results might appear supernatural, but that was because the people in those days did not know about such things as thought-transference, auto-suggestion and the impulsion of the will" (221). Some of the group survived, and fled to "Dagon" where they raised the great altar of the Devil Stone. "By day they were taciturn people, carrying on the quiet masquerade of pioneers, building up homes in the clearing, pushing the forest farther and farther back; but when the moon rose, the madness that was in their blood swept them out of themselves and they became other creatures employing pagan symbols and ancient phallic ceremonials. They existed in a domain out of place and time then, in a land of hallucinations and dreams and primitive urges" (223). In modern times, Jeffrey Westcott, a charismatic leader, "reinstated witch meetings, formed a coven here, and made himself the ruling Black Man... These people lead two lives, and one of them is the surface life that we see going on about us. The other is the secret life that centers about the place called Dagon" (229).

The book finds its climax in chapter ten, when after long anticipation, we observe the secret rituals at Dagon, at which Asmodeus is invoked in a kind of Black Mass (270-297): "enter into us Asmodeus! Enter into your heritage! Were we not sold to you by the bond of blood by Salem Village two hundred and thirty years ago? In the deep forest you accepted us and made a pact with us. We forsook all other gods but you for you were the eternal will of man. Though we have slept for generations, the ancient pact still holds." Throughout this section, we have an amazingly complex portrayal of neo-paganism, or at least paganism as it could be imagined by a highly bookish writer of the 1920s. The affair culminates in the attempted sacrifice of a woman, which is interrupted by the forceful intervention of the hero, who attacks and kills the group's leader, the Reverend George Burroughs (this was of

course the name of the actual minister at Salem). Virtually every allegation about real-life American Satanism, particularly during the Scare of the 1980s and 1990s, can be located in this one novel, and especially in this particular chapter. However forgotten today, this is a profoundly influential work.

#### Lovecraft and Friends

In light of Murray's work, the name Dagon evoked some bitter controversies of Puritan New England, which suggested that this Puritan society really had had its covert pagan side. The case in question was the notorious incident in 1627 in which dissidents erected a maypole of the type familiar from the English countryside, and held a festive gathering under the auspices of the Lord and Lady of the May. The story is recounted in Hawthorne's "Maypole of Merry Mount", and echoed faithfully by Gorman throughout The Place Called Dagon. Aware of its pagan connotations, outraged Puritan leaders denounced the maypole as a Dagon, after the Philistine idol mentioned in the Bible. Both Gorman and Lovecraft appropriated the name, implying that the maypole incident had been part of an American section of the witch-cult. The Dagon theme appeared in one of Lovecraft's "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," (1931), one of his best-known stories. This portrays a forbidding New England town, which is dominated by an evil race whose secret rituals are carried out under the cover of The Esoteric Order of Dagon, "a debased, quasi-pagan thing imported from the east," "a degraded cult" linked to devil-worship: the Order had its special holy days on Halloween and May Eve. In "The Haunter of the Dark" (published in Weird Tales in 1936), the secret cult is the Church of the Starry Wisdom, which is said to have flourished in Providence until eradicated by neighbors outraged at the disappearance of local children. Though entirely Lovecraft's concoction, the portrait of this cult draws heavily on actual esoteric movements of his own day, with elements taken both from the Golden Dawn magical tradition and from ancient Egyptian elements. Lovecraft explicitly cites the work of both Murray and Frazer, in addition to creating his own battery of spurious occult texts which sound so convincing that many readers then and since have thought them genuine.

Lovecraft portrayed secret cults as the conduits by which evil humans commune with malign alien intelligences, by means of the mass sacrifice of animals and, often, humans. This theme first appears in the 1926 story "The Call of Cthulhu," which shows how an evil "Cthulhu Cult" has operated in various parts of the world over the centuries. 16 The movement is related to other manifestations on the religious fringe, including "Voodoo orgies" in Haiti and "the wooded swamps south of New Orleans," and "ominous mutterings" in parts of Africa, while in California, "a Theosophist colony" dons "white robes en masse for some glorious fulfillment which never arrives" (Lovecraft could be thinking of either Point Loma or Ojai). The word "cult" is repeatedly used throughout, to describe the real-life world of Voodoo as well as the imaginary followers of Cthulhu, and cultists are responsible for abducting and sacrificing women and children.

