

A Reading and Discussion Guide

Salem Witch Judge

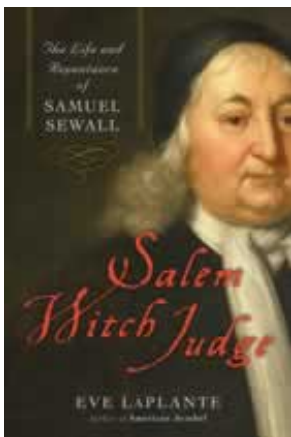
by Eve LaPlante

Harper One

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SUMMARY



Biographer and descendant, Eve LaPlante recounts the story and later repentance of Samuel Sewall (1652–1730), one of the Salem Witch Judges. Through her use of Sewall’s diaries and other archival documents, LaPlante paints a detailed picture of daily life in Puritan New England, offering small but fascinating details about religious practice as well as more quotidian activity in colonial Boston. Readers will learn about the food served to the midwives after a birth of a child as well as the rearrangement of the coffins in the Sewall tomb chamber after the death of one of many relations who did not survive him. Sewall, a Harvard graduate, a merchant and prominent Bostonian, was appointed to the Court of Oyer and Terminer. He served on the court in Salem along with other judges who unanimously convicted many accused “witches.” We learn of the conviction of Sewall’s friend, Reverend Burrough, as well as that of Giles Corey. Corey received a “slow crushing under weights” as punishment for refusing to enter a plea. Sewall later repents publicly his involvement in the witch trials and goes on to create New England’s first anti-slavery publication -- “The Selling of Joseph” -- as well as an essay arguing that woman’s bodies are resurrected in heaven. In addition, the backdrop of the French and Indian Wars, changes in leadership in England, and evolving religious views make this biography a history worth reading. A bonus feature is the section titled “Exploring Samuel Sewall’s America & England,” which details places Sewall lived in and traveled to.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the role of religion in daily life of Sewall and Puritan New England? In what ways might the Puritan religious mindset have driven the Salem Witch Trials?
2. Did any of the descriptions of the Witch Trial surprise you?
3. Judge Nathaniel Saltonstall left the court during the trials. Why might Sewall have chosen to stay on the court?

4. Why does Sewall dream that Jesus Christ appears in colonial New England? How does the dream influence him?
5. How do the steps of living rightly as a Puritan listed by Joseph Green (see Chapter 3) and the conviction of Cheever foreshadow future trials?
6. In Chapter 4, LaPlante states, “One legacy of John Winthrop, John Cotton, and other Bay Colony founders is the myth of America as a land specially favored by God, a myth we still live with today.” In what ways do we live with this myth today? How did Sewall manifest this myth?
7. David Hall, Puritan scholar, is referenced in Chapter 5 as describing Sewall’s mental world as “Elizabethan, medieval, and very different from our own.” How would you compare Sewall’s mental world to that of ours today?
8. LaPlante says that Sewall did not include his wife Hannah in his diary because “he did not see her worthy of mention.” Does anything in Sewall’s actions contradict the sense that he does not value his wife? What does his omission of Hannah from his diary tell you about the sphere in which women operated in 17-century New England?
9. What does the death of a child mean for Sewall and his wife Hannah?
10. Nearly a century before Thomas Jefferson declared the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” the early Bay colonists apply to Puritan officials in England to secure “possession of our religion, liberty, and property.” How did these early Bay colonists forge the path for future founding fathers? In what ways were their priorities different from those of Jefferson and his compatriots?

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Eve LaPlante -- great, great, great, great, great, great granddaughter of Samuel Sewall -- has also published *American Jezebel: The Uncommon Life of Anne Hutchinson, the Woman Who Defied the Puritans*. Stories of her great aunt Charlotte May Wilson show up in the *Salem Witch Judge*, which adds a connection to the story. She lives in Brookline “on land once owned by Samuel Sewall.”

LaPlante says of Sewall, “He was very much the way I think of myself and my friends. . . . He was very human and understandable, in a certain way ordinary, and I can understand his motivations.” LaPlante, who majored in Irish poetry and music performance at Princeton, graduating in 1980, taught for a year at a New Hampshire private school and, in 1984, taught literature at an international school in Rome. Returning to the U.S., she taught part-time at Brookline High School in the late 1980s. After she was married in 1990 she combined freelance writing with raising her four children, in Brookline, Massachusetts. (from Boston *Globe* article, 10/29/2007)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Additional Reading

Diary of Samuel Sewall

<http://books.google.com/books?id=f7wTAAAYAAJ>

Samuel Sewall Diaries Finding Aid

<http://www.masshist.org/findingaids/doc.cfm?fa=fa0243>

Includes Biographical Sketch and Timeline

Colonial Maps of Boston & Newbury

Old Maps & Documents of Newbury

<http://www.newbury375.org/>

Boston Public Library – Maps of Colonial Boston

http://maps.bpl.org/search_advanced/?mhid=5

Book Reviews

“Atonement” by David Waldstreicher

October 7, 2007 *New York Times Book Review*

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/07/books/review/Wald.html?ex=1349496000&en=d1d4cdcf410a17f5&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>

“Toil & trouble: A local author digs up common ground with her ancestor, witch trial judge Samuel Sewall.” by David Mehegan October 29, 2007 *Boston Globe*

http://www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2007/10/29/toil_trouble/

New England Travel – Selected Sites to Visit in Massachusetts

See also section in book “Exploring Samuel Sewall’s America & England”

Plum Island: Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, near Newburyport, Massachusetts.

<http://www.fws.gov/northeast/parkerriver/>

Great Marsh, Essex National Heritage Commission

<http://www.essexheritage.org/visiting/placestovisit/itineraries/greatmarsh.shtml>

Salem, MA

<http://www.salem.org/>

Granary Burying Ground, Boston

<http://www.cityofboston.gov/FreedomTrail/granary.asp>

Old South Meeting House

<http://www.cityofboston.gov/freedomtrail/Oldsouth.asp>



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