

2000/June CELIA REES - Publishing News

Wonderful thing, the Internet. Two clicks and there I am on the 'How do I Meet a Witch or Find a Coven?' website. I could have visited The Witches Tree ('Female paganism into the next Millennium') or The Covenant of the Goddess, with its carefully annotated sections on Philosophy, FAQs and Holidays, which I thought was going to be about all-inclusive and bring-your-own-broomstick weekends in spookily out-of-the-way Somerset villages, but was simply an almanac. All very twee and New Age, New Millennium. And nothing like the late 1650s, when witches were routinely pricked, burnt, ducked and otherwise punished and tortured for having arcane beliefs, or sometimes just being women.

Celia Rees was researching her next horror novel when she came across a document about witch persecution, and then, as is often the way with research, a book on Native American shamanism appeared. "That was when I realised a witch and a shaman both believed in the same sorts of thing...that a healer in England would have much the same knowledge as a healer in America," she tells me. "But the odd part was understanding that the Puritans would hang people whom they suspected of practising witchcraft, while the Indians revered their shaman...what, I wondered, would happen to a witch who went to America?"

The answer - an answer - comes in Rees's new novel, *Witch Child*, a story following 14-year-old Mary's journey from the country village square, where she's watching her beloved grandmother being hung for being a witch, to landfall in Salem and beyond. Mary comes from a line of women who have the power, but in 1659, even though the great witch hunts were in decline in Europe, the Old World was not a safe place for her kind to be. "I decided to write the book partly because, like a lot of women, when I read about the witch persecutions I felt indignant about what happened to all those other women," says Rees. "I mean, if they really had had this power, they surely would have used it on the people tormenting them!"

It was, continues Rees, a book she's always wanted to write but had never had the right vehicle. "I decided, in the end, to make it in into a diary...as

if it were a real story,” she says, “and then I realised that Mary would have to hide her journal somewhere very safe and it occurred to me that a quilt would be the perfect place.” Because Rees is a meticulous researcher, having an idea and having one that’s authentic are two completely different things. “I discovered that, at that time, quilts were always stuffed with anything, which came to hand - including paper. They had so little that everything had a use and nothing was ever thrown away,” she says. “Experience has taught me that when I think of something and it turns out to be accurate, I know it must be right for the book.”

All the quilt research wasn’t such a wild goose-down chase as it might sound. “It was pivotal to the whole book,” explains Rees. “It was the connection between Mary and the present day, when the fragments of her journal are found and pieced together to make the book. At the end of the novel there’s an appendix asking anyone who knows any more details about the quilt, and the people mentioned in the journal, to get in touch via a website...which is the connection to the next book, about a young Native American girl who does know something.”

The subject of witches is a bizarre mix of cackling Halloween/Macbeth imagery and hazy, semi-historical facts. “It’s difficult to find out what witches truly believed in, because everything we know about them is filtered through the persecution texts, written by men, and the male-dominated church,” Rees tells me. “If a woman had a belief in natural spirits that immediately became Devil worship...confessions were always extracted under torture and they’d say anything, implicate anyone.” In the book, Mary must, at all costs, keep quiet about what she is.

The Puritans who went to America took with them a deep belief in the supernatural, Satan, ghosts, the Dark Side, and, just like the Indians, they believed in ‘the other world’, in dreams and in their interpretation, says Rees, who read American history as part of her degree course at University, and made a special study of New England. “In fact, the more you look, the more you can find similarities between these two cultures,” she says, And these beliefs were clung to, like flotsam in a storm, in the New World. There, fear of the unknown made them grow and eventually helped to

create the conditions that led to the American witch trials in the late 17th century, of which Salem was the last mad flowering.

At the heart of this novel is the meeting of the two cultures, symbolised by Mary and the young Native American guide who helps take the newcomers safely through the wilderness “There are lots of stories about women who were abducted by Indians, some of whom even elected to stay with their captors - although I’ve yet to find a story of a woman who voluntarily left a settlement to live with the Indians, like Mary...it may have happened, though, it’s entirely possible.” I wondered if the writing had made Rees change any of her preconceptions, and she does admit to having become more tolerant towards the Puritans themselves “... because the fanatics amongst them would be intolerant wherever in history they were, and not simply because they were Puritans.”

Witch Child began life as an attempt to get an Arts Council grant to go to the States, lay forgotten when that was unsuccessful, but has gone on to become the standout book in a career spanning 15 books so far. Rees’s first title for Bloomsbury, this is a powerful, edgy story which uses the conceit of being the true and original diary of a real person to its full advantage. Rees makes you think, and, unlike some of her characters, she doesn’t preach, but weaves her extensive research seamlessly into the text of a story in a way that is never gratuitous. Like all the best children’s novels, it’s gripping and entertaining whatever age you are. And it would make a great movie.