Lovecraft often used this idea of subterranean colonial cults. In The Case of Charles Dexter Ward (1927), Lovecraft depicts Salem's Rev. Burroughs as the leader of a group of evil sorcerers, some of whom escape to carry on the cult into the present day. In "The Dreams in the Witch-House," reincarnated Salem witches in a modern city wait to celebrate Walpurgis Night, when "there would be bad doings, and a child or two would probably be missing." 17 Other Weird Tales writers concurred with his view: in 1936, Henry Kuttner referred to Salem's "old days, when Cotton Mather had hunted down the evil cults that worshiped Hecabe and the Magna Mater in frightful orgies." 18 America not only had real witches surviving into the twentieth century - the York case proved that - but they might be part of an ancient historical tradition, a deeply-rooted homicidal cult. The presence of the

Caribbean slave-woman Tituba in the original Salem tale allowed twentieth century writers to link the episode with Voodoo. 19 The human sacrifice motif flourished after Lovecraft's death in 1937. In 1948, this magazine published August Derleth's "Night Train to Lost Valley," about secret devil-worship in rural New Hampshire. In the story, the entire population of a small town heads into the woods for a Sabbat, the communal worship of Ahriman, which culminates in a human sacrifice when a baby's head is smashed against a stone altar. Subsequently, the community conspires to disguise the death as resulting from natural causes. 20

#### The Media and Human Sacrifice

By the early 1930s, the American popular media were discovering the human sacrifice theme from several sources, including versions of the anti-Semitic blood libel, and sensational reports of Haitian Voodoo. About this time, media reports started presenting ritual murder cases and "cult sacrifices" as if they were literally true. In 1932 Detroit police claimed that they had uncovered a real-life ritual murder linked to the city's so called Voodoo Cult, that is, the Nation of Islam, which may be the first time the phrase was extended beyond anti-Jewish accusations. Soon afterwards, the concept was extended to other religious cults. One of the first such stories to gain national attention occurred in Inez, Kentucky, in February 1933, when an old woman was killed by believers from a Holiness or Pentecostal sect: according to the New York Times, she was "choked to death in a religious frenzy to prove their power over death." The incident was a ritual to celebrate "the death of sin," and involved a week of dancing, fasting, and speaking in tongues. Supposedly, the woman in question agreed to be killed by her son, and several other women stood ready to face the same fate. The Times headlined a "cult slaying" and (a striking novelty) a "human sacrifice." Around the same time, the same paper reported that "Three 'Devil Murderers' Held In Baby Death; Father And Two Fanatic Practitioners Are Bound Over To Texas Grand Jury." 21

The ritual murder theme re-emerged during the still-unsolved Cleveland Torso slayings of the late 1930s, when seventeen victims were killed and mutilated in poor areas of that city, and some other victims were recorded in western Pennsylvania. As public frustration and panic reached new height in 1938, both police and media began investigating possible ritualistic elements, finding in the process some remarkable aspects of Cleveland's religious underworld. Police encountered "a wide range of unorthodox sects - blacks practicing Haitian Voodoo, covens of self-proclaimed witches and warlocks, and even a Hispanic group observing some obscure, ancient Aztec religion." Though none of these leads proved relevant to the case, the national public was further sensitized to the idea of authentic human sacrifice. 22

Just as notorious as the Torso killings was the sensational "poison for profit" ring discovered in Philadelphia in 1939, an insurance fraud operation which may well have claimed fifty lives. A mixed Italian and Jewish gang operated a criminal racket in which families took out insurance policies on the lives of relatives, who were then poisoned. The ring found its victims through a network of folk-healers, exorcists and popular magicians in the unassimilated ethnic communities, and the case offers an unparalleled glimpse into the plebeian occult underworld of the 1930s. The chief villain of the case was Morris Bolber, reported to be the greatest faith-healer and witch-doctor in the city, who claimed to have treated some twenty thousand patients. Bolber and his circle drew on very varied traditions, including Jewish popular Qabalism, German Hexerei, and Italian folk-magic or Fatura, while his colleague Paul Petrillo had sold his soul to the devil for the power of raising demons. Bolber reported attending a "midnight assembly [in Philadelphia] where weird rites were



practiced and black and white magic created strange illusions,” where “witches and magicians could assemble, in the dark of night, in a dimly lighted room,” in what earlier generations would have labeled a Witches’ Sabbat. Despite Petrillo’s confessed diabolism, the magic revealed was generally populist and peasant in nature, rather than anything resembling a Black Mass: the normal spell or cure involved carrying blessed eggs, or summoning spirits with a special knife, and Bolber’s chief talent involved his evil eye. Though the crimes were not sacrificial in nature, once more tales of violent murder we once more tales of violent murder were juxtaposed with words such as witchcraft and cult, and naturally, the media dwelled on the occult components of the case. The cases were generally known as the “Mass Witchcraft Murders.” 23

By 1940, popular interest in occult themes was both reflected and further stimulated by a spate of popular exposés and fictional works, most celebrated among which was probably William Seabrook’s Witchcraft: Its Power in the World Today. In 1939, Jules Michelet’s celebrated history of French witchcraft, La Sorciere, was translated under the evocative title of Satanism and Witchcraft, while in 1945, Montague Summers published his credulous study of Witchcraft and Black Magic. The theme gained power in popular culture during the early 1940s, when the interest in witchcraft themes presumably indicates the changing demographics of the audience. When millions of men were absent in the armed forces, the cinema made an unprecedented effort to cater to a predominantly female audience, which responded to tales of powerful female supernatural characters. In 1943, the suspense film The Seventh Victim showed a clandestine Satanic cult operating in contemporary New York City, and carrying out sporadic human sacrifices: the film was directed by Val Lewton, who in the same year made the Voodoo-oriented I Walked With a Zombie. Popular novels of the war years included Abraham Merritt’s Burn, Witch Burn (1942), depicting a real witch killing victims through devil dolls, and Fritz Leiber’s Conjure Wife (1943), which described a battle between good and bad witches for influence within a university community: Leiber’s book was pirated for the 1944 film Weird Woman. The 1942 comedy film I Married a Witch involved a Salem witch returning to the present day to take revenge on the descendants of the Puritans who had caused her death. In just twenty years, American witchcraft had been transformed from a guilty secret of the superstitious past to a (supposedly) living reality, which offered lively frissons for a mass audience.

Though one may initially be skeptical about the enormous power of academic anthropology and folklore research, I can point to many more recent examples. You may remember how in 1989 many bodies were unearthed at Matamoros, Mexico, and the media trumpeted the discovery of an authentic “Satanic murder ring”, practicing human sacrifice, allegedly following the dictates of a kind of “Hispanic witchcraft”. On further examination, that interpretation proved quite wrong, and the murders were in fact the work of a drug syndicate whose leader happened to be a homosexually oriented sexual sadist, who used spurious religious justifications to justify his atrocities. He found his particular occult scheme from a girlfriend named Sara Aldrete, a graduate student of anthropology, who drew both from academic speculations, and from the portrayal of Hispanic rituals in the recently released Martin Sheen film The Believers. It all goes to show that while popular fiction can be a bad influence, a little anthropology can be a very dangerous thing indeed.

## ABBREVIATIONS

- JAF *Journal of American Folklore*  
 LD *Literary Digest*  
 NYT *New York Times*

## FOOTNOTES

1. Philip Jenkins, Mystics and Messiahs (Oxford University Press, 2000).
2. ibid.
3. From many articles from the JAF, see for example Elizabeth C. Seip, "Witch-Finding in Western Maryland," JAF, 14(1901): 39-44.
4. Carleton F. Brown, "The Long-Hidden Friend," JAF, 17(1904): 89-152; Helen R. Martin, Sabina: A Story of the Amish (New York: Century, 1905).
5. A. Monroe Aurand, An Account of the Witch Murder Trial (Harrisburg, PA: Aurand Press, 1929); Arthur H. Lewis, Hex (New York: Trident, 1969.) For contemporary periodical coverage, see D. Nichols, "Witches Win in York," Nation, January 23, 1929: 98-100; W. Hichens, "Waylaying the Witchdoctor," Fortune, January 31, 1929: 93-99; O. P. White, "Gobble'uns 'll git you," Colliers, 83, Feb. 9, 1929: 8-9; "York County's Other Side," LD, May 4, 1929: 52-56; E. E. Slosson, "Revival of Witchcraft," Colliers, 83, May 25, 1929: 48; M. Widdemer, "Goblins That Got Us," Mentor, Sept., 1929: 38-41; T. Kenyon, "Witches Still Live," North American, Nov. 1929: 620-26; "Witchcraft Disease," LD, May 27, 1930: 27; N. Hibschman, "Witches and Wills," North American, Nov., 1930: 622-27. Before the York case, witch-beliefs were regarded as marking a culture as irredeemably primitive and superstitious: see "Witches Burned in Mexico" LD, March 29, 1919: 32.
6. "Witchcraft Murders," LD, January 5, 1929: 24-25; for Pennsylvania witchcraft, compare Raube Walters, The Hex Woman (New York: Macaulay, 1931); D. E. Starry, "Witchcraft in my Backyard," Travel August 1943: 22-23+. For Seabrook, see Lewis, Hex, 116.
7. A. Monroe Aurand, The Realness of Witchcraft in America (Lancaster: Aurand Press, n.d.)
8. A. Hamilton, "Witchcraft in West Polk Street," American Mercury 10, Jan.y, 1927: 71-75; John R. Crosby, "Modern Witches of Pennsylvania," JAF, 40(1927): 304-09; A. P. Hudson and P. K. McCarter, "The Bell Witch of Tennessee and Mississippi," JAF, 47(1934): 45-63; S. P. Bayard, "Witchcraft-Magic and Spirits on the Border of Pennsylvania and West Virginia," JAF, 51(1938): 47-59; Vance Randolph, Ozark Superstitions (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1947); J. R. Aswell, "Kate Was an Old Rip," American Mercury, August, 1953: 49-54.
9. "Witchcraft Still Earning Millions," LD, Oct. 31, 1936, 7; William Seabrook, Witchcraft: Its Power in the World Today (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1940), 301
10. "How Witches Weave Their Spells Today," LD, April 26, 1930: 41-42; Marc Simmons, Witchcraft in the South West (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1980); "Broomless Bruja" Time, April 29, 1946: 28.
11. Margaret A. Murray, The Witch Cult in Western Europe (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962); Margaret A. Murray, The God of the Witches (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970.)
12. Murray, The Witch Cult, 49, 253. The quote is from Charles W. Upham, Lectures on Witchcraft (Boston, 1832,) 53. For the "delusion," see Samuel G. Drake, The Witchcraft Delusion in New England (Roxbury, MA: W.E. Woodward, 1866); John

- Metcalf Taylor, The Witchcraft Delusion in Colonial Connecticut 1647-1697 (New York: Grafton Press, 1908.)
13. For modern political parallels, see L. Price, "Witchcraft Then and Now," Nation, October 4, 1922: 331-333. R. Dann, "Salem Witchcraft Delusion," Scholastic, 38, May 12, 1941, 12+; Marion L. Starkey, The Devil in Massachusetts (originally published 1949. Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1969.)
  14. "How Witches Weave Their Spells Today."
  15. Herbert S. Gorman, The Place Called Dagon (New York: George H. Doran, 1927); see the discussion in H. P. Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature," in Stephen Jones and Dave Carson, eds. H. P. Lovecraft's Book of Horror (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1993,) 43. Gorman's other writings included The procession of masks. (Freeport, N.Y., Books for Libraries Press, 1969: first published 1923); James Joyce, His First Forty Years. (Folcroft, PA., Folcroft Library Editions, 1971. Reprint of the 1926 ed. published by G. Bles, London.); Hawthorne : A Study In Solitude (New York : Doran, 1927); The Incredible Marquis, Alexandre Dumas. (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1929); James Joyce. (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1939); James Joyce, A Definitive Biography. (London, John Lane 1941); Brave General (New York: Farrar & Rinehart 1942); The Wine of San Lorenzo (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1945); A Victorian American: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. (Port Washington, N.Y. Kennikat Press, (1967, c1954). For the Black Mass, see J. K. Huysmans, Down There (New York: A and C. Boni, 1924;) A. E. Waite, Devil Worship in France (London: G. Redway, 1896.)
  16. "The Call of Cthulhu" was written in late 1926, and appeared in Weird Tales in 1928. Among the genuine esoteric sources cited by Lovecraft is W. Scott-Elliot, The Story of Atlantis and The Lost Lemuria (originally published 1925. London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1930.)
  17. The Case of Charles Dexter Ward was written in 1927, though not published in Weird Tales until 1941. "The Dreams in the Witch-House" appeared in Weird Tales in 1933.
  18. Henry Kuttner, "The Graveyard Rats," reprinted in Marvin Kaye, ed., Devils and Demons (New York: Doubleday, 1987,) 253.
  19. Fred Lieb, Sight Unseen (New York: Harper, 1939,) 165.
  20. August Derleth, "Night Train to Lost Valley," in Martin H. Greenberg and Charles G. Waugh, eds, Devil Worshipers (New York: DAW, 1990,) 131-147.
  21. "Nine are Indicted in Cult Slaying," NYT, April 5, 1933; Elmer T. Clark, The Small Sects in America (New York: Abingdon, 1949,) 98. "Three 'Devil Murderers' Held In Baby Death; Father And Two Fanatic Practitioners Are Bound Over To Texas Grand Jury," NYT, Dec 27, 1932. Another oft-told tale concerning human sacrifice in backwoods communities involved the Oklahoma-based Sacred Followers, who supposedly tried to sacrifice a virgin to prevent the feared catastrophe associated with Halley's Comet on its appearance in 1910: see George Johnson, "Comets Breed Fear, Fascination and Web Sites" NYT, March 28, 1997.
  22. Steven Nickel, Torso (Winston-Salem, NC; John F. Blair 1989,) 154.
  23. For the "sabbat," see Owen F. McDonnell, "Bolber Tells of Starting Practice as Witch Doctor Here in 1931," Philadelphia Inquirer August 5, 1939; Owen F. McDonnell, "Bolber Tells of Cures He Effected in Philadelphia With His Witchcraft," Philadelphia Inquirer August 7, 1939. Other stories by McDonnell in this Inquirer series included "Witchcraft in Philadelphia Revealed by Bolber in Own Story of His

Life,” August 3, 1939; “Bolber Tells Story of his Witchcraft Knife,” August 4.  
“Bolber Says Petrillo Lost \$1000 By Trying to Be a Witch Doctor,” August 8.  
“Bolber Tells of Ousting Ghost,” August 9. See also Seabrook, Witchcraft, 21.  
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